On the Record
by Richard Taws

Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar **ed. Francis X. Blouin Jr and William G. Rosenberg**, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2006; 512 pp., 2 drawings, 3 b/w photographs, $ 95.00; ISBN 0-472-11493-X.

Political Pressure and the Archival Record **ed. Margaret Proctor, Michael G. Cook and Caroline Williams**, Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 2005; 345 pp., $42.00; ISBN 1931666156.

In April 2003, shortly after the destruction of priceless antiquities in the National Museum and shortly before the collections of the Koranic Library suffered a similar fate, the National Library and Archives in Baghdad were broken into and set alight by unknown rioters, as allied troops stood by. Writing in the *Independent* the following day, eyewitness journalist Robert Fisk noted with resignation the inevitability of this course of events: 'So yesterday was the burning of the books', he remarked, the occurrence of this powerful gesture of erasure engendering little more than world-weary acceptance of its predictability.[1] While iconoclastic attacks on national archives are indeed commonplace in periods of political violence, war and revolution, they draw attention to the vulnerability of the archival record even in more ostensibly peaceful environments. Further, such episodes, which the early twenty-first-century person inevitably views through a lens coloured by the wars and ideological struggles of the previous century, prompt us to consider the role of archives in shaping history and memory. The critical writings of Freud, Benjamin, Foucault and Derrida, among others, have blurred the boundaries between interpretation of the category 'archive' and the investigation of *an* archive. More recently the stakes have been raised by the assimilation of 'archive' into the vocabulary of paper culture appropriated by the digital – 'desktop', 'files', 'document' and so on – while traditional paper archives have been transformed by digital reproduction, which has in turn provided new methods of searching and consequently interpreting their contents.

Historians and archivists are interdependent, yet their relationship has seldom been analysed in any depth. This despite the fact that, as Penelope Papailias observes, 'The archive appears to have taken the place of historical narrative as a key locus for critical historical reflection'.[2] The collections of essays reviewed here are notable for their attempt to foster dialogue

between the managers and users of archives. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the question of access is a recurrent theme in both collections, an issue which sometimes has a political dimension. The restriction of access to an archive inevitably recalls the suppression of archives in mid twentieth-century Russia or Germany. Many of the essays explore this politicization and manipulation of archival sources, raising important questions about what Kathleen Marquis (in an essay which argues for collaboration between researchers and archivists) dryly terms the 'dragon at the gate' stereotype of archival practice, and historians' assumptions about their agency in the production of history.[3]

Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory is the more ambitious of the two publications. The result of a year-long Sawyer Seminar, held in 2000–2001 at the Advanced Studies Center of the International Institute of the University of Michigan, the forty-six papers brought together in this collection, by historians and archivists mainly, but also geographers, anthropologists, lawyers, and curators, approach the field from a diverse range of perspectives, and with a variety of theoretical and historical interests in mind. As the editors note in the first of their lucid introductions to the book's five sections, the main point of departure for the collection was an understanding of archives not as passive 'repositories' for historical knowledge, but as 'a complex of structures, processes, and epistemologies situated at a critical point of intersection between scholarship, cultural practices, politics, and technologies'.[4]

The first essay in the collection, Carolyn Steedman's '"Something She Called a Fever": Michelet, Derrida, and Dust (Or, in the Archives with Michelet and Derrida)' is a fitting introduction, a sophisticated article which begins from a consideration of Derrida's 1995 *Mal d'Archive*, to consider the 'illness' of the archive as it affects the daily task of the historian, and then goes on to link the young Michelet's enthusiastic description of his 'inhalation' of the dust of history in the Archives Nationales to a history of occupational disease in early nineteenth-century Britain (particularly with regards to the hazards of dust as an industrial by-product). These are issues returned to later, and to different ends, in an essay by David Lowenthal, who references the work of Derrida and Michelet as two examples of a negative view of the archive 'not only as tediously cerebral but dirty, disease-ridden, death-inducing', a stigmatization re-energized today, in the era of the supposedly democratic, multi-voiced and paper-free 'post-custodial' archive so beloved of politicians.[5]

The tangled relationship of the archive to historical authenticity is addressed explicitly in the second section of the book. The question of *what*, and, indeed, *where* to archive is approached from the unique double view of the donor-historian in Atina Grossmann's fascinating essay describing the choices to be made in the submission of personal family documents to the archive. Are documents relating to post-war German Jewish experience and memory most suited to a German or American archive? What should

be included, and what left out? Grossmann considers these questions from a nuanced perspective, aware of her personal investment in them while at the same time approaching them as a research historian concerned to maximize archival sources.

The objectivity of the archive is simply assumed by most historians. Setting this assumption against an awareness of the role of archivists (past and present) in shaping historical interpretation throws up some interesting questions. As medievalist Patrick Geary points out, historical writing offers an illusion of unmediated contact with the past, when for the most part it is a past that has already been interpreted by generations of archivists. In the medieval context, as Stephen G. Nichols demonstrates, such issues are further complicated by digital reproduction, which, as with all on-screen reproduction, exposes the complex relationship between the archived text and image: a relationship – as Blouin and Rosenberg, following Foucault, remind us – that has long been dominated by the presumed superiority of word over image in the conveyance of historical 'truth'.[6]

Indeed, in recent years, the role of the archive has been of increasing interest within contemporary art.[7] Taking the archive as subject, and, often as material, artists as diverse as Christian Boltanski, Gerhard Richter and Susan Hiller have interrogated the ways in which the archive produces memory and subjectivity. It is, perhaps, to be expected that artists should be peculiarly sensitive to the processes of archivization, given the centrality of the museum or gallery collection as a projected outcome of their practice. Furthermore, the so-called 'dematerialization' of the artwork which took place in the 1960s, and the subsequent incorporation into the canon of film, performance, installation and a range of time-sensitive or ephemeral practices and media have had inevitable consequences for the preservation of the artistic record.[8] Nancy Ruth Bartlett's essay, 'Past Imperfect (*l'imparfait*): Mediating Meaning in Archives of Art' explores the specific challenges posed by archives of art, with particular reference to questions of provenance, antiquarianism, modernist rejection of the historical record and the always difficult relationship between artists, art historians and the market. These are also issues touched on by Joan Schwartz in her account of the relationship of photography to archival practices and the value of 'witnessing' in the nineteenth century, and by Kent Kleinman, in his analysis of architecture's archival dimension. Architecture frequently reverses the secondary role accorded to the archival record, as the built work – unruly, easily damaged, altered or appropriated, and, most importantly, subject to anonymous reconstruction – is less desirable for an archive than the architect's creative drawings. In fact, the archive in this sense becomes something that the built work cannot be, even taking on the aura of a distinct discipline. As Kleinman puts it: 'the archive is less a record of the genesis of built or projected work than it is a supplement for the qualities that the built work will inevitably lack'.[9] Complicity between architects and archival conventions is essential to this process, and in some instances

actually influences which works are produced, as architects design works on paper whose excess ensures the impossibility of their construction, perpetuating an ontological distinction between the archive and the built work.

This collection displays a welcome willingness to engage with a broader conception of the 'archive'. From Kleinman's discussion of the problems engendered by the archiving of actual buildings, to Wulf Kansteiner's analysis of television blockbusters and German collective memory, and Patrick Wright's study of red telephone kiosks as an archive of the welfare state in Thatcher's Britain, the archive is imagined in expansive and productive terms. In the final section of the book, on 'Archives and Social Understanding in States Undergoing Rapid Transition (China, Postwar Japan, Postwar Greece, Russia, Ukraine, and the Balkans)', Abby Smith raises important questions about what kind of Russian history is found in the archives. In the highly politicized context of the release of previously repressed archives, even the fabrications and repressions of the Stalinist archival record expose other truths.

Political Pressure and the Archival Record, like Blouin and Rosenberg's book, approaches the issue of the archive from an international perspective and a range of historical positions. As the title suggests, the collection, based on papers presented at a conference held in Liverpool in 2005, has a clearly defined aim to expose the ways in which political systems have influenced the production and use of archives, implicitly acknowledging Derrida's claim that 'there is no political power without control of the archive'.[10] Unlike Blouin and Rosenberg's larger and more wide-ranging collection, which concentrates on the relationship of archives to historical writing, the majority of the twenty contributions to *Political Pressure and the Archival Record* are from archivists, or those involved in the related field of archive studies. As a result, the essays share a concern to promote good practice, and, importantly, to investigate forms of resistance to state-sponsored interference. Of particular concern are manipulations of archival records in the interests of repressive ideologies or corrupt policies, the interrelation of archives and nationalism, ethical issues in archiving, issues of secrecy and accountability, and the systematic silencing or destruction of archives. As well as being a means of exerting political pressure, archives also stand as record of that activity. This is frequently, of course, experienced negatively, with the 'gaps' in historical records being their most revealing feature. Jeannette Allis Bastian's essay, 'Whispers in the Archives: Finding the Voices of the Colonized in the Records of the Colonizer', takes Michel-Rolph Trouillot's analysis of the silencing of the historical record in Haiti as a starting point for a discussion of the ways in which the historian or archivist might 'recover' voices which were never recorded in the first place.[11] Bastian's article complements essays on similar themes in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory* by, in particular, Laurent Dubois, Rebecca J. Scott, Frederick Cooper and

Ann Laura Stoler.[12] As Stoler notes, the reading of colonial archives 'against their grain' has in recent years become a paradigm of critical interpretation, especially important as a means of undoing the classificatory imperatives of archival knowledge that underpinned colonialism.[13] Concentrating in particular on the colonial archives of the Danish West Indies, Bastian concludes with an injunction to 'go back and fetch' histories, for instance those preserved in oral traditions, which have escaped the textual archive, whilst encouraging an awareness of structuring silences as a point of departure.[14]

Archival silences are, of course, silences imposed as much by restrictions on access to archives as they are by the content of the archives themselves: issues whose contemporary relevance in the context of the USA Patriot Act and 'Information Lockdown' under the Bush administration is explored in essays by Jackie R. Esposito and Thomas James Connors. Such exclusionary practices extend also to those charged with the management of archives. Indeed, Verne Harris draws attention to the monocultural, white, male-dominated make-up of the conference from which the collection is derived. Harris evokes an archival milieu under constant pressure from anti-democratic forces, urging future resistance. For Harris, the archive is not merely political, but 'is politics', and should be contested in such terms. In a historical context, Astrid M. Eckert's account of the fluctuations in access to West German archives during the Cold War exposes clearly the political ramifications of the availability of archives, both as historical record and as evidence for the trial of major war criminals. The initial conditions of unlimited access to foreign researchers imposed by the Allies after the World War Two were complicated in subsequent years, and as Eckert notes, by the late 1960s: 'If archival access was granted to scholars from the respective ''other side'', political motives were not usually far removed'.[15] Furthermore, as Tywanna Whorley notes, the repression of archives occurs at a domestic as well as international level, the continued withholding of access to archives relating to the United States Public Health Service's controversial, secretive and long-running study of possible racial aetiologies for syphilis in African-American men a case in point.

The collection concludes with a brief analysis of the future for archival processes, especially in the context of the impact of new technologies, the implementation of which, in the name of political modernization, is approached with a healthy scepticism. For Malcolm Todd, the relationship between state and archival practices is two-way:

> Even the environment of a stable liberal parliamentary democracy such as ours is not without its threats to the archival record, especially in a time of fundamental technological change. Naturally, we should also be very concerned at the possibility of a decline in professional standards in this area having an adverse effect on the political systems that we serve.[16]

Self-reflexivity of this kind is an inevitable outcome of any discussion of archival practice, which never operates entirely independently, but is always, to a certain extent, defined by its relationship to other interests, whether they be those of an interventionist state or of historians. However, this is a mutual experience, and as these books demonstrate effectively, historians are equally defined by their encounters with the archive. *Political Pressure and the Archival Record*, whilst a focused and rigorous collection, approaches the practices and contents of archives from a single vantage-point, addressing the history and implications of state intervention in their production and management. The collection succeeds in its stated aim, although its focus and appeal are relatively limited. Blouin and Rosenberg's book, by virtue of its sheer scope and intellectual ambition, offers an engaging and open-ended archive of issues relating to the archive, an impressive collection whose dust historians of all convictions would benefit from inhaling.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Robert Fisk, *The Independent*, 15 April 2003.

2 Penelope Papailias, 'Writing Home in the Archive: "Refugee Memory" and the Ethnography of Documentation', in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions...*, ed. Blouin and Rosenberg, p. 402.

3 Kathleen Marquis, 'Not Dragon at the Gate but Research Partner: the Reference Archivist as Mediator", in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions...*, ed. Blouin and Rosenberg, pp. 36–42.

4 *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions...*, ed. Blouin and Rosenberg, p. vii.

5 David Lowenthal, 'Archives, Heritage, and History", in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions...*, ed. Blouin and Rosenberg, p. 202.

6 *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions...*, ed. Blouin and Rosenberg, p. 165.

7 For a comprehensive history of the major contributors to this tendency see *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether, Cambridge, Mass., 2006.

8 Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966–1972: a Cross-Reference Book of Information on Some Esthetic Boundaries...*(1972), Berkeley, 1997.

9 Kent Kleinman, 'Archiving/Architecture", in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions...*, ed. Blouin and Rosenberg, p. 54.

10 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression*, transl. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago and London, 1996, p. 4.

11 See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Boston, 1997.

12 In a section devoted to 'Archives, Memory, and Political Culture (Canada, the Caribbean, Western Europe, Africa, and European Colonial Perspectives)'.

13 Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form', in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions...*, ed. Blouin and Rosenberg, p. 271.

14 Jeannette Allis Bastian, 'Whispers in the Archives: Finding the Voices of the Colonized in the Records of the Colonizer', in *Political Pressure and the Archival Record*, ed. Margaret Proctor, Michael G. Cook and Caroline Williams, Societyof American Archivists, Chicago, 2005, p. 43.

15 Astrid M. Eckert, 'Archival Access in West Germany During the Cold War'', in *Political Pressure*. . ., ed. Proctor, Cook and Williams, p. 91.

16 Malcolm Todd, '"Brave New World"? Electronic Records Management: Who will be in a Position to Influence the Archival Record in the Future?', in *Political Pressure*. . ., ed. Proctor, Cook and Williams, p. 320.

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Bloomsbury Lives
by Santanu Das

Barbara Caine, *Bombay to Bloomsbury: a Biography of the Strachey Family*, Oxford University Press, 2005; pp. xvii, 488; £25, ISBN 0-19-925034-0.

The quirks and ironies of life are often the biographer's delight, unless they turn on the chronicler, as Michael Holroyd once realized to his unease. He was appointed the literary executor of the writer John Collis but was away at the time of his death. Holroyd returned to the country and rushed to the writer's Sussex house to discharge his duties, only to find Mrs Collis reverently flinging the last of her husband's correspondence with his first wife into the garden incinerator. Literary bonfires, inaugurated by Samuel Johnson and zealously undertaken by the eminent Victorians – Hardy, Dickens and James all burnt their letters – lead Holroyd to ponder on the 'ethics of biography'. Indeed, he reminds us of D. J. Enright's advice to the potential modern-day victim of the prying, profiteering sifter of the dead: 'Much easier than your works / To sell your quirks / So burn your letters, hers & his – / Better no life at all than this'.[1] Fortunately for us, the Strachey family did not follow this counsel. Sir Richard and Lady Jane as well as the majority of their ten surviving children and their partners were not just inveterate writers but collectors and preservers of family letters. That extraordinary collection – now scattered in various archives such as the Oriental and India Office Collection in the British Library, the Berg collection in the New York Public Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale in France, among others – forms the foundation of Barbara Caine's engrossing and finely tessellated biography. With this book, the family biography has come of age: its dextrous threading of biography and history