Bad and Dangerous Work: Lessons from Nineteenth-and Early-Twentieth-Century Oxford Archives

Robin Darwall-Smith

Robin Darwall-Smith is the Archivist of University College and Magdalen College, Oxford. He read Classics as an undergraduate and postgraduate at University College, Oxford, before training as an archivist at Liverpool University. Previous to his current posts, he worked at Balliol College, Oxford, and at the Oxfordshire Record Office. He is a fellow of both the Royal Historical Society and the Society of Antiquaries. Among his publications are an edition of the medieval accounts of University College (two volumes, 1999 and 2001) and a history of University College (2008), as well as many articles and reviews on aspects of the history of Oxford and its colleges. He was also part of a team that co-authored a history of Magdalen College, which was published in 2008. More recently, he and Michael Riordan have begun to carry out research into the history of archives in Oxford; in 2009, they published an article in the Journal of the Society of Archivists on the history of the archives in the four colleges where they work.

Michael Riordan

Michael Riordan has been the College Archivist for both St. John’s College and The Queen’s College in the University of Oxford since 2002. He previously worked for Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies and in the Lambeth Palace Library. He holds degrees from the University of St. Andrews, Oxford, and Liverpool University, and is a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. His publications include articles on politics and religion in sixteenth-century England and entries in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, as well as papers on the history of archival theory and practice. In addition to working with Robin Darwall-Smith on the history of archival practice in Oxford c. 1450–1950, he is currently researching the interactivity between historians and archives in Victorian England.

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Abstract

From the 1860s, Oxford colleges invited external scholars to catalogue their muniments. By looking at how eight colleges’ archives were arranged and described between 1860 and 1930, and by comparing them with the Dutch Manual and Jenkinson’s Manual, both published in this period, together with some earlier cataloguing work from eighteenth-century Oxford, this paper will show that a preoccupation not only with making the archives accessible but also with making particular records instantly available encouraged the archivists to ignore the provenance of records, breaking up fonds and organizing them according to chronology and subject matter rather than maintaining their original order. The consequence was that they treated the records in their care as discrete items, thus prejudicing content over context. The essay will also consider our own attitudes to archival management today, using a brief overview of government policies, archival theory, and online developments to suggest that, once again, we are concentrating solely on access and ignoring provenance. Finally, it will examine several online catalogues to explore whether, like our late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century forebears, we too are in danger of putting content before context.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis les années 1860, des collèges de l’Université Oxford ont invité des spécialistes externes à faire cataloguer leurs titres de propriété. En examinant comment ont été classées et décrites les archives de huit collèges entre 1860 et 1930, et en les comparant avec le Manuel néerlandais et Jenkinson’s Manual, tous deux parus durant cette période, et en examinant aussi le travail de catalogage effectué à l’Université Oxford au XVIIIe siècle, cet article montre comment la préoccupation de rendre accessibles les documents d’archives non seulement mais aussi disponibles encouragé les archivistes à ignorer la provenance des documents, à disperser des fonds d’archives et à organiser les documents selon la chronologie ou le sujet, plutôt que de respecter l’ordre original. Comme conséquence, les archivistes ont traité les documents dont ils avaient la garde comme pièces isolées, favorisant ainsi le contenu plutôt que le contexte. Cet article considère aussi nos propres attitudes envers la gestion des documents d’archives aujourd’hui, en donnant un aperçu des politiques gouvernementales, de la théorisation archivistique et des développements récents en ligne afin de conclure, qu’encore une fois, nous plaçons l’accent uniquement sur l’accès tout en ignorant la provenance. Enfin, l’article examine plusieurs catalogues disponibles en ligne afin d’explorer si nous aussi, tout comme nos prédécesseurs des XIXe et XXe siècles, nous nous exposons au risque de priver le contenu plutôt que le contexte.

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openness in most countries, in international trade, investment and finance. Archives and Manuscripts. Sound and Moving Image. British National Bibliography. All Catalogues ». It was believed that bad smells caused disease. It was obvious; in poor districts, the air was foul and the death rate high. In the prosperous suburbs, no smells – therefore no disease. She spent many years working in the office of the Solicitor of the Inland Revenue and lived in Gray’s Inn and Hackney, before retiring to live in Oxford. The text in this article is available under the Creative Commons License. See Also.