

Stepping out from the Shadows: Is Impartial Decision-making in Archives a Myth?

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“[The archivist] accepts the responsibility and assembles the evidence, makes the diagnosis and prescribes the remedy—all without leaving a thumbprint on Clio’s scales.” (Maynard Brichford, 1968)

“The objectivity and impartiality of archivists is the measure of their professionalism.” (ICA Code of Ethics for Archivists, 6 September, 1996)

“The archivist . . . tends to be scrupulous about his neutrality, and to see his job as a technical job, free from the nasty world of political interest: a job of collecting, sorting, preserving, making available, the records of society. But . . . the archivist, in subtle ways, tends to perpetuate the political and economic status quo simply by going about his ordinary business. His supposed neutrality is, in other words, a fake.” (Howard Zinn, 1970)

The question posed by this conference’s theme—“Archival Traditions and Practice: Are Archivists Historians?”—challenges one of the core distinctions common to the American tradition about the role of the archivist in relation to the materials we hold and the users we serve. Perhaps it is just a matter of job classification, but in very broad terms, the archivist gathers, arranges, describes, preserves, and serves up the records and manuscripts of our institutions; and in this tradition is distinct from the historian who visits the archives for a few hours or days at a time in order to examine and interpret the records and manuscripts.¹ No doubt, good archival work requires sound historical training so we can better select and manage old documents and help our research users, but in this view we need to keep a clear line between “doing archives” and “doing history,” otherwise our users would be ill-served by repositories,

¹In his account of the separation of an American archival association from the American Historical Association (AHA), William F. Birdsall refers to comments by Albert R. Newsome, who in his 1935 “Report of the Special Committee to the [AHA] Executive Council” differentiated the professions thus: “He identified the historian as the man in front of the desk, and the archivist as the man behind. In contrast to that of the archivists, the historians' primary consideration was the location and accessibility of archives. Although both groups were concerned with the preservation and administration of archives, "the primary interests and problems of the two are different.” “The Two Sides of the Desk: The Archivist and the Historian, 1909-1935,” *American Archivist* 38:2 (1975): 170.

which would then reflect more of the particular historical penchants of the archivist rather than provide the record of history as it actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).

Of course this simple dichotomy breaks down in practice. Even the briefest consideration of the preeminence of appraisal or selection makes clear that the archivist has a determining role in what is available for the historian to research and a determining role in what will and will not be remembered. This is a paradox whose solution traditionally lies in the notion that archivists are honest, objective, and neutral professionals who will stand back once appraisal is done and leave the interpretation to the historian. There is, however, that nagging doubt as to whether neutrality is really ever possible since we all bring our own conscious and unconscious considerations to the decisions we make. Indeed, there has been a serious trend in the last decade's literature calling into question whether the very concept of archival objectivity or neutrality may be more a myth than a viable professional goal. This paper will examine the tradition of neutrality, look at its critics, and explore the instances where the two can intersect.

ROOTS OF THE IDEA OF ARCHIVAL NEUTRALITY

To assess the viability of such neutrality as part of considering a non-historian role for the archivist, we first need to look at the roots and prevalence of the concept in Anglo-American archives. Indeed, the professional literature provides many pointers to the idea that the archivist's role is to be a neutral purveyor focused on curating but not writing history; someone who does not intervene in historical narrative and who does not do interpretative history.

The image of archival neutrality has deep roots in the ideology of the relationship between archivists and historians. In 1888, at a time when the practice of American historical research was just beginning to be professionalized, Douglas Brymner, the Archivist of Canada, addressed one of the first meetings of the American Historical Association with some telling remarks:

The functions of the archivist are not the same as those of the librarian; neither

can he be called a historian. He collects documents from which history is to be written As an archivist he has to collect the rough material to be formed into structures of exquisite beauty in the hands of the skillful workman, or to be raised by the dishonest and incompetent into unsubstantial erections, which crumble into ruins before the first rude blast of adverse criticism. The more clearly does the archivist feel this distinction between him and the historian, the more useful is his work likely to be. If he seeks to obtain reputation as a historian, by so much will his proper duties be encroached on. He must not forget that he is only the pioneer whose duty is to clear away obstructions; the cultivated fields will follow.²

Ironically the acceptance of this self-effacing role may have made it more difficult for American archivists to achieve the recognition they needed for their work. In fact, the Conference of Archivists was accorded only second-class status within the AHA from 1909 until at least the mid-1930s, when it was superseded by the archivists breaking away to form the Society of American Archivists. Meanwhile, despite attempts within the AHA Conference of Archives to create a “manual on archives economy,” it was not until the 1922 publication of Hilary Jenkinson’s *A Manual of Archive Administration* that there was an English-language guide to archival practice. Thus, this work, especially in its revised 1937 edition, had enormous influence on the field.³

Heavily influenced by his particular experience with pre-modern records that had come into his care, Jenkinson forcefully articulated the idea that the research value of archival material was “. . . dependent upon the possibility of proving *an unblemished line of responsible custodians.*” [emphasis in original] He even wrote of a “moral defense of archives” and an “archive quality” based on a concept of archives as naturally occurring organic deposits, noting that they had an inherent impartiality because they were “drawn up for purposes almost infinitely varying. . . they are potentially useful to students for the information they can give on a range of

²Douglas Brymner, “Canadian Archives,” *Papers of the American Historical Association*, Volume III, No. 2 1889 (“Report of the Proceedings of the AHA in Washington December 26-28, 1888). (p. 151 [395]).

³Birdsall, “The Two Sides of the Desk: The Archivist and the Historian, 1909-1935,” 162-164.

subjects totally different but equally wide. . . . Provided, then, that the student understands their administrative significances they cannot tell him anything but the truth.” Operating in an era largely free from our current problem of the over-abundance of records, Jenkinson’s logic then took him to the idea that any selection of material for inclusion in or exclusion from the archives, whether by the historian or even more so by the archivist, “imperiled their unquestioned impartiality.”⁴

On a theoretical level and in the context of the time at which Jenkinson was writing, before the massive growth in documentation, there is an attraction to his deductive reasoning. A careful reading of his *Manual*, however, will show that he did recognize what later became known as the “life cycle” concept and the necessity for the documentary record to be narrowed down to a minimum, even if he thought that any such narrowing should be outside of the purview of the archivist. By the middle 1940s, the enormous growth of governmental records in the United States made it untenable to argue the exclusion of the archivist from the process of the selection of what to retain and what to discard. Theodore Schellenberg offered the most complete summary in 1956 when he argued that a systematic approach to selection made it possible to decide objectively on retention and disposal by following carefully-articulated principles and practices. Without specifically addressing the Jenkinsonian imperative of non-intervention, Schellenberg shifted the emphasis instead to the notion that the archivist filled a role as neutral arbiter, describing the archivist as an “. . . intermediary between the public official and the scholar in preserving records useful for research in a variety of subject-matter fields,” provided that appraisal or selection is based on following a systematic examination of the characteristics and assessment of particular of records.⁵

⁴Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co. 1937). 11-12, 147.

⁵T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1956), 31.

Also in the mid-1950s, when the U.S. National Archives was at the peak of its influence on American archival practice through the extent of its employment of archivists, its publications, and its training programs, the Archivist of the United States, Wayne Grover, issued *The Archivist's Code* for use in training new archivists. Its language provides telling evidence of the connection between the idea of scientific history and archival neutrality: "The archivist has a moral obligation to society to preserve evidence on how things actually happened . . . he acts as the agent for the future in determining its heritage from the past. . . making his decisions impartially without taint of ideological, political, or personal bias."⁶

It is ironic that it was someone **influenced** by Margaret Cross Norton, a committed Jenkinsonian, who articulated the notion that the archivist could be involved in selection without influencing the historical record. As noted at the outset, Maynard Brichford wrote in 1968

The most significant archival function is the evaluation of the mass of source material to select that portion that may be kept. The archivist is far more than an artful conversationalist who unlocks the secrets of the past by extracting advice, opinions and documents from others. He is no more procurer, than he is 'dead file clerk.' He accepts the responsibility and assembles the evidence, makes the diagnosis and prescribes the remedy—all without leaving a thumbprint on Clio's scales. ⁷

Brichford's vision of impartiality was holistic, noting that it should extend also to how archivists provide reference and research assistance to users of archives.

By the early 1970s, however, broad changes in society and an expansion of interests among researchers, especially those in the "new social history," were beginning to make clear that the ideal of a passive or neutral archivist might not result in as complete a documentary record as needed to capture more than just the governmental and administrative elites. Indeed,

⁶Wayne Grover, "The Archivist's Code," *American Archivist* 18:4 (October 1955) 307-08.

⁷Maynard J. Brichford, *Scientific and Technological Documentation; Archival Evaluation and Processing of University Records Relating to Science and Technology*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, Graduate School of Library Science, 1968): 4. Available at: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/detail?accno=ED046401>

Howard Zinn's 1970 address to the Society of American Archivists (SAA) became a call for archivists to be activists and reach out beyond their institutional mandates.⁸ Four years later, in what has become a landmark speech and article, F. Gerald Ham called for the profession to move to the "archival edge" and engage in more strategic documentation through a more activist involvement in society.⁹ The reaction of long-time manuscript curator Lester Cappon reflected the Jenkinsonian perspective still widely held in the profession: "This inherent virtue of the 'innocent document,' not designed for history, which characterizes most of the records in and outside archival custody, is a prime factor in the weighing of historical evidence; the document slanted for history is suspect to both the archivist and the historian."¹⁰

There may be no more telling evidence of the importance of the idea of archival neutrality or impartiality than the fact that activist archivists of the 1970s and 1980s were also centrally involved in the development of the SAA code of ethics, which put primacy on the role of the archivist as a pivotal actor in balancing competing interests and issues in records. A controversy in the late 1960s between historians and archivists over allegedly differential access to materials at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, had led the SAA to work for nearly a decade to develop the first Code of Ethics. Issued in 1980 and then revised in 1992, the code is completely structured around the idea that the archivist needs to occupy a middle ground between competing interests, whether they be governmental officials, administrators, researchers, or private individuals represented in the records: "Archivists negotiating with transferring officials. . . [should] seek fair decisions" "Archivists appraise documentary

⁸The address was entitled "The Archivist and the New Left" as reported in *American Archivist* 34:1 (January 1971): 45. With the title of "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," it appeared in *Boston University Journal* 19:3 (Fall 1971): 37-44. An expanded version with this same title appeared in *Midwestern Archivist* 2:2 (1977): 14-26.

⁹F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38:1 (January 1975): 5-13.

¹⁰Lester J. Cappon, "The Archivist as Collector," *American Archivist* 39:4 (October 1976) 432.

materials . . . with impartial judgement.” “Archivists strive to promote open and equitable access . . . without discrimination or preferential treatment.”¹¹

Interestingly, it is through the *SAA Code of Ethics* that we can see the international breadth gained by the idea of archival impartiality. By the early 1990s, very similar codes of archival ethics were being adopted widely. In 1991, the Association des archivistes du Québec adopted an ethics statement, followed in 1992 by the Association of Canadian Archivists, and in 1994 by the United Kingdom’s Society of Archivists’s *Code of Professional Conduct*. The International Council on Archives adopted a code at its 1996 Beijing Congress, and it is fully consistent with the idea that archivists need to strive for impartiality. Evidencing Jenkinsonian roots, it states “The primary duty of archivists is to maintain the integrity of the records. . . .” Recognizing that archivists will encounter conflicting rights, the ICA code states: “The objectivity and impartiality of archivists is the measure of their professionalism.” The code makes important uses of the words “impartial,” “objective,” “fair” or “balanced” at least ten times, and implies the concept of neutrality and balance throughout.¹²

THE POST-MODERN CRITIQUE OF THE PURITY OF ARCHIVES

Despite the persistence of the calls for impartiality and neutrality, Howard Zinn’s 1970 critique that the archivist’s “supposed neutrality is a fake” has found continued adherents, especially since the mid-1990s as the ideas of post-modernism have taken hold in higher education. Perhaps best articulated by Terry Cook and Tom Nesmith, the emergence of a post-modern critique has attempted to dispel as myth the image of archives as neutral places and of

¹¹Ironically, once the “Code of Ethics” was adopted at the SAA Council Meeting in September 1992, it did not appear in print via the newsletter or the journal, but it can be found in Karen Benedict, *Ethics and the Archival Profession*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003): 85-91.

¹²International Council on Archives, *Code of Ethics for Archivists*, adopted September 6, 1996, available at: <http://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/Ethics-EN.pdf> (URL verified September 21, 2010)

archivists as non-influencing custodians. Indeed, the very codes of ethics that call for archivists to be balanced and impartial have been singled out by Eric Ketelaar for criticism: “. . . these noble arguments—inscribed in the archivists’ code of ethics—are to a large extent rationalizations of appropriation and power.”¹³

Rand Jimerson has taken the critique further by saying that once we recognize how our institutions’ power structures inherently influence the archival record, we as archivists should become activists to balance off the record in many instances.¹⁴ Possibly inspired by the 1996 English translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Mal d’Archive: Une Impression Freudienne*, it has become almost *de rigueur* that every archival process, even something so basic as transferring file folders from their original filing drawer into archival boxes, be reexamined for how that process inescapably changes the meaning of the archives and records.¹⁵ In other words, all archives are contingent. Their meaning is not pure or static but reflective of their creation; they “construct social memory.”

Terry Cook has identified five core traditional archival principles challenged by the post-modernists: 1) the notion that archivists are neutral, impartial custodians of “truth;” 2) that archival documents are disinterested by-products of administrative actions; 3) that the provenance of records can and should be assigned to a single office; 4) that the order and language imposed on archives through arrangement and description are value-free; and 5) that

¹³Eric Ketelaar, “The Panoptical Archive,” *Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory*, Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (2006): 148.

¹⁴Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009), *in passim*, especially 290-91.

¹⁵Elizabeth Yakel, “Archival Representation,” *Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory*, 154, 158.

archives are passively inherited, natural, and organic.¹⁶

While the observations of some commentators seem strained if not pretentious, there is something to the post-modern critique. It has the salutary effect of clarifying that it is impossible for the archivist ever to be truly an impartial arbiter and that the archives could ever be repositories of something called the “historical truth.” Instead, through the entire range of archival practices, but especially through the process of appraisal and selection, the contents of archives can never be pristine sanctuaries for neutral testimonies of “exactly what happened.” Our work in selection, arrangement and classification systems, finding aids and databases, exhibitions, publications, preservation, digitization, and metadata for digital records all place both conscious and unconscious thumbprints on the scales of history.

WHAT COMES AFTER POST-MODERNISM

Unfortunately, in too many cases the post-modern analysis has been little more than a process in deconstruction. It leaves the archives in pieces with little hope of being reshaped into anything of meaning, other than an ever-malleable mass of documents testifying to little more than the fact that they have been manipulated and defined solely by having been created and placed in an archives.¹⁷ Fortunately, a few archivists, notably Mark Greene, have been able to

¹⁶Terry Cook, “Remembering the Future: Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory,” *Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory*, 174.

¹⁷Take a critical look at the examples that are suggested as evidence of ways in which the archival hand may have non-neutral influences. It is not unreasonable, in this light, to note that they actually provide examples of why economical practices and the public archives tradition should not have been abandoned for the manuscripts librarian approach. This point can be understood best in the context of the more elaborate and interpretative biographical, creator, scope and content notes that have become ever more fashionable in finding aids. This suggests a continuing legacy of difficulty from the historical manuscripts tradition. Indeed, such a viewpoint might be the first response to make to the comments in Elizabeth Yakel’s “Archival Representation,” *Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory*, 159. On the implications of the tension between the public archives and historic manuscripts traditions, see Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983).

both accept the post-modern critique and then move on. Indeed, he accepts the archivist's influence on the record and sees in the acceptance of our agency an opportunity to assert our professionalism: "Moreover, we claim power by articulating the ways in which we wield power: by shaping the historical record, by promoting freedom of government information, by protecting rights, by educating young minds, by affecting the way scholars apprehend and understand the material in our repositories, by providing substance to powerful entertainment (whether on PBS or the History Channel or in top-ten bestsellers)." He further notes that "agency is neither good nor bad, it just is an ineluctable part of what we do." Greene's is a refreshing observation of common sense, that archivists cannot help but make decisions that define what institutions and society can remember, attain, and conceive. These are decisions that shape the way users encounter materials and the way they shape the past. Following Greene's argument, I believe that by using the sum of our professional expertise, we can still make credible efforts to approach our work in an objective and neutral way. Most importantly, even if we can never attain objectivity or neutrality in an absolute sense, as professionals we have no alternative but to strive for them.¹⁸

ADJUSTING ARCHIVAL PRACTICE TO POST-MODERNISM IN THE POST-JENKINSONIAN AGE

Certainly, the post-modern critique of all aspects of archival work, from appraisal through reference use and public programs, is a relevant concern for the present consideration of whether the archivist should be a historian. That is, if simply doing our curatorial and custodial work is anything but objective and neutral, then it would seem even more a blurring of roles for us to embark on doing history. Nevertheless, we can find some guidance in the archival past. While no one would ever accuse Hilary Jenkinson of being a post-modernist, was not his

¹⁸Mark A. Greene, "The Power of Archives: Archivists' Values and Value in the Postmodern Age," *American Archivist*, 72 (Spring 2009) 20, 26.

fundamental point that archival practices such as changing the arrangement of records or selecting some records for retention and others for disposal inevitably change what the records of the past can tell the future? Thus, after more than 60 years of archival intervention in the selection of records and even the records-creation process, why should we be surprised if someone gets up and proclaims that they have “discovered” that archivists determine the future of the past by their active role in the management of records?

The post-modern critique is important and pedagogically useful, but in the end, not much more so than the ideal type projected by Jenkinson. That is, all it says is that because our work requires us to make choices from morning ‘til night, that work puts a stamp of agency on what we leave behind when we close the doors at the end of the day. While relevant to both the institutional archivist and the so-called manuscript curator specializing in subject or area-focused collections, post-modernism is probably more compelling and acceptable for the work of the non-institutional archivist, such as the archivist for the history of farm technology. Such a curator, focused on the documentation of a particular time period or subject theme, has the mission and mandate to engage in a proactive strategy to obtain a breadth and depth of coverage even when doing so means trying to capture marginalized and dissenting voices. By contrast, institutional archivists are constrained to varying degrees by our employment conditions to focus on the authoritative voices of our institutions. Thus, we may need to put greater emphasis on capturing the records of our regents, presidents, chancellors, provosts, and deans than on the residents of neighborhoods that may be pushed aside when our university needs to construct a new life sciences laboratory, hospital, or library. True, there are traditions of university archivists reaching out to document student organizations, faculty dissenters and grievants, protesting unions, and area residents, and they may also use oral history to proactively document people who do not otherwise appear in official records. But the opportunities and resources for this balancing of the official voice of the institution are limited. Such attempts can easily have

political fallout, if not for our continued employment then at least for our ability to stay in the good graces of administrators who control the budgets for our salaries, buildings, and supplies. And, of course, they also control the kind of policy support we need to manage the archives, including the continued supply of records transfers so the archives may grow.

Thus, from the standpoint of survival, there is great practical value in perpetuating the Jenkinsonian ideal and image of neutrality. It keeps our positions secure, enables us to make a credible case to secure records from multiple sides in any controversy, and it provides us with a self-satisfying image of being clinical professionals who unobtrusively gather the records of the past for the interpretative use by others. We can get a lot of mileage out of being just the handmaidens of history, the guardians of objectivity and neutrality, or to posit a less favorable analogy, the eunuchs guarding the seraglio.

Archetypes and ideals such as the Jenkinsonian one can be useful for public relations purposes and even for providing standards to which we should aspire. Indeed, if properly balanced by an astute understanding of the post-modernist lessons as to why we can never really achieve the ideal of neutrality, both perspectives should be defining elements of the profession of university archivist. When taken together, the perspectives can contribute significantly to the authoritativeness we can bring to bear on our work, especially in those circumstances when we may want or need to move beyond being mere custodians to become interpreters or narrators.

STEPPING OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Sometimes a move from mere custodian to active interpreter of our university's history may be needed when either institutional leaders or their critics start stepping into our territory by misusing or grossly ignoring the historical sources over which we preside. It may be as simple as when we call attention to errors in photo captions prepared by the university's public affairs department, or when a student "urban myth" that originated in student-led campus tours suddenly was inserted into an official campus on-line virtual tour, or raising questions when a

department plans its centenary anniversary in the wrong year. To shine the light of documentary evidence on such distortions, the archivist sometimes needs to step out of the shadows. To do so effectively without undermining our role as trustworthy curators, we have to be unobtrusive historians, or at least very astute at historical method, specifically in the analysis and critique of sources. We also must have a thorough understanding of context and the politics of language in time.

At Illinois, the archives has successfully managed such intrusions and thereby have generally enhanced our stature. In the case of the departmental anniversary, we even received a letter from the department head involved, the Physics Department, adding their stamp of scientific authority that our conclusions about their founding date should be accepted to “establish universal agreement.”¹⁹

STEPPING OUT: COUNTERING INSTITUTIONAL CLAIMS

In another case, we actually received funding to research the roots of a collegiate event that the our institution traditionally claimed had been invented at the University of Illinois. There is a popular annual event held by almost every university in the United States called Homecoming. It is a day or weekend designed to bring alumni back to campus for a series of parties, parades, student-alumni athletic matches, and the like, all coinciding with a home football game. The hope is that keeping alumni tied to their alma mater will eventually result in hefty financial donations. Homecoming is now such a ubiquitous affair throughout the U.S. that it is hard to imagine a time when Homecoming did not exist. But, of course, there had to be a first, and for the institution that can claim to be its creator, it is a big public-relations feather in its cap.

My university, of course, has a big stake in this because its claim to having originated

¹⁹Ansel Anderson to Vice-Chancellor Robert M. Berdahl et al., September 13, 1988. University of Illinois Archives, Departmental Subject File.

this popular event dates to 1910, the year of the first Homecoming at Illinois. Indeed, the tradition of claiming to have “invented” homecoming is based on the impressions and claims of the two students who came up with the idea, and they engaged almost immediately thereafter in a competition of claims with Indiana University.²⁰ So, it's no surprise that Illinois has milked this creation story for all its public-relations worth for generations, repeatedly listing it as a “first” and calling it our invention.

A few years ago, the Archives realized that the hundredth anniversary of this big event was coming up, so we decided that maybe we should be a bit more proactive about this, instead of waiting for someone to ask for the archival evidence of the claims—something that too often happens only after thousands of dollars have already been spent on the project. Utilizing credibility previously developed with the Alumni Association, we approached them for financial support for a summer project to try to assess the strength of the claim of “first,” and we embarked on the project with the hopes that we could settle the claim once and for all to the benefit of the institution.

What we found, however, was that the story as it has been promoted is not entirely true. Those two students back in 1910 probably were not aware that a university over 900 miles away in the deep south, Baylor University, held an event called Homecoming a year earlier, in 1909. The event, like the idea that later developed at Illinois, was an organized alumni affair including a varsity sports match as well as a concert, pep rally, parade, and bonfire. The only difference—that Baylor’s was not planned as an annual event until 1915—offered little support for Illinois continuing to claim it had “invented” Homecoming in 1910. Fortunately, the Alumni

²⁰ The student newspaper, of which one of the co-founders was editor predicted that the event would become “...a particularly and distinctively Illinois institution which if successful will without doubt be followed by other Universities.” *Daily Illini*, May 29, 1910, p. 1, col. 3. Equally wrapped in the archival record are accounts and announcements over the intervening decades repeating the founders’ claims of being the first. In other words, a prime example of the authority of the archives being added to reinforce the institutional mythology.

Association took the finding in stride, and they have shaped this year's 100-year celebration not as one based on invention, but simply based on the length of tradition followed locally.

Rarely do we step out from behind the scenes like this because, as Brichford put it, we would be stepping on Clio's toes. We have found, however, we can avoid bruised toes and egos when we do it very selectively and with as much historical rigor as we can apply. In the case of Homecoming, not only did the Alumni Association fund the effort, but the project increased our credibility with our institution.

STEPPING OUT AND ENCOUNTERING DISSENT

Interventions, however, have not always been totally successful or well-received by interested parties, and one particular example is rich with perspective on the delicate political position in which we all sit. In this case, it was our careful attempt in an FAQ to point out that an easy conclusion could not be supported by historical documentation. The issue was a student organization on our campus between 1909 and 1923 that called itself the Ku Klux Klan. As you probably know, after the U.S. Civil War gave freedom to the country's millions of slaves, a group of defeated southern soldiers formed the overtly racist group called the Ku Klux Klan for the express purpose of restoring white supremacy by threats and violence, including murder. Their preferred uniform of white sheets is well-known. The original group was eventually suppressed in the 1870s, but the underlying racism never really died out, and the Klan arose again in an even more virulent form in 1915.

About a decade earlier, however, a very popular trilogy of novels was published portraying the original Ku Klux Klan as the savior of civilized society. So, it may not come as a surprise that around 1909, two years after the last novel was published, a group of fraternity men on our campus sought to create a student group called the Ku Klux Klan, which they called merely an "interfraternity social club." From the few records we have, we determined that the group's membership was limited to one representative from every fraternity, that they

occasionally wore white sheets, that they were known as a club heavily into drinking and holding dances, but nowhere—not in campus records or in the local press—is there mention of any racial fights or their harassment of local blacks or black students. In fact, there are contemporary sources that specifically state that the group was a local social club that was in no way connected with the national racist organization. Of course, given the overall tenor of the times, it could well be that the participants would be deemed to be racist by today’s standards, and the possibility of a racist association would seem to have been more undeniable following the mass popularity of D.W. Griffith’s 1915 silent film *The Birth of a Nation*, which was based on that trilogy of novels.

The topic, not surprisingly, has intrigued students for a long time, for which reason we put together an FAQ pointing students to the few sources we had so they could decide for themselves what the nature of this group was. As good historians and archivists, however, we noted that “...absent any direct evidence, one cannot say that the campus group had racist aims.” Recently, this statement was interpreted by a freshman writing an ethnography-of- the-university assignment as an attempt by us as university employees to whitewash (no pun intended) an embarrassing period of the university’s history. In retrospect, the way we initially phrased the conclusions of our research about whether there was a connection between the national group and this student organization was not sufficiently precise. We may have left the impression that we were acquitting the student group of the possibility of racism, a problematic assertion about anything or anyone at the time. Unfortunately, our overall effort was seen as part of a sustained cover-up to hide the University’s racist past by presenting “polarized arguments.”²¹

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

²¹Stephan Lane, “An Analysis of the UIUC Ku Klux Klan and the Surrounding Debates” <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/8735> (URL verified September 11, 2010). Furthermore, the paper was touted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as an example of an excellent product of the “ethnography of the university” program to introduce students into critical thinking and writing.

The lesson of these examples may be “we are damned if we do and damned if we don’t.” On the one hand, if we are to be faithful to the record, we may find ourselves having to deliver inconvenient truths to the powers that be who can potentially claim we are not “team players.” At other times, being faithful to the record can mean stepping out from the shadows to note the weaknesses in the arguments posed by critics of the institution, who then brand us as sycophants. This is a dilemma that can affect not just reference, but also selection, appraisal, and description.

The post-modernists might contend that the solution lies in balancing the officialness of institutional records with external materials, but how we go about doing that contains great risks. We of course strive to be as objective as possible, though inevitably some of our decisions may cause us to step across the line of impartiality. If we follow the post-modernist road, however, we may end up being less impartial and objective than if we just take the institutional records as they come. Of course, it would not do to end up substituting one partiality for another or one set of blinders for another, but there is some validity in the desire to create a more complete and valid historical record. Nevertheless, to the extent that we follow the post-modernist critique and focus on collecting materials from outside the authority structure of our institution, we may be seen as overstepping our institutional mandates. This probably means that like it or not, we are all co-opted by our paychecks.

So, it is worth asking: As your institution’s archivist, what will happen if the institution does not want to have its myths corrected, its own historical narrative balanced off by archival work? Is it the archivist’s job to correct and balance (i.e., to be a historian), or is our job only to hold the records in the hope that others can make the corrections? We all know that there will be times when being faithful to the documents really does call for us to bring attention to the distortions and misuses that are made of those documents. Does it make us less impartial and less objective as archivists when we step outside of the shadows and start playing the role of the historian? Do the same questions apply if the ones doing the misuse and distortion are the

institution's critics?

These are all tough questions, demanding high professional standards. The ICA's *Code of Ethics for Archivists* does give us some broad outlines of how we need to balance these tensions: "Archivists must refrain from activities which might prejudice their professional integrity, objectivity and impartiality. . . . They should avoid activities that could create in the public mind the appearance of a conflict of interest. Archivists may use their institutional holdings for personal research and publication They may review and comment on the work of others in their fields, including works based on documents of their own institutions." But what of the dilemma faced by the archivist whose interventions challenge either the institutional narratives or the dissenters' critiques.

The potential challenges we face in these areas as university archivists are worthy of attention and perhaps action from ICA/SUV. As the international voice of professional university archivists, SUV is probably best positioned to articulate standards and guidelines for best practices for how a university archivist can balance the need to be supportive of the institution's documentary needs, be supportive of researchers' need for access to the institutional record, and also be a knowledgeable critic, based on sound historical study of the records and manuscripts that are particularly well-known to the archivist. These truly are special problems that can only be managed by an historically trained archivist who not only strives to be objective and impartial, but who also understands that his/her very agency as an archivist makes it impossible to achieve either. Perhaps knowledge and professional standards that could be articulated by the SUV may be the most effective defense for the conscientious archivist who needs to challenge inaccurate interpretations of the historical record, whether done by the administration or by its critics. For this reason, I am hopeful that this conference may help university archivists understand the diverse ways we may serve our roles as historians and interpreters, as well as preservers of history's documentary evidence. This would be an

important step toward the SUV taking a leadership position in developing a set of best practices so that when we do find ourselves stepping on Clio's toes, we have the weight of our international organization on our side.