

Book Reviews

Guardian of Heritage: Essays on the History of the National Archives,
TIMOTHY WALCH, editor. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and
Records Administration, 1985; vi + 93 pp.

Although, as editor Timothy Walch modestly suggests, this thin volume is “far from the last word” on the history of the National Archives, it is a very welcome addition to the literature. Besides Walch’s introduction, the book contains six essays, written by past or present members of the Archives staff, and a guide to further reading. In general, the essays are impressive and utilize a large number of primary and secondary sources. However, they reflect individual biases and interests; no common themes or concerns serve to unite them. As Walch put it, the book is not a “seamless narrative.”

The articles by Donald R. McCoy, Virginia C. Purdy, and Rodney A. Ross originally appeared in *Prologue: Journal of the National Archives* in a special edition in 1984 celebrating the first fifty years of the agency’s history. Collectively, the articles relate the history of the Archives to 1949. The enthusiastic response to that issue resulted in the decision to republish those articles in *Guardian of Heritage*, but to carry the story to 1985, when the Archives achieved independence from the General Services Administration and Robert M. Warner stepped down as Archivist of the United States. James Gregory Bradsher, Trudy Huskamp Peterson, and Warner himself supplied the remaining articles.

In “The Struggle to Establish a National Archives in the United States,” McCoy describes the frustrations that supporters of a national archives encountered as they enlisted the aid of presidents, patriotic societies, and politicians to secure a home for the nation’s documentary heritage. Led by John Franklin Jameson, the movement to establish an archives progressed in the pre-World War I years, although one issue that appeared to be a stumbling block was the precise place where the archives building was to be constructed. In any case, World War I delayed further consideration, and it was not until 1926 that President Coolidge signed legislation authorizing the establishment of a national archives building. Virginia Purdy in “A Temple to Clio: The National Archives Building” relates the fascinating tale of the evolution of the plans for the building itself, which was opened, although not entirely finished, in 1935.

Turning to the early management of the Archives, Rodney Ross examines the first fifteen years in “The National Archives: The Formative Years, 1934–1949.” Since the National Archives Act said virtually nothing about how the new agency should be managed or even exactly what its responsibilities should be, it was left to the first four Archivists of the United States—Robert Digges, Wimberly Connor, Solon Justus Buck, and Wayne C. Grover—to resolve basic issues of function and manage-

ment. Their answers shaped the future of the Archives: the Archives was not to store only the most important records, but was to serve as the repository for all federal agency records meant for permanent retention; basic European ideas of archival organization were accepted; records disposition schedules were drawn up; and the Archives staff was composed of professionals, many of whom were trained in history.

James Bradsher continues the story in "The National Archives: Serving Government, the Public, and Scholarship, 1950–1965." Bradsher notes the challenge facing the Archives as it attempted to manage the growing mountain of federal records. In 1949, when the National Archives and Records Administration (NARS) was created as part of the General Services Administration, the federal government was creating about two million cubic feet of records annually. In twenty years, the annual paperwork production doubled. Meanwhile, between 1962 and 1966, the records management staff was actually reduced by 7 percent. Bradsher also discusses the growth of the presidential library system, the increasing number of exhibit and educational activities, and the creation of the National Historical Publications Commission which, though created in 1934, did not become active until after 1950.

In "The National Archives: Substance and Shadows, 1965–1980," Trudy Peterson covers the administrations of Robert Bahmer and James B. Rhoads. Her succinct analysis of the technological, political, and management problems facing these two men makes this essay the most interesting one in the volume. During this time, controversies pertaining to privacy issues and the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) attracted much attention. Related questions dealt with scholarly access to certain documents, liberalized declassification procedures, and the proper handling of personal and public presidential papers. Meanwhile, technological advances created new problems. Discussion centered on the criteria for appraising machine-readable records, an issue that still has not been totally resolved. Still other problems that grew during this time, and also have not been resolved, were lack of space for records storage and a growing backlog of unscheduled records.

Perhaps the most disappointing essay is Robert Warner's "The National Archives: A Memoir, 1980–1985." The problem is that it reads too much like a campaign speech—a list of how he managed to resolve a number of problems he faced while Archivist of the United States. I do not wish to slight Warner's achievements, but it does seem that it would have been proper to mention some of the problems—and there were many—he was not able to eliminate. These would include an inadequate staff to handle the growing number of researchers, poor building facilities, insufficient storage space, the inability to discipline the entire records management system, and insufficient funding.

As a federal historian, I have often been amazed at the poor training graduate students in American history receive in federal records research. It appears that graduate professors either do not know themselves or do not care to inform their students how to gain access to agency records. Too few scholars understand the paper trail leading from the agency to the records center to the archives. Too few appre-

ciate the problems facing the National Archives or the rationale behind disposition schedules—some of which indeed should be changed. For these reasons, if for no other, this volume is most welcome, for it summarizes and traces many of the issues facing the Archives today. The two basic books on the National Archives are Donald R. McCoy's *The National Archives: America's Ministry of Documents, 1934–1968* (1978) and H. G. Jones's *The Records of A Nation: Their Management, Preservation, and Use* (1969). It seems unlikely, however, that most graduate students will read either of these volumes, which are in any case now out of date. As an alternative, I heartily recommend that every graduate student in American history be required to read *Guardian of Heritage*. It is well done and, as stated previously, thin.

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Cultural Conservation: The Protection of Cultural Heritage in the United States by THE AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER, Library of Congress, carried out in cooperation with the National Park Service, Department of the Interior; coordinated by Ormond H. Loomis. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress 1983; 123 pp., photographs, bibliography, table of significant legislation. Available through the U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 20402, S/N 030-000-00148-6; paperbound, \$4.50.

A Culture at Risk: Who Cares for America's Heritage? by CHARLES PHILLIPS and PATRICIA HOGAN. Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1984; 95 pp., tables, appendices; paperbound, \$10.00.

Although these two works were published for different reasons and audiences, together *Cultural Conservation* and *A Culture at Risk* constitute a cogent appeal for serious, sustained efforts to document culture and history at the local level.

Cultural Conservation is the published result of a mandate contained in 1980 amendments to the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act. This mandate directed the secretary of the interior, in cooperation with the American Folklife Center (AFC), to prepare and submit to the president and Congress a report addressing strategies for "preserving and conserving the intangible elements of our cultural heritage such as arts, skills, folklife, and folkways" (p. 1). Ormond Loomis, coordinating the project for the AFC, took major responsibility for drafting the report, which the Library of Congress subsequently published in 1983 for public dissemination.

The recommendations contained in the published report are directed principally at the federal level, e.g., to make the secretary of the interior an *ex officio* AFC board member, to make the librarian of Congress an *ex officio* member of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and to develop a standing memorandum of agreement between the National Park Service and the AFC to coordinate their efforts. However, the overall goal is clearly to encourage a wide array of public and private