

VERNE HARRIS

Exploring archives: an introduction to archival ideas and practice in South Africa

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In his booklet *Exploring archives: an introduction to archival ideas and practice in South Africa*, Verne Harris (a deputy director at the National Archives of South Africa) addresses certain aspects of what he calls the "invisibility" problem. He correctly points out that archives and archivists do not enjoy prominence in the public domain. For the greater part of the twentieth century the majority of South Africans were either barred from archives or probably had never heard of them. But even in the more privileged part of the population, there are few people who have ever made direct use of archives.

Many reasons can be found for the fact that archives have to a large extent become

"invisible" in South Africa, e.g. archivists have neglected, or have been denied the resources to sustain public programming; teachers (at school, technikon and university level) have failed to exploit archives as an educative tool and resource; and systematic barriers, for instance poverty, low educational standards, high rates of illiteracy and physical isolation from city centres, hinder access to archives.

The period from 1990 to 1996 saw the displacement of an outmoded South African archival dispensation by a successor born of and connecting with South Africa's post-apartheid societal dynamics. In this regard the passing of the National Archives of South Africa Act in October 1996 was of crucial significance. It sounded the death knell for archival legislation moulded by apartheid, and heralded a new and dynamic era for archives in South Africa. This Act forms the legislative framework within which a new archival system will be built in the country, at both national and provincial level.

The National Archives of South Africa Act was the product of a two-year consultative process convened by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, involving all the major interest groups in the fields of archives and public records. As indicated by Marie Olivier (National Archivist) in the Foreword, this process was energised by and, in turn, helped give focus to a new archival dispensation far removed from that which dominated the apartheid era. Since the late 1980's Verne Harris has been a prominent articulator of the discourse in connection with this dispensation, and is therefore ideally suited to write this introduction to archival ideas and practice in South Africa.

In ten short chapters Harris unfolds central features of the National Archives of South Africa Act and gives expression to the country's new archival dispensation. He deals succinctly with themes like the nature and meaning of archives, explaining that archives help to preserve social memory and are therefore an integral part of any society's heritage; archival institutions, organisations and literature in South Africa; making archives available to users, emphasizing the importance of outreach programmes; records management; the appraisal and acquisition of archives, pointing out that in the first instance archival value is located not in records but in the processes that underlie their creation; the preservation of archives; the arrangement and description of archives; electronic records, i.e. those records generated electronically and stored by means of computer technology; archival ethics; and archives as a career, challenging archivists to convince society that the service they offer is something more than a luxury.

The publication also includes three useful appendices. Appendix A contains a list of more than 180 predominantly published texts (books and journal articles), designed to assist the reader in taking his/her exploration of archives one step further. The list is divided into sections which, in the main, correlate with *Exploring archives'* chapter divisions, e.g. general texts, texts on the South African archival scene, the nature and meaning of archives, etc. The full text of the National Archives of South Africa Act (1996) is reproduced in Appendix B, and Appendix C contains the South African Society of Archivists' Code of Archival Ethics.

Without any doubt Verne Harris has succeeded in providing a fascinating elementary introduction to the world of the archivist and his/her (or rather: our!) archives. He has demonstrated that archives constitute a unique and vital public resource, and he provides very useful information that can be used as teaching tools by teachers of history, information studies, manuscript librarianship, records management, public administration, etc. at university, technikon and high school levels; as well as for those archivists who are responsible for the induction of entrants to the profession. Harris has not only shed light on the "invisibility" problem with which archivists had to cope for decades, but has in fact made

a major contribution towards making archivists and our country's archives more visible and accessible.

The archivist is the agent of the future in determining its heritage from the past; i.e. the archivist has a moral duty to preserve information about the past and present for the future. It is to be hoped that Verne Harris' booklet will enjoy a wide readership so that it can introduce as many South Africans as possible to the important and fascinating world of the archivist, and assist in the cultivation of an archival awareness amongst all South Africans.

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