

THE HISTORIAN AND THE ARCHIVES: A 1995 SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE¹

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Die historikus en die argiewe: 'n Suid-Afrikaanse perspektief vir 1995

Die katalogisering van dokumente deur die Suid-Afrikaanse Argiefdiens het besonder gebaat by rekenarisering. Veral die NAREM-projek, wat dokumente in staatsargiewe en in semi-private en private argiewe dek, is 'n betekenisvolle ontwikkeling.

Soos argivale tegnieke het ook die dissipline geskiedenis verander, veral sedert die verskyning van die revisionistiese skool van geskiedskrywers. Sosiale geskiedenis en in besonder "history from below" ('n belangrike dimensie daarvan) het nuwe eise aan argivarisse gestel, wat die versameling en evaluering van mondelinge bronne insluit.

Samewerking tussen historici en argivarisse is belangrik, veral ten opsigte van die bewaring van nie-amptelike dokumente in private besit, maar ook om historici op te lei in die gebruik van primêre bronne.

Toestande in die Suid-Afrikaanse argiewe is relatief gunstig. Nogtans ondervind navorsers enkele frustrasies. Een daarvan is die hoë koste verbonde aan navorsing, en die mikroverfilming van argiefgroepe op 'n groot skaal word aan die hand gedoen. 'n Ander probleem is die verkryging van toestemming om dokumente te raadpleeg. Dit sluit in arbitrêre besluite deur amptenare in die geval van staatsdokumente en selektiewe embargo's op private dokumente, skynbaar vanweë skenkingsvoorwaardes. 'n Wysiging van die argiefwet in eersgenoemde geval en oorreding van skenkers om dokumente sonder beperkinge beskikbaar te stel in laasgenoemde geval, word voorgestel.

Computerisation has been extremely beneficial to the South African Archives Service in cataloguing documents. In particular the NAREM project, covering documents in state archives and in semi-private and private archives has been a major development.

Like archival techniques, the discipline of history has changed, particularly since the emergence of the revisionist school of historians. Social history and especially "history from below" (an important dimension thereof) has provided new challenges to archivists, including the collection and assessment of oral sources.

Co-operation between historians and archivists is essential particularly with regard to the preservation of non-official documents in private possession; also in the training of historians in the use of primary sources.

Notwithstanding relatively favourable conditions in South African archives, researchers have a few frustrations. One is the high cost of doing research, and microfilming of archival groups on a large scale is suggested as a possible solution. Another problem is difficulty in

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obtaining access to documents, involving arbitrary decisions by officials in the case of state documents and selective embargoes on private documents apparently due to donors' conditions. Pressure on authorities to amend the archives act is suggested in the first case and persuading donors to make documents available without restrictions in the second.

The statement by Ch.V.Langlois and Ch. Seignobos in 1898 (and overworked since then) that "There is no substitute for documents: no documents, no history",² has been challenged and refuted decisively by scholars; yet, the other side of the coin has not yet been changed: if documents are available, no professional historian should dare to ignore them. While this remains a valid contention, the archives³ will remain a major reservoir of raw materials.

This article does not claim to present a theoretical analysis of the relationship between academic historians and archivists. It will rather overview developments in both archival techniques and the discipline of history in this country; it will also point to opportunities for co-operation between historians and archivists in the interest of both research and conservation. Lastly, some of the problems and frustrations of historical researchers, with comments and suggestions, will be mooted.

The South African Archives Service has largely benefitted from the development of technology especially during the past two and a half decades. When I first entered the Central Archives Depot in Pretoria in 1969 there were no photocopy facilities available; I had to make notes of everything relevant to my topic. Though it had the one benefit that material had immediately been digested through the process of selection and synopsis (except for direct quotations), it had the obvious disadvantage that the researcher had to spend much longer in the archives. For me, residing in a Free State town at the time, it meant a substantial bill in a Pretoria hotel - and not exactly a five star one, I may add.

Today the researcher in government and other archives scans the documents and pushes the button of the photocopy machine, organising material later at home. A spectacular development in archival accessibility has been the growing number of finding-aids which in turn have been facilitated by the computer. Hardly two years after my first encounter with the state archives, computerisation of inventories and indexes started; by 1993 nearly five and a half million documents have been catalogued on computer⁴, and the number grows astonishingly each year. In the reading room of the state archives depots and other institutions the computer as an instrument utilised by the individual researcher to find references to topics has become a research aid of great value. The computerisation of archives, though not without its unique technical problems⁵, represents the most significant progress regarding the preservation and appraisal of documents in the 1980s and 1990s.

Not only documents in state archives have been covered by computerisation, but also the manuscripts in semi-private or private archives and libraries countrywide through the National Register of Manuscripts (NAREM). The researcher now has central access to

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2. *Introduction to the study of history* (English translation by G.Berry, Westport, CT, 1979 reprint), p.17.
 3. By archives I have in mind the body of organised written records or oral evidence on tapes of all institutions or individuals on national or regional level. These records are to be found in various depositories, mostly state, church, university or business archives or libraries.
 4. *Jaarverslag van die Staatsargiefdiens*, 1993, p.13.
 5. The problems regarding preservation and appraisal of computer data are discussed by Clive Kirkwood in "Preservation and appraisal of computer archives: A South African perspective", *S.A. Archives Journal*, vol.33, 1991, pp.24-33.

inventories of major official documents as well as private records in state archives and elsewhere. More than 40 guides on archival records based on computer data are available. In addition a National Register of Photographs and National Register of Audiovisual Material have been developed.⁶

Apart from computerised finding-aids, the documents themselves have expanded - those in state archives depots and elsewhere. By 1988 there were an estimated 10 000 000 official document units from official sources in the state archives depots and the Director of the State Archives has indicated an average increase of almost 3 per cent per year in the early 1990s.⁷ Donations of private documents to the Institute for Contemporary History (UOFS) seem to continue at a steady rate. Last year (1993) no less than 76 private collections were received, while the Institute incorporated 94 618 newspaper and journal articles into its impressive collection of computerised newspaper and journal clippings.⁸ A significant addition to the growing number of records has recently taken place. The unbanning of the ANC, PAC, SACP and other liberation organisations in 1990 has opened up a wealth of new source material regarding the apartheid era and particularly of liberation movements. These sources, of which some have been kept in other countries such as Tanzania, and by institutions such as the London-based International Defence and Aid Fund, are flowing into this country for eager researchers to explore. The Mayibuye Centre at UWC and the University of Fort Hare are among the enthusiastic recipients of these records.⁹

While it is true that the archival milieu has changed quite dramatically over the past two and a half decades, the same can be said about the discipline history. Since the mid-1970s the scope of historical research in South Africa has broadened considerably with the emergence of the revisionist or radical school of historical writing. Social history especially has acquired a significant place in South African historiography. Informed archivists and librarians have already pointed to the challenge to archivists to adapt their collection policies to suit the needs of researchers of social history.¹⁰ In this country various oral history projects have been established at academic institutions and have done important work to establish "history from below", presently a very important dimension of social history.¹¹ Much has been written in recent times about the collection and appreciation of oral sources. I shall therefore not deal with that aspect in depth here, but wish to conclude that historians and archivists will have to confer with each other on a continual basis regarding the ever changing requirements of researchers, especially those interested in the newer branches of history.

But new methods of acquisition will also have to be applied to the more traditional political and diplomatic history involving the political elite. The practice of letter-writing as a way of communication has almost become extinct; long-distance communication

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6. Marie Olivier, "Die Nasionale Register van Manuskripte (NAREM): 'n Vorderingsverslag", *Argiefnuus*, XXVIII, 11, May 1986, p.22 and "Die Staatsargiefdiens en rekenariserig: 'n Oorsig", *Argiefnuus*, XXXI, 1, 1988, pp.18-20; *Jaarverslag van die Staatsargiefdiens*, 1993, pp.3 and 13.
 7. Marie Olivier, "Die Staatsargiefdiens se gerekaniseerde inligtingstelsel", *Argiefnuus*, XXXII, 4, Oktober 1989, pp.12-13; *Jaarverslag van die Staatsargiefdiens*, 1990, p.3; 1991, p.3; 1992, p.3.
 8. Instituut vir Eietydse Geskiedenis (UOVS), *Jaarverslag*, 1993, pp.3 and 9.
 9. *Argiefnuus*, XXXV, 4, Oktober 1992, p.29; J.F.van der Merwe, "Besook aan die Mayibuye Centre, UWK", *Argiefnuus*, XXXVI, 3, September 1993, pp.38-39.
 10. See Leonie Twentymen Jones, "Social history and the need to reinterpret sources", *S.A. Archives Journal*, Vol.28, 1986, pp.4-10.
 11. Among these the African Studies Institute and the Oral Documentation Project of the University of the Witwatersrand, the Killie Campbell Africana Library (University of Natal) and the University of Cape Town can be mentioned.

technology has ensured brevity without detail. In this process personal opinions and feelings have often been sacrificed. Written minutes have been replaced with tape recordings, and one can just hope that all these recordings are kept for posterity. History has taught us that tapes can be unsafe in the hands of top-level politicians, administrators, agents and keepers of law and order all over the world. Though the Institute for Contemporary History and some other institutions such as the Ossewa-Brandwag project at Potchefstroom University has done a lot to collect private papers, also making tape recordings of interviews with politicians,¹² there are still large gaps in the private collections of numerous politicians, not to speak of official records of political parties.

The issue of preservation of non-official documents in private possession creates a further opportunity for historians and archivists to co-operate. Valuable research material in private possession is continually lost by individuals or institutions who apparently do not appreciate its value. In this regard the only practical method of rescuing documentary material seems to be a concerted effort by historical associations and archivists to launch a public campaign with the aid of the media. The people of this country should be made aware of preservation of historical records and should be encouraged to donate valuable material to repositories. Astonishing little publicity has been given on television or in the newspapers to this matter. Is it not perhaps appropriate to involve the archives commission in projects such as the preservation of our documentary heritage?

But there are also other practical matters where the practising historian and the archivist can form a useful partnership. One of these pertains to the training of historians, where history lecturers should of course take the main initiative, but practical assistance by archivists could be of much value. Many M.A. students find the task of doing primary research too overwhelming to complete their course. It must be admitted that in some cases students are simply not equal to the task for a variety of reasons. But if lack of proper orientation towards archival research is one of the reasons, it is time that supervisors do some introspection regarding preliminary preparation of prospective M.A. students. I honestly believe it is unfair to expect from inexperienced students, who until then have merely worked with secondary material, to find their way intuitively through the labyrinths of archival material.

Preparatory work should start at Honours level, where students should be familiarised with the techniques of doing research. Guides to research methods (including techniques pertaining to the utilisation of oral sources) should be provided, seminar classes (or workshops) offered, and a visit to an archives depot or research institution arranged. Co-operation between academic institutions and archival staff should be extended in order to facilitate more efficient use of archives depots by novice researchers. Existing guides to source material are undoubtedly of great help, but one wonders whether a synoptic guide to the National Register of Manuscripts (NAREM) will not enhance the accessibility of this extremely useful tool. What I have in mind is an extremely "user-friendly" publication similar to the South African Library's *Directory of manuscript collections in southern Africa* (1986). This little volume provides invaluable information on repositories, including their addresses, visiting hours and most important manuscript collections. Containing a most useful index, it offers a fine preliminary overview of written historical records. A similar yet more complete NAREM index, compiled by computer, has the benefit that it can be updated very easily.

Judging from the steady flow of researchers to the archives depots and manuscript libraries each year, the interest in South Africa's past is growing, and statistics about visits

12. See for instance Instituut vir Eietydse Geskiedenis, *Jaarverslag*, 1989, pp.6-8.

to archives depots confirm this. Well over 3 500 "serious" researchers have annually visited the state archives depots in the early 1990s. Each year since 1990 more than 80 topics have been registered for doctoral research and nearly 90 for masters'.¹³ The Institute for Contemporary History in Bloemfontein registered 342 research visits in 1993 - excluding those by UOFS students.¹⁴

Historians, no doubt, are heavily dependent on the archives depots and libraries. Yet, one seldom finds a researcher without some form of complaint. These complaints vary from disgust about the time it takes to obtain permission for consulting documents in the "closed" period to uncomfortable chairs in the reading room, or delays in obtaining archival material ordered *via* the reading room assistant. Though there may be ground for some complaints, in general researchers in South Africa to my mind are not substantially worse off than those in other comparable countries as far as facilities are concerned. Limited archive hours used to be one of researchers' complaints, but in this respect the state archives have gone a long way to meeting their requirements by extending archives depots' hours for two days a week.

Rather than present a list of grievances, I shall instead point to a few areas of concern experienced by either academic historians or their post-graduate students. To start with, I feel that though the environment for archival research has markedly improved, the costs involved in such an undertaking remain a deterrent especially for those not fortunate enough to reside in the vicinity of an archives depot or library containing research material. Not only has M.A. research proved too costly a venture for many prospective students from disadvantaged communities; capable amateur historians who are keen to write local history have also been deterred by the financial sacrifices required for archival research. These two categories represent people who often have no or limited access to research grants at academic institutions - and even those resources have gradually been eroded by the clamps on state expenditure. Various suggestions have been made to address the problem and although there are no easy solutions, it seems as if microfilming of archival groups on a large scale offers the most viable answer.¹⁵ This is certainly not a short-term undertaking but can nevertheless produce good results over a longer period. In the Cape Archives Depot a project already exists according to which certain archives are microfilmed in their entirety for preservation purposes.¹⁶

The regionalisation of state archives,¹⁷ which has already started and will gain momentum in the near future, may also have an influence on the cost factor. While regional archives will have the benefit of reflecting the cultural heritage of a particular region, and may stimulate interest in local history, they may not necessarily be more efficient and cheaper to maintain than centralised archival depots.

Restraints on availability of documentary material can be a serious stumbling block in the way of historians attempting to find out the truth about the past. These restraints occur

13. *Jaarverslag van die Staatsargiefdiens*, 1990, p.3; 1991, p.3; 1992, p.6.

14. Instituut vir Eietydse Geskiedenis (UOVS), *Jaarverslag*, 1993, p.9.

15. J.M. Berning, "Local history: Taking the documents to the people", *S.A. Archives Journal*, vol.29, 1987, pp.23-30; Clive Kirkwood, "The distance researcher and access to archives: Some problems and suggestions", *Archives News*, XXX, 11, May 1988, pp.3-15. Although Section 8 of the Archives Act (no.6 of 1962, amended by Act No.63 of 1969, and substituted by Act No.32 of 1979) provides for the transfer of archives temporarily from one archives depot to another, the safety of these documents may be in jeopardy if this practice takes place on a regular basis.

16. *Jaarverslag van die Staatsargiefdiens*, 1990, p.6.

17. J.D. Bodel has dealt with this issue in an article entitled "Centralisation, regionalisation, and 'netwerkisation'", *Archives News*, XXIX, 8, February 1987, pp.12-15.

in the form of deliberate destruction of state documents and in selective embargoes placed on certain private documents. As far as the destruction of state documents is concerned, one may refer, for instance, to the destruction of magistrate court records. Dealing with this particular matter, Michele Pickover in a recent paper has made the point that the Archives Act is not being consistently implemented which results in "arbitrary access to the archives". Archivists, she argues, should not merely be passive record administrators, subserviently obeying the wishes of a particular government. They do have a moral obligation to truth and should therefore, in the interest of historical writing, uphold the principle that state documents also belong to the public and should therefore be protected from wilful manipulation by politicians and administrators.¹⁸

Selective embargoes on private and certain state documents are another thorn in the flesh of researchers. As far as state documents are concerned, there are theoretically no serious obstacles for researchers in getting access to documents. Section 9 of the Archives Act emphatically states that "every member of the public shall, free of charge, have access...to all archives and accessions in archives depots and intermediate depots" within the so-called "open" period. Sub-section (4) even provides for permission to access to documents in the "closed" period. The catch, however, is sub-section (2) (i), which stipulates that the "Minister [of National Education] may on the ground of public policy direct that access to any such archives or accessions be withheld..."¹⁹ The word "public policy" apparently has such a wide scope of coverage that any possible reason to withhold documents from researchers has been found by bureaucrats in state departments through the years. Obviously these bureaucrats must have then advised the Minister of National Education not to make any possible documents available for research which might have the faintest smell of sensitive issues. The Department of Foreign Affairs especially has for years denied researchers access to documents in an arbitrary way, a practice which hopefully has come to an end now. Although personnel of the South African Archives Service maintain that consultations between themselves and representatives of state departments do take place regarding restrictions on documents, I am still of the opinion that "public policy" too often serves as a pretext for not making all documents of a state department in the "open period" available to researchers. Therefore Section 9 (2) (1) should be scrapped. Perhaps historians in South Africa have to blame themselves for not putting enough pressure on autocratic measures by state departments. British historians set the example by launching a successful public campaign for the reduction of the "closed period" from 50 to 30 years.²⁰

Embargoes on private documents are admittedly often related to conditions laid down by donors of documents. The nett result of such conditions is a variety of restrictions imposed upon historical researchers by research institutions. These restrictions include limited access to documents and prescriptions about the photocopying of such documents. In some cases researchers may be required to submit their written drafts for approval to the institution where they have consulted the documents as a prerequisite for having access to certain documents.²¹

What would be the rationale behind these embargoes? Fear of public exposure seems

18. Michele Pickover, "Destruction of archival material from an archivist's viewpoint" (Unpublished paper presented at a seminar of the South African Society of Archivists, 18 August 1994), pp.1-8.

19. Statutes of the Republic of South Africa, *Archives Act*, no. 6 of 1962, p.23.

20. John Tosh, *The pursuit of history: Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history*, 2nd edition, London, 1993, p.50.

21. D.J. Jacobs, "Instituut vir Eietydse Geskiedenis: Een-en-twintig jaar van diens", *S.A. Argiefblad*, vol.34, 1992, pp.17-19.

to be the most important reason for restricting researchers. High profile public figures tend to place embargoes on some documents they donate because of their involvement in controversial matters; if the part they played in certain events is uncovered through documents which they have donated to archives or libraries, their good names or reputations might be damaged. More often than not they wish to protect their families or other prominent people holding high offices from embarrassment.

To my mind the selective opening up of documents, placing embargoes on some material, inevitably leads to suspicion and speculation about the reasons for such an embargo, which in turn stimulates conjecture about the person's part in a controversial issue. The whispers of skeletons in the cupboard could potentially be more harmful than revealing the truth in the first place. Of course there are limits to access to an individual's private papers, and nobody expects that a person should make personal matters available to the public eye. And because of human nature, important public figures for various reasons will always regard certain matters as sensitive, no matter what disagreement there is about the matter. I am nevertheless of the opinion that donors should be persuaded, in a most tactful way, to consider presenting their papers, especially those on public matters, without reservations. Archives depots and libraries are responsible institutions which among other functions preserve documents to facilitate scientific research. Likewise, the serious historian's motive is to find out the truth about the past, striving to be as fair and objective as possible. Stressing this mutual commitment to professionalism, fears of possible defamation might be largely allayed.

Concluding this article by stressing disadvantages of archives to researchers, would be a distortion of reality. I believe there is a common interest between archivist and historian regarding the evidence of the past - an interest binding them together. The archivist unlocks the raw material; the historian uses it, attempting to reconstruct the past in a meaningful way. It is a symbiosis which should be valued and maintained; and therefore the channels of communication should be kept open.