

REVIEWS

Donors and Archives: A Guidebook for Successful Programs

By Aaron D. Purcell. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015. 238 pp. Softcover. \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-8108-9217-0.

To a great degree, the agenda of archives is made possible and propelled forward by donors. Without someone transferring records to the archives, the archives remains empty and pointless. Archives and archivists only rarely tread into those worlds where records are obtained without the intercession of a donor or where records are bought from a dealer, years after the death of the records' creator. So why does the archival literature so infrequently address the topic of donors?

In the full run of *The American Archivist*, only nineteen articles include “donor” or “donors” in their abstracts. I cannot find another single monograph focused on the issue of donors to archives. Aaron Purcell himself, the author of *Donors and Archives*, provides a literature review that uncovers no other monograph. This book appears to have become, at the moment of its publication, the entirety of the monographic literature on a topic central to the practice of archives. The answer to the question I asked a paragraph ago seems to be answered in the pages of *Donors and Archives* itself, where Purcell notes that archivists simply do not focus much on donor relations. Instead—and here I am speaking—they seem to have determined that donor relations is a simple and obvious practice that requires little skill, one that will not even increase the practitioner's skill after considered repetition. Archivists as a whole have concluded that there is nothing to learn here, that dealing with people (rather than being extremely complex) is one of the simplest human activities, merely because we do it every day.

Purcell believes otherwise. With fifteen years practicing donor relations at two institutions and with multiple archival and historical books under his belt, he has decided to focus on donors from an archivist's point of view. He wrote this book principally because of the dearth of information in the field. Purcell also wrote it to correct the sometimes erratic and erroneous information parlayed between archivists on those rare occasions when we discuss the issue as a professional practice—rather than as a set of anecdotes about the engaging

personalities and strange storage areas we have encountered during our dealings with donors.

This book engages seriously with its subject and creates a framework for managing donors and donations of records in a systematic, professional manner designed to increase the chances for success and reduce the opportunity for error and disappointment. Purcell asks the reader to rethink what “donor” means. First, he proposes that we also see as donors those who are required by law or internal policy to transfer records to the archives. Instead of seeing donors as being only those people divesting themselves of accumulated papers on their own accord, he suggests that the government records officer in charge of official records and the corporate administrative officer with similar responsibilities are also donors. They may or may not want to transfer the records. They may or may not help ensure the efficient transfer of those records, depending on how the archivist interacts with them, explains the process, and allays any unfounded concerns. Second, he suggests that we must see as donors anyone who donates anything to an archives, rather than only those who donate records. In Purcell’s mind, those who donate money (as in benefactors) and those who donate time (as in volunteers) are simply other types of donors who give the archives something it needs in order to succeed.

Most importantly, however, Purcell creates a framework within which we can manage donors and donations well. This framework outlines processes and concepts that allow donor relations to become a truly professional activity in archives. He suggests the steps in any donation: contact, negotiation, examination, agreement, and transfer. He details the work that continues with donors even after the finalization of a transfer. He discusses personality types of donors. He calls on archivists to work closely with their development offices, where they exist, to ensure coordination of any work with potential donors to archives. He calls on archivists to develop donor plans and detailed donor profiles to guide us in developing, maintaining, and documenting any donor program. In doing all of this, Purcell sets the stage for a serious, profession-wide discussion of donor relations as a core professional activity—rather than an accidental endeavor that occurs only when a wayfaring donor steps unannounced into our presence bearing what looks suspiciously unlike gifts.

Throughout the book, Purcell provides practical detail (a list of items necessary for any site visit kit), personal experience (a large number of anonymized and abbreviated case studies), and professional know-how (information on how donor relations fits within the management of any archives). The book also has the advantage of being extremely readable. Neither academically turgid nor pointlessly simplistic, the book presents itself as a practical tool for the busy archivist. Its language is simple and direct, insights are many, and its structure supports comprehension on first reading and easy lookup when the book starts

to bear its sweetest fruits to its readers: later, when we refer back to it as a guide.

One of the most valuable benefits of this book is that it carefully lays out how to think of donors as real human beings, with quirks and strengths and, most importantly, with distinct differences. The book tries to train us how to understand and work with the broad array of donors we might deal with in our archival lives, so that we can achieve success for all involved. All of this makes this a deeply humanistic book, one concerned with the management of archives but also one that understands the human core, the human purpose, of any work. Purcell takes us to this purpose by making sure we consider the issues that might concern a potential donor as well as the personality that drives that person toward those concerns. Although, or maybe because, this type of insight is uncommon in archival literature, I found it refreshing. Given that the topic of this book is donors, I found this insight essential to its success.

Still, every human endeavor has both strengths and weaknesses, and this one has the latter as well. Despite the remarkable readability of the book, too often Purcell's drive for universality encourages him to add unnecessary words to sentences. Rather than mention "records" in general, he catalogs record types one might find a donor trying to donate. Instead of saying that records exist in many formats, he provides an almost exhaustive list of their general types. As he tries to leave no stone unturned, he sometimes disturbs enough dust to obscure, slightly, the point of what he is saying. This need for exhaustiveness adds sentences to paragraphs that were already finished, paragraphs to chapters that had made their points. These are not huge weaknesses, but they slow the reader in an otherwise fast read. Possibly 10 percent of the book could have been edited away with no loss of value.

The one simple intellectual issue in the book that never quite works is Purcell's redefinition of "donor." It is easy enough to accept as donors those officers of organizations required to transfer records to an archives—and I found that a useful insight, one that can help us better conceptualize our work with such people. Even describing donors of money as a subtype of donor to an archives is a common meaning in archivy. (The current *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* includes this sense within its single, broad definition of "donor.") But the book never fully addresses donor relations for this donor subtype, focusing instead almost entirely on those who give records to an archives. Although a case can also be made to include volunteers (donors of time) in our profession's definition of "donor," the case is relatively weak, and the book ends up addressing this subtype only tangentially. In the end, "donor," as used in our field, refers to those people or institutions who donate archival records to any archives, whether or not those donors are the creators of those records or simply their current owners.

These are small quibbles. This book opens a new world for archivists, one that was always there but which few of us could ever see through the fog of our focus on the more technical issues in the field. This book is a call to action, a roadmap, and an avuncular advisor all at once. *Donors and Archives* codifies something core to the archival enterprise yet one treated with something worse than disdain—with neglect borne out of our certainty there was just too little there to consider. Now, our consideration can begin, and we can thank Aaron Purcell for getting us started.

Geof Huth

New York State Unified Court System

Preserving Our Heritage: Perspectives from Antiquity to the Digital Age

Edited by Michele Valerie Cloonan. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2015. 736 pp.
Softcover. \$110.00. ISBN 978-1-55570-937-2.

This monumental work by editor Michele V. Cloonan serves as a survey and commentary on the cultural preservation and conservation literature from 740 BC to today. Cloonan, dean emerita and professor of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College, has thoughtfully built upon her expertise as editor-in-chief of *Preservation, Digital Technology and Culture* and her service on the editorial boards of *Libri*, *Libraries and Culture*, and *Library Quarterly* to create a magisterial summary of core preservation writings. Compiling preservation literature thematically focused on libraries, archives, museums, information sciences, informatics, and historic preservation (architecture), as well as the preservation of time-based media and digital preservation, this work presents the reader with an enriched and condensed source of core readings in a single volume. Cloonan thoroughly covers the management issues of what work should be done, where, and with what resources; who should do the work and why; and why we are attempting to preserve these materials and for whom, and how they will be shared.

This volume does not focus on how preservation work should be done, as a step-by-step manual might. Instead, *Preserving Our Heritage* explains and expands upon a unified field theory of cultural preservation that is essential for anyone teaching graduate students in archives, library science, museums, informatics, or historic preservation. It will also be useful for those attempting to broaden their knowledge of the field of preservation. The volume is organized around the following topics: history (early perspectives); context (libraries, archives,