

REVIEWS

Elisabeth Kaplan, Editor

The Biographer's Tale

By A. S. Byatt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001. 305 pp. \$24.00. ISBN 0-375-41114-3.

A. S. Byatt, the British author and critic whose 1990 novel, *Possession*, won the Booker Prize and captured the imaginations of readers worldwide, has produced in *The Biographer's Tale* another literary mystery constructed around the attempted unraveling of primary source materials. As the work opens, narrator and protagonist Phineas G. Nanson, a student of postmodern literary theory, suddenly decides to abandon his studies. His resolution is sparked by “an urgent need for a life full of *things* . . . full of facts” (p. 7). Professor Oremond Goode responds to this explanation by musing on the nature of facts and their place in scholarship, speculating that “the art of biography is a despised art because it is an art of things, of facts, of arranged facts” (p. 7). He suggests that Nanson might find it interesting to read Scholes Destry-Scholes’s excellent but little-known biography of Sir Elmer Bole, a Victorian polymath, as he embarks on his new life.

Despite an initial skepticism of the merits of biography as a literary and scholarly form, Nanson becomes engrossed in Destry-Scholes’s biographical study of Bole. As he examines and reexamines this monumental three-volume work, Nanson finds himself increasingly intrigued by the biographer rather than his subject, marveling at Destry-Scholes’s masterful storytelling and arrangement of facts. His admiration leads him to form the project of writing a biography of Destry-Scholes, reasoning that “only a biography seemed an appropriate form for the great biographer” (p. 26). With this decision begins Nanson’s adventure into the world of facts and things, a quest which soon leaves both Nanson and the reader questioning the very nature of facts and their limits.

Nanson commences his research on Destry-Scholes enthusiastically enough, looking up the biographer’s birth and death records, writing to his publishers, and advertising for pertinent information. His efforts to piece together the life of Destry-Scholes are soon stymied, however, by scant primary source material. The few documents he locates—notes for a lecture on the “Art of Biography,” three cryptic manuscripts which appear to be uncompleted

biographical sketches, and two shoeboxes full of index cards and photographs—are ambiguous and fragmentary. Faced with this paucity of sources, Nanson laments that Destry-Scholes “was very good at finding out other personages, but left no tracks of who he was” (p. 118).

During the course of his research, Nanson develops relationships with two women. Fulla Biefield, a Swedish bee taxonomist, translates passages from primary source materials that Nanson uncovers. Vera Alphage, a radiographer and, coincidentally, the niece of Destry-Scholes, provides him with an odd assortment of her uncle’s possessions, including most significantly the aforementioned index cards and photographs. Nanson is also diverted by accepting employment at Puck’s Girdle, a quirky travel agency which specializes in designing unusual vacations. Ultimately, the results of Nanson’s research prove unsatisfactory, and what he had intended as a biography of Destry-Scholes becomes, to his purported chagrin, an autobiographical account of his ill-fated attempt (and its subsequent abandonment) to document the great biographer.

Of particular interest in *The Biographer’s Tale*—to archivists, researchers, and general readers alike—is the interweaving of the primary source materials, several of which (the lecture notes, the three manuscripts, and some of the index cards and photographs) Byatt includes in Nanson’s text. The manuscripts (which he concludes are three separate, but somehow interconnected, biographical sketches) play a pivotal role in the narrative. From beginning to end, however, there is an aura of mystery about these documents. Indeed, their subjects, whom Nanson identifies as historical figures—a taxonomist, a statistician, and a dramatist—are referred to only by initials. Moreover, there is something fantastical and surreal about the manuscripts, and Nanson’s research suggests that these accounts represent a complex web of truths, half-truths, and untruths. The index cards, which Nanson spends a considerable amount of time attempting to arrange into related clusters, seem to be the notes from which these accounts were constructed, but shed little light on either the biographical accounts or Destry-Scholes’s purpose in writing them. Nanson is left to speculate about Destry-Scholes’s motives, wondering, “Was this a wry comment on the hopeless nature of the project of biographical accuracy, or was it just a wild and whimsical kicking-over of the traces?” (p. 273).

In the end, the mystery of Destry-Scholes and his manuscripts remains unresolved and unsolved, and Nanson notes the conspicuous absence of his intended subject from the narrative, conceding that he “appeared to have failed to find Destry-Scholes himself” (p. 248). Like Nanson’s search for Destry-Scholes, *The Biographer’s Tale* itself has about it an air of incompleteness, refusing to resolve itself neatly in the manner of Byatt’s earlier literary mystery, *Possession*. While initially frustrating, this lack of resolution appears to result more from design than from accident. Had all the facts fallen into place neatly, had all the loose ends been tidied up and tucked away, had all the mysteries been solved, *The Biographer’s Tale* might have been more satisfying to readers’

expectations, but it no doubt would have been a lesser work as a result. It is the uncertainty and ambiguity of the novel that requires readers to reevaluate the nature of facts and what they think they know about facts, to consider the limits of primary source materials and of scholarship, and to wonder to what extent it is ever possible to construct a definitive whole from fragmentary parts. Perhaps these are some thoughts that archivists and users of archives, with their faith in and respect for documents and primary source materials, might do well to take away from *The Biographer's Tale*.

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All the Names

By José Saramago. Translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa. New York: Harcourt, 1999. 238 pp. \$24.00 ISBN 0-151-00421-8.

All the Names, the recent novel by Nobel Laureate José Saramago, can be added to the list of fictional works featuring archives and archivists. This particular novel takes place in the Central Registry, an imposing edifice with nameless clerks, which contains information on the births, marriages, and deaths of a faceless citizenry. The protagonist, Senhor José, is a low-level clerk who has long worked for the Central Registry. The novel begins just as Senhor José commences an investigation that will lead him and the Central Registry down a path that signals parallel changes in both Senhor José and in the Registry. The linkage of Senhor José and the Central Registry is literal as well as metaphorical. Senhor José lives in the last of several clerk's houses that were physically attached to the Registry. The house features a door leading directly between it and the Registry. When the novel begins, this door has not been used for some time, but it is about to be opened.

The Central Registry acts as an instrument of both control and memory. The ultimately irreconcilable tension between control and memory within the Registry is a central theme of the novel. Saramago presents the institution as a mechanism of control, one that is both feared and revered among the populace. Citizens are at once fearful and respectful of interactions with the office and are anxious to assist in ensuring that the information is correct. The Central Registry also embodies memory. It contains *all the names*. Two large card indexes (catalogs) trace the journey from the catalog of the living to the catalog of the dead. "The papers pertaining to those no longer alive are to be found in a more or less organized state in the rear of the building, the back wall of which, from time to time, had to be demolished and rebuilt" (p. 3). At the beginning of the novel, though, the desire to control outweighs the impetus for memory.

The Central Registry is also presented as an anonymous bureaucracy; it is slow to change and deliberate in actions. “The whole building had the air of a ruin fixed in time” (p. 155). The work routines of the Central Registry also bear the stamp of bureaucracy. Little change has occurred, and the meaning of some routines has been lost. The Registrar explains, “I am aware that times have changed, I am aware of society’s need for a continuous updating of working methods and processes, but I understand, as did those who were in charge of the Central Registry before me, that the preservation of the spirit, of the spirit of what I call continuity and organic identity, must prevail over any other consideration, for if we fail to proceed along that path, we will witness the collapse of the moral edifice which, as the first and last depositories of life and death, we continue here to represent. . . there will be those who consider us to be ridiculously frozen in time, who demand of the government the rapid introduction into our work of advanced technologies, but while it is true that laws and regulations can be altered and substituted at any moment, the same cannot be said of traditions, which is, as such, both in form and sense, immutable” (p. 173). The anonymity of the institution is also notable. It is nameless in terms of the employees who are generally referred to by title, e.g., the Registrar (no one is referred to by name except Senhor José). This bureaucracy is also faceless because although it collects information on people, what is really known about these citizens is incomplete and lacks context. “In the Central Registry there were only words, in the Central Registry you could not see how the faces had changed or continued to change, when that was precisely what was most important, the thing that time changes, not the name which never changes” (p. 91).

Yet traditions do change. It is by accident that Senhor José and the Central Registry begin a journey moving from control to memory. Senhor José is a collector of information about celebrities. He copies the vital statistics of these individuals from their cards in the Registry, adds information clipped from newspapers and magazines, and creates scrapbooks and context for these very public persons. This hobby takes a turn when Senhor José enters the Central Registry through the connecting door after hours and inadvertently pulls the card of an ordinary woman along with the cards of celebrities. He becomes obsessed with finding out about this woman: who she is, where she lives, and what kind of person she has become. The book traces Senhor José as he attempts to recover the memory of “the unknown woman” by understanding a context for her that includes photographs, school records, and information from friends, parents, and colleagues. In the midst of his search, the unknown woman commits suicide and Senhor José must again enter the Central Registry in the night to recover her index card from the catalog of the dead.

The novel focuses on the impossibility of really knowing another person and if known, the difficulty of holding on to that memory. At one point, Senhor José’s search takes him to a cemetery. Once there, Senhor José discovers that a shepherd who grazes his sheep in the cemetery also switches the numerical tags

that denote who is buried where, prior to the placement of headstones. Senhor José muses, “Why, it’s hard to explain, it’s all to do with knowing where the people we’re looking for really are, he [the shepherd] thinks we’ll never know.” But, in the end, Senhor José’s quest to remember the unknown woman is assisted by a surprising source. The Registrar has been monitoring Senhor José’s after-hours searching in the Central Registry. Together they conspire to change the unknown woman’s records by creating a new card without a death date and refileing it in the catalog of the living. They come to the conclusion that the only way to maintain the woman’s memory and thus the true tradition and spirit of the Central Registry (remembering and maintaining a memory of all the names) is to falsify information and thus save the Central Registry from the bureaucratic mentalité.

This falsification may offend some archivist-readers among us. But, Saramago raises the issues of exactly what the ultimate mission of the archives is and how this mission can best be achieved. In the process, he provides us with a compelling story of a journey of discovery.

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A Guide to the Archival Care of Architectural Records, 19th–20th Centuries

By Maygene Daniels, Louis Cardinal, Robert Desaulniers, David Peyceré, Cécile Souchon and Andrée Van Nieuwenhuysen. Paris: International Council on Archives, 2000. viii, 150 pp. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Available from the Society of American Archivists, \$20 members, \$26 non members.

Blueprints to Bytes: Architectural Records in the Electronic Age

By the Massachusetts Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records. Boston: MassCOPAR, 2000. 37 pp. Available from the Society of American Archivists, \$14 members, \$24 nonmembers.

Once, not too many years ago, it was difficult for archivists to find any guidelines on handling architectural records. Most archival institutions were not paying any sort of attention to these important materials. They were viewed, in fact, as mysterious, difficult, and awkward and therefore to be avoided, if at all possible. Happily, that situation has dramatically changed. Many libraries and archives have established collecting programs in architectural records in the past decade and a half, bringing a corresponding increase in the amount

of cross-talk among archivists. The Architectural Records Roundtable within the SAA, for example, has become an excellent source for the exchange of ideas, problems, and solutions. At the same time, a number of manuals and guides have appeared, providing archivists with guidance and advice in all aspects of the management of architectural records. Some, including *Toward Standards for Architectural Archives* (1984), *Proceedings of the Symposium on the Appraisal of Architectural Records* (1985), and *Documenting Twentieth-Century Architecture: Problems and Issues* (a special issue of *the American Archivist*, 1996), came out of conferences. Others, such as the SAA's own *Archives & Manuscripts: Maps and Architectural Drawings* (1982), Francoise Hildesheimer's *The Processing of Architects' Records* (1987), Porter and Thorne's *A Guide to the Description of Architectural Drawings* (1994), and *Architectural Photoreproductions: a Manual for Identification and Care* (1999) by Kissel and Vigneau, were designed and written as self-help manuals. The result is that now an outstanding array of articles, manuals, and Web-based information is available to assist archivists in dealing with architectural records.

A Guide to the Archival Care of Architectural Records 19th-20th Centuries is a product of the Architectural Records Section of the International Council on Archives. Its information is by no means new, but then the book has no such pretenses. As its introduction is quick to point out, the guide "does not claim to solve all the practical problems associated with the care of architectural records." It is a practical, basic manual, aimed chiefly at archivists in Europe and America who have relatively little experience with architectural records. Archivists more experienced in the field will probably not find the guide particularly helpful, and will gain from supplementing it with those guides that offer a more detailed treatment of specific questions and issues.

Despite its title, the guide deals almost exclusively with records produced in the twentieth-century. It consists of seven chapters, each written by a different author and covering a specific topic. The first chapter defines the various types of architectural records. It is followed by six chapters that range through acquisition principles, appraisal, arrangement, description, conservation, and access and dissemination (including research and exhibition). The manual was composed by English and French authors who write from their own experience. This mix of European and American viewpoints produces occasional awkwardness. For example, the opening chapter on record types is written with French architectural records in mind, and the terminology and techniques, especially of printing, may, at times, be somewhat alien to U.S. archivists. In fact, the authors, Andree Van Nieuwenhuysen and David Peycere, admit that "the situation in the U.S. seems to be fairly different from that which can be observed in France." Overall, however, the guide will serve well for most archival situations in North America and Europe.

The most useful sections for American readers are those dealing with appraisal (by Robert Desaulniers of the Canadian Centre for Architecture),

arrangement and description (by Maygene Daniels of the National Gallery of Art), and conservation (by Louis Cardinal of the National Archives of Canada). Desaulniers not only addresses the archival audience but also devotes three pages to the management of records in architects' offices, a subject often missed in such guides. Daniels presents a clear and comprehensible summary of how architectural collections should be organized and offers helpful suggestions for the construction of finding aids, using terminology familiar to American archivists. Cardinal's chapter on conservation manages to pack a huge amount of information (including a bibliography) into just twenty-seven pages. These chapters deal efficiently and effectively with issues that often perplex newcomers to the field, and could well be disseminated as freestanding documents by themselves.

The guide's main weakness, and it is an important one, is the lack of adequate attention to the problems presented by CAD-generated records. Except for a few brief references to the new technologies being employed to create construction drawings, consideration of architectural records in electronic formats is ignored. An entire chapter should have been devoted to this topic, especially at a time when archivists are begging for answers to the problems inherent in preserving electronic records. The ICA designed the manual to be regularly revised and leaves the door open for a future edition that will include the study and discussion of problems presented by the "increasing importance of computers." Nonetheless, this omission serves to make the present guide less pertinent and, as a result contributes to its more rapid obsolescence.

A helpful list of suggestions for further reading is to be found at the end of the book and includes most of the important literature produced in the past three decades. There is no index, the inclusion of which would certainly extend the usefulness of the manual's otherwise excellent organization. Its 8 1/2 by 11-inch format is convenient to handle and the spiral binding further contributes to its practicality. The illustrations are well placed, although the small formats of some of them result in a consequent loss of detail. Still, the guide is a worthwhile contribution to the literature currently available concerning architectural records, the care and preservation of which should no longer be a cause for uncertainty among archivists.

In a sense, *Blueprints to Bytes* continues where *A Guide to the Archival Care of Architectural Records* leaves off. *Blueprints to Bytes* comprises the proceedings of a conference held by the Massachusetts Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records (MassCOPAR) at the Boston Architectural Center on March 12, 1999. The proceedings are concerned with how CAD-generated records are created and their future preservation. While not going into lavish detail about specific steps that can be taken to ensure their preservation, the book (actually, it is small enough to be called a "booklet") does a good job of summarizing the problems inherent in the creation and preservation of electronic records and offering some practical answers to a critical issue.

The book is divided into three sections. The first is a talk delivered by William J. Mitchell, professor of architecture and media arts and sciences and dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT. Mitchell's address is entitled "New Digital Technologies in Architecture and their Implications for Architectural Records." It is a fascinating glimpse into the contemporary world of digital technology as applied to the creation of architectural records, stressing mainly three dimensional CAD modeling. He points out the inevitable and obvious problems—namely, that digital formats are constantly changing and that, in order to preserve these kinds of records, the software, the operating systems, and possibly the hardware have to be saved to read the data files. He offers no solutions, but instead leaves it to the archival profession to deal with. Unfortunately for the reader, Mitchell's lecture was illustrated, and the illustrations do not appear in the text. Thus the reader, finding references to the slides being shown, can only imagine what they look like. Not to have at least some of them included for reference is frustrating, but one assumes that publication cost was a major issue in the decision to omit them.

Tawny Ryan Nelb, the main speaker gave a lecture entitled, "Protecting Your Investment: Will Your CAD Drawings Be There When You Need Them?" This is a look at the development of computer-assisted design from its earliest beginnings to the present, and the preservation problems accompanying it. Part of the thrust of Nelb's message is the lack of attention paid to the preservation of electronic records by the architects themselves (not to mention their historic disinterest in caring for their paper records), leaving much of this to the archivists to try to resolve. She also correctly points out that CAD systems were never meant to be archival tools; that most of the media—including software—is transitory in nature and highly susceptible to rapid obsolescence; and that architects using CAD (and most are these days) develop everything from the earliest concept schematics to the final construction drawings electronically, often failing to save many of the steps in between in either electronic form or hard copy. And, of course, Web-based project management (WPM) (an exceedingly handy tool for architects and contractors to instantaneously exchange information regarding an on going job), absolutely boggles the mind, as Ms. Nelb quite graphically points out. Because the data on a particular project is often in partial form and in several offices, WPM makes it extremely difficult to bring together and permanently retain such records as well as determine which parts of a project came from which source. After surveying measures that archivists can take at least to stem partially some of the rising tide of long-term preservation problems, Nelb falls back on the tried-and-true conclusion: that the only proven solution to the question is to produce a hard-copy record of every project.

The third and concluding section is a panel discussion by Katherine Meyer, Brad Horst, Ted Dooling, and Ardys Kozbial. Meyer and Horst work for Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott and took turns describing how that

firm maintains its paper records and its electronic files. Dooling, of Boston Computer Scanning, discussed his experience with tape and floppy backups and how most digital files are now being saved on CD. Kozbial, from Harvard's planning and real estate office, related how her office maintains the drawings and related documents for all of Harvard's buildings, and the successes and pitfalls of trying to deal with CAD-generated records. Each section is followed by a transcript of the questions and answers from the audience and is helpful in elucidating or expanding upon points discussed in the papers.

The book is useful, but must be used as an adjunct to other related publications. It cannot and is not intended to be a stand-alone cure-all or how-to-do-it manual; instead, it is a brief survey of the problems of CAD-generated records, with suggestions for dealing with at least some of them. To that extent, the book is useful for archivists grappling with architectural records in electronic formats.

This reviewer would like to have heard someone at the conference recommend that archivists should spend more time at the firms, talking to architects and learning firsthand how they create and preserve their records. Archivists would find it revealing because, at least in the experience of this reviewer, architects, in general, are finally becoming more sensitive to the value of their records and are consequently spending more time and money to back up and migrate their electronic files. A large number of firms have devoted a great deal of their resources to the design and implementation of sophisticated systems for storing and retrieving digital records. Most firms are making hard copies for permanent reference. Archivists should therefore be happy to learn that architects evidently have, one way or another, finally gotten the message. Small comfort as it is, this may make it a bit easier to sleep at night.

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