

Archives and their communities: Collecting histories, challenging heritage

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Historians, of course, do not own the past. We all do. But because historians spend their time studying history, they are in a better position than most amateurs to make reasoned judgments. Historians, after all, are trained to ask questions, make connections, and collect and examine the evidence.¹

[H]istory is too important to be left just to the professional historians.²

The two quotations, one recent and one dating from the first issue of the *History Workshop Journal*, represent two views of an on-going debate over the relative roles of professional and 'amateur' historians and the value of the history they write. Similar debates are to be found in the heritage professions, including increasingly in relation to archives, where the tradition of archivists' sole professional responsibility for managing the materials from which histories are written has been challenged by more independent and participatory approaches. This paper seeks to identify and examine such recent changes in thinking and practice with regard to archives and the archive profession, with particular reference to research being undertaken at University College London (UCL) into independent and community archives. After identifying some of the main drivers for change within the archive sector, the paper will briefly examine traditional professional thinking and practice and then outline more contemporary views which have critiqued traditional understandings and have imagined a refigured archive, in which democratised and inclusive archives might better reflect their diverse audiences. In exploring what this refiguring might mean in practice and how it might be achieved, this paper will then introduce two separate but not unrelated developments, independent and community archives and the enabling of user participation in what have previously been

¹ Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games. The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Modern Library Chronicles, 2009), p. 43.

² Sally Alexander and Anna Davin, 'Feminist history', *History Workshop Journal* 1 (1976), pp. 4-6: 6.

considered areas reserved to the archive profession. It will be argued, that linked by technology and a commitment to democratising archives and heritage work, these two developments (along with others) have the potential to alter significantly how we think about archives and the (hi)stories they tell. Although for a long time the archive profession ignored or dismissed these initiatives, and many remain concerned about these on-going challenges to their professional 'authority', others are now exploring the ways in which a transformed profession might seek to embrace these developments as a means of diversifying and democratising archives and the histories that are, in part, written from them.

Archives in transition

Archivists, the way we think about archives and perhaps even the archives themselves are going through a period of transition and change. Even the word 'archive' has multiple meanings and is open to change and debate. As a noun, archive can stand for the collection and the documents preserved for future use (on the basis of some recognition of their continuing value). It can mean the physical building or space (or even digital space) where such a collection is held. It can also mean the idea of a memory space. As a verb, 'to archive' signifies an act but again one with multiple meaning. In using the term 'archiving' an individual or organisation might be variously describing assigning long-term preservation status to a physical or digital object, the more transitory movement of a file from the in-box to a filing system, the putting of something away in order to be forgotten, or conversely writing something into the record in order to be remembered. The agent of that act – the archivist – sometimes describes a professional (frequently someone who has received training in the academic discipline of archives and records management) but increasingly also refers to those whose archival responsibilities are assumed voluntarily, either personally or on behalf of others, and without professional training.³

These definitions of what an archive is or what the word 'archive' means are not fixed but evolve and change, in part responding to their adoption and use by others, including those involved in independent grassroots heritage activity and those working with information technologies. Not everyone welcomes these 'nonprofessional appropriations', seeing them as 'a challenge to our position as

³ See definitions and references for 'Archives' in Richard Peace-Moses, 'A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology', Society of American Archivists 2005 and available from <<http://www.archivists.org/glossary/>>.

professional archivists',⁴ but in fact such appropriations and changes in meaning are inevitable in light of ongoing fundamental changes in the nature of archives and the responsibilities of those who work with them.

A range of separate but perhaps also inter-related developments in terms of technological advances, public policy priorities (especially with regard to social and economic impacts), and shifts in political and cultural thinking are all responsible for changes in our understanding of the archive. First, developments in technology over the last fifty years but especially over the last twenty-five years have transformed how we think of archives and records. The need to consider the preservation and accessibility of digital content ranging from what is held on the PC (or Mac) on everyone's desk, to the expansion of communication media from email to text and instant messaging, and of course the web and social computing, has transformed our understanding of what a record or an archive might 'look like' and what needs to be done and when, to ensure its survival.

Second, since the 1960s, a growing challenge to the legitimacy of authority and authoritative voices within society, and in this case in particular a decline in the acceptance of the right of heritage institutions to tell histories especially when those histories have persistently under-represented or misrepresented many groups within society, has led to a fundamental questioning of the basis on which archives, museums, historians and other practitioners of public history operate. Many of these under-represented groups have responded to their persistent invisibility and/or misrepresentation, by seeking to control and tell their own stories. Stuart Hall described the resulting twin pressures on heritage organisations thus:

a decline in the acceptance of the traditional authorities in authenticating the interpretative and analytic frameworks which classify, place, compare and evaluate culture; and the concomitant rise in the demand to re-appropriate control over the 'writing of one's own story' as part of a wider process of cultural liberation.⁵

Finally the whole heritage sector, again including archives, has been for the last ten or more years subject to the need to demonstrate its relevance to a whole range of public policy agendas including lifelong learning, health, social inclusion and exclusion, neighbourhood renewal, community cohesion, liveability and well-being. Whilst much of the

⁴ William Maher, 'Archives, archivists, and society', *American Archivist* 61:2 (1998), pp. 252–265: 254.

⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Whose heritage? Un-settling 'the heritage', re-imagining the post-nation', in J. Littler and R. Naidoo, eds., *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of 'Race'* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 23–35: 28.

evidence for such relevance remains somewhat superficial and although the sector has moved beyond rather simplistic economic measurements of impact and to more social and cultural measures of value, it still remains the case that archives must continue to seek to demonstrate their relevance and engagement beyond their traditional audiences. The next section will try to examine the implications of these changes in the context and expectation in which the archive sector operates by briefly exploring what might crudely be termed ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ views of the archive.

Traditional views of archival duties

Any discussion which seeks to contrast perceptions in terms of traditional versus new, old-fashioned versus contemporary, or conservative versus radical is likely to run the risk of reductiveness and a certain over-simplification. This is certainly a danger when applying these terms to alternative views of the archive. So for instance I am going to refer to a ‘traditionalist’ position, which in fact retains its importance and in some aspects, in response to technological changes, has actually become more influential; and I am going to describe more ‘contemporary’ and ‘radical’ views which actually have a considerable heritage. Despite these qualifications, I believe that there has been a definite shift in our understanding of archives and the archive role, and that it is important to explore and acknowledge these shifts.

The traditional view of the archive and the role of archivist – particularly in the United Kingdom as articulated by Sir Hilary Jenkinson – laid particular emphasis on the neutral, objective and evidential qualities of the archive and the passive, impartial and defensive role of the archivist. Jenkinson was Deputy Keeper of the Public Record Office in the inter-war period and through his writing (notably the *Manual of Archive Administration*, 1922 and 1937)⁶ and his role in establishing courses in archival education continued to be extremely influential on the development of the UK archive profession after the Second World War. He famously referred to the good archivist as the most ‘selfless devotee of Truth that the modern world produces’⁷ and further argued that the archivist, in order to preserve the impartiality and integrity of the archive, should not be involved in either the selection or the interpretation of the archive and that such choices should be left to others.

According to Jenkinson the primary duties of this neutral disciple of truth should be the moral and physical defence of the document (the

⁶ Hilary Jenkinson, *Manual of Archive Administration*, 2nd edn. pub.1937 (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co., 1965).

⁷ Quoted in Elizabeth Kaplan, ‘“Many paths to partial truths”: Archives, anthropology, and the power of representation’, *Archival Science* 2 (2002), pp. 209-20: 215.

preservation and safeguarding of the archive). Access and enabling use were secondary duties only to be contemplated after the primary responsibilities were completed. These primary and secondary duties were not to be reversed: 'The Archivist, then, is the servant of his Archives first and afterwards of the student Public'.⁸ Furthermore the archives themselves, if properly looked after could be guaranteed to be trustworthy, reliable, authentic and neutral records of past activities or transactions – drawn up not with posterity in mind but as a product of personal or organisational activity and preserved for administrative reference.⁹

The impact of technology and the expansion of record creation posed a challenge to Jenkinson's traditional view of the neutrality of the archivist by making the act of appraisal a central archival duty, involving the archivist in choosing what is to be preserved and what is to be destroyed, instead of this remaining the responsibility of the record creator alone. Nevertheless for many influenced by Jenkinson such developments have not fundamentally challenged their underlying view of the archive, narrowly defined and selected on the basis of its evidential value in respect to the administrative or business transactions of an organisation. An example of this is the influential yet limited definition of a record (and an archive in this case is a record deemed worthy of preservation) in the international standard for the management of records: 'Information created, received and maintained as evidence and information by an organisation or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transactions of business'.¹⁰ This view has been championed by those who have been termed the 'new traditionalists' or neo-Jenkinsonians, and who continue to assert that the authenticity and reliability of the archive can be ensured by adhering to traditional principles and basing the archive on narrow definitions of what is to be kept (transactional records) and pseudo-scientific approaches as to how these decisions are made, especially in the digital environment.

To some critics of the neo-traditional position, its stress on transaction-based archives and the neutral 'disinterested' role of the archivist results in the diminution and under-estimation of the cultural role of archives in favour of providing accountability and supporting business functions.¹¹ For historians and others interested in historical research, the implications of the (neo-)traditional position are two-fold.

⁸ Jenkinson, *Manual of Archive Administration*, pp. 15, 44.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰ ISO, *ISO 15489-1 Information and Documentation. Records Management Part 1 General* (Geneva: ISO, 2001), p. 3.

¹¹ For an account of and reflections on these debates see Terry Cook, 'What is past is prologue. A history of ideas since 1898, and the future paradigm shift', *Archivaria* 43 (1997), pp. 17–63; Mark Greene, 'The power of meaning: The archival mission in the postmodern age', *The American Archivist* 65 (2002), pp. 42–55.

First, it significantly narrows the range of materials that are kept – frequently privileging the records and archives of formal institutions, mainstream opinions and the elites in any society over the informal, the ‘people’ and the periphery, of business and government over the social realm, with the result that the histories that are written and the heritage that is constructed further favours the centre, the elite and the bureaucracy. In an early volume of the *Oral History* journal Raphael Samuel wrote of historians being at the ‘mercy’ of the limited and narrow sources available to them:

The reason why history has so often a bureaucratic bias is not I think because of a particular bias of individual historians, but very largely because bureaucratic documents are the ones most often preserved. The reason why so much of the history of the English land is the history of property is because in county record offices so many documents are deeds. Historians have very often simply followed the lines suggested by the documents.¹²

Different sources, more widely drawn, would encourage and enable the production of different histories. Secondly and crucially, an attachment to the chimera of impartiality absolves the archivist from consideration of his or her role in this bias, this narrowness, this process of exclusion.¹³ It supports the maintenance of the (self-)image of the archivist as a neutral facilitator of historical research rather than a central framer of that research and the stories that the archives tell.

Re-imagining the archive and the archivist

These ‘traditional’ perspectives have been thoroughly challenged and critiqued in recent years, resulting, in some writings, in a re-imagining or refiguring of the archive.¹⁴ Rather than an assertion of archives as ‘the authentic voice of the past speaking directly to people of the present, without intermediaries or interpretation’,¹⁵ as leading archive bodies have routinely claimed in recent years, it has become common to stress the importance of questioning the archive – how it came to be, who created it and why, what perspectives does it represent and what perspectives does it exclude? Elizabeth Kaplan has described the

¹² Raphael Samuel, ‘Headington Quarry: Recording a labouring community’, *Oral History* 4 (1972), pp. 119-20.

¹³ Verne Harris, ‘A South African archival tale,’ *ESARBICA Newsletter* 21 (2007), pp. 5-9: 8.

¹⁴ Carolyn Hamilton et al., eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2002).

¹⁵ National Council on Archives (NCA), *Strategy 2006-2009* [c.2006], p. 7; available at <http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/materials/strategy_final.pdf>

contingency, the partiality and the role of agency in the creation of an archive thus:

The pervading view of archives as sites of historical truth is at best outdated, and at worst inherently dangerous. The archival record doesn't just happen; it is created by individuals and organizations, and used, in turn, to support their values and missions, all of which comprises a process that is certainly not politically and culturally neutral.¹⁶

Similarly the neutral, impartial, passive self-image of the profession has also been thoroughly critiqued by a series of writers, inside and outside the archival discipline:

[U]ltimately, in the pursuit of their professional responsibilities, archivists – as keepers of archives – wield power over those very records central to memory and identity formation through active management of records before they come to archives, their appraisal and selection as archives, and afterwards their constantly evolving description, preservation, and use.¹⁷

Such observations are now relatively common-place within academic archival discourse and may seem obvious to many from other disciplines. However it is important to recognise that what I have termed the 'traditional' (or neo-traditional) view of professional objectivity and neutrality retains a powerful hold within the archival imagination. Nevertheless questioning the way we think about archives and archival practice is not new but has a lineage which can be traced back fifty years or more. Developments in politics and in history (both academic and public) since the 1950s have challenged the partiality and misrepresentations of dominant historical and heritage narratives, and ultimately therefore have challenged the partiality of the sources (the archives) upon which these dominant narratives rest.

The emergence of New Left and identity politics heralded the growth and development of new social, labour, oral, women's, black, queer, and cultural histories. These in turn informed and inspired ideas of how such histories were to be written and shared including history workshops and other radical heritage initiatives, and the enabling of grassroots and community histories. All these movements and endeavours embodied at heart a dissatisfaction with dominant narratives, and a desire to challenge, subvert and transform those narratives by telling other

¹⁶ Elizabeth Kaplan, 'We are what we collect, we collect what we are: Archives and the construction of identity', *American Archivist* 63 (2000), pp. 126-51: 147.

¹⁷ Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz, 'Archives, records, and power: The making of modern memory,' *Archival Science*, 2.1-2 (2002), pp. 1-19: 2.

stories, and ultimately pointed to the necessity of creating and collecting new sources on which to base these new histories. Sometimes this has resulted in individuals or groups establishing their own independent archives, libraries and museums.¹⁸

Within the archive profession, at least until recently, the influence of these arguments and developments has been more keenly felt outside the UK, with debates in the United States,¹⁹ Canada, Australia and, since 1994, South Africa²⁰ being particularly rigorous. However, even if it was not openly reflected within the professional discourse, these developments did have an impact on UK archives. The records of organised labour and to some extent working-class life were collected more systematically from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, and the awareness of the need for archive collections to better reflect the role of women within society was more widely recognised from the same time. However, archives reflecting other histories such as those of African and Asian heritage, or of gay men and women remained much rarer and largely hidden. Accompanying these changes was a growth in the use of oral history to 'fill the gaps' in historical understanding and ultimately in archive collections. In these ways progress in making collections more democratic and representative was made, particularly at a local level, but it was frequently uneven and never part of a systematic process. It often relied on committed individuals, working closely with activists and historians, rather than being a responsibility taken on by the profession as a whole.

This is beginning to change. There is a growing awareness of the role of the archive and the archivist in the construction of local and national narratives, and of a necessary duty for public archives to more faithfully reflect all sections of society, to enable the writing of histories with 'thick description'. In practice this 're-imagining' has meant a more open acknowledgement of the active and interpretative role of the archivist in moulding and defining collections, a broader and more inclusive definition of what might constitute an archive (including personal papers, diaries, ephemera, oral testimony, memory texts, objects, and perhaps performance, dance, and the built environment), and a willingness to engage and collaborate more fully with those outside the profession and its traditional audiences. To reflect further on these changes this paper will now consider two inter-related areas of 'new' archival practice which both symbolise and are driving change within the archival world and the writing of history; that is, independent or community archives, and the utilisation of community-generated or user-generated content.

¹⁸ Andrew Flinn, 'Community histories, community archives: Some opportunities and challenges', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28.2 (2007), pp. 151-176.

¹⁹ Gerald Ham, 'The archival edge', *The American Archivist* 38.1 (1975), pp. 5-13.

²⁰ Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*.

Independent or community archives

This section is informed by but does not discuss at great length research conducted at UCL entitled ‘Community Archives and Identities: documenting and sustaining community heritage’. This AHRC-funded project explored the history, motivations, impacts and challenges facing independent community archive and heritage initiatives, mainly but not exclusively focusing on the history of people of African and Asian heritage in England, and in London in particular. The research has looked at four of these archives in detail, employing a participatory-observation approach, and working closely with each archive on an almost daily basis over a three or four month period. Among other things the project sought to understand better what inspires volunteers and activists to set up and support these initiatives and what challenges they face, and to try to appreciate their impact particularly in articulating alternative or otherwise misrepresented histories. Further details and results from this research can be found elsewhere so this paper will merely briefly introduce the idea of independent and community archives and indicate some of the impacts that they can have on archival thinking and the production of history.²¹

What then are community archives? The terminology is problematic since the meaning of the term ‘community’ is obviously contested, and not one that everyone working in independent archives would want to use. Nor is ‘archive’ always a meaningful or helpful description for those working in these endeavours. Terms such as community museum or library, resource centre, oral history or local heritage project are frequently used to refer to very similar types of activity. Nevertheless in the last few years the term ‘community archive’ (or perhaps better independent community archive) has gained broader currency and some level of wider acceptance. Internationally the term has a variety of interpretations. In Canada it can refer to a local archive funded and supported by local government, whilst in the USA and Australia it is used to refer to informal local archives as well as ‘minority’ archives. In

²¹ UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project, ‘Community Archives and Identities: documenting and sustaining community heritage’, 2008-2009. The research team comprised Andrew Flinn, Elizabeth Shepherd and Mary Stevens. This research would not have been possible without the help and partnership provided by all our case studies (Future Histories, rukus!, Moroccan Memories, Eastside Community Heritage) and all the other participants and interviewees. See for further details, including the final report and recommendations <<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/icarus/community-archives/>>. Some relevant publications include Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens, “‘It is noh mistri, wi mekin histri.’ Telling our own story: Independent and community archives in the United Kingdom, challenging and subverting the mainstream’, in Jeannette Bastian and Ben Alexander eds., *Community Archives. The Shaping of Memory* (London: Facet, 2009); and Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens and Elizabeth Shepherd, ‘Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream,’ *Archival Science*, 9:1-2 (2009), pp. 71-86.

South Africa, a 1998 article used GALA (the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa) to exemplify community archives as 'archival initiatives that place in the foreground the perspectives of communities – as defined by and for communities themselves'.²²

In the UK, community archives and the community archives movement incorporates in its definition both locally focussed heritage endeavours and those more politically motivated activist archives. The Community Archives and Heritage Group which seeks to act as a forum and representative body for community archives defines them as inclusively as possible:

Community archives and heritage initiatives come in many different forms (large or small, semi-professional or entirely voluntary, long-established or very recent, in partnership with heritage professionals or entirely independent) and seek to document the history of all manner of local, occupational, ethnic, faith and other diverse communities [...] By collecting, preserving and making accessible documents, photographs, oral histories and many other materials which document the histories of particular groups and localities, community archives and heritage initiatives make an invaluable contribution to the preservation of a more inclusive and diverse local and national heritage.²³

In these definitions what is notable about community archives is their variety (in terms of the communities they seek to represent, the organisational forms they take, and their levels of autonomy) as well as the wide range of materials that they collect and in many cases actively create. In terms of the traditional archival understandings discussed earlier, community archives operate within much looser, much broader frameworks where ephemera, objects, works of art, performance, autobiography and oral testimony are all core parts of their collections and are fundamental to the heritage and histories they wish to preserve and share. Our research at UCL distinguished the differences between the motivations and objectives of two types of activity, that is between essentially local history and the more politically inspired archives we mainly studied. However there are also certain similarities in the way that these are all generally grassroots activities which emerge from and are in some respect answerable to the 'communities' they seek to represent, and also in their concern to record and preserve a history that is not, in the minds of those involved, otherwise properly represented.

²² Kathy Eales, 'Community archives: Introduction.' *South African Archives Journal* 40 (1998), pp. 11-15.

²³ Community Archives and Heritage Group, 'Our Vision' (2009), available at: <http://www.communityarchives.org.uk/documents/CAHG_Vision_.doc>.

In recent years there has been a significant growth in the numbers of such initiatives within the UK (frequently responding to social and economic change, taking advantage of limited but newly available streams of funding and embracing the possibilities offered by new technologies) and this has been accompanied by a much greater willingness upon the part of the archive profession to acknowledge their importance. However it is also clear that independent and community archives are not new phenomena. Some local community history groups can trace their history back a hundred years or more as well as to comparatively more recent inspirations such as the History Workshop movement of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.²⁴

What motivations underpin these endeavours? As suggested above, at root many of these archives and the history-making activities which accompany them are explicitly conceived as an active intervention in response to under-representation and misrepresentation within the mainstream archive and heritage world, and as an educational resource to challenge, and sustain challenges, to those misrepresentations. The Lesbian Herstory Archive of New York was established in 1975 'to end the silence of patriarchal history about us – women who love women. Furthermore we wanted our story to be told by us, shared by us and preserved by us'.²⁵ Libraries and archives such as the Institute for Race Relations and the George Padmore Institute and Archive (both in London) are viewed by their founders and key activists as providing much needed counter-hegemonic resources for contemporary struggles.²⁶

Writing in *History Workshop* in 1976, Ruth and Eddie Frow explained the causes of the 'disease' which had resulted in their own house being turned into a public resource for the study of working-class history – political conviction and a belief in history as a motivating force for social change:

We know that eventually there will be a change in our social system; that the country will be governed by those who produce the wealth; that there will be a need and a longing to know what preceded these changes. Recognizing this we set out to gather a library of books and ephemera relating to the labour movement in its broadest aspects.²⁷

Although sadly both Ruth and Eddie have now passed away, the Working Class Movement Library in Salford is still acquiring new

²⁴ Flinn, 'Community histories, community archives'.

²⁵ Joan Nestle, 'The will to remember: The Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York', *Feminist Review* 34 (1990), pp. 86-94: 87.

²⁶ Flinn and Stevens, "'It is noh mistri, wi mekin histri.'" Telling our own story'.

²⁷ Eddie and Ruth Frow, 'Travels with a caravan', *History Workshop* 2 (1976), pp. 177-82: 177-78.

materials and is a crucial, internationally renowned library and archive of British working-class organisations and struggles.²⁸

The Black Cultural Archives (BCA) was founded in 1981 by amongst others, Len Garrison.²⁹ His work in the 1970s campaigning against the treatment of black children by the UK education system and the lack of black history in the curriculum, led directly to the foundation of the Black Cultural Archives. Initially based largely on his own collections, Garrison intended the Archive as an education resource which would provide the material and documentary evidence of the black experience in Britain, one which would counteract the denial of black heritage to black (and white) children. Garrison explained his objectives for the BCA in this way:

For years some young Black people have faced the forces of racism and its contradictions and have been ashamed to identify their Blackness as a positive attribute. Victims of the assimilation process, their lack of recognized history has rendered them invisible, thereby disinheriting and undermining their sense of a Black British heritage. The Black Cultural Archives Museum would hope to play a part in improving the image and self-image of people of African and African-Caribbean descent by seeking to establish continuity and a positive reference point. [...] We do not assume that historical data and artefacts by themselves are going to change a child's self-image. They will however, provide the environment and structure within which the Afro-Caribbean child can extend and build positive frames of reference, and a basis for White children to understand the Black presence in an anti-racist context.³⁰

After many years of struggling with limited resources the BCA is now on the cusp of a transformation into a professionalised heritage organisation with a permanent home of the highest standard. Whilst this transformation is not without its tensions, the core aspirations to promote the history and heritage of people of African and African-Caribbean descent remain very much the same.

Amongst those community archive projects, concerned as much with place and class as with other identifications, there is frequently a sense of challenge or at least of reproach of the mainstream heritage sector for not fully representing the local or everyday. Eastside Community Heritage describe their aims as being 'documenting the lives of

²⁸ For the Working Class Movement Library, see <<http://www.wcml.org.uk/>>.

²⁹ For the Black Cultural Archives, see <<http://www.bcaheritage.org.uk/>>.

³⁰ Len Garrison, 'The Black historical past in British education', in P. G. Stone and R. MacKenzie, eds., *The Excluded Past: Archaeology and Education*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 231-44: 238-39.

“ordinary” people from, and who live in, East London’ in order to ‘celebrate the cultures and heritage of East London’s diverse communities’. This endeavour originated in (and is still motivated by) a sense that mainstream heritage bodies often tend to reflect and reinforce the stereotypes rather than the reality of the lives of those living in East London.³¹

Community-generated or user-generated content

Associated with the challenge to and the implicit rebuke of mainstream heritage collections posed by independent community archives, are the possibilities offered by community-generated or user-generated content. Independent community archives are very much associated with the active sharing of archives and other content generated within the community. As already noted, a major cause of the recent rise in the numbers and profile of community archives has been the adoption of easy to use technologies which support community (in this case meaning largely non-professional) digitisation and description of archival material, particularly images. The best of these digital archives, those that have adopted the Web 2.0 participatory template of collaborative and community working, have gone even further by not only allowing individuals to upload their archive materials and memories but also to comment on and amplify the content submitted by other community members. In the right circumstances and with the appropriate balance of active participants contributing content of different sorts, such community heritage sites have the potential to epitomise Samuel’s dictum of history as ‘the work [...] of a thousand different hands’,³² offering the potential for the collaborative ‘We Think’ approach to replace ‘I think’ in the production of history.³³

One of the best examples of the latter type of website is the *My Brighton and Hove* site.³⁴ Run and administered by volunteers, and affiliated to QueenSpark, the long-standing community history and publishing organisation, *My Brighton and Hove* accepts photographs and other digitised materials, as well as allowing memories and commentaries to be appended. The website was launched in 2000, though the project had its origins in a local history exhibition in a local museum in the mid 1990s. By 2009 it had over 9000 pages. Amongst the kind of material regularly shared by users are identifications of people

³¹ See the Eastside Community Heritage ‘Hidden Histories’ website, <<http://www.hidden-histories.org.uk/>>.

³² Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: vol. 1, Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 8.

³³ Charles Leadbetter, *We-think: Mass Innovation, Not Mass Production. The Power of Mass Creativity* (London: Profile Books, 2008).

³⁴ <<http://www.mybrightonandhove.org.uk/>>.

and places in others' photographs, memories and recollections of life and events in Brighton, and amplification of the memories offered by others. Many of the memories and comments offered tend towards more personal family history type of material, but nevertheless, like the personal recollections and photographs of Richmond Buildings,³⁵ they contain much potentially valuable social history detail about life in post-war Brighton. Elsewhere, such as the sections on crime in Brighton, details are corrected and further stories are added by those who lived through the events in question or were related to individuals within the story recording their own memories of those times.³⁶ Although the significance of such material can be overlaid ('Let me tell you about my grandpa'³⁷), this is the kind of personal material that is otherwise very difficult to collect and which provides vivid and living sources for local and other histories and 'which might well substitute for the absences in the official record'.³⁸

What is the significance of these developments? Samuel's identification of the production of history as the work of a 'thousand hands' demonstrates that awareness of collaborative creation is not new, though it may be better and more easily facilitated by technological developments. In the case of independent community archives and community-generated content, this kind of material being created and then being utilised by historians and others is not novel either. Histories from below have long made a virtue of speaking with or at least listening to other (rarely heard) voices, and it is no surprise that oral history, which was at the heart of so many of the history-from-below and History Workshop initiatives of the past, remains one of the core approaches within independent community archives and history endeavours. Indeed one could view oral history as an early and often successful attempt to capture user-generated content (albeit mediated through the interview process) and insert seldom heard voices into mainstream historical narratives. In this sense, whilst archives and historical practice may be challenged by community-generated content and the collections held by independent archives, these challenges remain much the same as the ones posed by earlier experiments in oral history and communities telling their own stories in response to the absences in the sources and orthodox historical narratives. These challenges bring us inevitably back to the debates about the authority

³⁵ <http://www.mybrightonandhove.org.uk/category_id_1408.aspx>.

³⁶ <http://www.mybrightonandhove.org.uk/category_id_166_path_0p116p.aspx>.

³⁷ Jessica Sedgwick, 'Let Me Tell You About My Grandpa: A Content Analysis of User Annotations to Online Archival Collections.' Presentation at Society of American Archivists conference, 2009, available at <<http://www.slideshare.net/jmsedgwick/let-me-tell-you-about-my-grandpa-a-content-analysis-of-user-annotations-to-online-archival-collections>>.

³⁸ Hilda Kean and Brenda Kirsch, 'A nation's moment and a teacher's mark book: Interconnecting personal and public histories', in Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean, eds., *People and their Pasts: Public History Today* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 199.

and expertise of the 'professional' historian (and archivist) with which this paper began.

In a contemporary context what is new is perhaps the consideration of how to make these online collaborative endeavours a success by encouraging 'deeper' levels of participation and sharing. Joy Palmer has questioned the validity of some of the recent wave of Archive 2.0 initiatives that proceed from the 'often untested belief that if we build the right tools to promote interaction, "they" (our elusive users) will come'.³⁹ Questions of motivation and ownership may provide some of the answers to this dilemma and there are indications that there is greater potential for collaborative participation on those grassroots community sites whose development has been organic and viral than with those initiatives associated with mainstream heritage organisations where a passive consumption of content may be the cultural norm.⁴⁰ Huvila ('participatory archives')⁴¹ and Giaccardi and Palen ('living heritage practice')⁴² suggest a fuller, deeper collaborative partnership is possible between users, archives and those who administer them, and that this would ultimately result in a richer and more rounded heritage for all. However it seems likely that such partnerships will work most effectively when, as in the community archive model, there is a strong sense of common ownership and shared identity between the users and the archival activists.

Ultimately the material which results from such collective endeavours represents a significant opportunity for archivists and historians to broaden the range of the sources that their work draws upon. For social historians and anyone involved in producing public histories, the materials held and created as part of community archive activity should be a tremendously valuable resource, offering a window into the lives, memories and experiences of various communities which are often under-represented or misrepresented in mainstream collections. As Samuel suggested, the type of histories which can be written are also potentially changed by the transformation of the archive and the archivist. The 'thick description' history which he advocated and which places rounded individuals (with families, beliefs, interests, etc.) and individual agency at the centre of historical narratives can only be achieved with a more imaginative approach and the use of a wider range

³⁹ Joy Palmer, 'Archives 2.0: If we build it, will they come?' *Ariadne* 60 (2009), available at <<http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue60/palmer/#21>>.

⁴⁰ Janice Affleck and Thomas Kvan, 'A virtual community as the context for discursive interpretation: A role in cultural heritage engagement', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 14:3 (2008), pp. 268-80.

⁴¹ Isto Huvila, 'Participatory archive: Towards decentralised curation, radical user orientation, and broader contextualisation of records management', *Archival Science* 8 (2008), pp. 15-36.

⁴² Elisa Giaccardi and Leysia Palen, 'The social production of heritage through cross-media interaction', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 14:3 (2008), pp. 281-97.

of sources, notably oral history, autobiography and other memory works.⁴³

As an example, along with Kevin Morgan and Gidon Cohen, I was involved in writing a book on a traditional subject, the history of a political party, in this case the British Communist Party.⁴⁴ But what the book sought to do was to take an innovative prosopographical approach, seeking to tell the collective biography of the Party through the lives of its members. To achieve this we used not only the official party records but also extensive life-history interviews and all manner of biographical and autobiographical material. We were not only interested in their party lives but wished to examine British communism through the prism of all aspects of the lives of its members. This kind of approach, one of many potential thick-description histories, is an exciting one but it is dependent on the location, preservation and utilisation of a much broader range of sources than is normally the case.

Conclusion – towards a transformed and re-imagined archive

Over the last thirty years or more, political challenges to the subject and the form of academic histories have been accompanied by significant questioning of the construction and the content of the archive, the role of the archivist in that process, and the partial public heritage which is produced from these archives. One manifestation of these challenges are those independent community initiatives which have sought, often in very difficult circumstances, to challenge the exclusions and marginalisations by establishing their own archives and by telling their own histories. Independent or community custody of archives and cultural property means that decisions about what is to be preserved, and how (and by whom) the material is to be accessed, remain within that community and not with some external academic or professional body. This gives the group or community in question some control over its representation and the production of its histories. New technologies which allow communities (however defined or policed) to share and participate in the construction of these histories online potentially extend this autonomy and independence. Such control and authority might in some circumstances lead to inward-looking, exclusive and even offensive characterisations of 'others', but it is not an inevitable development. Rather most independent archives and community-shared and community-generated content represent a counterpoint to

⁴³ Raphael Samuel, 'Local history and oral history', *History Workshop* 1 (1976), pp. 191-208; Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 161.

⁴⁴ Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society 1920-1991* (London: Rivers Oram, 2007).

otherwise frequently exclusionary and marginalising mainstream narratives. These projects are not politically neutral but frequently arise from and are part of social movements with broad political, cultural and social agendas of transformatory change which fundamentally challenge the mainstream. As such, they remind mainstream archives and other memory institutions of the need to re-imagine, diversify and transform their collections and narratives.

