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| **Engaging with Records and Archives: Histories and Theories**, edited by Fiorella Foscarini, Heather MacNeil, Bonnie Mak and Gillian Oliver, London, Facet Publishing, 2016, xvi + 224 pp., £59.95 (Paperback), ISBN 978 1 78330 158 4 |

There is much to enjoy in the individual papers of this volume which derives from the I-CHORA 7 conference held in Amsterdam in July 2015. A long-overdue history of the genesis of archival description (by Jonathan Furner) is well handled and reminds us of how far we’ve come in that area; an assessment of the development of information and record keeping in Malawi (by Paul Lihoma) adds to our understanding of the problems faced by professional colleagues elsewhere; Juan Ilerbaig’s fascinating study of the ‘archivist as palaeontologist’ considers the development of archival science within the context of nineteenth-century science’s fascination with historical reconstruction of all kinds. The advertising blurb promises, and the volume certainly delivers, ’a wide variety of views of records, archives and archival functions, spanning diverse regions, communities, disciplinary perspectives and time periods.’ And therein, of course, also lies the problem with this volume, a coverage so diverse that it defies any attempt to impose the coherence which it claims.

I-CHORA, the International Conference on the History of Records and Archives, has established itself as a key research forum, engaging the profession, and archival scholarship (and the many disciplines which have adopted the ‘archival turn’) with the historicist study of archives, of archival practices and theory. Thus the ways in which archives and archival practices have been conceptualised and engaged with in the past is a wholly relevant area of concern for the series. The I-CHORA 7 call for papers invited proposals ‘that explore different ways of historicizing and theorizing recordmaking, recordkeeping, and archiving practices from a range of disciplinary perspectives and through the eyes of creators, custodians, and users.’ The conference programme (available at http://ichora.org/?page\_id=113) indicates the wide range of responses that were received and presented in response to the call. However, the contents of the volume suggest that the original aspirations of the conference organisers (and consequently of the editors) were not wholly realised. There is certainly ‘archival history’ in this volume but the ‘different ways of theorising archives’ are not always evident, and in some cases, it seems clear, that in being re-presented for publication rather than speaking, a theoretical perspective has been tacked on to an original contribution to fulfil the rather hazy requirements of the volume.

The editors faced an uphill task in creating a coherent whole from the wide range of papers; that this was a problem is clearly evident from their Introduction. Typically, the ‘edited volume’ format is prefaced by an introduction which identifies the themes (deriving from a synthesis of the individual papers) and explores them; ideally it can become a further contribution to the area of knowledge explored by individual authors. Here the editors, all respected scholars, seem reluctant to engage with their project at all. The introduction starts with a brief description of the series (drawn primarily from a previous account of the conference), but this is followed by four pages of abstracts, with no synthesis attempted, as if in acknowledgement that the attempt is inappropriate or perhaps unattainable. It seems curious, then, that the volume has been presented as a monograph - the use of ‘Chapters’ surely suggests some relationship between the individual parts, and an overall progression - rather than what is in practice: conference proceedings.

While there is no longer the expectations that conferences will necessarily result in conference proceedings, one alternative has been the journal ‘special issue’ which serves some of the purposes of regular ‘proceedings’ (as well as being welcomed by journal editors desperate for content). Unfortunately, this was not the route taken for I-CHORA 7. Anyone hoping to catch up with the conference through this volume, perhaps to read Eric Ketellaar on Rembrandt’s recordkeeping, or Geoff Yeo’s reassessment of Posner’s account of *Recordkeeping in the ancient world,* will be disappointed not to find them, and these are just two omissions which cause the reader to ponder the nature of the ‘selection’ criteria for the volume.

In brief, it is difficult to see who this volume is aimed at. The introduction claims that it invites archivists ‘to think differently about how we understand, interpret and interact with histories and theories of the archive and archives’, though that audience has most recently been well served by the two edited collections *What are archives: Cultural and theoretical perspectives* (Ashgate, 2008) and *The Future of Archives and Recordkeeping*  (Facet, 2011), edited by Louise Craven and Jennie Hill respectively. Readers interested in a specific author’s research would benefit from accessing their longer journal articles or monographs: the work of Elizabeth Shepherd (on pioneering female archivists), of Charles Jeurgens (on the Dutch East India Company), of Marlene Manoff (archives of the marginalised) all falls into this category. At the same time, it is certainly the case that the majority of articles are engagingly written, the authors are well-informed and expert commentators, and the topics themselves relevant to many professionals. Some readers, too, will relish the fact that the individual contributions are shorter than the average journal article. Yet in the final analysis, all these positives only underscore the conclusion that, in this case, the whole is rather less than the sum of its parts.

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