

“All shook up”: The archival legacy of Terry Cook

Edited by Tom Nesmith, Greg Bak & Joan M Schwartz. Association of Canadian Archivists and Society of American Archivists, 2020. 674 pp. ISBN 978-1-945246-31-9 (ePub)

“All shook up” is a remarkable tribute to the immortality of Terry Cook’s legacy through evaluation of his nuanced ideas and unconventional thinking by contributors from several countries. Edited by Tom Nesmith, Professor Emeritus, Greg Bak, Associate Professor, both in the Department of History at the University of Manitoba and Joan M. Schwartz, Professor and Head of the Department of Art History and Art Conservation at Queen’s University, I believe that the book is adequate in form, substance, and content befitting to honour a luminary of Cook’s stature. There is no doubt that Terry Cook played a significant role in shaping and sharpening archival theory and practice worldwide. As such, I can safely say many archivists around the globe are familiar with Terry Cook’s professional work and ideas or at least the name. Terry Cook is best known in archival circles for the theory of macroappraisal. His work attracted a great deal of attention, and several national archives outside of Canada made attempts to emulate them, for example, through his influence, South Africa adopted macroappraisal after the first democratic elections in 1994.

Archival scholars and practitioners from Australia, Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, and United States were invited to reflect on his writings to honour his legacy. For this reason, his impact globally is fairly represented in this book, although missing voices from Asia and South America are needed to make it complete. As Verne Harris highlighted that Terry Cook was “sought after, celebrated, honoured, cited, and translated” (p. 613), I am of the view that his work or he himself would have reached other regions of the world that are not represented in this book during his cavalcade of visits throughout the world. Voices from such regions, whether they interacted with him in person or engaged with him through reading his work, would have made this book complete. This also goes for the languages into which his writings were translated. It would be inspiring to hear how his work impacted archival endeavours in languages other than English and how the translated versions were accepted and debated. We are not talking of just anybody here, but Terry Cook. In this regard, perhaps the editors could have created space for such voices by removing some of his previous published work that is included in this book. To contradict myself, the decision to include a selected works of Terry Cook alongside the chapter critiquing it is one unique feature as it gives the reader proximity to the work. However, the space could have been created as the contributors have cited the work they were critiquing. Perhaps, a special issue dedicated to Terry Cook in the *Korean Journal of Archival, Information, and Cultural Studies* in 2016 represented the views on and impact of Cook’s works in that region (p. 635). From what I read in the book, or at least in my imagination, Terry Cook would have been hospitable to other voices that were touched by his work or even happy to see dissenting voices to be included.

Through his friends, colleagues, mentees, and those who had an encounter with him, we are made aware of other things about Terry Cook outside the archival arena even though he was somebody who saw archives in everything. From portrayal of the young Terry Cook by Tom Nesmith to a discussion of his bookshelf, to professional visits to Australia and South Africa, contributor after contributor provides their encounter experience with Terry Cook and the work that inspired them. Indeed, Terry Cook contributed immensely to the archival profession and was widely recognised, hence Ian Wilson in the foreword compares him to a ‘musical idol’ and Verne Harris in the epilogue calls him ‘international superstar’ (p. 613). It is clear from the authors that his contribution was not only on theory but also on praxis of total archives, electronic records, postmodernism, macroappraisal, and encouraging of multidisciplinary approaches to obtain parallel modes of thought from other discipline. The latter might have helped to grow the discipline as Jennifer Douglas rightly argues that “of the three different generations of archivists reflected by Terry Cook, that is the Pioneers, the Boomers, and the Archival Studies generation, the latter “signifies a certain maturity, a recognition of the archival field as a field in its own right not a specialization of another field, a problem we see in developing countries today” (p. 75). The confidence and security enjoyed by ‘Archival Studies’ today are thanks to the battles fought by luminaries and divas such as Terry Cook through their writings. He had laid a foundation and contributed to the discourse on transformation of archives for social justice. As he warned us, we should not be complacent but take the baton.

While almost all the contributors were inspired by his work, in this book it is mostly Geoffrey Yeo and Chris Hurley who provided some dissenting views in the evaluation of Cook’s writings. For example, Geoffrey Yeo contends that while he “accepted and expanded on Cook’s demonstration that fonds are conceptualizations and need not be physically assembled, he is of the view that archivists must take account of physical and conceptual groupings alike, at a variety of levels” (p 203). Although he acknowledges that a fond transcends the notion of an aggregation brought together in a particular space, he (Yeo) opposes suggestions by Cook that archivists should ignore the physical as information about their evolving histories can indicate how creators or custodians translated understanding of records and their context. He

also does not agree that information about material orderings is largely redundant. On the other hand, Chris Hurley (p. 154) argues that although Cook proposed a “groundbreaking redefinition of appraisal, he was not yet ready to explore his more complex redefinition of context further.” I might have missed the period, however, Hurley (p. 154) views this as the weakness of “Mind over Matter” as appraisal is a matter of judgment and cannot be reduced to formula.” Even though this book celebrates his legacy, I think Terry Cook would have welcomed the debates put forward by Yeo and Hurley as cross-fertilisation of ideas which, in turn, could help to mould his theory and writings.

In the foreword, Ian Wilson paints the picture of Terry Cook as someone who was very welcoming even to students who were treating him as a superstar as they took photos with him and shook his hand, and yet he treated them as colleagues in the archival endeavour. This is also emphasised by Verne Harris in the epilogue that Terry Cook “was hospitable, in his thinking and character” (p.613). Although Anne Gilliland indicates that she was mentored by Terry Cook, who himself stood on the shoulders of Hugh Taylor, I think one or two voices from some of those many students mentioned in the foreword should have been added in this book in the form of a contribution. The only other voice of a student is that of Jennifer Douglas who encountered Terry Cook at a viva voce, as Cook was the examiner of her dissertation. She explains her experience with Cook as being more of a conversation about the nature of archives as opposed to that of a student defending her dissertation in front of the examiner.

Finally, I was also fascinated by the nature of correspondence Terry Cook had with colleagues and friends such as the claim by Nancy Bartlett that Ed Dahl mentioned in a group message in Cook’s circle that his own “COOK email folder contains more than 12,000 messages which were exchanged between 1998 and 2014” (p. 41 I was enticed by the messages posted by Verne Harris in the epilogue. Perhaps an electronic archive of such email messages could be created and made available. A fitting way to honour an archivist and to complete “Terry’s big book.” The book also includes a comprehensive list of the writings by Terry Cook from 1972 to 2015. It would be interesting to make those that are out of print available online. There is more to Terry Cook than what some of us who only encountered him through this book would have known.

As Eric Ketelaar (p. 302) reckons, Terry Cook’s concerns in “What is past is prologue” is still relevant to this day, hence we dare not let the tales of what was accomplished by Cook pass unrecorded. The relevancy of many of his work makes him immortal. Like me, other readers of “All shook up” will recognize the importance of this book as a trailblazer in recording the remarkable journey of a Canadian archivist who became a ‘universal archivist’ and contributed immensely to the profession. He has transformed the archival landscape through his ideas especially propagating appraisal to be sensitive to citizens rather than to the state only. Indeed, through Terry Cook we could see that “everything is impossible, until it is done,” as Nelson Mandela would say. The memories and ideas of Terry Cook in this book will inspire archivists, not only to do the impossible, but also to develop the profession further and in the regions where it is still in its nadir, propel it to the unchartered territories.

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