

**Review of Verne Harris, *Exploring archives: An introduction to archival ideas and practice in South Africa***

Pretoria, National Archives of South Africa, 1997, v + 73pp, bibl, appendices.

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This slim, soft-covered publication hardly qualifies as a book, its eleven brief chapters amounting to no more than 73 pages in total. The remainder of the booklet comprises three interesting appendices including the full text of the important National Archives of South Africa Act of 1996. It is around this new piece of legislation that the text of *Exploring archives* revolves.

This is not a book for the uninitiated. In her *Foreword*, Marie Olivier, the National Archivist, claims that it fills the need for an 'introductory text on archives in South Africa', one which will be 'read and enjoyed by many South Africans keen to know more about the world of archives' (p. v). Contrary to these expectations, this book is unlikely to inspire young aspirant historians or those mildly interested in aspects of our past to rush to the nearest archival repository. It is too esoteric (and a trifle dry) to attract such readers. But it does indeed provide those who realise and appreciate the crucial role played by archives, with a useful background of the fundamentals of archival practice in South Africa. And the booklet is all the more relevant at this particular time, coming as it does in the wake of the new 1996 Archives Act which abandons the last vestiges of archival legislation shaped by apartheid and 'proposes a fundamental redefinition of archives for a democratic South Africa' (p. 2). As we move into a more enlightened era, archival discourse reflects our societal dynamics. Here lies the real value of this booklet for historians, teachers, and others who delve into our past in search of the truth. It certainly makes interesting reading alongside articles published by academics Graham Dominy, Albert Grundlingh and archivist Verne Harris himself, on the topic of archives in a democratic South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

After a very brief but nevertheless informative introduction, the author moves to discuss *The nature and meaning of archives* in Chapter 2. Here the role of archives in the preservation of a society's heritage is stressed and the distinction is drawn between public and private records. It is also made clear that a record does not speak for itself: society (or more specifically, the members of society who use the records) breathe meaning and significance into the documents. An interesting issue which emerges from Chapter 3, *Archival institutions organisations and literature in South Africa*, is one to which regrettably, many historians can relate: the more than 100 archival institutions which fall outside the public sector have come in for a degree of criticism for their 'overly restrictive access policies' (p. 8). While framing the new 1996 legislation there was apparently some support for the idea of state control measures to curb this tendency,

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Dominy, 'Archives in a democratic South Africa: the proposals of the ANC, an evaluation,' and Albert Grundlingh, 'Historical writing and the State Archives in a changing South Africa'. Both these articles are published in *South African Archives Journal*, 35 (1993). See also Verne Harris, 'Transforming South African archives: discourse and delivery', *South African Archives Journal*, 38 (1996).

but such proposals were eventually abandoned in the face of the argument that they were inconsistent with the new democratic governance. Accordingly, the only state restriction which has been placed on non-public archival institutions in terms of the 1996 Act is one which controls the disposal (including their sale to foreign purchasers) of records with archival value.

New ideas to make archives more accessible to users, management of existing records, and the manner in which archivists acquire, appraise and preserve new documents which pass into their care, are discussed in very brief successive chapters. Here the author will certainly lose the interest of all but the professional archivists. The same is also true of the concluding chapters on archival ethics and a discussion of archives as a career (Chapters 11 and 12).

The arrangement and description of records, the topic of the four pages comprising Chapter 8, does have more relevance for historians and other researchers who make use of the archives, and some new ideas do emerge here. Chapter 9, *Electronic records*, is obligatory reading for any old-fashioned researchers like myself. Indeed the electronic media has mushroomed to the extent that any such text is probably outdated by the time it reaches publication! The best most of us can do is to try and acquire some modicum of proficiency when confronted by the computer in the archives. In this chapter *Exploring archives* provides some good background information.

The author makes no claim to cover the entire range of archival practice in South Africa in this introductory text. Sensibly, the reader is instead referred to the very comprehensive list of publications in Appendix A in order to expand on the aspects treated in each of the chapters. The list is lengthy, well categorised, and gives ample evidence of the author's great expertise in the field of archival practice in South Africa and similar institutions worldwide.

Appendix B is the highly significant 1996 legislation, the National Archives of South Africa Act, which is neatly summarised in its preamble: ...'to provide for a National Archives; the proper management and care of the records of governmental bodies; and the preservation and use of a national archival heritage...' One of the most relevant stipulations for historians is article 12 (1) which lays down that public records in the safekeeping of the National Archives are available to the public after 20 years. Moreover, a door which was previously firmly shut is now left open to researchers: permission may also be granted, on request, to see public records which are less than 20 years old.

*Exploring archives* is a compact, useful booklet. Although it will not have particularly wide appeal, it lays out how the National Archives will now move forward to 'preserve public and non-public records with enduring value for use by the public and the State.' (p 61).