

*A History of Archival Practice*. By Paul Delsalle. Translated and revised by Margaret Procter. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018. 245 pp. Index. Hardcover. \$119.96.

The French statesman and military leader Napoléon Bonaparte (1769–1821) declared: “I love power. But it is as an artist that I love it. I love it as a musician loves his violin, to draw out of it sounds and chords and harmonies. I love it as an artist. As an artist!”<sup>1</sup> In his classic 1998 volume, *Une Histoire de l’archivistique*, Paul Delsalle, professor of modern history at the Université de Franche-Comté, France, like a true virtuoso, played all the right notes and symphonized for a francophone audience the broad, global sweep of the history of archival practice from its ancient origins to the present with all its omnipresent displays of power and control (p. ix). Indeed, the watchwords “power” and “control” permeate Delsalle’s historical account, where archives are described not only as “the center of power,” but are also presented as the institutions of administrative, cultural, documentary, evidential, intellectual, and political power (pp. 102, 133, 197). From the earliest times, Delsalle contends, archives have been part of the arsenal of government, used to help maintain control and authority (pp. 11, 142). Now, 20 years later, with *A History of Archival Practice*, Margaret Procter, senior lecturer in record and archive studies at the University of Liverpool, UK, provides a beautifully rendered revision and translation of Delsalle’s chronicle of power and control for an anglophone audience.

In his introduction to the French edition, Delsalle acknowledges the imperfect nature of writing a definitive, universal history of archival practice (p. ix). Although Delsalle admits further that his work was purely a provisional synthesis and summary account, he takes solace in the fact that he designed his short history of *archivistique* to provide archivists, and especially archives students, with some topical reference points for further research (pp. ix–x, xii). As a historian, Delsalle maintains that archivists need to construct a reference framework to understand where they came from, overcome their crisis of identity, and, in this process, discover a clear future (p. xi). Therefore, Delsalle’s narrative covers both ancient and contemporary documents and encompasses the concepts of *archivage* (records management), *archivologie* (knowledge of archives), and *archiveconomie* (archives management and preservation), which allows for the widest historical treatment (p. x). Echoing Delsalle’s need for a framework, Procter asserts that this new English language edition is intended to provide such a structure for future research and to encourage archivists to adopt a long view toward the value of the archival role and discover their own rich professional genealogy—a lineage imbued with such characteristics as the ability to provide information and evidence, and to sustain rights (p. xv).

As an editor, Procter asserts that she wanted to ensure that readers were provided with accessible tools to investigate topics for themselves (p. xv). In this noble goal, she achieves great success. With the support of Paul Delsalle throughout the translation project, Procter substantially updated the original bibliography with supplementary English language scholarship. She also provides additional photographs to accompany the text and instructive examples, which reveal the exchange and development of

archival concepts throughout Europe, Africa, Asia, and North and South America (pp. xvi, 109).

According to Delsalle, this transmission of archival concepts originated among ancient civilizations, which stressed not only the centrality of documents, but also the development of arrangement methodologies and retrieval practices (p. 11). Turning to the Middle East, Delsalle offers the archaeological discoveries in the ancient Syrian town of Ebla as an incisive illustration of the early interchange of archival management practices. In 3000 BCE, Ebla (now Tell Mardikh, located about 37 miles south of Aleppo), was a dynamic urban center (p. 3). Among the initial archaeological treasures unearthed in the king's palace were 17,000 tablets and fragments, which represent about 5,000 original documents. Although disturbed by the passage of time, these tablets maintained enough of their original order that scholars were able to gain insights into the archival arrangement and administrative purposes of the documents (p. 3). Delsalle argues further that ancient archives were not designed for permanent retention, but instead were intended to be used to conduct periodic checks on the activities of officials, workers, and the purveyors of goods (p. 11).

With the invention of paper, however, in 105 CE by Ts'ai Lun (50–121 CE), an adviser to the Han emperor, the spread of archival concepts gained even greater momentum (p. 39). In 751 CE, for example, the Arabs took Chinese prisoners at the battle of Samarkand and set them to work making paper from flax. This process led to the introduction of paper-making practices throughout the Arab world, and then in Europe via Byzantium, Sicily, and Morocco (pp. 40, 74). To illustrate this, Delsalle asserts that everything changed during the sixteenth century, when the influence of Islamic archival administration came to its full fruition with identifiably modern archival practices in the vast Spanish and Habsburg territories ruled by Charles V, his brother Ferdinand I, and later his son, Phillip II, who governed much of Europe, coastal Africa, the trading ports of Asia, and the Americas (p. 106). Delsalle, for example, notes that Philip II was characterized as the *rey papelero*, a king dedicated to bureaucracy and obsessed with paperwork, which was linked to his recognition of the importance of maintaining control of information and exercising power. This highly organized and professional recordkeeping system was designed by the archivist Diego de Ayala, who established the earliest state repository in Europe and a vast archive service, where records were arranged in various *fonds*. Diego de Ayala's archival management techniques were long-lasting and eventually transmitted throughout Europe and the Americas (pp. 107, 118, 120).

In Delsalle's historical account, archivists, as the guardians of records, operated at the center of the Old World system of power. Margaret Procter, however, asserts that the relatively recent archival function of facilitating and promoting research has irrevocably changed this crucial archival management role (p. 234). Procter maintains that the fostering of historical research has created a paradigm shift in the nature of rights, from archivists upholding the feudal privileges of the Ancien Régime as represented by such icons of power as Napoléon, to supporting the protection of human rights as embodied by such symbols as the international criminal justice system (p. 234). Therefore, for Delsalle and Procter, through historical investigation of archival practice over

time, archivists gain a connection to their history and achieve an understanding of the enduring importance of archives and the integral role they occupy within society (p. 234). Returning again to Napoléon, Delsalle notes that “The Little Corporal” once remarked: “The state needs a good archivist more than it needs a good artillery general” (p. 126). In *A History of Archival Practice*, Delsalle and Procter ask archivists, in essence, to overcome their crisis of identity, learn their entire history, embrace its paradigm shift to human rights, soldier on, and adapt General Bonaparte’s words for the twenty-first century—Love your power as an archivist. But love it as an artist. Love your history. But love it as a historian of your profession, who understands all its connections and then researches, writes, and fights in the present to ensure a vibrant future built on a foundation of human rights.

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#### **NOTE**

1. Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life* (New York: The Modern Library, 1923), 11.