

## Editor's Introduction

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History is made with documents. Documents are the imprints left of the thoughts and the deeds of the men of former times. For nothing can take the place of documents. No documents, no history.<sup>1</sup>

This issue considers archives in Peru, Spain and Cuba which contain documents on connections with Ireland, and on the Irish. Indeed, our contributors, out of dedication to their subjects, selflessly share what they have found thus making research easier for subsequent scholars. Such generosity of spirit is what allows the academic world to continue to move forward. It especially aids the work here of SILAS in general, and this journal IMSLA in particular. Dr. Margaret Brehony, guest co-editor of this issue, elaborates in her introduction on the specifics of each article, and the editorial team is grateful for her collaboration.

It is important to give some space to considering what archives mean to scholars, what scholars do while there, and what happens after they leave the archives. Unless one has been part of the archival experience, it is difficult to appreciate the trials, tribulations and, sometimes, triumphs involved. Those who work in the archives are true adventurers who go it alone to far-away places. Archival research involves monotony, tedious hours, days and weeks of deciphering difficult manuscripts when one is suffering from jet lag, different food, strange accommodation, and, sometimes, uncomfortable physical surroundings. All this has to be endured (and sometimes enjoyed) before an article or book is finally written, polished, submitted, and published.

While there are many archives that are modern and state of the art, there are still those that resemble Bonnie Smith's description of nineteenth-century archives where "...decay was everywhere: small animals gnawed at the documents, which were fouled with dead bugs, rodent excrement, worms, hairs, nail clippings; old papers vellum, and script were damaged by water, fumes, soot, extremes of temperature." Moreover, the seasoned researcher would agree with Smith that, along with the unsettling

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<sup>1</sup> This quote can be found on the website of University College Dublin's archives. It was originally used in a French publication in 1897, and was cited in English by Eamon de Valera in a letter from prison in 1924. For details [http://www.ucd.ie/archives/html/main\\_fra.htm](http://www.ucd.ie/archives/html/main_fra.htm)

environment, “Illegible writing, strange languages, shorthand, and secret codes all made archives places of mystery” (Smith 2000:119).

Indeed, there are unexpected joys as well unpleasant surprises. Irish historian Dr. Caitriona Clear remembers that her trips to convent archives in the early 1980s “were invariably accompanied, or interrupted, by a lovely tea-tray with good china and biscuits and cake, in those lovely mellow old convents with dark wood and tiled floors.”<sup>2</sup> Historian of Mexico, Dr. Bradley Benton, savors the memory of his archival work in Seville, Spain, at the *Archivo de Indias*

I noticed that all of the Spaniards working in the reading room would get up and leave at about 10:30 every morning and then all come back in about an hour later. Eventually, I learned that they were all going to have breakfast, really a second breakfast, of *café con leche* and toast with either jam, *jamón serrano*, or ham *paté*. After a few weeks, I made friends with some of the local researchers and got invited to go with them to breakfast. They all went to the same spot, the Rayuela, which was just around the block on a quaint pedestrian street in the city center. Those breakfasts were such a great opportunity to meet fellow researchers from around the globe, to network, and to enjoy tasty Spanish food!<sup>3</sup>

Whether archival work is seen as a hardship or a joy, or a mix of both, researchers have to work with what made it into the archives. There are different views on how archives are shaped. Are they shaped by fate and chance or by deliberate human decision-making? Researchers suffer the consequences of the decisions of those who (often long ago) have decided what should and should not be preserved, decided how the archives are going to be organized, and for whom they are intended - thus influencing the history that is going to be written. According to historian Richard Evans, “Archives are the product of the chance survival of the documents and the corresponding chance loss or deliberate destruction of others. They are also the products of the professional activities of archivists, which therefore shape the record of the past and with it the interpretations of the historians” (Evans, 2000: 75). Edward Walsh, a frequent contributor of articles on the Irish in Latin America, adds a further dimension to the discussion when he asserts, “I firmly believe that there are documents/

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Caitriona Clear, History Department, National University of Ireland, Galway, email correspondence, April 11, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Bradley Benton, Department of History, Philosophy and Religious Studies, North Dakota State University, email correspondence, April 11, 2012.

letters/correspondence held in family collections, solicitors' offices, archives (both public and private) which have not seen the light of day....".<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Walsh has dedicated much time to retrieving sources of Irish Latin-American interest from obscure locations. Thus, it is a sobering thought to realize that the history we are writing is based not only on what has survived but also on what has not survived, as well as on what has not yet been found. Historians need to be very tentative in the assumptions they make about the past considering all the missing sources.

After weeks, months and sometimes longer in the archives researchers return home and face the next task – writing up the research. Based on the sources they have found, they have to make the connections, write the story, and tell the narrative. Historian of France, Natalie Davis, author of several books, including *Fiction in the Archives*, writes that in the archives the stories do not come ready made. She maintains that historians examine certain documents, and then try to weave a story, and though they are constrained by the evidence (and lack of evidence) they need to make certain creative leaps to write their narratives (Davis 1987: 1-6). Truly, not only the historical imagination but also the creative imagination must be used. For without that we will just have a mere summary of what is in the archives on a particular topic, and no context, analysis and insights. Without researchers' prior expertise, intense training, and extensive knowledge of the already existing literature and scholarship, along with creative writing skills, they would be able to do little with what they find in the archives. Without the act of writing up and publishing the research, the time spent in the archives is of little use to anyone except the researcher. Therefore, what one reads in a journal such as this is the result of an arduous and creative process.

In recent years digital archives have been appearing and seem to be making sources more accessible. Initially, they were seen as the answer to every researcher's dream, both student and advanced scholar. They do have all kinds of potential, especially for bringing large amounts of material together, encouraging ambitious projects and allowing collaboration between scholars and often with members of the general public too. However, digitizing is time consuming, expensive and involves many resources. There is also the problem of who decides what gets put up on digital archives. How does the prioritization of what to put online change the history that gets written? Are national newspapers put on line, while regional ones are left out? Are the letters of some well-known individual put up, while those of lesser known individuals are ignored? Are mistakes made when some documents are scanned, copied or transcribed? Do these decisions and efforts shape the history that will be written? Who funds digital archives? How long will the funding last? Who updates

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Walsh, Independent Scholar, London, email correspondence, August 8, 2013.

archival websites and for how long? While these questions are being grappled with, it is undoubtedly true that the arrival of digital archives is changing the discipline of history, the view of the past and the accessibility of the past. However, caution should be maintained, and all the reservations about traditional archives should be kept in mind when approaching the digital archives.

While not all will agree fully with Dr. Caitriona Clear, it is appropriate, for this issue of IMSLA, that she shall have the last word,

doing research online while it is convenient and cheap, is boring and soul-destroying, with no trip to make, archivists to chat to, and worst of all, no faint spidery handwriting to decipher in a hushed atmosphere as you are plunged right back into the era you are looking at. Nearest thing to time travel any of us will experience.<sup>5</sup>

## **Bibliography**

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Evans, Richard, *In Defense of History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000).

Smith, Bonnie G., *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000).

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Caitriona Clear, cited above.