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Book Review: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections

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Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections. Edited by Laura Uglean Jackson. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019. 206 pp. Index. Hardcover. \$90.00.

As our institutional archives mature and we gain more insight into what materials our researchers use, we become more discerning in what we collect and preserve. Real estate in any archives or special collections is valuable, and overcrowding is a common lament. In time, we become laser focused as to what collections within our holdings resonate with users. Equally, we all have collections that for whatever well-intentioned reason were accessioned, processed, and maintained, but that are inappropriate for our institutions. In her book *Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections*, Laura Uglean Jackson has compiled 13 case studies describing various archival situations that focus on using reappraisal and deaccessioning as collection development tools to help build robust collections (p. ix). Rather than viewing it as a negative process, the archivists in Jackson's book advocate for thorough reappraisal and targeted deaccessioning to address holdings in their repositories that are outside their collection scope or institutional mission. Jackson's introduction includes concise abstracts of each chapter that provide a succinct description of each of the case studies summarized.

It is not critical to read the studies in any particular order; however, Marcella Huggard's chapter "Good Intentions: Distinguishing Deaccession from Weeding," the first in the book, is a good starting point. She defines the distinction between weeding (removing unwanted items from a collection while accessioning or processing) and deaccessioning (removing entire holdings after careful reappraisal), which establishes a consistent way for the reader to view the terms in subsequent chapters. Huggard creates her argument for these definitions by meticulously guiding us through the Society of American Archivists' *Glossary of Archival Records and Terminology*¹ and *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning*,² as well as international definitions provided by the International Council of Archives (ICA) and ISO standards. She points out that although archival literature does not conflate weeding with deaccessioning, archival practitioners often do, leading to confusion in distinguishing each activity (pp. 3–4). Huggard's chapter also includes examples and a brief case study to further clarify her line of reasoning.

Consistent themes across the cases described each show different means to achieve control over collections by reappraising them and deaccessioning portions. Outside forces triggered many of the reappraisal projects described. Loss of an off-site storage facility, transfer of collections to new storage, or an influx of new records to an already crowded environment are situations readily understood by most archivists. Many of the archival repositories in the case studies had periodic staffing shortages, which led to gaps in accessioning and processing, leaving future staff with backlogs of unknown materials. Similarly, a number of the case studies show a lack of clear policies and procedures regarding appraising collections prior to their accession, again leading to backlogs. In related examples, past archivists unfamiliar with their organization's records management retention schedules allowed accessions of materials that should have long since been destroyed.

Although at first view these can seem like negative situations that would be difficult to overcome, the authors of the case studies were able to ultimately create stronger collections through reappraisal and deaccessioning. Two lessons learned are stressed in the cases. First, documenting the reappraisal and deaccessioning process is critical for consistency and for future generations of archivists. Cliff Hight provides his thoughts in the chapter “Burns Like a Prairie Fire: Improving Access to University Records through Reappraisal,” where he compares deaccessioning to burning out the deadwood to encourage new growth. Hight notes that documenting appraisal decisions will improve decision-making and help develop a more professional outlook, as well as give future archivists insight into and understanding of selection considerations made by their predecessors (pp. 65–66). The second lesson is the importance of transparency to all stakeholders, particularly donors and library staff. Explaining what is being reappraised and why, and defining the ultimate disposition for deaccessioned materials more likely gains support than does hiding the process. Several of the studies include the details of transparency relating to their projects. Two in particular, “A Gentleman’s Agreement: Donor Driven Deaccessioning and the Ethics of Collecting” by Adriana P. Cuervo and “Your Co-operation Has Been Splendid in This Matter: Returning a Selected Portion of a Living Donor’s Personal Papers” by Ruth E. Bryan, concentrate on working with donors regarding promises made by previous administrations that current ethics or copyright laws cannot support. In both cases, the archivists maintained close contact with their donors during the deaccessioning process, as painful as it was at times, showing that honesty, ethical responsibility, and consistency are necessary in our professional toolkit.

Most of the authors noted a lack of current case studies to consult and model their reappraisal projects on. SAA’s *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Accessioning* is the most frequently cited source, while SAA’s *Glossary of Archival Records and Terminology*, Frank Boles’s *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*,³ and a couple of articles by Mark A. Greene from the early 2000s,⁴ were the most recent materials used as research. Although the cited articles are useful for reference, the case studies in Jackson’s book bring the use of reappraisal and deaccessioning into current best practices. Most authors had to invent reappraisal and subsequent deaccessioning processes through trial and error for their specific cases. The development of their procedures is as relevant as the outcome, and learning from their mistakes will help the archival profession wrangle with the concept of deaccessioning items from collections. The authors generously share forms to document projects, as well as links to their work products.

As with any compilation of individual studies, I found some of the case studies less useful than others; however, Jackson has chosen her authors to represent a wide variety of situations including academic collections, governmental repositories both large and small, and private archives. She also includes examples from Canada and New Zealand to give an international perspective. Jackson has successfully published the book she set out to: a compilation of real-life case studies that provide models for others to reference as they address “questions, challenges, and issues encountered during reappraisal and deaccessioning activities” (p. x). My biggest complaint about Jackson’s book, as petty as

it may sound, is the quality of the binding. The text block has a loose, flimsy feel to it and the hinge on the inside cover has already split on my copy. I hope that future printings or softcover editions have more staying power, which this book deserves.

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NOTES

1. Richard Pearce-Moses, s.v. "deaccessioning," *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), <https://files.archivists.org/pubs/free/SAA-Glossary-2005.pdf>.
2. Society of American Archivists, "Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning," Society of American Archivists, 2012 (revised 2017), <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/technical-subcommittee-on-guidelines-for-reappraisal-and-deaccessioning-ts-grd/guidelines-for-reappraisal-and-deaccession>.
3. Frank Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005).
4. Two of Greene's articles were cited throughout the book: Mark A. Greene, "What *Were* We Thinking? A Call to Embrace Reappraisal and Deaccessioning," *Provenance* 20 (2002): 33–49; Mark A. Greene, "I've Deaccessioned and Lived to Tell about It: Confessions of an Unrepentant Reappraiser," *Archival Issues* 3, no. 1 (2006): 7–22.