



ASSESSMENT OF THE VIEWS OF  
SIR HILARY JENKINSON ON THE  
ROLES OF ARCHIVES AND  
ARCHIVISTS IN THE PURSUIT OF  
HISTORICAL TRUTH

ARCHIVAL STUDIES (HIST5513)

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## 1. BACKGROUND

1.1 This essay attempts to assess, from the perspective of a historian, the views of Sir Hilary Jenkinson on the roles of archives and archivists in the pursuits of historical truth. It will be based mainly on his “Manual of Archive Administration” (1937 edition),<sup>1</sup> and supplemented as appropriate with his other writings.

## 2. ASSESSMENT OF JENKINSON’S VIEWS

2.1 In assessing Jenkinson’s views on the roles of archives<sup>2</sup> and archivists<sup>3</sup> in the pursuits of historical truth, one would first ask the question: what is historical truth? In this essay, the historical positivist school championed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century historian Leopold von Ranke, who argued that the historian should seek to describe historical truth “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist” (“what actually happened”), i.e. evidence based, is adopted.<sup>4</sup> The statement “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” that

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<sup>1</sup> Jenkinson, Hilary (1937): *A Manual of Archive Administration*, new and revised edition, Percy Lund, Humphries & Go Ltd, London, 256 pp.

<sup>2</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p11. Jenkinson defined archives in the following way: “A document which may be said to belong to the class of Archives is one which was drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether public or private) of which itself formed a part; and subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors.”

<sup>3</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p38-39. Jenkinson defined the archivist as “*either the person who takes over, by himself or his deputy, as part of the legitimate inheritance of an office he fulfils the written memorials of its activities in the past, or, as in the case of an official of the Public Record Office, a person charged with the duty of receiving from the functionaries of (sometimes) expiring other institutions the inheritance for which there will be no direct heir, a kind of Public Trustee*”.

<sup>4</sup> Ranke, Leopold von (1824/1956): “*Vorrede zur ersten Ausgabe*.” In *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494–1514*, Leipzig. Trans. “Preface to History of the Latin and German Nations from 1494–1514.” In *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern, 55–58. London: Macmillan.

a witness providing evidence in the court would affirm<sup>5</sup> also comes to one's mind.

### **Archive quality**

2.2 First and foremost, the following qualities of archives, as laid down by Jenkinson, are fundamental to the pursuits of historical truth:

(a) **impartiality:** resulting from the first part of the definition of archives,<sup>2</sup> due to the organic nature of archives,<sup>6</sup> they were not drawn up in the interest or for the information of posterity<sup>7</sup>, and therefore they cannot tell the posterity anything but the truth;

(b) **authenticity:** resulting from the second part of the definition of archives,<sup>2</sup> as they were preserved in continual official custody and for official information only, they were free from the suspicion of prejudice or the suspicion of having been tampered with in regard to the interests in which we now use them.<sup>8</sup>

2.3 According to Jenkinson, the **integrity of the archives**, under the custody of the archivists, is ensured by their primary duties, notably the physical and moral defence,<sup>9 10</sup> in safeguarding the essential qualities of the

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see: <https://www.courts.vic.gov.au/court-system/appearing-court/oaths-and-affirmations>

<sup>6</sup> Jenkinson, Hilary (1943), *"The Classification and Survey of English Archives"*, British Society for International Bibliography, Proceedings, IV, 12-23, 1943, in Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson, Alan Sutton, 1980, p197. Here, Jenkinson summarized very nicely the quality of natural accumulation of archives as *"they came together by a natural process... they grow: they are parts of an organism: they were not singled out for preservation on account of their believed value for aesthetic, historical or literary purposes by the more or less fallible judgment of an expert"*.

<sup>7</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p11.

<sup>8</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p44-83 (physical defence) and p83-123 (moral defence).

<sup>10</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p146. He wrote: *"His work consequently is that of physical and moral conservation and his interest an interest in his Archives as Archives, not as documents valuable for proving this or that thesis."*

archives.<sup>11</sup> Under moral defence in particular, the most important principles of provenance<sup>12</sup> and original order<sup>13</sup> were highlighted. Jenkinson's view on the archivists' primary duties to maintain the integrity of the archives, i.e. being complete and unaltered, should be recognized in the pursuit of historical truth.

2.4 Jenkinson however allocated a lower priority to the archivists' secondary duties<sup>14</sup> which included tasks such as the provision of guides, transcripts and descriptive lists about the archives' contents, and those for meet the special requirements of the users,<sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> which apparently pertained to the **usability of the archives** and provision of services for the users. Jenkinson argued that if the archivist developed an interest in historical research subjects, it could endanger the primary duties since such interest "*might give him a prepossession in favour not only of a subject, but also perhaps of a school of opinion within that subject*".<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in carrying out the secondary duties, the archivist "*would no longer be the expert on his own ground but simply the servant of the public; and the public, which pays, is entitled to indicate what shall be done*".<sup>18</sup> Clearly Jenkinson was adamant about upkeeping the professional role of the archivists but took it to the extreme to consider the user service role as eroding or even

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<sup>11</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p15. He wrote: "*The duties of the Archivist, as it is one of the chief functions of this volume to point out, become under these circumstances very obvious, at least in their main lines. They are primary and secondary. In the first place he has to take all possible precautions for the safeguarding of his Archives and for their custody, which is the safeguarding of their essential qualities.*"

<sup>12</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p97.

<sup>13</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p104 and p113.

<sup>14</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p123-124.

<sup>15</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p125-132.

<sup>16</sup> Jenkinson (1937) referred to the "student" in many places (e.g. p124) which, from the context, could also mean the "user" in today's language.

<sup>17</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p123.

<sup>18</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p124.

endangering this professional role. While the professionalism and conviction of archivists expressed by Jenkinson<sup>19</sup> should be fully appreciated, one would argue that without a service orientation mindset, in particular, the commitment of archivists to meet the user's needs, how could Jenkinson evaluate their service quality, and if their services are value-for-money? Professionalism and service orientation should not be mutually exclusive but should go hand-in-hand in developing the archival profession. Jenkinson's views above are perhaps too narrow and inward-looking.

### **Archival appraisal and records destruction**

- 2.5 Undoubtedly, the most far-reaching views of Jenkinson are on the impartial or even passive role of the archivists in archival appraisal. He argued that it should not be the role of the archivist to decide on the destruction of the archives – the archivist should stick to their physical and moral defense, and not concerned about whether the archives are valuable to historical research or other uses.<sup>20</sup> His major concerns were that, if the archivists (or even the historians) were to take up this role, their judgement and choice would be liable to prejudice,<sup>21</sup> and more seriously this would tarnish the archivists' reputation for impartiality,<sup>22</sup> surrender the impartiality of the archives, and rendering them an inferior

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<sup>19</sup> Jenkinson, Hilary (1947), *"The English Archivist: A New Profession"*, an Inaugural Lecture for a new course in Archive Administration delivered at University College, London, 14 October 1947, in *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, Alan Sutton, 1980, p258. He wrote: *"His Creed, the Sanctity of Evidence; his Task, the Conservation of every scrap of Evidence attaching to the Documents committed to his charge; his Aim, to provide, without prejudice or afterthought, for all who wish to know the Means of Knowledge"*.

<sup>20</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p145-146.

<sup>21</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p146-147.

<sup>22</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p149.

quality as evidence, due to the fact that there could be no absolutely safe criterion for their elimination.<sup>23</sup>

2.6 Taking this thinking even further, Jenkinson arrived at his important conclusion that the administrative body, i.e. the creator of the archives concerned, is the only legitimate and competent body to make such decisions.<sup>24</sup> But Jenkinson was very careful to point out two pre-requisite conditions for the administrative body to undertake this role: (a) it “*proceeds only upon those grounds upon which alone it is competent to make a decision — the needs of its own practical business*”; and (b) it can “*refrain from thinking of itself as a body producing historical evidences*”.

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2.7 From the point of view of preserving all the evidence, in an impartial manner, for the pursuit of historical truth *and the whole truth*, I would tend to agree with Jenkinson’s reluctance on destruction of records, if not for the substantial efforts that would be needed to deal with the growing bulk of records. Indeed, when I was Director of the Hong Kong Observatory (HKO)<sup>26</sup>, I was concerned about the need for the department to schedule disposal, including destruction, of records without retention value. How could we determine this? Take the hypothetical example of some records on operations of a certain weather station<sup>27</sup> closed decades ago, say the Cape Collinson station which was closed in 1974 – they are no longer needed for today’s operations, but for a historian writing on the history of weather services, such records will have both

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<sup>23</sup> Jenkinson, Hilary (1956), “*Modern Archives: Some Reflections on T R Schellenberg*”: “*Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*” - a Review, *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, I, 147-149, 1956, in *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, Alan Sutton, 1980, p341-342.

<sup>24</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p149.

<sup>25</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p149-150.

<sup>26</sup> The author was Director of the Hong Kong Observatory from April 2011 to February 2020.

<sup>27</sup> There are currently hundreds of weather stations operated by HKO.

evidential and informational values.<sup>28</sup> If on average only 2-5% of records created are retained nowadays,<sup>29</sup> there is a high chance that these records will not be retained, as they are not considered to have significance such as policy matters, or even from HKO's business perspective, as Cape Collinson is much less significant than major stations like HKO Headquarters, King's Park, etc. As an interim measure, I directed that no HKO programme records should be destroyed unless personally approved by the Director.<sup>30</sup> Here, if we recall condition (a) mentioned in 2.6 above, this example clearly illustrates that even if the administrative body is truly concerned with the need of its own *practical business* and keeps the records intact as long as the weather station is being operated, there is still no guarantee that the administrative body will fully recognize the historical value of these records after the weather station has long been closed down. Indeed, historical interest is normally not the practical business nor the concern of most organizations. Who then will be the one to save these records from being destroyed – the administrator, the archivist or the historian?

2.8 Following this line of thought, the next question is: could any archivist or historian *in general* fully appreciate the future value of such highly specialized records to make the retention decision? As mentioned in 2.7 above, the archivist will probably consider the records of Cape Collinson station to fall outside the 2-5% of records to be retained. The engagement

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<sup>28</sup> Cape Collinson station was one of the two aeronautical meteorological stations (the other one was Cheung Chau station) established in 1950s – 1960s to provide meteorological observations for operational use at Kai Tak airport. The records would be able to provide basic information such as the dates of opening and closure of the station, the initial and subsequent installations of equipment, manning etc which may not be found elsewhere or dispersed in various documents.

<sup>29</sup> Chu, Simon (2022): Slides 18-19 of HIST5513 Lecture (4) – Core Functions of An Archivist.

<sup>30</sup> And of course such destruction will also need the approval of the Head of the Government Records Service according to the "Records Management Manual of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region".

of historians by HKO has also been few and far between,<sup>31</sup> and so far has not made significant impact on archival matters at HKO.

2.9 Let us consider a further example: preservation of old weather charts – the Public Record Office (PRO) had earlier indicated that only pre-WWII charts and those post-WWII charts pertaining to exceptional weather events like Typhoon Wanda (1962) would be kept by them, therefore HKO has to secure about \$3.6 million funding in 2015 to scan all the weather charts and devise criteria for retaining those with significance at HKO.<sup>32</sup> In view of the above examples, one could form the view that, at least for such a specialized institution, ideally only someone who deeply understands it and at the same time has an interest in its history will truly be in a position to decide on its records retention. Of course, this person will need the professional advice from the archivists. Indeed, the engagement of in-house archivists or even setting up of permanent archives by corporations like China Light and Power, HSBC, Swire, Jardine Matheson, Lee Kam Kee etc has been a recent trend which could be of great assistance in preserving records.

2.10 There is of course also the other side of the coin in this issue of letting the records creator to decide on their destruction – given the relatively frequent changes in posting of senior officials in modern organizations, their interests, not to mention ownership, in preserving records would not be high. They might even be reluctant in keeping sensitive records that could provide evidence some years later for scrutinizing the decisions they made. This is exactly the problem of Jenkinson's proviso that was introduced as condition (b) in 2.6 above – could the records creator refrain from thinking of itself as a body producing historical evidences? The destruction of 1,181.71 linear metres of records from policymaking

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<sup>31</sup> Only on three occasions were historians engaged in writing on the history of HKO: 1983 (book written by Anthony Dyson entitled "From Time Ball to Atomic Clock"), 2003 (book written by Ho Pui-yin entitled "Weathering the Storm: Hong Kong Observatory and Social Development") and ongoing (Hong Kong Chronicles: Natural Environment).

<sup>32</sup> Notes of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting and 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of HKO Working Group on Heritage Conservation held on 6 August 2015 and 24 August 2016 respectively.



bodies during the move of the Hong Kong Government offices to Tamar is a case in point<sup>33</sup> countering Jenkinson's view.

"Laissez-faire" approach?

2.11 Equally controversial, Jenkinson considered the following as part of the natural process of records turning into archives – after being half-forgotten or even wholly neglected by the creator or its successor, they survived by chance and re-emerged from “a kind of cocoon stage”, and their archival value is recognized leading to their ultimate preservation.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>35</sup> This was actually the unfortunate reality behind the old weather charts mentioned in 2.9 above – hundreds of them were discovered to be deteriorating<sup>36</sup> in an improper storage space.<sup>37</sup> This was brought to the attention of the Director (i.e. the author) and their archival value was immediately recognized, leading to a series of remedial actions to rescue, preserve and in particular to apply for funding for converting them into electronic format. Needless to say this situation was highly undesirable and so should be avoided. The above “cocoon” view of Jenkinson is obviously far too passive and could lead to detrimental effects to preservation of archives if interpreted literally.

2.12 We should nevertheless do justice to Jenkinson in recognizing that he did recommend, in Part IV of the Manual,<sup>38</sup> the need to re-introduce control of records by setting up a central registry in each organization, with the

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.scmp.com/article/984966/lai-see>

<sup>34</sup> Jenkinson, Hilary (1943), *“The Classification and Survey of English Archives”*, British Society for International Bibliography, Proceedings, IV, 12-23, 1943, in Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson, Alan Sutton, 1980, p197.

<sup>35</sup> Jenkinson, Hilary (1947), *“The English Archivist: A New Profession”*, an Inaugural Lecture for a new course in Archive Administration delivered at University College, London, 14 October 1947, in Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson, Alan Sutton, 1980, p240.

<sup>36</sup> Partially damaged by water, some even rotten.

<sup>37</sup> A covered car parking space was converted into storage to alleviate the lack of storage space at HKO Headquarters at the time.

<sup>38</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p156-190.

objective that those records with archival value would ultimately be preserved if certain rules were followed. These rules include, *inter alia*, description, preservation and destruction of records.<sup>39</sup> It is thus clear that Jenkinson did not simply take a “laissez-faire”<sup>40</sup> approach to the management of records.

### Jenkinson’s final words and the Public Records Act 1958

2.13 In reality, the challenges of the lack of space and resources<sup>41</sup> for properly keeping the ever-growing bulk of records, and for converting them into electronic media will continue to be faced by all organizations large or small. Despite his controversial views on archival appraisal and destruction of records, Jenkinson did mention in his last writing in 1960<sup>42</sup> that:

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<sup>39</sup> Jenkinson (1937), p147-153. Jenkinson described “*Regulations distinguish certain types of document which ought to be weed (to use the English expression), generally in the office to which they belong; which the administration, or in some cases the Archivist, is accordingly empowered to ‘weed’... the desired qualities for our Administrator in respect of Archive-making... (iii) he must preserve as little as possible*”. He also laid down the golden rules for “archive making” for the administrator: “*It appears then that the golden rule for the Administrator, so far as concerns his papers, must be to have them always in such a state of completeness and order that, supposing himself and his staff to be by some accident obliterated, a successor totally ignorant of the work of the office would be able to take it up and carry it on with the least possible inconvenience and delay simply on the strength of a study of the Office Files.*”

<sup>40</sup> Or “non-intervention” approach in more general terms.

<sup>41</sup> In the case of HKO, which is only a small department with less than 400 staff, as \$3.6 million is required to just scanning the weather charts, the costs for converting all records on HKO programme files could be envisaged to be prohibitively high.

<sup>42</sup> Jenkinson, Hilary (1960), p380. Footnote 8 stated: “*The corrected and extensively revised script of this Address, so far as is known Sir Hilary Jenkinson’s last completed literary work, was passed by him for press on 29 January 1961, five weeks before his death*”.

*“... this ultimate intrusion of selection based on the interests of research is inevitable.”<sup>43</sup>*

Ultimately, Jenkinson had to accept the reality and archival appraisal had since become a major role of the archivists. But has history proved him wrong, especially from the perspective of historians?

- 2.14 A review on what happened after Jenkinson retired from PRO of the UK (now The National Archives (TNA)) in 1954 may provide some insights on this question. A Royal Commission on Departmental Records chaired by Sir James Grigg to review the issue of the growing bulk of records in the UK, submitted a report in 1954<sup>44</sup> which became the basis of the Public Records Act (PRA) of 1958.<sup>45</sup> PRA defined public records, assigned duties between TNA and government departments. In particular, under this ‘Grigg System’, the departments are given the authority in custody and control of records, and in reviewing and destroying of files after a certain period of inactive use (the “first review”).<sup>46</sup> Only those files surviving this first review will be subject to a second review by the department, *under TNA supervision*, to determine whether they have historical value for permanent archival at TNA. While the Grigg System is considered by TNA to be “outstandingly effective”,<sup>47</sup> it should be noted that during its initial implementation, 5,398 tons, or an estimated 400,000 ‘foot-run’, of ‘valueless records’ were destroyed in 1957; 6,651 tons in 1958 and 7,578

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<sup>43</sup> Jenkinson, Hilary (1960), p378. Here, Jenkinson still insisted on the passive role of the archivist: *“But note that none of the pruning processes is made the task of the Archivist. The business of the Keepers of Archives is still, as Sir Thomas Hardy once put it, to keep them”*.

<sup>44</sup> <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4391576>

<sup>45</sup> The National Archives (2004): *“The National Archives Appraisal Policy: Background Paper – the ‘Grigg System’ and beyond”*, The National Archives, 2004, 10pp.

<sup>46</sup> TNA (2004), p1-2. Under the Grigg System, *“five years after a file has passed out of active use, departments (either the business users of the departments’ records centres) carry out “first review” at which they decide whether the file has any continuing administrative value to the organisation or could have administrative value in the future. Files may be destroyed immediately or earmarked for destruction without further review after a stated period”*.

<sup>47</sup> TNA (2004), p1.

tons in 1959.<sup>48</sup> Years after this period, there were still public outcries about the massive destruction of public records, e.g. on 12 July 1975, The Times published a photograph of ‘jolly civil servants’ throwing unwanted files into a waste bin under the headline: ‘Life with the weeders,<sup>49</sup> who throw out our unwanted secrets’.<sup>45</sup> Thus it can be seen that, even though the Grigg System did have the element of archival appraisal by the archivists, it did allow massive destruction of records by the departments,<sup>50</sup> apparently following Jenkinson’s views that the record creators are the most legitimate and competent body to decide on this matter! As a reviewer of the PRA lamented:

*“For the historian, there is little sign of excessive retention. Some of what was disposed of in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the years in which we have a prime interest, was valuable and it can never be recovered. Time and again we have stumbled on lacunae which foiled our work.”<sup>41</sup>*

While Jenkinson might have escaped ultimate responsibility for this situation as he was deliberately excluded from Grigg’s Committee,<sup>51</sup> the lack of collaboration, and indeed the presence of a gap, between the archivist (mostly taking a passive role) and the creator (subject to condition (b) in 2.6 which is unrealistic in many cases) in the destruction and appraisal processes is inherent in his theory, and is perhaps to blame.

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<sup>48</sup> Rock, Paul (2017): *“The dreadful flood of documents’: the 1958 Public Record Act and its aftermath: part 2: after-effects”*, Archives: The Journal of the British Records Association, 52 (134). ISSN 0003-9535.

<sup>49</sup> Ironically, Jenkinson also used the word “weed” in his Manual. See note 38.

<sup>50</sup> Before the record files reached the second review.

<sup>51</sup> Rock, Paul (2016): *“The dreadful flood of documents’: the 1958 Public Record Act and its aftermath. Part 1: the genesis of the act”*, Archives: The Journal of the British Records Association, 51 (132/3). pp. 48-69. ISSN 0003-9535.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

- 3.1 Overall, Jenkinson's inspiration views about the role of archives in providing impartial, authentic, complete and unaltered evidence for the pursuit of historical truth should be duly recognized by historians.
- 3.2 His views on the role of archivists were however rather passive, apparently erring on the side of professionalism and impartiality, but missing the service orientation mindset and the benefits of close collaboration between the archivists and the creators in the archival appraisal and record destruction processes. His long experience and focus in preserving medieval archives could have strongly influenced his school of thoughts,<sup>52</sup> including the trust he had on the record creator.
- 3.3 A close collaboration between the archivists and the creators may hold the key in addressing the ever-growing bulks of records, in particular the tsunami of electronic records, that constantly challenges the notion of Sanctity of Evidence in today's Big Data Era,<sup>53</sup> when too much data does not necessarily mean better-quality evidence for the pursuit of historical truth.

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<sup>52</sup> Cook, Terry (1997): "What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift". *Archivaria* 43 (February), p25. Cook wrote: "*Jenkinson had joined the Public Record Office in London in 1906, where his work focused almost exclusively on medieval and early nation-state records. This experience helps to explain his insistence on the legal character of archival records, their evidential nature, and their stability and inherited completeness. His archival assumptions also reflect his personal identification with the corporate culture of the prewar British Civil Service, which underpins his faith in the government "Administrator" being an honourable, educated, and civilized person capable of exercising disinterested judgements in terms of record preservation*".

<sup>53</sup> This essay does not assess Jenkinson's views in relation to issues arising from modern electronic records, e.g. lack of custody for records stored on the cloud, as it would be difficult for him to foresee such issues in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the computer had yet to be invented.