

# THE LIVING PAST

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Let the dead Past bury its Dead!  
Act, act in the living Present!

**T**HESE exhortations of the poet Longfellow are familiar to most literate Americans, and there is reason to believe that many accept the implications that the past is dead and that it is possible to act in the present without reference to the past. A moment's reflection, however, is sufficient to demonstrate the absurdity of these concepts. In strict logic the present is only an infinitesimal line between the past and the future. The antecedents of every act lie in the past when the act is performed, and in fact the beginning of the act itself is in the past before it is completed. In practice, however, when we speak of the present we have in mind what philosophers have called the "specious present," an indefinite period of time made up in part of the recent past and in part of the immediate future. Since the future is always beyond the veil, it is obvious that the nature of this specious present is determined wholly by the past. Not all the past is dead for any of us.

The part of the past that lives and influences the conduct of each individual depends, of course, upon his memory—not merely, however, his memory of his own experiences and observations, but also his memory of what he has read or been told about the past. Mr. Everyman, as Carl Becker has said, has his history, his conception of the past, and draws upon it constantly for his understanding of the present and his forecast of the future. If his memory of the past is inadequate for his purposes, he, like any other historian, consults the record, perhaps a vest-pocket memorandum book, for additional data. Obviously his memory and his supplemental data must be accurate and his inferences from them be carefully drawn if he is to act to the greatest advantage.

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For mankind as distinguished from individual men the past lives today mainly in recorded history based upon contemporary documents. Man's ability to make and preserve documents, either consciously or unconsciously, and to interpret them has made possible that vast extension of memory which is history—his best and only reliable guide in interpreting the present and anticipating the future.

Not only is our history—our "memory of things said and done" as Becker has put it—a part of the living past, but most of our other knowledge as well. The ability to acquire, use, and add to the accumulated knowledge of the past and especially the ability to transmit that knowledge to the future by all the processes of education is the distinguishing characteristic of man and the foundation of his civilization. Without it he would never have progressed much beyond the estate of the first specimens of the genus homo that were evolved upon the earth.

This knowledge, derived from the past, exists in two forms. The first form, which may be called active or functional knowledge has its existence in the brains of individual human beings. The second, which may be designated as passive or potential knowledge exists in the great reservoir of documents in which are recorded the observations, thoughts, ideas, discoveries, and achievements of men of the past as well as of men who are still living. The word "documents" is used here to include not merely written and printed materials but also all other forms of representation such as maps, drawings, pictures, and sound recordings, and even the physical remains of man's activities, when they have survived in the originals. These two forms of knowledge are not mutually exclusive of course. All of you are aware that George Washington was once President of the United States, and that bit of knowledge is recorded in innumerable documents. Nevertheless there is a vast amount of potential knowledge in the reservoir of documents that is not at any given moment to be found in the mind of any man, and conversely there is also much knowledge in the minds of men for which no documentary counterpart exists. Obviously either type of knowledge may readily be derived from the other and such derivation is constantly taking place.

A survey of the story of mankind indicates that human progress has paralleled and in all probability has been largely dependent on the growth of this great reservoir of documentary knowledge and

the availability of the material in it. Although the human race is believed to have existed on this planet with practically the same physical and mental attributes as it has today for something like a million years, the dawn of civilization took place only about six thousand years ago. It is true that primitive man has to his credit many important achievements, such as the utilization of fire, the development of speech, and the establishment of social relations—achievements that were to serve as the foundation for the future civilization—but his rate of progress was infinitesimally slow compared to that of his descendants during the last fifty or sixty centuries. With the exception of physical remains, which are often of little value without accompanying records, he had no reservoir of documentary knowledge upon which to draw, and such knowledge as he possessed was based therefore solely on observation, experience, and tradition.

The reasons for the speeding up of the process of acquiring, preserving, and utilizing knowledge, which is of course the basis of civilization, are doubtless complex, but it seems certain that of outstanding importance among them was the development of the use of marks made on material objects as symbols of mental concepts—in other words, the invention of writing—which is supposed to have occurred some six thousand years ago. The importance of writing in the diffusion of culture is obvious. It provided a method of communicating knowledge from person to person when communication by speech was not possible. Fully as important, however, is the rôle that it played in making possible the development of a reservoir of knowledge, independent of the minds of individual men. By means of written documents it was possible for mankind to preserve and to pass on from generation to generation the accumulated knowledge of the past and thus to provide an ever-broadening base to which additions could be made at an ever-increasing rate.

Another great step forward resulted from the invention of printing, which occurred about 500 years ago and which not only made possible the communication of knowledge to the many instead of to the few but also greatly accelerated the rate of growth of the reservoir of recorded knowledge. In the first place the incentive for research—for acquiring knowledge—and for recording it was greatly increased by the possibility of transmitting that knowledge to large numbers of people and, in the second place,

the fact that many documents were produced in thousands of identical copies and widely distributed greatly increased the chance that at least one of the copies would be permanently preserved and would be available for the use of future generations. It is an interesting fact that the concept of progress based on constantly increasing knowledge was practically unknown until the seventeenth century, when the use of printing had spread widely, and was not generally accepted until the nineteenth century, when the influence of printed documents had become almost universal.

The constant improvement and mechanization of printing processes, the invention of the typewriter, and the development of various so-called "near-printing" processes, together with the tremendous expansion of literacy, have naturally resulted in an enormous and constantly accelerating increase in the quantity of recorded documents. That increase in quantity and the increased demand for certain types of documents that in the past have been largely neglected have made it clear that every effort must be made to comprehend the problems of documentation in all their vastness and scope and to make systematic plans for the solution of those problems. The fact that the word "documentation" has recently come into use in a number of languages to express the concept of the entire range of problems having to do with documents, including producing, reproducing, preserving, arranging, controlling, and making them available for the dissemination of knowledge and the promotion of research, is in itself evidence of a growing realization of the relation of these problems to the continuous progress of civilization. It is evident that not only the activities of libraries and archival establishments but also those of writers, printers, publishers, photographers, filing bureaus, and record offices are included in the concept of documentation and affect the character and content of the reservoir of recorded knowledge.

This broad concept of documentation was developed mainly in Europe during the period between the two World Wars. The International Institute of Bibliography, which had been established with headquarters in Brussels near the end of the last century, was transformed into the International Institute of Documentation and later into the International Federation of Documentation. Its membership consists of national institutes for documentation, which have sprung up in most of the European

countries, and international organizations concerned with phases of documentation; with particular institutions, such as libraries and archival establishments, and interested individuals admitted as associate members. The Federation held international conferences nearly every year during the decade of the thirties, at which there were discussions of such topics as general bibliographical methods, abstracting, standardization of periodicals, classification, information services, filing methods in public agencies and in business establishments, and photographic or other methods of reproducing documents. Perhaps the best known activity of the Federation is the development and promotion of the use of the international decimal classification, a much more elaborate scheme than our well-known Dewey decimal classification and one designed to serve not only for books but also for all other varieties of documents that lend themselves to subject classification. It is interesting to note that this classification is being used by over sixty municipalities in Holland as a basis for the filing of their current records. The Federation publishes a bulletin four times a year, which contains articles and a current bibliography on all phases of documentation and it also publishes the proceedings of the international conferences.

The concept of documentation was slow in making its way in the United States, perhaps because we were so busily engaged in special activities within the field that we did not have time to think of generalizations. An American Documentation Institute, composed of representatives of national scholarly and professional associations and governmental agencies, was set up in 1937 but has concerned itself, as yet, mainly with problems connected with increasing the availability of documents by means of photographic reproduction. Americans participated, however, in the international conferences of 1937, 1938, and 1939, and there is reason to believe that, when and if the nations of the world stop fighting with each other, this country will play an important part in the international promotion of documentation.

Mention has just been made of the fact that we have been very busy of late in this country in activities concerned with special phases of documentation. Many of those activities are in the field of library work, but what I shall have to say on this subject will be concerned mainly with activities relating to archives and other manuscript material.

The establishment of The National Archives in 1934 and its installation in a magnificent new building in Washington have contributed to a rapid advance in archival activities throughout the country; the Society of American Archivists, established in 1936, through its annual meetings and its quarterly magazine, *The American Archivist*, has also contributed to this movement; but the Historical Records Survey set up in 1935 with a view to utilizing unemployed white-collar workers to bring under control the documentary resources of the country, especially public records and historical manuscripts, has probably been the most important factor in that advance.

Largely as a result of these recent activities and developments it is now possible to isolate certain pressing problems with reference to documentation in this country and to note what has been done or is being done or might be done toward their solution. One of these problems of special importance is concerned with the making of records by public and private agencies. The quantity of material that is now recorded and filed is so great that it threatens to overwhelm not only the archivists but also the investigators of the future. Much is recorded or filed that might well be left unrecorded or be disposed of as soon as it has served a temporary purpose. On the other hand much information that might have a social value in the future is left unrecorded or, if it is recorded, the record is not preserved. No systematic efforts are being made at present to solve this problem, but archivists, at least, are beginning to realize that many of the problems that beset them when they take over bodies of noncurrent archival material have their origin in the lack of careful planning with reference to the creation of those bodies of records.

Closely related to this problem is that of the selection of records for preservation in archival or other repositories. Until recently such selection has been largely a matter of chance, at least it has not been much affected by any consideration of the possible value of the material for society in the future. For example, vast quantities of records of the federal government that have been disposed of in the past as useless papers would now be of great value, if they were still available, not only to research scholars and private searchers for information but also to public administrators; while, on the other hand, vast quantities of records that apparently can never serve any useful purpose, either because

of their purely routine character or of the duplication of the data in them in more convenient forms, have been carefully preserved for generations. Fortunately so far as Federal records are concerned this problem seems to be in process of satisfactory solution. Under the National Archives Act of 1934 and later legislation all agencies of the federal government are required to bring to the attention of the Archivist of the United States any records that they propose to dispose of. The records are then carefully examined by competent members of the staff of The National Archives, who consider their possible value not only as sources of information in any field of research or investigation but also in connection with any governmental activities and who report thereon to the Archivist. Only such records as the Archivist deems to be without permanent value or historical interest may be disposed of by the agencies. Similar steps have been taken by some of the States, the Society of American Archivists has a committee studying the subject, and it can be reported that progress is being made toward a solution of this problem.

The problem of preservation has, of course, long been recognized as one of outstanding importance. Even as long ago as the reign of Queen Elizabeth an English archivist identified the enemies of documents as "Fier, Water, Ratts and Myce, Misplaceinge [and] even plaine taking of them away . . . by a Privy Councilor . . . or anie of the Kinges learned Counsell." All these enemies are still to be guarded against, but the problem of preservation has been complicated in more modern times by the appearance of other enemies or of the old ones in new guises. Among these new enemies are: the deterioration in the quality of the physical material with which most documents are created, resulting, mainly, from the introduction of wood-pulp paper and of impermanent inks in the second half of the last century; the great increase in bulk of recorded material, already referred to, which raises the question as to whether society can afford the amount of storage space necessary for the preservation of all documents that theoretically should be preserved for the use of future generations; and finally, the greatly increased destructiveness of warfare—for evidence concerning which one need only read the daily papers.

The first of these enemies is being attacked in a variety of ways. So far as concerns public records created in public offices quality standards of paper, inks, and typewriter ribbons are being

more and more generally set up and enforced by legislation and inspection; business firms have interested themselves in improving the quality of such materials used for their records; and numerous publishers of magazines and newspapers are printing part of each issue on rag paper. So far as concerns the preservation of the great mass of documents already created out of impermanent materials and also those still being so created, there are two developments of very great importance. One of these is the evolution by The National Archives in coöperation with the Bureau of Standards of the process of lamination, by which manuscripts, newspapers, or other documents on paper are rapidly and inexpensively covered on both sides with a thin sheet of transparent cellulose acetate foil, which is fused with the paper and which, according to the Bureau of Standards, will prevent future deterioration. The other development, which is a contribution to the solution not only of this problem of deterioration but also to numerous other problems of documentation, is the evolution of convenient and inexpensive processes for the photographic reproduction of documents, and especially the process of microphotography.

The fascinating story of the progress of microphotography is too long to be recounted here, but some of the ways in which it is being used to circumvent the enemies of documents should be noted. In the first place, it offers the possibility of making permanent facsimile reproductions of documents that are likely to disintegrate. In the second place, it offers the most promising solution of the problem of the excessive cost of storage space, for it is now entirely feasible to reproduce the great mass of documents that have no intrinsic or sentimental interest and are important only for the information they contain, dispose of the originals, and preserve the reproductions in five per cent of the space that would have been required for the originals. Finally, the making of miniature photographic reproductions of unique and valuable documents and the deposit of copies of those reproductions in different places offers the best available insurance against the loss of the texts of the documents by fires or explosions, whether caused by wars or otherwise. It is known that considerable use was made of microphotography for this purpose in France and in England during the last two or three years, and it is probable that it has been similarly used in other European countries.



The next problem to be considered may be designated as the problem of control. Obviously, it is useless to preserve documents unless those who might have occasion to consult them are able to learn of their existence, to find them, and to find in them the information that they need. Librarians and scholars have been struggling with this problem for generations, of course, especially as it applies to books, and have produced a multitude of tools in the forms of catalogs, indexes, bibliographies, classification schemes, abstracting services, union lists, interlibrary loans, and other devices in their efforts to cope with it. Archival and other manuscript materials, newspaper files, and ephemeral printed materials have received no such comprehensive treatment, however. About a decade ago research scholars, especially those working in the fields of the social sciences, the humanities, and history, took the lead in initiating a movement to bring such materials under control—a movement that has developed into a veritable campaign on a nation-wide scale. In the year 1929—a year made famous by the beginning of the depression—the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council set up a Joint Committee on Materials for Research to wrestle with this and related problems. With the coöperation of many agencies and individuals the Committee initiated, promoted, or aided a number of important projects; and its thinking and planning helped to pave the way for the more comprehensive movement that followed. Many other forces and agencies besides the Joint Committee have contributed to this movement. For example, The National Archives has made a comprehensive survey of the voluminous records in Washington of agencies of the federal government, in addition, of course, to arranging, describing, and making available the records that have been transferred to it in vast quantities. The product of this over-all survey and numerous descriptive lists of transferred records are available for consultation by scholars at The National Archives, and the recently published 320 page *Guide to the Material in The National Archives* makes it possible for anyone interested to obtain a general view of the sources of information available at that institution.

It was the depression, however, and the need for giving useful work to unemployed people that provided the greatest impetus to this movement. Under the Civil Works Administration and its successors numerous local projects demonstrated the feasibility of

using relief labor for compiling useful data concerning documents, and finally, near the end of 1935, the Historical Records Survey was set up by the Works Progress Administration as a national project with over \$1,000,000 available for expenditure in the remainder of that fiscal year. The Survey has had a somewhat hectic career, and about a year ago it was broken up into State projects, the activities of which, however, are still guided and controlled to a considerable extent by a central office in Washington. How many millions of dollars have been expended by the Survey is unknown to the writer; certainly thousands of people have been given employment that has helped to keep them alive and to sustain their morale; and certainly the finished products of the Survey, which are now being distributed to libraries and other depositories, will have ultimate values to the American people much in excess of the cost of the projects. Not the least of these values is the demonstration of the fact that it is possible by systematic planning and careful supervision to use clerical workers to accomplish tasks in the field of documentation that heretofore have been considered impossible because of the great amount of labor involved.

Most of you are probably familiar with some of the products of the Historical Records Survey. They include detailed inventories of state and county archives, guides to depositories of and collections of historical manuscripts, inventories of the records of church organizations, and of thousands of individual churches, calendars and transcripts of important groups of manuscripts, checklists of early imprints, and the like. Other WPA projects, independent of the Historical Records Survey, have made comprehensive indexes to or abstracts of newspaper files, union catalogs of books available in groups of libraries, and other tools for bringing documents under control. The Survey of Federal Archives Outside the District of Columbia, which was set up originally as an independent WPA project sponsored by The National Archives but was later merged with the Historical Records Survey, has prepared and is now publishing descriptive inventories of the millions of cubic feet of records in the thousands of field offices and agencies of the federal government scattered throughout the country, inventories that are of great value, not only to officials, scholars, and other investigators to whom the material may be useful, but also to The National Archives, which

has a certain responsibility for all federal records. It is not too much to say that in this country more progress in bringing unpublished documentary material under control has been made in the last decade than was made in the preceding century.

Not all people, however, who may have occasion to consult documents can with convenience travel to the depositories in which unique copies are preserved. The principal medium for the dissemination or widespread distribution of documents in the past has been, of course, printing; but printing is comparatively expensive and is usually feasible only when the demand for copies is likely to exceed 2,000. Many documents, however, and especially products of detailed research, are needed by only a few hundred, or perhaps only a dozen, libraries and individuals. The most practicable solution of this problem available at present is to be found in the various forms of "near-printing" that have had extensive development in recent years, though most of them have been known for a generation or more. By means of such processes as multilithing, multigraphing, mimeographing, and hectographing, it is possible to produce documents in small editions at costs per copy no greater than those for comparable works printed in editions of 2,000 copies. Most of the inventories produced by the Historical Records Survey, for example, are manufactured by one of these processes. Even these processes, however, do not meet the needs of the individual scholar or searcher who may wish to make use of a document in a repository at a distance. Here again microphotography comes to the rescue. Transcripts made by hand or by the typewriter though much used in the past have never been satisfactory because of the possibility of error; full-sized photographic reproductions and especially photostatic prints, which came into use a generation or so ago, were a great improvement on transcripts, but they are too expensive for large-scale operations; microcopies, however, have not only the advantage of being facsimiles but also the further advantage that they can be produced in quantities at a very small cost. The only objection to them is the fact that they cannot be read with the naked eye, and that objection is losing its force as a result of the production of satisfactory but inexpensive reading machines. It would seem that very real progress is being made toward the solution of the problem of dissemination.

What then can be said of the prospects for the more rapid

accumulation and more effective application of knowledge in the future and consequently the more rapid progress of civilization? It must be admitted at the outset that everything depends upon finding solutions and finding them soon for the pressing problems of social and economic control and of international relations, so that peace may be substituted for warfare throughout the greater part of the world and men may once more devote major efforts to the promotion of civilization. Possibly research based on documentation and the more widespread dissemination of knowledge will help in the solution of these very problems. Assuming that some workable solution will be found for those problems, it is not too optimistic to look forward to the time when the potential knowledge of the human race as recorded in documents will be so adequately controlled and the dissemination of documents will be so efficient and inexpensive that it will be possible for anyone anywhere to discover promptly what documents exist that would be useful to him; to obtain and use them, perhaps in pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge; then to make known the results of his research to those to whom they would be of value, whether few or many; and finally to have those results, if sufficiently important, so preserved that they will be available to future searchers in the great reservoir of recorded knowledge. When that time comes the characterization by H. G. Wells of the processes of documentation as the functioning of a "World Brain" will be justified.