

*Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists*. Archival Fundamentals Series III, Vol. 3. By Kathleen D. Roe. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019. 149 pp. Paperback. \$69.00. \$49.00 for SAA members.

Writing a formal review for this work seems oddly unnecessary; given the background and experience of the author, one would not even have to read this book to know its worth. Kathleen Roe has long been a powerful voice for promoting the vital importance of advocacy in the archival profession, not only in her own career (notably as director of archives and records management at the New York State Archives) but in her record of prominent professional service. Roe served as president of the Society of American Archivists in 2014–2015, where she made advocacy one of the centerpiece policies of her administration. As past president of the Council of State Archivists (as well as during her SAA service), she provided leadership not only in lower-level advocacy efforts but also as an active voice for archival advocacy at the federal legislative level. Few people in our profession are better poised than Roe to “write the book,” as it were, on archival advocacy in all its aspects. Here she has provided us with an invaluable reference tool to help us pursue advocacy initiatives and programs regardless of our institutional limits.

The fact that advocacy and awareness are among the subjects covered in SAA’s Archival Fundamentals series—along with such traditional subjects as archival appraisal, arrangement and description, reference services, and preservation—is itself telling evidence of Roe’s central contention.<sup>1</sup> Advocacy is as central to the institutional mission and as vital to thriving archival services and operations as any of the more commonly agreed-upon functions. Indeed, Roe points out how a failure to actively advocate can harm institutions and the profession alike. It is a familiar phenomenon, as Roe notes:

Nearly every archivist has found it necessary to counteract the common misconceptions on archives involving words and phrases such as *dusty*, *old*, *hidden away*, and *housed in the attic* and a litany of terminology that bedevils the profession. Newspaper articles, however well-meaning, often characterize archivists as individuals who “have long spent their careers cloistered, like the objects they protected.” That undervaluing of archives also has a *direct economic impact on individual members and the status of the profession* (p. 3, emphasis mine).

I would wager that most of us who have ever had our institutions and our work covered in the media have experienced this (with obligatory references to the library at Hogwarts and the vast government storehouse in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*). While there is certainly something quirky and fun about the kinds of descriptive frames into which the media, institutional funders, administrators, and political leaders like to place us, it ultimately does our profession and the work we do a disservice. It reduces us to the status of paper-pushers, or passive caretakers of endless files, rather than the professionals committed to a full and accurate historical record or the protectors and revelators of hidden and underrepresented voices that we are (or hope to be). These distortions of reality can be combated through active and ongoing advocacy of the kind Roe delineates here. The advocacy and awareness functions are not discrete, episodic activities—Roe notes, wisely, that advocacy must be ongoing and integrated into the regular operations

of an archival institution. As she says, quoting Nancy Amidei, “Advocacy is a frame of mind” (p. 2).

Little that Roe says here is groundbreaking or radical per se; what it *is*, though, is straightforward common sense. She herself notes that “much of the information provided here will not be surprising or complicated for those who make the decision to pursue advocacy and awareness efforts” (p. 14). However, making the commitment “does require individual archivists, institutions, and professional organizations to focus on the change needed, invest the time to develop a plan, and then pursue an approach that will engage the audience and result in real change” (p. 14). Simple advice, perhaps, but no less necessary.

In her readable, instructional writing style, Roe presents an assortment of brief case studies and examples to demonstrate advocacy efforts at multiple levels. The establishment of the National Archives and Records Administration through the efforts of J. Franklin Jameson and the creation of the Labor Archives at Wayne State University provide examples of how determined archivists can advocate for the development of vital institutions. Passionate efforts by archivists in 2012 to defend the Georgia State Archives from defunding and Columbia College’s Center for Black Music Research from dissolution prove that persistent and active lobbying of administrators can save endangered institutions. Similarly, the creation of the vitally important Documenting Ferguson digital repository project shows the positive result of carefully planned and focused advocacy goals. The use of so many real-world instances of successful advocacy is one of the most valuable aspects of Roe’s book. Theorizing about how useful thoughtful advocacy efforts can be is all very well, but ours is a practical profession, and we need practical examples to justify advocacy and awareness programs to our administrators and our other stakeholders.

Practicality and real-world use are hallmarks of Roe’s book. She carefully takes the reader through the various stages of successful advocacy efforts, from the development of achievable and explainable goals, to understanding the various stakeholders at play (e.g., Who are your supporters? Who comprises your audience for this particular effort?), to methods for developing a compelling message. This last can be particularly challenging for archivists who advocate—it is easy enough to say that “we have cool stuff!” but, as Roe notes, it is necessary to move beyond the flatness of inherent interest. An archival advocate can use the power of emotional resonance to make people care about their collections: “the point of sharing archival records with any audience is to engage their interest initially by telling them ‘stories’ that provide a touchstone to their own interests and experiences” (p. 65). In other words, an archival advocate should find narratives within their records that will touch hearts. But an effective advocate should also use evidence of positive outcomes to make their case and show the actual impact of the materials in their care to actual people and policies. Finally, an effective advocate should collect and use available and credible data to demonstrate value.

Roe uses one chapter to delineate ways in which to put advocacy into practice beyond the planning stages, including utilizing a range of different types of supporters, using social media as a publicity tool, establishing contacts with members of the press, and

being a vocal advocate for one's collections and institutions (i.e., through the fabled "elevator speech"). She also discusses in helpful detail the process of government lobbying—an activity that may not be undertaken by archivists at every level, but which is crucial to ensuring federal, state, and local funding for archives and to instilling in legislators a knowledge and understanding of records so that appropriate laws and regulations can be made in an informed environment.

Throughout, Roe writes with an eye toward the book being a useful guide to real-world work. She incorporates powerful, thematically apt quotes that inspire, easily understandable graphs and diagrams that explicate and summarize her points, and thoughtful pauses that allow the reader to write down or fill in their own thoughts and answers about what they have just read. She also adds examples of real-life advocacy documents, presented to stakeholders during particular advocacy efforts, that could be used as models.

Advocacy and awareness are activities in which all of us need to engage, even when we are nervous about doing so. One of Roe's final observations is worth noting:

Archivists sometimes express reluctance about involvement in advocacy and awareness initiatives. Some have concerns, particularly when it involves direct contact or meetings with government officials and their staff or with the president of a university, the leaders of a business or religious organization, or vaunted scholars and journalists (p. 107).

Library schools rarely teach advocacy as a formal course of study or frame it as a crucial archival function (I do wish Roe had touched more on this gaping absence in our professional educations). For this reason, many of us do not see advocacy as something we need to do in our everyday work—it is something, many of us suppose, that our supervisors do, or that people specifically hired for the task are trained for. On the contrary, though, Roe shows that we all have a role to play in archival advocacy work. Her book is most valuable in providing numerous avenues by which "each of us needs to find our own voice and determine how we can best contribute to advocacy and awareness efforts in our institutions and our profession" (p. 107).

Jeremy Brett, CA  
Associate Professor and Processing Archivist  
Cushing Memorial Library & Archives, Texas A&M University

## **NOTE**

1. Roe defines *advocacy* as "giving a focused, purposeful message to a targeted audience in order to effect a positive change" (p. 6), whereas *awareness* has a broader meaning of "efforts and initiatives to share information about archives to raise the general knowledge about the existence of archival collections, the institutions that hold them, and the professionals that manage them" (p. 5). The two functions are related, but their targets and initiatives are different.