Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts. **Archival Fundamentals Series III, Vol. 2. By Dennis Meissner. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019. 224 pp. Softcover. $69.00.**

Dennis Meissner's *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* is the fourth manual on the topic to be published by the Society of American Archivists since 1977. A longer volume than its Archival Fundamentals Series II predecessor, Meissner's *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* is organized to proceed from basic definitions to the principles of arrangement and description, and then to the practice of each. A chapter on nontextual formats (i.e., photographs, sound and moving image recordings, and digital records) affirms that arranging and describing such materials occurs within the same basic framework as those for traditional paper records. A brief final chapter offers speculation about future change, and a recapitulatory conclusion and six appendices round out the manual. Meissner's clear treatment of fundamental ideas provides a basis for the reader to understand the work of arrangement and description. Throughout, the author offers both concise and practical advice. Among other things, the manual offers lucid descriptions of concepts and practices such as levels of arrangement, multilevel description, and practical and physical requirements for archival processing, as well as a concise guide to arranging and describing born-digital records. *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* successfully fulfills its author's stated goal of providing "a very practical manual" that situates its pragmatic guidance within archival theory (p. 1).

At the beginning of the manual, Meissner acknowledges both his own "prejudices" and his guiding "assumptions" (pp. 2–3). The prejudices—reflecting the outlook that one might want from the author of this particular manual—include the assertions that arrangement and description "lie at the very heart of the archival endeavor," that arrangement in particular is our "most important intellectual work," and that description's role is to communicate this "value-adding" work to prospective users (p. 2). In his prose, rather than affecting a detached and authoritative style, Meissner acknowledges his authorial role and writes in an accessible and personal voice that includes judiciously inserted and very dry humor. Any volume like this one synthesizes a large corpus of resources, and, while the book includes an extensive annotated bibliography, Meissner also cites numerous authorities within the text, from twentieth-century pioneers to recent modules from SAA's Trends in Archival Practice series, directing the reader to sources of more extensive advice on certain topics (including prior SAA Archival Fundamentals manuals). By engaging the American archival literature so forthrightly and generously, the author both provides points of entry to it and exemplifies its depth and maturity.

As for Meissner's assumptions, many will not surprise readers who are familiar with More Product, Less Process (MPLP), a framework Meissner codeveloped with Mark A. Greene that has had a transformative impact on archivists' understanding of arrangement and description work. Several assumptions cluster around how user access should determine the extent to which archivists employ effort, resources, and archival principles in arrangement and description work. Meissner emphasizes that the "preeminent reason" for arranging and describing the materials in our care "is to serve the eventual users of

the records by providing effective access" (p. 156). He underlines the need for weighing effective access against the time and resources archivists expend on certain arrangement and description functions such as construing original order. Both in the details and as a broader outlook, the author's advice is consistently sound. Furthermore, a manual that acknowledges choices—and their ramifications—is preferable to one that enshrines ideal practices that may be unattainable and ultimately counterproductive. As Meissner notes in cautioning against overprocessing, such misdirected effort has costs that are both "financial and psychic" (p. 25).

Although Meissner emphasizes that arrangement and description are complementary—with arrangement being the hand and description the glove—and to a degree synchronous processes, he analyzes them discretely. Another theme of Meissner's assumptions is that archival description should be viewed as structured data and that our data may reach our patrons through redistribution by systems and machines other than our own. The chapter on descriptive principles is the manual's longest and most novel in approach. Meissner's starting point is that the components of description should be viewed as data, highly organized and conforming to a model. Standards exist to guide us in structuring, differentiating, exchanging, and populating our collection data. In turn, our data are then disassembled and distributed, by us, our machines, and other machines over which we have no control. This strategy provides a framework that helps to make accessible and clear the relationships among descriptive standards, the concepts of context description and entity relationships, and the fact that collection description can be rearranged to convey either intellectual or administrative order. In the chapter on descriptive practice, Meissner builds on that foundation by providing clear and eminently practical advice on the elements of *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS) and the input and output solutions to create and convey collection metadata. Meissner treats Encoded Archival Description as the "preeminent" tool to create structured collection data and spreadsheets as a minimal data-based solution (pp. 113–18). A minor disappointment with the manual is that archivists who must rely on word processors and PDF files (or anything lower tech) may be alienated by this presentation. Nonetheless, the point that "description is structured data, not prose" is a powerful guiding rule for practice, and Meissner employs it systematically and persuasively in the text (pp. 37–39).

Meissner's final chapter warns readers that our professional ground "is shifting in a seismic way" (p. 144). He offers some speculation about future challenges, especially as digital records and access erode the practical necessity of original order, new descriptive and conceptual concepts open fixed hierarchical descriptions, MPLP reminds archivists to think in terms of resources and outcomes, and archival description becomes both more transparent and encompassing of multiple points of view. Undoubtedly, all are profound challenges, especially if we single-mindedly pursue our professional concepts as "sacred verities" rather than tools and conceive of our descriptive products as linear works of prose (p. 3). However, with the conceptual guidance that this manual provides, both archivists-in-training and experienced practitioners can meet them. If arrangement and description are intended to serve users, our choices can be weighed rationally and our practices can evolve. Furthermore, if description is conceived of as data to facilitate

user access, we can be rigorous, concise, and inclusive in creating it and, moreover, welcome its distribution and reuse.

Meissner's *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* provides a solid guide to basic arrangement and description practices and to established and evolving standards, but also enunciates concepts and values that undergird the work. It encourages a realistic decision-making framework and articulates a sophisticated and user-oriented concept of our descriptive products. The manual also situates itself in the rich body of theoretical and practical literature that reflects a thriving profession. In his series introduction, Peter J. Wosh expresses the ambition that these latest SAA manuals will be "helpful, provocative, and essential" to archivists' "intellectual life and to their daily work" (p. x). Dennis Meissner has accomplished that goal with this wise, thorough, and engaging volume.

William W. Hardesty
Coordinator of Archival Collections Management
Georgia State University Library