

structures.—*Deborah DeGeorge, University of Michigan.*

Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions: Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels. Ed. Terry Cook. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011. 434p. \$56 (ISBN 9781931666369).

In 1986, Massachusetts Institute of Technology archivist Helen Willa Samuels published an article in *American Archivist* entitled "Who Controls the Past." Invoking George Orwell's lines from 1984: "who controls the past, controls the future," Samuels noted that in "a modern, complex, information-rich society... only a small portion of the vast documentation can be kept... archivists are challenged to select a lasting record, but they lack techniques to support this decision-making." She proposed an appraisal process called "documentation strategies... to respond to these problems."

The plight of the modern archivist in today's information-saturated society is, to put it mildly, daunting. Given the staggering number of physical and electronic documents generated by institutions in particular, and society at large, how does an archivist go about creating order and accessibility to this mountain range of information? Cutting to the crux: how does an archivist decide what to keep and what to destroy?

Helen Willa Samuels grappled with these questions and sought to answer them in a body of work that helped define the role of archivist as much more than merely a collector of the past. Rather, Samuels described how, through the careful, collaborative, and thoughtful appraisal and selection of what materials should be archived, archivists have an active role in shaping societal memory.

As a testament to her stature in the archives community, editor Terry Cook has compiled *Controlling the Past* as a *festschrift* that celebrates the work and legacy of Helen Willa Samuels. *Controlling the Past* contains 16 essays by noted

archivists, as well as an introductory overview by editor Terry Cook, an annotated bibliography of Samuels's work, and an autobiographical essay by Samuels.

There's a lot to unpack and digest in Samuels' work, and these essays do a wonderful job of providing context and insight to her body of work. A number of these essays address and expand upon Samuels' documentation strategy/activist archivist literature, as well as one of Samuels' concept of archival functional analysis. Outlined in her 1992 book *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities*, functional analysis suggested that institutions such as universities were best understood by looking at what they do—their functions.

The essays are broadly categorized under two main divisions: "Documenting Society" and "Representing Archives/Being Archival." The former category focuses on appraisal and related issues and includes essays on electronic records management, oral history, problems presented by digital records, corporate archives, archiving photographs, and the "complication of color in an academic archive," an examination of the monochromatic nature of archival work.

The second section addresses the role of the archivist within Samuels's documentation/appraisal/activism model. Included are essays on the importance of collaborative work among archivists, the interrelated role between creators, archivists, and users of information, the philosophical and ethical role of the archivist as "controller of the past," and the changing nature of the archivist in relation to the historical research process.

For the nonarchivist, *Controlling the Past* sheds some light on the archival profession from a theoretical and practical perspective. For archivists, this volume is filled with thought-provoking essays that mingle theory, observation, and practice. It's one of those books that you'll return to, one that will lead you back to Samuels's original work with fresh insight.—*Gene Hyde, Radford University, Radford, Virginia.*