

Perspectives on Women's Archives

TANYA ZANISH-BELCHER with ANKE VOSS

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Despite the many roles women have played in shaping culture, politics, and society throughout history, the work of actively documenting and preserving records of women's lives is a relatively recent undertaking. The historic lack of visibility of women's collections became a vicious cycle: because many archivists assumed primary source materials on women didn't exist, they made no effort to collect them.

In the 1930s, a few historians began to critique the holdings of mainstream archival and manuscript repositories in the United States, questioning their default approach of collecting and documenting almost exclusively male lives and experiences (and generally white, upper-class males at that). Some began to advocate for separate women's repositories in order to create a space where women's lives and stories could be documented and preserved. These early efforts resulted in the establishment of archives and libraries devoted solely to women, most notably the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College in Northampton Massachusetts, and the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Radcliffe College, in Cambridge, Massachusetts (now part of Harvard University). These early repositories of primary source materials laid the foundations for the development of academic study of women's history, and helped demonstrate women's roles in shaping American politics, society, and culture. They also signalled to mainstream repositories that sources and papers on women did in fact exist, and could be collected.

Of course, women's archives weren't the only places where women's collections existed. Yet many resources on women held by mainstream repositories in the United States continued to be unknown and under-utilised well into the 1970s. Inadequate archival description was often an issue. Sometimes women's materials were buried within the papers of male relatives, or had received only scant description in finding aids. Other women's collections sat within institutional backlogs, without any description at all.

Perspectives on Women's Archives provides an overview of archival literature on women's collections in the United States, past and present. The volume contains 18 chapters, including eight essays previously

published in academic journals between 1975 and 2010, which provide historical context. The remaining ten chapters are new additions to the archival literature on women and women's collections, which provide contemporary analysis and reflection. The volume adds to the growing body of literature on women and archives, with the aim of evaluating the state of women's collections and women-focused archival repositories in the 20th and 21st centuries. While the volume focuses solely on the American experience, many essays offer commentary that is relevant to libraries and archives in New Zealand (and beyond).

Three major themes appear throughout the volume. The first is the importance of women's sources for the development of women's studies and collaboration between archivists and historians of women's history. The second theme is the need to address the historic and contemporary challenges regarding access to women's collections, both physically (their location) and intellectually (their description). The final theme that runs throughout the book is the challenge to create a truly inclusive historical record of women's experience, and the contributions of citizen archivists, oral historians, and community archives in this work.

The first section, *Reclaiming our Past*, contains mostly older essays and begins with an essay written in 1975 by historian Gerda Lerner. Lerner questions the emphasis on collecting (and studying) only the papers of "notable women", explaining that "the history of notable women is the history of exceptional, even deviant, women, and does not describe the experience and history of the mass of women."¹ Additional essays in this section describe the history and status of women's collections generally, as well as the groundbreaking work in the 1980s to locate "forgotten" black women's collections in American repositories. In the only contemporary essay from this section of the book, Kären M. Mason looks back on the work of a 1975 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop an inventory of women's history sources in the United States. *Women's History Sources: A Guide to Manuscripts and Archival Collections*, also known as the Hinding Guide, was published in 1979 and comprised over 1000 pages of collection descriptions and repository listings, plus a nearly 400 page index as a separate volume. Not only did it open up a wealth of previously unknown collections to potential new researchers across the United States, but as Mason argues, the publication of the guide – and the initial survey sent to repositories asking them to assess their holdings pertaining to women – forced them to take notice of gaps in their own holdings, and inspired archivists across the country to take a more active role in collecting materials

about women.

In the second section, *Locating Women in the Archives*, Kären M. Mason and Tanya Zanish-Belcher provide an overview of women's collecting institutions, noting that during the second- and third-wave feminist movements in the United States of the 1970s and 1990s, the number of women's archival repositories continued to grow, with no less than 15 established in the 1990s and 2000s. However, the establishment of separate repositories for women's collections generated some ambivalence, even among those working with women's collections. Margaret Storrs Grierson, archivist and founder of the Sophia Smith Collection, questioned the practice of keeping women's materials physically separate from men's, noting that "much of what is purely feminist loses its significance in segregation ... it is artificial to consider one sex as a world apart".² And in a 1973 issue of *The American Archivist* devoted to the theme of women in archives, Eva Mosely Brown, curator of manuscripts at the Schlesinger Library, emphasised the need for and importance of women's archives, while cautioning that they are not sufficient on their own. "Libraries like the Schlesinger and the Sophia Smith Collection are fine for those who are working specifically in women's history ... But there are many more people who will never appear at a women's library, so it is important that other libraries and archives make known their holdings on women."³

Yet, without dedicated spaces, it's all too easy for women's collections to be overlooked, particularly collections containing subject matter once considered taboo. And several authors argue that there is something special about having a separate space, often citing Virginia Woolf's concept of the "room of one's own". Mary Caldera discusses the significance of lesbian and gay community archives in the United States, which began to collect and preserve their own materials at a time when mainstream institutions would not. While Caldera praises the work of community archives, she acknowledges the many difficulties they face, such as limited funding, dependency upon volunteers, often with little or no archival training, and issues of access. Caldera advocates for partnership between community archives and mainstream institutions while emphasizing that it requires trust and commitment on both sides. Similarly, Tanya Zanish-Belcher uncovers documentation of human sexuality and reproduction, and addresses the "culture of concealment" surrounding sex, sexuality, and reproductive health. Both chapters discuss the sometimes problematic application of subject headings and labels regarding sex and sexuality, and subjectivity or even "squeamishness"

about describing reproductive health and women's experiences of sex and sexuality in finding aids and records.

The third section, *Documenting Women's Experiences*, addresses contemporary issues regarding collection development, advocacy and outreach, current descriptive practice, and documentation strategies for women's collections outside the mainstream. Janice E. Ruth details the Library of Congress's recent strategies for documenting the lives of women, including improved description and finding aids, research guides, digitisation projects, online exhibitions, and in person events such as symposia and lectures. Danielle Moon discusses regional collections and emphasises the importance of oral history in order to fill gaps in documenting women's experience. Several chapters throughout the volume detail the benefits, as well as the pitfalls, of working outside the mainstream.

The book is designed as a reader to offer an array of past and contemporary perspectives on women's archives and collections. However, this ideal is somewhat undermined by the inclusion of multiple chapters by the same authors, with some writers contributing up to three chapters each. While the volume covered a range of topics relating to women's collections, I would have liked to have seen more about indigenous women and their experience. Only one chapter – Fernanda Perrone's discussion of religious archives – even mentioned Native American women, and only in passing, rather than in relation to their own records and archives.

Overall, the volume is well-written and well-edited, and while some of the historical pieces may not be as relevant today as when they were first published, there are definite insights and takeaways to be gained from each essay. Reading through the explorations of women's materials in the US, I did wonder if similar work to excavate women's collections had been undertaken here in New Zealand as well. Most of the publications on women's collections in New Zealand I was able to find were collection listings created for the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage, over twenty years ago in 1993. Obviously, published volumes of collection listings – which become instantly obsolete – are no longer required for institutions with online finding aids and catalogues. And resources like the Community Archive, Digital New Zealand, and others make it easier to search for collection materials across New Zealand institutions. Still, it would be good to see more detailed and reflective analysis of women's collections in Aotearoa produced.

Perspectives on Women's Archives is perhaps most successful in

reminding us that as archivists, we must understand our responsibility to ensure that collections provide an inclusive and representative historical record for all women across a spectrum of identities and experiences. As our society is ever evolving, our collections and collection development strategies must be as well. And we must ensure that women's collections are accessible and well-described in all institutions, whether women's materials are their focus or not.

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Endnotes

1. Lerner, chapter 1, page 15.
2. 'No Documents No History – Mary Ritter Beard and the early history of women's archives', page 44, see footnote 52, chapter 2.
3. 'Women in Archives: Documenting the History of Women in America'. *American Archivist* 36:2 (April 1973).