Overall, I commend KWS Publishers and Colin Harding. Artists and historians will find this book useful and enlightening. Harding’s essay breathes life into an important period in the history of photography. This wonderful introduction, splendid with details and anecdotes, includes the history behind the inspiration for the title The Pencil of Nature. The introduction proves that an erudite and well-written preface can offer an edifying framework for a sound, informative, and pleasing book. — Sarah Passonneau, Assistant to the Dean of the Library/Assessment Librarian, Iowa State University Library


Processing the Past is an examination of the evolution of professional archival management and its relationship to the study of history. As the title states, much of this book deals with the concept of authority, from both an archival and an intellectual perspective, and seeks to build understanding in the increasingly separate worlds of the historian and archival professional. Blouin and Rosenberg, an archivist and historian, have labeled this disparity the “archival divide” and, in the course of Processing the Past, trace its beginnings, meanings, and consequences for archivists, historians, and the creation of archives past and present.

The book begins with a detailed history of public archives and their use in the creation of “authoritative history.” Archivists and historians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shared a view of archives as objective sources of truth. The authority of the archive was largely derived from its relationship to the state, and much of the historian’s practice was spent in researching and writing the history of nations and their leaders. Chapters 2 and 3 describe the first turns toward a separate archival authority as archivists and records managers took on a custodial role. The authors cite foundation archival texts by Hilary Jenkinson as influential during this transition from the role of the archivist in establishing “historical authority” to the role of the archivist in a passive, neutral position. By the 1970s and 1980s, both the volume of records being produced and the new technologies being used to describe them further widened the archival divide as archivists became fully consumed by the practical aspects of archival management.

Chapter 4 explains the changes that led historians away from archival authorities. As the methods of social historians moved past the paradigm of state-centric history, historians also moved away from using government archives. By the 1970s, the authors argue, historians were unable to find the sources they needed in government or historical repositories, because the archives had not collected relevant cultural material or because methods of description obscured topics like
race and gender. Chapter 5 posits that the archival divide was further aggravated by collection strategies based around the “essential” relationships between records and records producers. “Essentialism,” as it is called in this book, became a primary point of departure between archivists and postmodern historians who challenged the traditional roles of institutions and institutional functions.

Part II delves into the issues of social memory, the “activist” archivist, the contested nature of archival sources, the role of technology in archives, and finally a discussion on bridging or mitigating the archival divide. Having already discussed historical authority and archival authority in Part I, the authors deal in chapters 6 and 7 with “counter authorities” and the question of archival neutrality. The concept of “multiple pasts” has emerged from the study of social memory, individual recollections, and identities. In the authors’ opinion, this runs counter to traditional archival thought and sometimes puts archival sources at odds with dominant collective memories. The authors borrow the concept of the “archival grain” from anthropologist Ann Stoler in explaining how historians can use the “archival grain” as the “only way scholars can fully understand the meanings archives and archivists have contributed to their sources, the kinds of knowledge archival processes produce.” Likewise, reading “against the grain” will uncover “knowledge archival processes have obscured or suppressed” (119). Along these lines, chapter 8 sets out to examine archival practices such as appraisal, arrangement, and description and how these contribute to the archival grain.

Chapters 9 and 10 look at two external forces over archives: politics and cyber-infrastructure. The variety of laws affecting records administration in the United States are certainly relevant to this discussion and pertain most importantly to the ways that they prevent access to records. Cyber-infrastructure, however, has the potential to make records accessible in ways that have never before been possible. Even so, Blouin and Rosenburg are not optimistic that increased access will lead to increased understanding and see the new opportunities of cyber-infrastructure fraught with pitfalls such as the enormity of born-digital files, digital preservation, and the questionable methods for description of digital objects.

The authors conclude Processing the Past by suggesting ways to bridge, or at least minimize, the archival divide. They suggest that historians should take steps to understand archives and archival processes; likewise, archivists should become familiar with trends in scholarship and look toward forming partnerships with scholars in creating archival descriptions more oriented toward the needs of historians.

Processing the Past will likely raise the hackles of any reader working in an archival role. Although Blouin and Rosenburg attempt to present their argument without as-
signing blame to either historians or archivists, it is clear that they view archivists as responsible for the creation of the archival divide and believe that archivists should bear the brunt of responsibility to bridge the divide. Practical aspects of archival administration are criticized as “subordinating historical authority” (48) or dismissed entirely. Perhaps most shockingly, Blouin and Rosenburg argue that the only relevant users of archives are historians and that archivists attempting to involve other constituencies in the archival mission are merely seeking to enlarge their funding base. Sections of the book dealing with technology are the weakest and would have been better treated by archivists and historians working in digital humanities.

Overall, Processing the Past is a worthy addition to archival literature and presents many important ideas. In particular, the author’s exploration of “identity archives” specializing in race, ethnicity, and gender deserves further study. Archivists and historians alike should consider reading this book as a stepping stone across the archival divide. ~ Morgan Davis, Head of Archives and Rare Books, University of North Texas


A Lancastrian Mirror for Princes is McGerr’s study of the relationship between the illustrations and the text within a single manuscript copy of the New Statutes of England (or Nova statuta Angliae) owned by the Yale Law School. The manuscript bears the coat of arms of Margaret of Anjou, who was the consort of Henry VI. McGerr supplies a full codicological description of the manuscript (Appendix 2), as well as links between it and other known Lancastrian “mirrors for princes,” or works of advice about kingship. Her objective, as stated in the Introduction, is to explore the role of a fifteenth-century legal manuscript, as well as to compare the forms of representation it may share with other medieval manuscripts in other genres. Focusing on the relationship between the illustrated margins and the center of the text, McGerr views this illustrated manuscript of the New Statutes of England as a work that not only serves as a record of English law of the period, but also a means of “presenting ideals of kingship, queenship, justice, and grace” (1–2, 10).

The book is relatively brief (only 139 pages without the end matter) and the subject matter is narrow; but, like the visual elements in the Nova statuta, the special features of A Lancastrian Mirror for Princes heighten its value as a resource. Of particular note, especially in a book of such modest cost, is the substantial section of illustrated plates found between pages 86 and 87 of the text. McGerr’s concentration on visual components of the manuscript certainly necessitates the inclusion of such vivid imagery from the Nova statuta Angliae in her book, but she includes a va-