

The Allure of the Archives

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Arlette Farge

The Allure of

the Archives

Translated by Thomas Scott-Railton

Foreword by Natalie Zemon Davis

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Foreword

Readers of Arlette Farge's writings have marveled at the world of eighteenth-century France that she has opened before our eyes. Whether in her stylish and lyrical French or in excellent English translation, her books have brought to life women and men of Paris in their workshops, bedrooms, and kitchens; on their doorsteps and in their streets and taverns; making appeals to their parish church and summoned before the commissariat of police. She has retrieved stories of love and abandonment among young working people and servants; of quarrels between apprentices and masters, with the master's wife standing in the middle; of street crowds gawking at neighbors, or watching executions or fireworks, or marching in vigorous protest. She has helped us hear the sounds of popular Paris life: the timbre of songs sung mockingly in front of an employer's door or chanted sorrowfully at a funeral procession; the slogans of protest and the groans of suffering. She has caught the rumors afloat among the people, the news accounts printed and spread about anything

from royal doings to the cost of bread, and showed how these coalesced into a form of “public opinion.”

Whether portraying an out-of-work baker so poor he was reduced to stealing bread to eat (as in her earliest publication) or quoting a jealous suitor insulting his would-be bride at a local fair (as in a recent work), Arlette Farge writes with respect for the human qualities of her subjects and a wise appreciation for the range in their feelings, from rage, cruelty, and sorrow to audacity, solidarity, and love. Eighteenth-century life in France is “fragile,” as she says in the title of one of her most celebrated books, but it is also full of possibility. I had the delight of seeing this generous vision in play when we served as co-editors of the early modern volume of *A History of Women in the West*.

The remarkable achievement of Arlette Farge has been especially drawn from a vast judicial archive, the criminal records of the Préfecture of Paris, a court of first instance, and of the police of Paris. The outreach of the lieutenant general and the commissioners of the police was a crowning achievement of the Ancien Régime structures of authority: complaints, arrests, trials for petty offenses, prisons, networks of spies eavesdropping on the inhabitants of Paris, and much more. Farge’s first book using such sources, *Délinquance et criminalité: Le Vol d’aliments à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, became an instant classic in the social history of crime, its detection, and prosecution: who stole food? where? what? why? and what happened to them?

But already here Arlette Farge saw that though these documents were framed around legal prosecution and defense, much else could be gleaned from them about the life, feeling, and language of the poor and vulnerable. So over the years, as she made her trips to the Archives Nationales and the Archives de la Bastille at the Arsenal Library and other collections, Farge read these police records with and against the grain: for the legal narrative of accuser and accused, but also for what was revealed beyond that narrative. An example of her keen eye is her 2003 book, *Le Bracelet de parchemin*, where she explores the bits of paper sometimes attached to the bodies of those found frozen or drowned or otherwise deceased in the waters and by-ways of Paris and its environs—their “parchment bracelets” and also other writings on them or collected in inquiries about them. She describes herself coming upon such a bracelet from 1761 and reading the police description of its contents: a cross, a heart, and letter/number E 184. On other bodies were shirts, handkerchiefs, and cravats with initials embroidered on them—“A.D.,” “D.F.,” “G.P.”—as well as garments whose color spoke to the taste of the deceased. From these and other signs and papers, Farge gives us a new way to think of how eighteenth-century French people marked their identity.

In *The Allure of the Archives*, elegantly translated for us by Thomas Scott-Railton, Arlette Farge takes us into the archives and pulls us into the experience of research. Specifically, we’re at Arsenal library, where the police archives are held and where

the reading room can be glacially cold on winter days. Farge takes us through the confusion of getting a reader's card, having the required identification, finding the right office, knowing where to line up for a seat in the reading room, discovering what the best seat is, and hoping one day to get placed there. She takes us up to the inventory shelves where we pull down the large volumes and hope to find the registers and call numbers that we need. She evokes inventory rooms with researchers poring over the card files, clacking the wooden drawers closed. We are sitting with her in the reading room, distracted momentarily by a neighbor's cough or an archivist's ringing phone, and yet totally caught up in our quest. Farge looks over the room and laughingly compares its occupants to "galley-slaves, backs bent, hunched over and silent."

Absorbed as we are, we experience the wonder of the register when it finally comes, its look, the touch of its binding, and the feel of its paper or parchment. We struggle with handwriting difficult to decipher and are relieved when the reading is easy. We turn the pages, hoping for discovery, not just for what we planned ahead of time, but—because Arlette Farge is our guide—for the unexpected, the surprise. We rejoice when we make a find, even though the story or event itself may be sad, troubling, ghastly, baffling; even though it may oblige us to rethink our earlier understanding of our topic and restructure it.

Farge takes us beyond the setting and performance of research to reflect on the "traps" and "snares" of the archives

and on the thinking we should do as we take our notes. Her specific examples are drawn from the police archives, but her counsel is relevant for people doing research in many fields, including those looking up the history of their own families. The historian must be both close to and distant from the figures, words, and events emerging from the archives. He or she must not drown in citation, or be lured into thinking that quotations will carry the story without intervention and interpretation. He or she must relish the individual or unusual case, even while seeking to understand its singularity. But her final words are for the busy worlds that emerge in reading and interpreting, always in complex movement, resisting all “abstract categories.”

Newcomers to historical studies will welcome Arlette Farge’s introduction to archival research. Amateur history enthusiasts will be fascinated by her insider’s account of how historians practice their craft. But old-timers like me will have their memories enriched and their understanding deepened by this book. I am reminded of how much the setting for my archival research has become entwined with the discoveries I made at its tables. My first archival venture in 1952 took me to the Municipal Archives of Lyon, then housed near the Rhône in the centuries-old archbishop’s palace, its dark wooden tables highly polished, its elegant lamps small and often turned off, since the war years were still close and electricity was conserved. Some days I would climb many stairs to the Departmental Archives of the

Rhône, then high above the city in the ancient convent of the Discalced Carmelites, birds serenading us from outside the windows. I still recall the kind archivist at the Municipal Archives, who helped me get started on the sixteenth-century French hand. I was surrounded by French scholars, almost all of them from Lyon itself, historians and serious antiquarians.

My most recent archival venture, in the year 2011, took me to the National Archives of the Netherlands in the Hague, in pursuit of the story of slavery in colonial Suriname. Its building dates from 1980, its fourth home since it was lodged in the Dutch Parliament in the early nineteenth century. I still take inventories off the bookshelf, but I order by computer. The very helpful manager of the delivery desk is a Dutch citizen of Indian origin; his mother is my generation. The tables and microfilm readers are filled with people from the Netherlands and elsewhere: I strike up conversations with young Dutch historians scrutinizing volumes of Dutch colonial history; Americans and Canadians on the track of figures in Dutch religious and cultural life; and people from many lands seeking their family's past. Some of the latter are from Suriname, descendants of the people of color and of the Jews and Calvinists whose wills and marriage contracts I have been reading.

One experience remains common throughout all these changes, the experience with which Arlette Farge opens her book: the direct connection with the document itself. I still

recall the look of the important archival sources I've used: the large heavy volumes, with their leather thongs and sometimes their original binding; the bundles of papers tied with string, sometimes with a centuries-old pin holding pages together. In their handwriting, their occasional doodles and asides, and their registers, I have in my hands a link to persons long dead: it strengthens my historian's commitment to try to tell of the past with as much discernment, insight, and honesty as I can.

Arlette Farge's book was originally published in French in 1989, before the digitizing of books and archival records had become widespread. We had microfilm, to be sure, and many of us availed ourselves, say, of the Mormon collection of births, marriages, and deaths from many lands when we could not get to our distant archives. At the archive itself, we might be told that a document we sought was too fragile for direct consultation and available only as microfilm. The royal letters of remission that I used for my book on "pardon tales" were all read first at a microfilm machine in the Archives Nationales, but I was still able get permission to check a phrase in the great sixteenth-century parchment volumes themselves.

The current digitization of archives carries the process much further and has mixed fruits. On the one hand, there is the wonder of access, the ease with which we can bring distant documents before our eyes. Community is also possible, too, here an electronic one that replaces the exchange over lunch

in the archive cafeteria or at a local seminar. On the other hand, there is the loss of the object itself, of the marginal notations missed by the camera, the signatures cut off, the paper not available to the touch, the bindings unseen. The parchment bracelets and the strange sack of seeds that Arlette Farge found among the documents are missing from the digital world. Her book is more relevant than ever in our early twenty-first century, reminding us to sustain at least some of the time our physical link with the records from the past, to read directly from the handiwork of these persons whose voices are long since stilled, and to leave our own written traces for those who will come after.

—Natalie Zemon Davis

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Traces by the Thousands

Whether it's summer or winter, you freeze. Your hands grow stiff as you try to decipher the document, and every touch of its parchment or rag paper stains your fingers with cold dust. The writing, no matter how meticulous, how regular, is barely legible to untrained eyes. It sits before you on the