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Book Reviews

Dust: the archive and cultural history
CAROLYN STEEDMAN, 2002
New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press
195 pp, $20
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Dusty archives. Media reports frequently refer to new developments in museums and archives sweeping aside their dustiness, almost as though 'dust' were a metonym for the essence of the archive. That image portrays archives as being of little relevance to the present, as they lie virtually untouched decaying into dust. Carolyn Steedman goes far beyond this into an exploration of the nature of history, playing with different varieties of dust; some literal, some literary and some metaphorical. As she writes in the opening paragraph 'Dust is the immutable, obdurate set of beliefs about the material world, past and present, inherited from the nineteenth century, with which modern history-writing attempts to grapple; Dust is also the narrative principle of that writing; and Dust is the joke.'

First published in 2001, the inspiration for this book is Carolyn Steedman's response to Jacques Derrida's 1994 *Mal d'Archive: une impression freudienne*, much of which originated in papers she wrote for the *American Historical Review*, though she does not try to review that paper. Instead, in the first two chapters she explores the implications of different translations of *Mal d'archive*; from the feverish anxieties and exhaustion brought on by working in an archive that are suggested by its translation as 'archive sickness', to the implications of the *archive du mal*—the archive of evil—that is also implied in French. Pursuing the idea of illness brought on by working with archives, Steedman discusses the occupational diseases of the hide, skin and leather-processing and paper-making industries, highlighting the dust that is composed of anthrax spores and the red rot of leather. Her discussion is very rich, bringing together the creation of books with the experience of reading them through the matter—and metaphor—of dust.

The succeeding four chapters investigate the practice of writing history, principally through a discussion of the work of nineteenth-century commentators, novelists and historians, principally Jules Michelet, Henry Mayhew, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot. She starts this discussion by focusing on the ways that judicial decisions created an archive as a written biography with its authority lying in magistracy—one that subsequently acts as its own magistracy by structuring the ways in which history is written. The following chapter emphasises the selectivity of archives and contrasts this with the complexity of memory. She uses this discussion to show how twenty-first-century history writing is still dominated by nineteenth-century approaches that try to create unambiguous stories of what actually happened. The succeeding two chapters are versions of previously published papers. One is a detailed discussion of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* arguing that it is 'made of fragments from an Unvisited Archive' to show the inseparability of historical fiction and history. The other also focuses on a novel, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, to discuss the way that readers of histories bring their own memories and perceptions to bear on their reading.

Unfortunately, rather than being 'a sustained argument' (as it is described on the cover), the relationship between the middle chapters of the book and the ideas raised in the first two chapters is not obvious. Indeed, it is striking that the index records no occurrences of 'dust' in the middle chapters. The link is only made in the concluding chapters as she suggests that, like dust, nineteenth-century historical approaches persist and cannot easily be erased. Consisting almost entirely of revised existing papers, it is perhaps inevitable that some of the grafts should show, but it does weaken the coherence of the book.

Given the title, I am disappointed by the slightness of her exploration of the materiality of the archive. For example, it is surprising that the chapter titled 'What a Rag Rug Means' discusses the *absence* of a rag rug in *Mary Barton* rather than the ways that, like archives, rag rugs are fragments of people's lives brought together for a purpose never originally intended. This could have led to a discussion of the values of integrating textuality and materiality when interpreting the past. Likewise, she does not explore the power of the archive as a collection, despite referring to Susan Stewart's ideas about the gigantic and the miniature. Items

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that enter an archive collection do not just maintain their meanings as souvenirs of past events. Instead, they continue to accrete meanings as they are catalogued, labelled and conserved as part of a collection. The life of an archive is one that creates meanings; it is not true that 'nothing starts in the Archive'.

This is an intriguing and poetic book, sometimes light-hearted and fast-moving and sometimes ponderous and dense. On the one hand, she deploys some very well-written historical discussions to raise profound issues about the nature of history writing. On the other hand, her rhetoric can overwhelm some interesting ideas, such as those that appear to be in a key passage lying in the middle of the book:

> The Archive then is something that, through the activity of History, becomes Memory's potential space, one of the few realms of the modern imagination where a hard-won and carefully constructed place, can return to boundless, limitless space, and we might be released from the house-arrest that Derrida suggested was its condition.

This book takes a careful and sympathetic reading to understand more than a small fraction of the ideas that Carolyn Steedman is exploring. These are ideas that are important for all of us who work with archives, so it is unfortunate that some of her greatest insights are liable to be lost on anyone who is not already involved in debates about post-modern historiography.

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