Reviews


While sharing an almost identical title to Disaster Management for Libraries and Archives edited by Graham Matthews and John Feathers (Ashgate, 2003), Matthews, Smith and Knowles base this new volume on the findings of a 2005-2006 survey project, Safeguarding Heritage at Risk: Disaster Management in UK Archives, Libraries and Museums, and incorporate feedback from conference presentations through Summer 2008. Recognizing the commonalities and differences among the three cultural heritage organizations, as well as size and type of institution, the authors offer insights into disaster management they hope will stimulate planning and action.

The book "aims to provide a contemporary overview of disaster management in archives, libraries and museums in the United Kingdom, and an insight into activities elsewhere in the world," excluding digital resources and services. The authors describe the research project; lay out the context of disaster management in archives, libraries, and museums; provide overviews of the situation in the United Kingdom and other countries; analyze disaster control plans against an analysis framework; present the key themes in their findings using extensive quotes from interviewees; and suggest plans for the future. References conclude each chapter, and a final chapter of sources of information updates the guide in Matthews and Feathers’ 2003 book, while adding sources relevant to museums.

This is an excellent snapshot view of the state of disaster management in the United Kingdom. However, there are some minor flaws in the presentation. The “insight into activities elsewhere in the world” is extremely slight, and it is impossible to tell whether an attribution to “International museum and library” is from the US, Asia, Africa, South America, or Europe; none of the survey respondents are named to protect confidentiality. Some of the terminology may be unfamiliar to non-British readers, such as the “estates department” of a national museum; for a truly cross-institutional and worldwide audience an explanation of unfamiliar roles and responsibilities would help place something like estates in context. Although they allowed the respondents to speak for themselves in the Findings chapter, the authors failed to edit and tighten up the phrasing and sentence fragments to make them more readable; too often the paragraphs read like strict verbatim transcripts from interviews full of stops and starts. They even repeated the same paragraph under Training—Needs (p. 153) and Staff (p. 156). The whole book could have benefited also from more careful proofreading to eliminate typographical errors.

Now that we know the state of disaster management in archives, libraries, and museums, where do we go from here to follow through and implement disaster prevention, planning, and recovery? Many of the stories conveyed through the interviews in this book express dismay at the financial and hierarchical obstacles to the successful integration of cooperative disaster management plans and hint that the problem may not be across the cultural heritage fence but the financial divide between the well-funded and the shoestring volunteer operations. The resilience of the optimistic pragmatists shines through in two quotes: “Be prepared. Be practical. Be trained.” And “Always expect the unexpected.”

Matthews, Smith, and Knowles offer the professions an opportunity to take these research findings and craft working disaster management policies applicable across boundaries, within localities, and as best practices to emulate. This book belongs in the working collections of archives, libraries, and museums.

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