

# *Introduction*

## *Dismantling the Tower of Babel: Developing a Common Language Through Descriptive Standards*

A common language for archival description has long been a goal of the archival profession in this country. Until recently, the prospects of realizing that goal seemed fairly remote. It was generally believed that the uniqueness of archival holdings and the lack of uniformity in descriptive practices would impede and ultimately defeat efforts to standardize archival description. The 1985 report of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards, *Toward Descriptive Standards*, changed that perception by demonstrating conclusively that, although the language which we use when we communicate information about archival holdings varies considerably from one repository to the next, the nature of the information which we are trying to communicate remains virtually the same.

Since the publication of *Toward Descriptive Standards*, the archival profession has travelled some distance towards the goal of a common language for description which will facilitate the retrieval and exchange of information about archival material at the local, national and international levels. The profession has now reached the halfway mark in the actual development of descriptive standards, and institutions have begun to make tentative steps towards implementation. The ACA 1992 Annual Conference therefore provided a timely opportunity for archivists to reflect on the journey thus far, and to debate and commiserate with one another as they shared their ideas about, and experience with, descriptive standards. Conference speakers examined the effects of descriptive standards all along the records management/archival management continuum and explored their implications for archival theory and practice. Some of the topics dealt with in sessions and workshops were concepts and principles associated with archival description generally, and the fonds d'archives specifically, the management and implementation of descriptive standards throughout the life of archival documents, and the ways and means of improving the effectiveness of archival information retrieval systems.

The overarching justification for descriptive standards — enhanced communication and cooperation — transcends the borders of any one country. The ACA Annual Conference theme was therefore particularly apt, given the international forum in which the Conference was taking place. The 1992 meeting in Montréal was scheduled between the XIIth International Congress on Archives and the annual meeting of the Society of

American Archivists, and it ran concurrently with the annual meeting of the Association des archivistes du Québec. All of the organizations which met in Montréal are engaged in the process of developing descriptive standards for their jurisdictions. This historic convocation of archivists provided a rare opportunity for conference participants to share their experiences relating to descriptive standards, to discuss and debate the issues associated with developments at the local, national and international levels, and to learn something about the influence of different cultural and professional traditions on that development.

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