

Review Article

A Small World Expands

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The Management of Information From Archives. MICHAEL COOK. Brookfield: Gower Publishing Company, 1986. ix, 234 p. ISBN 0-566-03504-9 £19.50.

A Manual of Archival Description. MICHAEL COOK and KRISTINA C. GRANT. Liverpool: University Archives, University of Liverpool, 1985. (The manual is distributed by the Society of Archivists.)

The archival profession worldwide is small, and thus the shelf of literature, particularly books, on the discipline of archives in any given language is not large. For decades English-speaking archivists relied on Sir Hilary Jenkinson's manual, first published in 1922, perhaps on Muller, Feith and Fruin's classic work of 1898 translated in 1940 by Arthur Leavitt, or on one or the other of Theodore Schellenberg's two works (1956 and 1965) for a booklength introduction to the field.¹ Early manuals attempted primarily to encompass the theory and practice of arrangement and description, but authors always attended to matters of definition and often treated certain other basic functions. In the last decade or so a burst of writing, most of it in journal articles or pamphlet-like publications, has given promise of a flowering of writing of sufficient breadth and depth to allow the profession to lay claim to its own discipline of study. Much of this recent writing has now been used by Michael Cook to fashion a general, book length study on the management of information from archives.

Cook is certainly one of the most prolific archival authors. This book, his third in a decade, is in addition to his articles and publications for ICA/UNESCO.² One of his

- 1 Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London, 1922); Samuel Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, translated by Arthur H. Leavitt (New York, 1940); T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (New York, 1956); and *The Management of Archives* (New York, 1965).
- 2 Michael Cook, *Archives Administration: A Manual for Intermediate and Smaller Organizations and for Local Government* (Folkestone, 1977); *Archives and the Computer* (London, 1980); *Guidelines for Curriculum Development in Records Management and Administration of Archives: A RAMP Study* (Paris, 1982); *The Education and Training of Archivists: Status Report of Archival Training Programmes and Assessment of Manpower Needs* (Paris, 1979); *The Training of Archivists: Analysis of the Study Programme of Different Countries and Thoughts on the Possibilities of Harmonization* (Paris, 1979); *The Teaching of Technology as a Subject of Preparation of Librarians, Documentalists, Archivists and Other Information Specialists* (Paris, 1984).

earlier books was a manual on local archives in the British context. The other was written to introduce archivists and students of archives to the use of computers in archives administration. Neither made much of an impact in North America. His latest book should travel better for in it he limits his penchant for introducing lengthy illustrations of practical applications in the field in favour of a generalized elucidation of the concepts and principles of managing the information derived from archives.

Cook sets out to offer a radical view of archives administration. He claims that his book is an outgrowth of his work with colleagues at the University of Liverpool on *A Manual of Archival Description*. Work on the *Manual* to some extent parallels that of the Society of American Archivists' National Information Systems Task Force and the Bureau of Canadian Archivists' Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards.³ Because this is the first book length work to reflect some central developments and refinements in archival theory and practice of the last decade or so, many of them spurred by the slow advance of automation into archival services, it deserves extensive review.

In the opening chapter, "Archival Management in an Information Context," Cook states his purpose no fewer than six times. On one occasion, he writes that:

The aim of this book is to reassess the theory and practice of archives and records management from the standpoint of processors and suppliers of information, as part of a developed and effective information management service.

On another occasion, he says he is looking at "provision of information as a commodity to a body of users." He is also interested in exploring ways in which "newly established standards can be integrated into a total service" and in examining and evaluating the distinction often made between the treatment of public archives (and other archives in a corporate setting) and those acquired by gift or purchased from private agencies or organizations as "delegated" archives. To achieve his aims, Cook gives a brief survey of the various kinds of archival services, discusses records management "as a front end system," and then treats acquisition and appraisal, arrangement, description, data elements, information retrieval, automatic data processing, and user services. For most North American readers, there is nothing terribly radical in the way the study is organized. Indeed, the only mildly radical passages I could find occur not in the core of the book devoted to the management of information derived from archives, but in the chapter on records management.

Cook's review of records management is thoroughly progressive. Its aim, he writes, "is to achieve the best retrieval and exploitation of data held [in records], and incidentally to reduce the cost and improve the efficiency of record-making and keeping processes." Moreover, he advocates forging links between records management, library services, technical documentation centres, and archives. For instance, he believes that "finding aids, systems for disseminating information, and arrangements for communicating data have no theoretical need to be separate." True enough, whatever practical or managerial impediments exist, and there are plenty. In Cook's view, society possesses "an information stock" of which archives is a part, and users wishing access to that stock are not

3 Richard Lytle, "An Analysis of the Work of the National Information Systems Task Force," *American Archivist* 47 (Fall 1984), pp. 357-65, gives a review of NISTF's accomplishments; *Towards Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa, 1985).

prepared to, and ought not to have to, stumble against barriers raised by the various professional groups involved.

In a similar vein, Cook makes short shrift of one internal barrier to effective communication within the archival sphere. He sees no essential difference between archives as an internal service in a bureaucratic environment and archives as collectors and preservers of records created in the private sector. Here his ideas are stimulated by the work of Richard Berner on the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts traditions.⁴ He simply substitutes acquisition field work for front end records management and maintains that operation of basic functions is thereafter essentially the same. The case made is quite persuasive, but on several occasions what is said has more relevance to an internal service than to "delegated" archives, or at least the examples are more often chosen from the former area. Archivists have clung too long to a number of bogus distinctions concerning the origins or the form of the archives cared for, with the result that they can hardly make their own "information stock" available to users, let alone cooperate with other agencies and professions.

Lest the reader think that Cook is an airy futurist, I hasten to say that his treatment of basic archival functions is firmly in the mainstream of recent archival thinking, and down-to-earth to boot. He frequently leavens his more theoretical discussions, which are never extensive, with acknowledgement of the limited resources of archives. He is wise to do so. Other areas of information work are also hard pressed. For all the talk about the information age, most people in our society, especially those in control of the purse strings, put rather too much faith in sophisticated hardware and other facilities and too little faith in cultivating a cadre of people to assist society in using new technology imaginatively. The result is a lot of pessimism about the ability of existing professions to rise to the challenge. Happily, Cook is an optimist. Sometimes, I fear, he is a little too sanguine.

For instance, here is what he has to say about scheduling, which he believes is the focus of appraisal in an internal service and the focus of interface between records management and archives:

The main purpose of the schedule is to record appraisal decisions which have been made, so that these decisions can be put into effect routinely ... These schedules are apt for inclusion in data base management systems, and in automated systems the expiry dates can be automatically implemented.

I can see how an automated system might be used to track expiry dates, but I suspect archivists and records managers will still face all the problems they now experience in getting administrators to act on schedules. Moreover, even though Cook acknowledges that archivists "consider potential research values in the records," he does not take sufficient account of the difficulty of bringing judgement of such values to bear in an exercise traditionally divorced from assessment of the value of information to outsiders. In any event, scheduling rarely works as an appraisal tool. The reasons for this might have received more attention from the author. He sees that the two sources of information about records created in the records management process are the records survey and the schedule. But the kind of documentation contained in surveys and schedules is rarely adequate for the appraisal archivist. If surveys are done, they reflect records holdings at a particular time. Like other inventory procedures for accruing records, they become dated

4 Richard Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle, 1983).

and therefore are of little use to track changes in records keeping, with obvious implications for appraisal. The problem with schedules is somewhat different. If changes occur, theory dictates, the schedule must be amended. But rarely do schedules accumulate the kind of data assembled during archival appraisal, when a broad range of factors is taken into account in reaching a decision on whether to destroy, keep in total, or sample records. During the process of appraisal much valuable information about the origin, functions, form, extent, and subject matter of records is or ought to be documented. Hence, during appraisal the process of managing the information from archives begins — that is, often before accessioning. In his chapter on appraisal and accessioning, Cook fails to concentrate enough on the documentary aspect of appraisal. If a proper analysis is done during appraisal and the results of that analysis recorded, accessioning can be stepped up to constitute the kind of first, or, for some accessions, permanent level of control which Richard Berner advocates for it.⁵ In this regard, one might suggest that a definition of data elements applicable to appraisal is in order. Some, if not all, of those data elements will easily transfer to other descriptive documents beyond the accessions register. The important integration we are seeking, after all, is a means of progressively accumulating data from and about archives, and storing it in ways to facilitate its ready transfer and use for both administrative and research purposes. This is precisely what Cook wishes to advocate, but his traditional compartmentalization of the various archival functions tends to blunt his aim. For instance, one is well over halfway into the book before data elements are discussed.

Cook's elucidation of arrangement is excellent. Arrangement is really far more intellectually complex than many archivists seem to believe, and there is no doubt that careful identification of levels of arrangement is a key to programmatic description. Cook identifies nine levels of arrangement, two of which (repository and archive group) are simply defined for management convenience and have little effect on physical or intellectual treatment of the records. Two others, sub-group and sub-sub-group, are merely subdivisions of the record group/collection in the Holmesian scheme of five levels, the scheme adopted, for instance, by the Canadian Working Group. Cook recognizes that the class (British) or series (American) level is the main control level for archives, although not, one might suggest, for many collections of personal papers, special media archives, and the like. At least so far as textual records in the public and corporate spheres are concerned, Cook's model follows traditional lines.

5 Richard Berner, *Manual for Accessioning, Arrangement, and Description of Manuscripts and Archives* (Seattle, 1982), pp. 4-6 and 31-39.

On one score, a truly radical leap is again avoided. Cook makes brief reference to the work of Peter Scott, but gives no assessment of Scott's ideas for a series system of control.⁶ Scott set out to prove that administrative change had wreaked havoc with tidy archival theory of arrangement and description. His arguments are very persuasive. But the ramifications of his ideas for information control and retrieval from archives are profound. Scott's work suggests that the route to effective information retrieval is through abandoning the attempt to order records in record groups. Each series would be identified, described, and to borrow Berner's felicitous phrase, its "parentage" or administrative/historical context established.⁷ The puzzle of relationships is never completely fixed in a single document, an inventory or guide, but in progressive documentation of the origin, composition, and content of series. A focus on series offers to archives something like the describable unit the single publication is in the library world, even if certain nagging problems related to accrual and the functional nature of records cannot be made to disappear. Much of Scott's exegesis is intended to prove that series control need not offend the principle of provenance or the integrity of the records. Observing provenance is essentially a matter of documenting the context in which records and archives are created. Linking descriptions of series (or comparable groupings) is of course needed to allow users to knit together their own patterns in the records, not just those dictated by patterns of administration. I do not mean to suggest Cook should have tried to adopt Scott's revolutionary ideas — no doubt that would have been too much for his British colleagues as it would be for North American archivists, to judge by reaction to the kites Richard Lytle and David Bearman fly from time to time. Archivists tend to be very conservative in this realm because they are constantly looking over their shoulders at their accumulated holdings handled by traditional means. A revolution means at least two systems must exist side by side, for few repositories will have the resources to bring past accessions into a new system. To his credit, Cook acknowledges as much. Still, he might have explored Scott's ideas more fully than he has, particularly Scott's series of articles with a battery of colleagues in *Archives and Manuscripts*, only one of which Cook cites and then only in a bibliography.⁸

6 Peter J. Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," *American Archivist* 29 (October 1966), pp. 493-504 is often cited, most recently by David Bearman and Richard Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-86), pp. 14-27, and by Max Evans, "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept," *American Archivist* 49 (Summer 1986), pp. 249-61. Less often cited is Scott's "Facing the Reality of Administrative Change — Some Further Thoughts on the Record Group Concept," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 5,2 (October 1974), pp. 94-100, which was a reply to Gerald L. Fischer, "Letting the Archival Dust Settle: Some Remarks on the Record Group Concept," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 4,8 (October 1973), pp. 640-45. Almost never cited and, one suspects, little read, are the series of five articles of Scott and colleagues at the Australian Archives, New South Wales Regional Office, which together amount to an explanation and defence of a series system of control for records and archives. The articles are a monument of archival scholarship. See Peter J. Scott and G. Finlay, "Archives and Administrative Change: Some Methods and Approaches (Part I)," *Archives and Manuscripts* 7 (August 1978), pp. 115-27; and under the same title, Part 2, *ibid.*, 7 (April 1979), pp. 151-65; Part 3, *ibid.*, 8 (June 1980), pp. 41-54; Part 4, *ibid.*, 8 (December 1980), pp. 51-69; and Part 5, *ibid.*, 9 (September 1981), pp. 3-18. See also Meyer Fishbein's letter in *American Archivist* 30 (January 1967), pp. 239-40 and Scott's reply *ibid.*, 30 (July 1967), pp. 541-42.

7 At least it is a phrase I have heard him use, but my search for it in print did not avail.

8 See footnote 6. Cook's book is marred by some very curious footnotes and bibliographic habits which makes tracing his sources awkward, though not impossible.

Cook has his own distinctive analysis of description, which he first outlined in his *Manual of Archival Description*. He begins by positing that archives' "structural representation files" (the inventory of a record group/collection, for instance) are radically different from the most, though not exactly, comparable library instrument (the author/title catalogue). He takes the standard view that non-expert users of archives can rarely use the standard archives representation file, and so advocates producing additional finding aids (usually subject based) to serve their needs. Here is how he describes the whole complex of finding aids:

Finding aids in archives systems therefore consist of a main (structural) representation file, additional (subject based) representation files, specialized files for administrative control, together with secondary information retrieval instruments, such as indexes and user guides, which bind the whole complex together.

Cook identifies two kinds of fields in archival description: "those with free text or narrative entries, and those which are dedicated to specific data." An administrative history note, biographical sketch, or scope and content note would be in the former class. A title of a records series, a statement of physical extent, or a date would be in the latter. These two kinds of description appear in what Cook distinguishes as vertical and horizontal finding aids. A vertical finding aid concentrates on description of the levels of arrangement in a particular group or series, for example, as in an inventory or file list. A horizontal finding aid links groups and classes in a single repository or across several repositories, as in select or thematic guides or union lists and other inter-institutional data bases.

Cook also identifies a concept he calls depth of description, which, borrowing from the terminology of library science, is called level of detail of description by the Canadian Working Group. As a general rule, he advocates construction of finding aids "at a depth of description which is the maximum possible in the circumstances." I would think that a prime rule of archival economy ought to be: all the description that is needed but only that which is needed. It is true, however, that many a brief description thought once to have merely been preliminary remains for years the sole description. In any event, as Cook argues, judgments of the depth or detail of description are made "in the light of the service's resource and priorities."

The discussion of data elements is interesting. Before going into Cook's ideas, a brief digression is in order. One can search in vain for the term "data elements" in archival literature published before the mid-1970s. There is no doubt that the concept arrived with computer technology. But that does not mean that archivists were not familiar with capturing data elements. They were, but they tended to embed them in narrative descriptions or extended lists. Early attempts at archival automation, such as SPINDEX, simply tried to automate archival listings in their traditional form. The notion of data elements offers archivists the opportunity to combine information derived from archives and about the context in which it was created in new ways. But in fact, recent writers seem to choose one or the other traditional approach: either adaptation of the mode of bibliographic control to archival purposes, or analysis of traditional narrative or free text (and free form) finding aids in terms of the concept of data elements. Cook takes the latter approach. The American effort to develop the MARC (AMC) format and adapt AACR2 rules (as

Steven Henson, Elizabeth Betz, et al have done) takes the other course.⁹ Much as archivists, including Cook, are wary of adopting library practice, for it has manifestly failed to cope with certain enduring archival problems, they seem in North America to have overcome old shibboleths and are now investigating the new developments with vigour. The starting point is often definition of data elements to be incorporated in documentation associated with basic archival functions, including administrative or managerial functions relying on information about records and archives. Cook pays almost no attention to the drift of American practice, except to mention MARC (AMC) and Henson's work. The irony is that a unified information service involving library materials, technical documentation, and archives, and even artifacts, will ultimately need some common basis on which to work. One thing is clear from all this work. Archivists are for the first time becoming capable of analyzing their information handling in terms other disciplines can begin to understand. Moreover, Cook's work can be understood with relative ease by the North American reader. This was not always the case. On the subject of description, his analysis in his *Manual* of some ten problems archivists face is well worth reading.

Cook's treatment of data elements is adapted from the work of the Methods of Listing Working Party of the Special Repositories Group of the Society of Archivists. He defines two sectors of data elements: the archival descriptive sector and the management information sector, each of which is subdivided and sometimes divided again. Cook does not offer definitions of the terms he uses to designate data elements, and he nowhere suggests that an enormous problem exists in defining rules for deciding the values to be entered in any data field, although he hints that his *Manual* offers further advice, but it is in fact limited even there.

One suspects Cook, like most archivists, believes that there is just too much free text, to use his term, in archival description to allow for precise rules to be promulgated. But he also clings tenaciously to the notion of hierarchy of archives and therefore to the kinds of finding aids with which the work of Scott, Bearman, and Lytle takes issue. In the Winter 1985/86 issue of this journal, Bearman and Lytle advocate rigorous separation of the assemblage of access points and the construction of authorities from descriptive activities aimed at administrative control of records. Archivists who are often hard pressed have tended not to do this. Lists primarily useful for control purposes have therefore had to bear the burden of information retrieval, which, of course, they do poorly. If Bearman and Lytle assume that some structured and logical system of control is easy to work out, the traditional concern of Cook and the Canadian Working Group to honour hierarchies of arrangement and description, hearkening to hierarchical structures of bureaucracy, assumes the outcome will be effective retrieval. I suspect we are in an era in which old ideas and practices are not yet outmoded and new ideas are not yet worked out in practice. A brave person indeed would venture to write a book amidst such flux.

Cook's chapter on information retrieval is essentially a discussion of indexing as the creation of entry points (British) or access points (North American) to archival descrip-

9 Nancy Sahli, *MARC For Archives and Manuscripts: The AMC Format* (Chicago, 1985); Steven L. Henson, *Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies and Manuscript Libraries* (Washington, 1983); Elizabeth W. Betz, *Graphic Materials: Rules for Describing Original Items and Historical Collections* (Washington, 1982); Wendy White-Henson, "Archival Moving Image Materials: A Cataloging Manual," (Washington, 1984); Sue A. Dodd, *Cataloging Machine-Readable Data Files* (Chicago, 1982); Hugo Stibbe, Vivien Cartmell and Velma Parker, *Cartographic Materials: A Manual of Interpretation for AACR2* (Ottawa, 1982).

tions, not directly to archival records. It appears to be a fixed principle of archival work on both sides of the Atlantic that indexes (including the index feature of catalogues) knit together inventories and other list-like finding aids (as advocated, for example, by Lydia Lucas¹⁰) which is not to say that special indexes to important series or groups of records cannot be done directly from the records. Given that one can search a long time in vain for literature, almost any literature, on the place of indexing in archives — at least directly and acknowledging the complexities — Cook's discussion of the subject is welcome, if rather general.¹¹ Virtually the same thing can be said about the chapters on ADP and on user services. Indeed, the broad and general coverage of this book marks it more as a textbook than a theoretical work, but it is still the most ambitious attempt to write a general work on the central aspects of archival methodology in English since Schellenberg. In his book on description for ICA several years ago, Hugh Taylor hinted that writing a general work on archives in the vein of Muller, Feith, and Fruin, Jenkinson, and Schellenberg had become an extremely difficult task.¹² It has. Cook has tried, and therefore deserves to be read and judged in light of the difficulty of the subject and the lack of other attempts.

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- 10 Lydia Lucas, "Efficient Finding Aids: Developing A System for Control of Archives and Manuscripts," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981), pp. 21-26.
 - 11 All but one of Cook's own citations in this chapter are to British articles or works. The subject of indexing has rarely been treated on its own by North American archivists. One of the best articles on the subject, albeit tied to a project to index a particular series, the British Cabinet Papers, is Lionel Bell, "Controlled Vocabulary Subject Indexing of Archives," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 4 (1971), pp. 285-99.
 - 12 Hugh A. Taylor, *The Arrangement and Description of Archival Materials* (New York, 1980), p. 9.