

## *The Fonds Concept in the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards Report*

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A copy of *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards*<sup>1</sup> now seems to be on the desk of every Canadian archivist, and so it should be. Its identification of archival and library functions, of existing archival and library standards and of current practices in archival repositories is invaluable. I have reservations, however, about one issue: the group advocates archival description at the *fonds* level and makes reference to the writing of Michel Duchein on the definition of *fonds*, but it offers no critical analysis of Duchein's work, nor does it make equal reference to the relevant and widely debated writing of Australian archivist Peter J. Scott.<sup>2</sup>

The Working Group offers a useful definition of *fonds*:

'The whole of the documents of any nature that every administrative body, every physical or corporate entity, automatically and organically accumulates by reason of its function or of its activity.' This definition may be taken to encompass documents in any form or on any medium created by agencies or persons acting in a public or private capacity.<sup>3</sup>

The group has not indicated, however, that a *fonds* can be an abstraction rather than a physical entity. It is clearly the role of an archivist to gather as many as possible of the archival records produced, used, and retained by a given creator, but we cannot assume that every document originally forming part of a *fonds* will necessarily find its way into an archives, nor should we assume that records for which more than one unit of an organization has been responsible can be physically and intellectually incorporated into only one archival *fonds*. Michel Duchein makes the latter assumption:

*Respect des fonds* means to group, without mixing them with others, the archives (documents of every kind) created by or coming from an administration, establishment, person, or corporate body. This grouping is called the *fonds*....<sup>4</sup>

According to this definition, records should be "grouped;" that is, a given document should indeed be physically and intellectually assigned to only one *fonds*. Duchein's notion of *fonds* is derived from the work of Natalis de Wailly, a nineteenth century French archivist who also regarded a *fonds* as a physical entity:

Here are the terms of it: 'to gather together by *fonds*, that is to unite all the deeds (i.e. all the documents) which come from a body, an establishment, a family, or an individual, and to arrange the different *fonds* according to a certain order....'<sup>5</sup>

The danger in such a system is that the complex history of many records, along with access to them, will be obscured when they are placed and listed with the documents of only one creator. The "series" system developed over twenty years ago by Peter J. Scott does greater justice to the principle of provenance. Acknowledging his debt to Scott, Max Evans recently published an article in *The American Archivist* demonstrating that it is the role of archivists to describe units of organizations, along with their administrative histories, and the record series created and maintained by those units. The descriptions of each record series should then be linked to *all* of the descriptions of the administrative units involved in their provenance (history).<sup>6</sup>

I relied upon the writing of Peter Scott when devising an authority control, accessioning, and inventory system for the Anglican Diocese of British Columbia in 1983. The first step was to develop an authority file for the names of administrative units of the diocese (including executive bodies, parishes, coastal missions, schools, and senior citizens' homes). In addition, brief administrative histories were compiled for as many units as possible in the time available.

The next step was to accession, arrange, and describe documents that had been accumulating for several years in the Diocesan Archives. To protect the provenance of each set of records on the shelves, the records were maintained and listed in terms of accession units. Incoming records were treated in the same manner. It is important to note that the basic glossary compiled by the Society of American Archivists includes in its definition of provenance, "in general archival and manuscript usage ... information of successive transfers of ownership and custody of a particular manuscript;"<sup>7</sup> and Michel Duchemin states that "to appreciate a document, it is essential to know exactly where it was created, in the framework of what process, to what end, for whom ... and how it came into our hands."<sup>8</sup> Documents entering an archives at a given time share a unique history and must be handled and described as a separate unit. For example, if one official of an organization deliberately withheld certain files from a set of records being routinely transferred to an archives but another official later did transfer them, it would be important to be able to link specific files to their donor. If the records had legal value, documenting their provenance would be imperative.

The origin, use, and custody of records in an accession unit was determined from the donor and from the records themselves, then noted on an accession form in terms of record series reflecting the organization and activities of the creator(s) (e.g. correspondence of church committees; minutes of annual Women's Auxiliary meetings). Material was then placed in storage containers and labelled with an accession number. Documents were shelved in location areas according to media, each unit being placed after previously accessioned units, and location numbers were noted on the accession form.

Finally, each of the series listed on an accession form was copied into one or more inventory entries; that is, they were added to master lists of the records created by units and personnel (past and present) of the Church. Creators, along with their administrative histories or biographies, were thus linked to all of the records that they created; and records which were created and retained during the course of administrative activity were

thus described in the context of their creation and use. Max Evans stresses that these two types of data handled by archivists, data about creators and data about records, should be brought together for the benefit of researchers. He acknowledges that *series should be listed under as many names of creators as the provenance of the records requires*. In the “series” system, a series may appear in more than one inventory entry, and “archival management of records is based on the assumption that context is the key to understanding.”<sup>9</sup>

An example would be as follows:

A register of marriages is created in 1920 and used by priests on a Columbia Coast Mission boat to record marriages on Quadra Island and Denman Island. After entries have been made in the first half of the register, it is transferred in 1930 to a newly created parish on Quadra Island. When it is full, a priest takes it to his home for safe-keeping. He is subsequently transferred in 1940 to a parish in Victoria, where he serves for thirty years. Many years after his death, the register is discovered among some of his personal papers which were left in the office of his Victoria parish. The records are given to his wife, who transfers the register, along with his personal correspondence and diaries, to the Diocesan Archives. The records are accessioned and assigned Accession No. 87-5. The priest is noted as the last official having custody of the records, and his wife is noted as the donor. After examination, further notes are made on the provenance of the register.

Because they do not need to be separated by media, all of the records in the accession unit are shelved in the textual records location area and are assigned Textual Records No. 198. The register is then listed in the inventory under headings for the Columbia Coast Mission, Quadra Island Parish, and Denman Island Parish; but, since it does not seem likely that researchers interested in the priest will want to know that he had safeguarded a register unrelated to his own activities, it is not listed in the inventory under his own name; and, since it was unconnected to the activities of the Victoria parish which he later served, it is not listed as part of its *fonds*. The other series which form part of the accession unit (the personal diaries and personal correspondence), on the other hand, do appear in an inventory entry under the name of the priest.

The resulting three inventory entries would be:

### 1. Columbia Coast Mission

(An administrative history would preface the inventory entry.)

Originals; photocopies of maps. 1910-1952. 2 m.

Accession numbers and media location numbers (for administrative control):

84-8 (Textual Records No. 111; Map No. 12)

84-12 (Textual Records No. 115)

85-13 (Textual Records No. 150)

87-5 (*Textual Records No. 198*)

Master list of series, with dates and accession numbers:

Ships' logs	1910-1935	84-8
Register of baptisms	1910-1918	84-8
Register of marriages	1910-1920	84-8

<i>Register of marriages</i>	1920-1930	87-5
Register of marriages	1930-1935	84-8
Register of marriages	1935-1947	84-12
Register of marriages	1947-1952	84-12
Register of burials	1910-1925	85-13
Register of burials	1925-1935	84-8
Maps (photocopies)	1910-1920	84-8

The register received and accessioned in 1987 fills a gap in the list of Columbia Coast Mission marriage registers. If there was no inventory entry for the mission, the alternative would be to send researchers seeking the marriage registers (e.g. researchers who needed copies of their marriage certificates for legal purposes, and who recalled that they had been married on a mission boat) from index cards to five inventory entries for other *fonds* (the registers listed above entered the Archives in five different accession units). Sending researchers to lists of records (*fonds*) created by all of the parishes which grew out of the mission would be inconvenient and unnecessary.

## 2. Quadra Island Parish

(Administrative history, indicating that the church in the parish was served by the Columbia Coast Mission from 1918 to 1930, when the congregation formed an independent parish.)

Originals. 1920-1960. 1.2 m.

Accession numbers and media location numbers:

- 86-98 (Textual Records No. 193)
- 87-1 (Textual Records No. 194; Photograph No. 52)
- 87-5 (*Textual Records No. 198*)

List of series, with dates and accession numbers:

Minutes of Church Committee	1930-1935	87-1
Minutes of Church Committee	1935-1939	86-98
<i>Register of marriages</i>	1920-1930	87-5
Register of marriages	1950-1960	87-1
Records of Women's Auxiliary	1931-1960	87-1
Photographs (with negatives)	1930-1960	87-1

Note that the register of marriages in Accession Unit 87-5 appears in the master list of series for this parish as well as for the mission. It fills a gap in the list of records created in the church on Quadra Island. If a register of marriages for the period between 1930 and 1950 is transferred to the archives in future, it can easily be inserted into the series list, and its accession number and textual records number can be added to the list of media location numbers.

### 3. Denman Island Parish

This inventory entry would contain an administrative history indicating the links between the Columbia Coast Mission, Quadra Island Parish and Denman Island Parish; and the register of marriages would, once again, be found in the list of records created by the parish.

Presenting series with their accession numbers alerts researchers to the fact that records created in the past by one unit of the Church have arrived in the archives through a variety of channels.

Having developed a system which satisfies the need to respect the provenance of records and which also satisfies the need for an intellectual overview of all of the archival records of any given creator (that is, a list of the series in the *fonds* of any creator, *fonds* being defined here as an abstract entity which can be re-constructed intellectually), I cannot find anything in the *fonds* system advocated by Michel Duchein which would improve it. On the contrary, his rules for defining *fonds* would obscure the provenance of some records and would make access to them more difficult. He proposes, for example, the following rules for defining *fonds*:

When a *fonds* has kept its identity and individuality, it must be considered as *provenant* from the agency which created it, even if, before being turned over to an archival depository, it has been received by one or more intermediary agencies. In this situation, the notion of *provenance* is linked to that of creation and not to that of transfer. On the contrary, when a *fonds* has been, in the course of its history, dismembered and/or integrated into the *fonds* of an agency other than the one which created it, to the extent of having lost its identity and individuality, it must be considered as *provenant* from the agency which received it and integrated it into its own *fonds*. In this situation, the notion of *provenance* is linked to that of transfer and not to that of creation.<sup>10</sup>

Duchein would presumably argue that if a register created by the Columbia Coast Mission was integrated into the *fonds* of Quadra Island Parish it would thereby lose its "identity and individuality," and therefore would be considered as *provenant* only from Quadra Island Parish; and, although the mission was involved in the creation of the register, the register could not be added to a master list of records created by the mission, nor could it be placed in the context of the mission's administrative history, because the functions and records of the mission had been slowly absorbed into other administrative bodies.

Researchers interested in the records produced by the mission, Duchein would say, should read many index cards referring them to series lists in inventory entries for the *fonds* of related administrative bodies. This approach contradicts accepted literature on the archivist's role in the development of finding aids. The SAA glossary indicates that in preparing inventories an archivist should include a brief history and a description of the functions of an agency plus a descriptive list of its record series.<sup>11</sup>

Is the Columbia Coast Mission not worthy of an administrative sketch and a list of the archival documents which it created? Although the accession/inventory entries given above are hypothetical (because none of the actual entries in the Diocesan accessioning/inventory system seemed sufficiently convoluted for the purposes of this argument), the Columbia Coast Mission was in fact an important arm of the Anglican Church in B.C.,

and researchers are currently expressing much interest in it. Records created by the mission did indeed enter the Diocesan Archives through some of the parishes which it spawned, and it would have been far from productive to refuse to provide researchers with an inventory entry for it simply because Duchein's conception does not permit an organizational unit which has been absorbed into other units to create a *fonds*. Respecting provenance means reflecting more than one aspect of the complex histories of many records. Duchein requires that documents be assigned to one *fonds* or another and that provenance therefore be related to only one records creator or records custodian. I do not agree that a Columbia Coast Mission register loses its "identity and individuality," as he suggests, simply because the second half of it is filled with entries from Quadra Island parish and because it was held in private custody before being transferred to an archives. The register has a complex individual history and its complexity should be respected by links on paper or on computer to all of the relevant organizational units or officials to which it has been connected by provenance. Duchein's definitions of provenance and of *fonds* are simply too narrow.

Max Evans states that the record group system (widely used in the United States and Canada) fails because the arbitrary assignments of records to one record group produces practical problems.<sup>12</sup> The *fonds* system will be no different from the record group system if we allow it to mean the assignment of records to inventory and guide entries for only one relevant administrative unit or one individual. Peter J. Scott recommends that we interpret respect for *fonds* and respect for original order, the principles according to which archival records must be arranged and described, as respect for administrative context. Series should be described within each relevant context. As the history of a series becomes more complex, the links to each context become more important.<sup>13</sup>

Given the ease with which computers can connect records descriptions to descriptions of all of their creators and custodians, to insist upon assigning records to one *fonds* seems primitive. Instead, a record series entering an archives can be described on computer, previously assigned codes for the administrative bodies or officials related to the series can then be entered into the computer, and the computer can place the series in appropriate places in master lists for each relevant body or official, repeating series name, dates, and accession number. Max Evans makes this point:

It is clear that information about agencies is quite different from information about records. In an automated system, or in a manual system, it makes sense to maintain the two separately. However, in various presentations of the data — on the computer screen or in a paper inventory — we may display the two types of information together. Computers, employing relational data base management systems, can easily pull these records together into a presentation format.<sup>14</sup>

A separate problem with Michel Duchein's conception of *fonds* is that, in spite of his discussion of the possibility of both maximalist and minimalist approaches, he advocates definition at too high (maximum) a level.<sup>15</sup> He states that the internal divisions of agencies cannot meet the criteria which he advocates. According to Duchein, a *fonds* is only a *fonds* if the agency (presumably meaning administrative unit and, also presumably, a high-level official) possesses its own name and judicial existence proclaimed in a dated law, edict, decree, etc.; if its powers are defined by a text having legal or regulatory status; if its position in an administrative hierarchy is clearly defined; and if the official in charge

of it possesses adequate powers of decision.<sup>16</sup> His conditions are far from practical. For example, the Bishop of the Diocese of British Columbia, who has the authority to define the activities of his Executive Assistant, may decree (verbally) that the assistant is responsible for certain community activities. It is understood that the assistant's resulting correspondence files are to be maintained separately from the bishop's. When the assistant's files are transferred to the archives they are, of course, listed under the assistant's official title.

Duchain's rules would not permit this. Because the assistant has no written job description ("powers defined in a text,") Duchain would presumably decide that the files should be listed in an inventory entry under the bishop's name. This rule violates the archival principle that records should be described in accordance with the manner in which the creating organization created and maintained them. I would not have dared to inform the bishop that his assistant's files were *not* his assistant's files unless the bishop could provide me with a written job description for the assistant, nor would I have wanted to. It is more important to study the activities of all officials creating archival records, and to reflect information to researchers about their activities and the resulting records.

Admittedly, it can sometimes be difficult to determine the organizational level at which "creators" can be reflected in an inventory. If the definition is too high, as in "the bishop" alone rather than both "the bishop" and "the bishop's assistant," we risk obscuring the complexity of the origin of records. If it is too low, as in records produced by local parish branches of the Women's Auxiliary, we risk wasting the archivist's time. For instance, although the Women's Auxiliary does meet Duchain's criteria for defining *fonds* (local units of the Auxiliary have official status, and they operate with relative autonomy within a national network of units bound together by a constitution), due to time constraints I chose not to prepare separate inventory entries for each local unit. Instead, although "records of Women's Auxiliary" should not be defined as one series (they are actually composed of many series, including minutes, correspondence, and photographs), I defined them in a summary manner in series lists for parishes (see entry for Quadra Island).<sup>17</sup> The records of women's groups are *fonds*, or at least *sous-fonds*, but description at too low a level is impractical. The choice of an organizational level at which to make guide and inventory entries for *fonds* will depend upon both the structure of the organization itself and the time available for the creation of finding aids.

In conclusion, we need more discussion of the work of Michel Duchain, Peter Scott and Max Evans. Information about archival records, as the Working Group indicates, is best conveyed in terms of *fonds*, and archivists should provide consistent descriptions at the *fonds* level before moving to other levels. The Working Group's definition will be more useful, however, if we acknowledge that *fonds* can be understood as an abstract concept. Perhaps the definition could be expanded from "the documents that every administrative body ... accumulates" to "the documents that every administrative body ... *creates* and accumulates," so that the list of records created by the Columbia Coast Mission can fit within its bounds.

In the past archivists have asserted that the provenance of archival records is important and that records should therefore be maintained in accession units. It is important that we begin to use guide and inventory entries to link record series held within accession units to every administrative body and every official involved in their provenance.

### Notes

- 1 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa, 1986).
- 2 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, p. 56.
- 3 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, p. 7.
- 4 Michel Duchein, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des fonds* in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), p. 64.
- 5 Duchein, p. 66.
- 6 Max J. Evans, "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept," *The American Archivist* 49 (Summer 1986), pp. 249-61. On specific points mentioned, see pp. 254 and 258.
- 7 William L. Rofes, ed., and Frank B. Evans, Donald F. Harrison and Edwin A. Thompson, comp, "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *The American Archivist* 34 (July 1974), p. 427.
- 8 Duchein, p. 67.
- 9 Evans, pp. 250 and 259.
- 10 Duchein, p. 74.
- 11 Rofes *et al.*, "Glossary," p. 424.
- 12 Evans, p. 251.
- 13 Peter J. Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," *The American Archivist* 29 (October 1966), p. 493. This article was published twenty years ago. It deserves more attention and more implementation than it has received.
- 14 Letter from Max Evans to Debra Barr, 11 December 1986.
- 15 Duchein, p. 69.
- 16 Duchein, pp. 70-71.
- 17 "Series: File units or documents arranged in accordance with a filing system or maintained as a unit because they relate to a particular subject or function, result from the same activity, have a particular form, or because of some other relationship arising out of their creation, receipt, or use." Rofes *et al.*, "Glossary," p. 430.