

Counterpoint

Protecting Provenance: Response to the Report of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level

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Members of the archival community have been invited to respond to all aspects of the *Report of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level*, and have been asked to give particular attention to the specific rules proposed in Chapter Three.¹ To respond to them adequately will be difficult, however, until a fundamental issue has been addressed: within the broad range of archival descriptive tools, where is the product created by these rules meant to fit, and what is its purpose meant to be? The authors of *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* noted that “it seems surprisingly difficult for many archivists, including those on the Working Group, to prepare a succinct and informative statement of the purpose of a particular finding aid.”² Equally, the members of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level have not stated clearly how the fonds descriptions which they are advocating will be related to such prevalent archival tools as accession forms, inventories and catalogue entries.

First, reconsideration by Canadian archivists of the archival principle of provenance seems long overdue. If documents should always be treated with respect for every aspect of their context, as many archivists agree, then the classic definition of provenance, which is that it consists of respect for i) fonds, and ii) original order, is inadequate.³ As any gallery curator or rare book specialist knows, the provenance of an item — a painting, a rare book, a document — is the entire history of its origin, use, and custody.⁴ The authors of the *Fonds Level Report* have acknowledged this by indicating that provenance is related not only to creators of material but to successive transfers of ownership and custody. In other words, respect for provenance requires more than respect for fonds, if a fonds is regarded as the documents of any given creator. In addition, the principle of respect for original order must be reconsidered. If we agree that part of the meaning of records can be found in their relationship to each other, then it is the existing order of any set of documents that should be respected, rather than suppositions about what their original order might have been when they remained in the custody of their creator. Records often travel separate and meaningful routes between their creator and an archives, and their histories can be evident in their arrangement.

Some archivists have determined that they can best honour the history and existing order of documents by maintaining them in discrete accession units for which the provenance has been recorded (physical and administrative control) and by compiling inventories to demonstrate their connections to their creators and to each other (intellectual control). During the accessioning process, material is usually identified quickly, and preliminary notes are made on its provenance (information about its creator or creators, its custodians, and its specific donor). Arrangement and description often takes place at a later time, when some archivists actually rearrange material according to their own concepts of order and interfile documents with other records of the same creator, previously acquired. In so doing, they destroy part of the legal and other research values of the material. For example, if one official of an organization deliberately withheld certain letters from a set of records being routinely transferred to an archives, but another official later did transfer them, and if it was discovered that they had been missing at a time when they were needed for a court case, it would be important to be able to link them to their specific donor. This would be almost impossible unless they were maintained as a discrete unit. Having been held back from prior transfer would now be part of their provenance. An archivist who files correspondence in what he/she supposes is its original order among other files already received obscures its unique history. Some archivists would argue that an alternative approach would be to itemize all incoming letters on an accession form before intermingling them with those already acquired, but this would be too time-consuming to be possible in most repositories. It is more principled and more efficient to leave documents in accession units, linking them in an inventory to any related material accessioned earlier.

To demonstrate the connection between the maintenance of accession units and the legal value of records, a further example might be useful. Official documents being admitted to courts of law must prove to have been i) officially created, and ii) used and stored under routine conditions. Documents that have been housed outside of a parent institution are regarded with suspicion. If a judge enquired about the history of a marriage register being presented to contest an estate settlement because it revealed the existence of a spouse, and if many registers of the creating parish had been arranged tidily on one archival shelf rather than maintained in accession units linked to provenance information, then the archivist would probably be unable to document the custodial history of the register in question. On accession forms, descriptions of incoming material are generally vague, given the need to accession material quickly. In the case above, many archivists would simply have stated that "correspondence and marriage registers" had been acquired. The particular register could have been lost for years before surfacing in the archives; and if its history could not be supplied, its authenticity (or, as Hilary Jenkinson would state, its line of unblemished custody) would have become suspect.

Failure to maintain records in accession units has a negative effect upon their research value in general. For instance, if an archivist acquired the papers of a noted author from one family member and interfiled them with papers previously received from another family member, and if pages of a document were found to be missing or if someone had censored its content, researchers would need to be able to link it to its chain of custodians in order to ask questions of them. Again, if documents are not itemized when they are accessioned, scattering them among other documents destroys part of their history and their worth.

As another example, if an individual donated a set of correspondence with several noted persons and later transferred another set including letters from some of the same persons, combining the units could destroy part of the meaning of the correspondence. It might be explicit in most, but not all, of the letters in the second set that the donor had been a member of a Trotskyist association and had previously held back some letters from fellow Trotskyists. By interfiling correspondence to gather all letters from particular correspondents, in cases where the Trotskyist affiliation was not explicit the full meaning of a given letter could be lost. Part of each letter's value would be derived from its relationship to others in the original accession unit.

Arrangement, or in fact rearrangement, is a dangerous activity under any circumstances. Frequently the topic of a single document is unclear, e.g., "About that amendment: go ahead." Letters and memoranda often make sense only when read as part of a natural series relating to an activity, rather than as part of an invented series; yet invention of series (on the basis of names of correspondents, for instance) is a common practice, defended by many custodians on the grounds of convenience to researchers. It is also common for archivists to reorganize and describe material according to form, e.g., separating bound registers, certificates, and maps, even when media storage requirements are not a concern. Many manuscript curators advocate the separation of all drafts of literary works from correspondence, for instance, yet drafts are often best understood in relationship to letters. By comparing a draft and the signature on a letter from a literary agent, it might be obvious that annotations on the draft had been made by the agent rather than the author. In completely reorganizing an author's papers, documenting all of the existing relationships between items before shifting them would be horrendously time-consuming. Leaving items in their original order is both more practical and more principled. Various drafts of a literary work can be connected intellectually in an inventory.

To reiterate, accession units are like archaeological layers: the layers should not be mixed, nor should their internal order be tampered with. To pull records out of incoming units is to destroy the researcher's chance to see them in the context of their provenance, including i) their history, and ii) its manifestation in their existing order.

To assert that archivists should not physically reorganize documents on the basis of a fonds linked only to one creator is not to suggest that researchers should be denied the opportunity to gain access to them in terms of creators. Providing intellectual access by describing them as series resulting from the activities of creators is a crucial archival task. Series that have formed naturally on the basis of activity rather than form ought to be reflected in descriptions, e.g., if engineering files for particular projects consisted of photographs, plans, and correspondence, they would constitute a natural series; the photographs would not be a distinct series simply because they had a distinct form. When all of the series in any given accession unit have been described, each series description can be added to an appropriate inventory entry, i.e., an entry which is headed by the name of a creator and which includes descriptions of all of the series of that creator, with references back to every accession unit where those series are physically located. (Series generated by more than one creator, or used in a meaningful way by more than one organization or person, can be listed in more than one inventory entry, under headings for each appropriate name.) In this way, all of the existing parts of a fonds can be brought together, a fonds being an intellectual construct defined as "all of the records created and/or

accumulated naturally by any person or organization in the course of activities.” The tool which best accomplishes this is an inventory (or a data base serving the same purpose) which brings together information about: the relationships among creators; the activities of creators; the provenance of the record series created; and the relationships among series. An inventory provides an overview of each fonds. Because a fonds is an abstract concept and because it is rarely certain that a repository will have finished acquiring all of the records of any creator, virtually every fonds will be an open (incomplete) fonds, and inventories can be updated to incorporate portions of fonds as they come to light. The whole of a fonds will always be greater than the sum of its described parts.

In many archival repositories, primary descriptive tools seem to be based on the assumption that description must slavishly follow arrangement, like a shelf list. In libraries, in contrast, shelf lists are maintained only for administrative reasons, and intellectual access is provided primarily through bibliographic entries, which are not organized to parallel shelf order. If a library holds two versions of one publication, one shelved in a regular stack area and another annotated by the author and stored in a rare book area, main bibliographic entries are still placed together alphabetically in a public catalogue. Similarly, various drafts of a literary work can be stored in different accession units according to their particular provenance, but can be described in logical order in an inventory, with references back to their locations. As an example:

Series name:	Accession/File
Autobiography, Draft 1, 1950	79-001/01
Autobiography, Draft 2, 1951	85-001/01
Autobiography, Draft 3, 1952	79-001/02

In the above example, the first and third drafts of a literary work have been acquired in Accession 79-001 (one in File 1, the other in File 2) and are physically separate from the second draft, acquired in Accession 85-001. In the inventory entry, however, their descriptions appear in a logical sequence, according to date of creation. The inventory entry is organized according to intellectual order rather than shelf order.⁵

Having protected provenance by respecting physical accession units, and having provided intellectual access by compiling full inventory entries linking records to context, an archivist can offer brief bibliographic summaries of the inventories, along with subject access, by compiling catalogue/guide entries and subject index entries. Catalogue/guide summaries serve a different purpose from inventories. Whether constructed for use in repositories, in hard-copy disseminated catalogues, or in databases, they are meant to offer only brief introductions to holdings. Using summaries, researchers who know what they’re searching for can establish quickly whether a fonds exists, and browsers can determine quickly whether or not a particular fonds is likely to be useful to them. Summaries also serve to direct researchers to more complete finding aids, i.e., they lead to inventories, which in turn can lead to even more detailed finding aids (container or item lists). The second edition of Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (with Steven Hensen’s revisions of its fourth chapter) offers useful rules for the compilation of catalogue entries, and includes suggestions for means of keeping entries brief.⁶

In view of the differences between the purposes of catalogues and inventories, analysis of specific elements of the descriptive tool proposed by the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level cannot be made until the Group has clarified its purpose and revised the elements accordingly. For instance, a biographical note in a catalogue entry would be succinct, e.g., Peter Jones (Methodist minister; Ojibwa chief), and would serve primarily to distinguish between many individuals named Peter Jones, whereas a biographical description in an inventory would provide a full account of the activities of Jones, to allow a researcher to understand the variety of series resulting from his activities. Is the Group proposing rules for the production of guides or inventories? The rules being suggested combine elements of both, without distinguishing between them.

The statement by the Group that "it [seems] obvious that the most appropriate descriptive device for the fonds level is the guide"⁷ is worrisome. *Both* guides and inventories are appropriate tools for the description of fonds; *both* tools list series. The distinction is that an inventory provides more detail. Although the product that would result from the rules being proposed would not prevent full description of records by any institution using it as a substitute for an inventory, its format is not congenial for a tool of that nature; on the other hand, it would result in entries too large for in-house or shared catalogues.

Some fundamental archival principles and practices need to be readdressed before a revised *Report* is presented.

Notes

- 1 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Report of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level* (Ottawa, 1988).
- 2 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa, 1986), p. 36.
- 3 The concept of "respect for fonds" has long been challenged by Peter J. Scott and other Australian archivists. After I had prepared this response to the *Fonds Level Report*, a two-part paper produced in 1986-87 by Colin Smith was brought to my attention. He recommends that archivists describe records primarily at a level lower than the fonds level, and that "final active order" be maintained, i.e., that physical reconstruction of fonds not be attempted. See: Colin Smith, "A Case for Abandonment of 'Respect'," *Archives and Manuscripts* 14 (No. 2), pp. 154-168, and 15 (No. 1), pp. 20-28.
- 4 *Fonds Level Report*, p. 6. See also: the definition of provenance in *A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers*, William L. Rofes, ed., *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974), pp. 415-433.
- 5 For further discussion, see: Max J. Evans, "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept," *American Archivist* 49 (Summer 1986), pp. 249-261; and Debra Barr, "The 'Fonds' Concept in the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards Report," *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88), pp. 163-170.
- 6 Steven Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts: A Cataloguing Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies and Manuscript Libraries* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1983).
- 7 *Report of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level*, p. 13.