

Letters to the Editor

Notice of *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* (2nd Edition): The Author Comments

I have long contended that Canadian and U.S. archival descriptive practices are not really all that different in both theory and observance. Heather MacNeil's recent review of the second edition of *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* has helped to confirm that opinion. For, if the objections she outlines to *APPM* represent the chief impediment to Canadian acceptance of the principles underlying these rules, then we are all much closer than many would have us believe. While I very much appreciate the overall positive tone of her review, the criticisms she registers represent a substantial and serious misunderstanding of the text. In fact, what is particularly interesting is that the objections she raises are the very same points I have heard on numerous occasions as representing the fundamental differences between Canadian and U.S. archival description. I now take heart to see that these differences appear to be less substantive and serious than I feared.

The point she makes about *APPM*'s principal orientation towards either "collection-" (her quotes) or item-level description is simply not true. The orientation is towards *collective* description of groupings of archival materials, as distinct from item-by-item cataloging. (Rules for item-level cataloging are provided only as an acknowledgement of the reality that some manuscript and archival items exist quite on their own outside of any collective context, or that there are occasional items within larger collectivities that may deserve more detailed analysis.) Nowhere is it mandated what those groupings must be. Rule 0.12 states, "There may be several appropriate levels of description for any given body of archival material. These levels normally correspond to *natural divisions based on provenance* [emphasis supplied] or physical form." The rule goes on to require only that whenever cataloging records are created at a hierarchically subordinate level, they be done so "within the context of a hierarchically superior unit — *for which a comprehensive entry has been made*" (emphasis in original). Furthermore, rule 0.13 states, "These rules may be used for description at any level where the objective is to provide access through separate catalog records. The intent is to give archival catalog records a consistent format at every level, from the most comprehensive to the smallest component. The *choice* of level(s) appropriate to individual collections or entire

repository holdings must be made by each repository based on its own internal needs.” At this point a footnote is provided giving examples of hierarchical levels from U.S. archival and manuscript practice. An example of the Canadian *fonds* hierarchy could just as easily have been given here as yet another approach to this problem without diluting at all the thrust of the principle. Although nothing specific is said regarding “complex *fond d’archives*,” it is easy to see them as another “appropriate level of description.”

Further, Ms. MacNeil’s contention that “*APPM* prescribes only one analytical technique for linking descriptions” is also incorrect. Rule 1.7B3 states, “Make a note concerning any complex hierarchical relationship between catalog records, i.e., when the material being described is a component part or subunit of another collection or series that is an existing bibliographic entity.” Although the examples of suggested introductory wording may imply an “In” analytic technique, the intention clearly is to document *any* relationship. In a MARC-AMC record this note provides the intellectual link to related material; the actual machine link is made in a field not subject to the constraints of descriptive cataloging. While it is true that there may be better ways to describe complex hierarchical relationships, it is nonetheless a reality that to a large degree these descriptive rules are constrained by the fact of their implementation within specific bibliographic software and systems. On the other hand, given the degree to which those systems so far have been willing and able to change to accommodate archival needs, one may be sanguine about problems in this area being similarly accommodated; once we all agree on what our specific needs are with respect to expressing hierarchical relationships, it is altogether likely that the systems can be changed accordingly.

While I very much appreciate the necessity of the process the Canadian archival community is going through to arrive at a consensus on descriptive standards, I also believe that eventual agreement on a North American standard is in the long-term interests of both countries. I only hope that misunderstanding and lack of communication do not become an artificial barrier to reaching that agreement.

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The Reviewer Responds

Steven Hensen’s letter is written in response to a notice that appeared in *Archivaria* 30. In that notice, I was not so much raising objections to *APPM2* as pointing out differences between what has become the American standard for archival description and the standard that recently has emerged in the Canadian archival community. Although I admit my comments were necessarily elliptical, I do not believe they represent “a substantial and serious misunderstanding of the text.” I welcome, therefore, the opportunity to respond to the criticisms which Steven Hensen proffers in his letter.

The first point with which Mr. Hensen takes issue is my characterization of *APPM2* in terms of its orientation toward either collection- or item-level description. In arguing against this characterization, he attempts to draw a fundamental distinction between the “collective description of groupings of archival material” and collection-level description, a distinction that is not evident in *APPM2*. The phrase “collective