Form, Function and Archival Value

by **J. PETER SIGMOND***

In a world defined by the enormous size of archives, where the multiplicity of records is in turn driven by the growing complexity of society and its administration, and by the proliferation of types of 'information carriers', it is becoming increasingly difficult for archivists to fulfil their primary tasks. It is therefore necessary to study carefully the development of maintenance and control mechanisms for archives. We cannot afford to waste or overlook any possibility. It is also necessary to look around us, to discover what other archivists in other countries are doing, and what others in related fields, such as libraries and museums, have accomplished. Essentially, we all deal with the same problems and must try to find new solutions to master these problems.

   One such expedient could be a more structured and more integrated use of formal and institutional data on records and archives. I cannot offer any completed model of this enhanced perspective, and as far as I know, one does not exist. However, it is a new way of thinking and of looking at the problems we encounter. What I would like to do is draw attention to some of the approaches now being developed in The Netherlands. In a way, this presentation will therefore be a report on the Dutch archival situation.

   In his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell describes at length the 'Field Service Post Card', a well-known document which was a card with printed phrases such as "I am quite well;" "I have been admitted into hospital" [i.e. wounded]; "I am being sent down to the base;" etc. The soldier could cross out each one except "I am quite well." Often the cards were sent to relatives, even before an attack was launched. Fussell argues that

> The Field Service Post Card has the honour of being the first widespread
> exemplar of that kind of document which uniquely characterizes the
> modern world: the Form. It is the progenitor of all modern forms on which
> you fill in things or cross out things or check off things, from police traffic
> summonses to 'questionnaires' and income-tax blanks.[1]

In a way, Fussell may be right, but we archivists know that all sorts of forms were used much earlier and can still be readily recognized.[2] The charters of the Middle Ages, for example, were made up in a special way or form, using special phrases in a special

order, as were acts of notaries from the sixteenth century. The first printed forms to be filled in were probably sixteenth-century papal indulgences, but forms such as those for marriage registration, tax payment, passports and military service existed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and became widespread during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

If in those early days a person wanted to make a certain request to an administration, it was necessary to do this in a special formalized way, using certain phrases in a certain order, thus creating a recognizable type of document. Professionals made their living from this, writing requests for others. Some things never change, and thus today requests to administrators for pensions, licences or whatever, still have to be made on special forms. The fact that these documents are already ninety per cent printed, and that only some data have to be filled in, is not of importance.

Document forms can be regarded as forms of objects. We probably need to gain more experience in recognizing different forms of documents and interpreting them, but once we have this knowledge, we can use it in the same way as we now use 'form' in its archival sense: to distinguish one object from another. This, in fact, is one of the most important reasons for paying attention to diplomatics in the curricula of training schools for archivists: medieval charters can serve as perfect examples in the study of forms.

Forms are also to be found within organizations. When, for instance, in the seventeenth century a request was made by a certain person to an administration, that individual had to address himself via a special form. Someone in the administration who received the request probably would give his opinion on the same piece of paper, while another person would decide and record his decision, again on the same document. Then it would be returned to the applicant. This form of document is called a *kantbeschikking* (decision-in-the-margin). Administratively, the decision in the margin is the most important part of the document, for it is the end of the procedure. What we see here is, in fact, the complete administrative procedure in a nutshell, since all decisions on similar subjects were made up in the same way and can still be recognized on the document. This process became increasingly sophisticated during the nineteenth century, when bureaucracy came into existence. More complicated procedures required the completion of additional documents before a certain decision could be made, but most of the time all the documentation was kept together in one file, from the request to the final decision, and all followed the same process. Later, separate bureaus were involved, each keeping for their own use part of, or copies of, the documents made up by themselves in this process.

The important point here is that one can distinguish between forms (types) of individual documents and forms of complete procedures consisting of all kinds of different forms of documents. In fact, by extension, one can even construct and defend the thesis that all decisions in an administration are reached using standard procedures and forms. Once this is realized, one can ask: what use do archivists make of this knowledge in their daily work? What are the possibilities?

In The Netherlands, we are used to working more or less along the same lines as in handling archives. Traditionally, much attention is paid to the structure of the archive involved, to the administrative organization that produced the archive, and to the formal features of the records. The scheme of the inventory reflects the functions of the

administration, while series are often constructed according to form of material. The inventory itself always begins with a short institutional history of the development of the organization and its functions. Descriptive standards are applied, as well as a terminology agreed upon by all archivists.[3] Many of these terms refer to forms of material. The description of a record or a body of records starts with the form (type of record), using one of the standardized terms from the official thesaurus. In addition, each description is structured in the same way (form of material, content, date, extent or number of documents involved, and status). In principle (but not otherwise) content indexing is not done.

Appraisal

It is an interesting paradox that in this modern age of progress — or revolutionary changes, if you prefer — people are more than ever before and anxious to preserve their heritage for future generations. This is the conservative age of preservation, and never before has so much been preserved for so many: this is reflected not only in our concern for archives, but also in the efforts lavished on preserving landscapes, the environment, buildings, museum objects, and so on.

The necessity to appraise archives — and it is perhaps trivial to say so — must be driven primarily by pragmatic considerations. First of all, the enormous quantity of archival material forces us to appraise for financial reasons. There is simply not enough space and not enough money to keep it all. Secondly — and fortunately — neither is there any cultural reason to keep it all. It is therefore necessary to appraise in order to control the proliferation of records and to distil information from them. Information of good quality gets lost in the mass of information of lesser quality, and is as difficult to retreive as the proverbial needle in the haystack.

In The Netherlands, we do not appraise archives dating from before 1800; even the smallest piece of paper from that earlier period is kept, because such documentation is perforce relatively rare. In addition, the size of these older archives does not necessitate appraisal, because we can control them: the total volume of records concerned is small. Problems begin in the Napoleonic era, however, when bureaucracy — a word of French origin — takes over and the number of record-producing offices grows rapidly. From then on, and especially for the period following World War II, it has become almost impossible for archivists to keep up with the proliferation of offices and documentation.

How then can we make use of our knowledge of forms of material, of procedures in organizations, and of the structure of those organizations, when we have to perform an appraisal? Appraisal begins with the broad decision to acquire or not to acquire certain archives. Which archives should be acquired? Modern-day administration has become a myriad of offices and agencies; duties, rights and responsibilities of the administration are discharged by hundreds of different and always changing institutions; responsibilities are transferred from one agency to another; agencies merge or disappear.

One should also keep in mind here that European bureaucracy is much more intense and widespread than North American.[4] Records concerning, for example, the digging of a canal are to be found in the administration of several agencies (local, provincial and national), and on several different levels within these agencies. What then should be kept, and where? Before these decisions can be made, it is necessary to have a clear

understanding of the whole structure of the organization involved, to determine which bureau produced which records for what purpose, and to find out which procedures were used. Often the forms of material created prove to be of a more consistent nature than the offices that use them. If an office ceases its activity, another will take over its tasks and for the most part will use the same or almost the same forms of material.

Because there exists a huge backlog in the appraisal of administrative records, the Dutch government decided in 1981 to create a special agency to help alleviate this problem. The Central Records Selection Department, part of the Ministry of Home Affairs in Winschoten, began — with about 150 employees, including many trained archivists — to do research into the record-creating organizations before they even started to think of appraisal. Which offices performed which functions on what legal basis, and which records did they create for what purpose?

In a way, this department operates as a research office. According to Archives legislation in The Netherlands, administrative records older than fifty years must be appraised and transferred to a formal archival institution. The records involved are thus at least fifty years old, and often the transferred material covers periods of hundreds of years or more. The research into administrative history sometimes results in a kind of genealogy of the administration, including responsibilities and procedures. However, this necessary background work makes it possible to formulate decisions such as the level at which to preserve certain records, or which fonds are of no importance at all. It sometimes makes it possible, as well, to appraise almost complete archives of certain agencies without even looking into them; and it tells us what is missing and what is to be expected.

In another example, the municipal archive of The Hague, archivists began several years ago to describe all activities and existing forms of material of the municipal authorities before starting to construct a comprehensive thematic guide to the archives of the city. This meant research into the nineteenth-century municipal organization, to see what institutions there were, based on which laws, what responsibilities they held, and what forms of material they were producing in order to fulfil their responsibilities. This research made it possible to replace many files, and led both to a re-evaluation of large bodies of archival material and to new appraisal decisions.

Once one has a clear view of an organization and its links to other agencies, the next step is to discover that almost all activities of an administration can be reduced to procedures, set out in instructions and regulations; and that during these procedures certain prescribed forms are always used. A decision — every decision — follows a certain pattern and passes through certain offices before the decision is made. The records used in this process can be recognized easily by their form, once the form has been identified and the content is clear. Sometimes the colour of the document gives enough information! There is no need to look into all records, once one knows what the contents must be according to the form of material.

Concerning forms of material, it should be noted that not all forms will help to determine value and necessity of retention. To be able, for example, to recognize the form of a letter alone does not always help; in this case, the determination of archival value depends on who wrote the letter or received it, as well as on the contents of the letter. However, many forms will contain basically the same type of information — and of these records, especially, one will have thousands. Here form of material will

help, although the archivist still has to decide whether the documents are of archival value or not. Once this work has been completed for one municipality, it becomes rather easy to do the same for all the others, because all municipalities in The Netherlands work along the same patterns, according to a Law of Municipalities dating from the middle of the nineteenth century. It then becomes easier to appraise and to decide what should be retained or destroyed. Knowledge of forms of material is also useful in drawing up appraisal schedules, whereby records managers can determine when certain records can be appraised. In The Netherlands, such schedules are prepared by the administration and archivists, both for municipalities and for many government agencies. The schedules are constantly updated and are discussed by an advisory board consisting of specialists, archivists and historians, before the Minister of Culture approves them.[5]

Every organization has certain functions to fulfil within a certain jurisdiction, and within a certain limited period of time. These tasks, executed according to specific procedures, result in records. The procedure influences both the quantity of documents and the form, while the jurisdiction influences the content. All records taken together shape a fonds d'archives. Apart from the procedure within the organization, there is often an office or section of the organization, that takes care of the filing and storage of the records. This office has an entirely autonomous influence on the structure of the archive. It does not influence the form or the content of the individual records, but instead determines the evolution of the archive as a whole. It is important here to distinguish between the form of the archive as given by the above-mentioned administrative bureau, and the form and procedures of the records within the working organization itself.

Understanding the functions of the organization will provide archivists not only with information about the material involved, but also with a knowledge of the procedures, which in turn provides information about the records and their different forms. This kind of synthetic understanding enables archivists to make all kinds of decisions, and it is important to note that at least part of this knowledge should be provided to the users, so that they can decide which records might be of interest to them. Thus it is vital that archivists begin constructing their holdings by examining not just the records which have been transferred to them, but rather by an initial reconstruction of the underlying administrative organization, analysing the functions and procedures with all their forms. Only then should they make any decisions concerning appraisal and the actual processing of the archive.

Inventory Construction

Traditionally, form of material has played a more significant role in processing archival material and in constructing finding aids than it has in the appraisal process. In The Netherlands, the classic inventory has been the most important tool for describing the records of an archive. Because there is only one archival training school, teaching one method and using one agreed terminology, there is great consistency among all inventories, no matter where they are produced or who produces them. This is an advantage for researchers in Dutch archives, because they always know what to expect. However, the traditional inventory format has been under discussion for decades, mainly because it is more a tool for archivists and experienced researchers than for casual or intermittent users.

The inventory is not an easy finding aid, mainly because the descriptions of records or groups of records are based on formal characteristics, and not on record content. The archivist is not interested in the content of records, but rather in knowing where certain types of records can be found. The researcher, however, is primarily interested in content. Users often ask for lists arranged by subject or name, and indeed for certain frequently used groups of records (e.g., notarial archives) indexes are provided. Most often, however, archivists will argue that it takes too much time, that it is a subjective choice to decide which subjects are to be entered, and that therefore such lists are inaccurate and unproductive. And indeed, one can question whether the results of content indexing *are* so much better for the user, when one considers the results of Richard Lytle's study in 1980.[6]

We are increasingly aware that we must distinguish between processing an archive (i.e., organizing records according to archival principles after appraisal) and making the contents available for users through finding aids, indexes and other means. With respect to the latter, it is clear that archivists should make use of both content- and provenance-based indexing. They should take advantage of the possibilities offered by the structures and forms of material — something which the librarian cannot do. Furthermore, they should use content indexing in a selective way, only when they think it necessary better to serve researchers.[7]

The introduction of the computer into archives at first weakened the use of institutional structures and forms and strengthened the use of content indexing, because most computer programmes were developed for the library world, where forms and archival structures are unfamiliar. On the other hand, the computer initiated new thoughts about the possibilities of the more formal approach. The National Archives in The Hague has responded to these new perspectives by developing a computer programme called MAIS (Micro Archives Inventory System), which is a formal way of processing archives based on provenance.

Institutional knowledge and knowledge about procedures and forms are of interest, not only to the archivist but to the researcher as well. Using form of material can be one of many possibilities. Several years ago, a series called *Broncommentaren* ('Commentaries on Sources') was started in The Netherlands.[8] This series examined and described procedures and special types of records (militia registrations, tax forms, etc.) that were used by organizations during the nineteenth century to carry out their mandates, and which could be found in almost all archival institutions. From this, a user's guide was produced, containing samples of all the kinds of forms one might find in municipal archives.[9] Another example of this attention to using forms of material in order to facilitate archival processing and description, is a guide to all forms of notarial acts used before 1800.[10] While these initial Dutch efforts have been produced in a rather unorganized way, it should nevertheless be possible to approach the work more systematically in future, building up a body of knowledge of forms for users of archives. David Bearman has offered some preliminary suggestions in this direction, in the article cited above; it is now a matter of more research required to realize something positive in this field.

Conclusion

The object of this presentation has been to show that use of structure, forms of material and functions, can aid the archivist in his/her work. It has often been argued that all our

methods of today are outdated and that we must begin all over again. I agree that automation, in particular, causes problems and that new ways to tackle computer output have to be developed. Among the many decisions they must make during the processing of records, archivists are faced with a critical one early on: they have to evaluate files. The problem of appraisal is primarily a problem of value or values, figuring out what should be retained or destroyed. The determination of value here should be based on value for the organization that created the records, first to ensure its continuity (juridical value) and secondly to be understood by future generations (evidential value). The archivist, with his/her sense of history, is the person who can and should make such decisions. Since there are no absolute objective values, appraisal decisions always will be decisions reflecting the cultural awareness and appreciation of our own time, archivists being the instruments of this. Since archivists cannot prophesy — something no one can blame them for — they should not be afraid to destroy what they think is of no historical value. As long as archivists are able to explain why they made certain decisions, they will have discharged their responsibilities in a proper way. Future historians will judge the archival profession in that light. The archivist of today, furthermore, should not underestimate the historians of tomorrow. Since there does not exist one final, objective vision of history, historians will write their own interpretationss over and over again, based on the same documents preserved by archivists. And to be sure, we shall leave them with more than they could ever study in a hundred lifetimes.

Notes

* Edited version of a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Banff, Alberta, on 25 May 1991.

1 P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1977), pp. 184-85.

2 I shall use the term 'form' in different ways which may be confusing. Sometimes I shall refer to the (partly printed) piece of paper itself, which is to be filled in, the document Fussell mentions; most of the time, I shall use it meaning the type of record to be recognized by external and internal standardized characteristics, such as size and colour of material, format, phrases, etc., which tell us something about the content; and sometimes I shall use it for a standardized process of record creation.

3 *Lexicon van Nederlandse Archieftermen* (Den Haag, 1983).

4 J. Peter Sigmond, "Divergences and Convergences of Archives: a European Looks at North America," and Francis X. Blouin Jr., "Convergences and Divergences in Archival Tradition: A North American Perspective," Judith A. Koucky, ed., *Proceedings of the Second European Conference on Archives 9-13 May 1989 in Ann Arbor*, pp. 5-38.

5 F.J. Duparc, ed., *Archiefwet 1962* (Zwolle, 1962), p. 11 and 31-36 on appraisal. A new Law on Archives is expected in 1992, reducing the transfer period to twenty-five years.

6 R. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: I. Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *The American Archivist* 43, no. 1, 64-75; idem., "Intellectual Access to Archives, II. Report of an Experiment Comparing Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *The American Archivist* 43, no. 2, 191-207.

7 J.P. Sigmond, "De speld in de hooiberg," *Nederlands Archievenblad*, nr 4 (December 1986), pp. 282-98 (written as a result of the author's participation in the 1986 Research Seminar on Modern Historical Documentation at the Bently Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

8 D. Bearman and J.P. Sigmond, "Explorations of the Use of Form of Material and Authority Files by Dutch Archivists," *The American Archivist* (1987), pp. 249-53; P.M.M. Klep and others, eds., *Broncommentaren* (Nijmegen, 1985-). Hugo Stibbe of the National Archives of Canada, who made an English translation of the Manual for the preparation of a source commentary, explains that 'source' here means an instrument that an organization creates and uses to carry out its mandate or function.

9 Th. J. Poelstra, *Hollands Stadsarchief* (Rotterdam, 1986 [2e dr.]).

10 A. Fl. Gehlen, *Notariele Akten uit de 17e en 18e eeuw. Handleiding voor gebruikers* (Zutphen, 1986). Another example is a handbook on Dutch palaeography. Here texts have also been chosen because of their specific forms. P.J. Horsman, Th.J. Poelstra en J.P. Sigmond, *Schriftspiegel. Nederlandse paleografische tektsen van de 13de tot de 18de eeuw* (Zutphen, 1988 [2e dr.]).