

Description Standards: The Struggle Towards the Light

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“Man is a history-making creature who can
neither repeat his past nor leave it behind.”

D.H. Lawrence

We must always start from where we are. The British contribution to the movement towards setting up archival description standards can best be explained by looking at it in historical terms. The same is true of other contributions to this movement. We all start out from some point of departure. The interesting thing is that we now seem to be coming together in one commodious destination.

Background: The Starting-Place

The various countries of the British Isles all have respectably old traditions of work in archives, at least as far as the central government institutions are concerned. The Public Record Office dates from 1838, the Scottish Record Office from the middle of the eighteenth century. The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (HMC), whose field of interest is in all other source materials (i.e., materials not held in government repositories), began in 1869. All these institutions continued administrative traditions inherited from long-standing civil service and academic usages. Because they were staffed by men educated in the humanities and law, moreover, they were affected by changes in the prevailing intellectual climate of Europe. As far as archives were concerned, the prevailing climate favoured university studies in administrative and legal history and an interest in the auxiliary sciences of history. All these activities, and the academic institutions where they flourished, were important in this country (as in others) over the century which stretched, broadly, from 1850 to 1950.

From these origins, the movement which created the archival profession, emerged. The base and centre of this development was the creation of the county record offices. The first foundations were made in the aftermath of World War I. The first textbooks of professional practice appeared in the 1920s.¹ It was not until after World War II, however, that the movement achieved its full momentum. The English and Welsh counties did not manage to set up a record office in each local government jurisdiction until

after 1974, and Scotland is still in the process of establishing regional and city record offices. All of this was achieved without the effective leadership of central government, and without the guidance and standards which would have been provided by an archives law or by central initiatives.

Archival professionalism, therefore, did not exist in Britain until the mid-century. The Society of Archivists was founded (initially as the Society of Local Archivists) in 1947, and in that year as well the two principal training courses were set up in the universities of London and Liverpool.² Naturally enough, the customs and preoccupations of the newly self-conscious professionals were formed by the circumstances in which they found themselves.

These county record offices had a strong character of their own, and this character was the principal element in the formation of a professional ethos. They appeared in the context of the general structure of local government as it existed in England and Wales at that time. That meant that these offices had, in a sense, to fill the gaps which were left them after a century of reforming legislation had set up and improved local services. In effect, that meant they had to avoid the historic cities and seek the undeveloped countryside. In the cities, there were long-established and prestigious public libraries (in Liverpool, from 1847), colleges and universities, and museums. The rural counties, on the other hand, had few library services and little tradition of being linked with information or academic services. They were, on the contrary, well-endowed with historic archives, not only of the county administration itself (which went back to the late Middle Ages), but also of the major centres of document survival — the great houses and historic family estates.

The pioneer record offices set the path of development. There was an initial period in which the massive core of inherited records of county administration were brought under some degree of control. This period saw the publication of the first standards for the arrangement and listing of the Quarter Sessions and Poor Law archives. These standards were produced by the first record offices to carry out this work, and were copied, with more or less variation, by the later comers.³

As soon as this phase was over, county archivists turned their attention to the next most pressing problem: the rescue and centralization of the archives of the great landed estates. This set the pattern which still for the most part dominates. The administration of the county's own archives was relegated to a second level of priority; the record office increasingly saw itself as a collecting agency for all records relating to the territorial area. When the landed estates were gone through, there followed the ancient parishes of the Established Church, then local business firms and institutions, and finally the archives of local business and leisure. The county record office of today contains an agglomeration of all sorts of archives arising within the county area, but has only recently begun to take an interest in records management or in other aspects of internal organization.

All of this took place without effective leadership or guidance from the centre. In 1947 the HMC set up the National Register of Archives, a central collecting point for information about the archives acquired by the county record offices (and others). After the initial phase, however, there was no further interest in the professional problems of arrangement and description.

In the early phases of this extraordinary movement, the few institutions which took a share, and which were not county councils, instinctively followed the same patterns. The British Museum (as it then was) Department of Manuscripts continued to collect the papers of individuals, and explicitly refused to collaborate with any other institution. The Bodleian Library, which ran an archival training course, acted like a county record office for Oxfordshire. Other universities, such as Durham and Exeter, acquired the archives of ancient dioceses of the Church of England. The training courses, soon augmented by new courses at Bangor and Aberystwyth in Wales, based their curricula on the auxiliary sciences of history. All except one were based in departments of history, and some of them also joined in the race to collect, or to exploit and publish the ancient records of the countryside. The county record offices remained alone in their general field until the rise of the large county museums in the 1980s. Library services have never been important in the rural counties, being confined to educational support services and the provision of small branches. The record offices, although organizationally quite separate from the library services, have therefore had to serve the function of the local library, and often of the local museum as well. Most of them are situated in the ancient shire towns, which are often remote from academic and information centres. The archivists who work in them have never received any training in library systems, and have usually never had the opportunity to be in regular contact with libraries or with bibliographic systems. The Society of Archivists did not set up a committee on any aspect of professional practice until 1972. There was no published manual of archival practice, other than Sir Hilary Jenkinson's prestigious but irrelevant manual, until 1977.⁴ The principal feature of the archivists' professional life in county record offices was its self-reliance and autonomy.

The Movement Towards Descriptive Standards

In the mid-1970s a number of strands of development began to emerge. Records management began to gain respectability, the Society of Archivists began to exercise a regulating role in training courses, and the pioneers of automation set up the first systems. The first stirrings of interest in the tools of information management made their appearance.

At first, these were rather unformed. The National Register of Archives published a sketchy and experimental subject index scheme.⁵ A group of volunteer archivists under the leadership of Sheila Thompson, City Archivist of Southampton, worked on the production of a general classified list of subject headings. This work went on for five years or so, and the resulting bulky document was used experimentally in several record offices and in the Liverpool training course for awhile; it was defeated by its own weight and complexity, however, and was never completed. The work attracted attention, nevertheless, and soon afterwards the Methods of Listing Working Party was established, under the leadership of Ruth Vyse, then University Archivist of Oxford. The MLWP adopted an active programme of consultative meetings in different parts of the country, and finally produced a list of data elements for use in archival descriptions. By this time, members of the Working Party were aware of parallel work being done in the Society of American Archivists. The two lists of data elements were roughly contemporaneous.

In the light of the experience gained, the Archival Description Project was set up at Liverpool University, and has remained in operation ever since. Funded initially by the British Library Research and Development Department and by the Society of Archivists,

the project has produced two successive versions of the *Manual of Archival Description* (known as *MAD*), and is now working to maintain and extend this standard.⁶

When the historical background and local setting is borne in mind, it is easy to see why the Archival Description Project has always accepted that its aim is to provide a standard for the construction of archival finding aids. Its aim is to provide an infrastructure for isolated, autonomous record offices, and for the training of the staff that will work in them. Neither the Project nor its clients have as yet been able to utilize the standards, traditions or facilities of the world of librarianship, and though today we are much more open to friendly communication with this sector, there is little sign that a fruitful intercommunication is likely to develop.

The purpose of *MAD*, therefore, is to provide an analysis of the structure of a finding aid system, together with rules and models which will allow archivists to construct their finding aids according to regular standards. It has not directly aimed at providing standards for data exchange, though this is likely to be included in the next phase of the Project's work.

The Working Principles of MAD

It was always accepted that *MAD* should incorporate existing best practice. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is not much in it that is new. It is a restatement and working-out of old familiar principles and methods. The British archival community has generally accepted this feature, and indeed has chiefly complained only about those features of it which seem to import concepts of information management: the technical language, for example.

It may be useful to survey some of the central principles set out in *MAD*, so as to examine their applicability to the newly drafted General International Standard Archival Description - ISAD(G).

Levels of arrangement

The idea that there are standard levels of arrangement is not new. The concept was first clarified in the USA,⁷ and has been rediscovered and republished in different forms ever since.⁸ *MAD* restates the principle, but also extends it. A table of levels is given which looks like the hierarchical continuum characteristic of a classification scheme, and is numbered like one:

- 0 Repository level: suitable for combined descriptions covering more than one repository.
- 1 Management levels: assemblies of archival groups brought together on the basis of some common feature for the convenience of the repository, e.g., official/non-official archives, ecclesiastical archives, private papers. Subordinate groupings may be numbered using decimals of 1.
- 2 Group or collection level (internationally, "fonds"): the archives of distinct entities. Subgroups (functional divisions within the group) are numbered using decimals of 2.
- 3 Series (within Britain, "class"): physically related sets of archives. Subseries are given as decimals of 3.

- 4 Items: the unit of physical handling (volume, file, box).
- 5 Pieces: indivisible components; documents. Levels 4 and 5 may be used interchangeably in some cases.

The interesting thing about this is its universality. Yet it is unlike a general classification scheme because it is tied to observable external phenomena at three points:

Fonds (level 2) always relates to the total archival product of a distinct entity (organization or individual);

Series (level 3) are always the physically and systematically related product of an administrative activity, records that belong together because of the way they were created and used;

Items (level 4) are always the physical units of handling.

No level of arrangement is compulsory. Therefore, provided that we accept that the three levels above must always be set to correspond to the appropriate physical entities, any or all of the levels of arrangement can be used, above the fonds or below the item, as convenient.⁹

The multilevel rule says that archival descriptions should normally embrace more than one level. This is fully consistent, of course, with the multilevel rule laid down in ISAD(G), and in the Madrid Principles¹⁰. However, *MAD* has a further elaboration of the principle, which is important in the context of finding aids. This is the concept of the 'macro' and 'micro' description.

These two terms do not relate to the specific levels of arrangement which are being described, but to the relationship among them. For example, finding aids frequently contain descriptions at fonds, series and item levels. There the macro-micro relationship has a triple form:

Fonds description: a macro description governing

Series description 1: a micro description in relation to the above, but a macro governing

Item descriptions: micro descriptions of items in series 1, governed by the above.

Series description 2 . . . etc

In the *MAD2* models, guidelines suggest that these relationships of dependence should be demonstrated to the user by the use of narrower margins, left and right. This example shows a common situation, but not the only one. In any given case, the macro and micro descriptions may relate to any level of arrangement: fonds/item, management group/fonds, item/piece, etc. It is therefore a misconception to regard the macro description as peculiar to the 'higher' levels of arrangement, and the micro to the 'lower' levels.

Macro descriptions are written from a different standpoint from micro descriptions. Their standpoint is the aggregate (whichever it is). Micro descriptions give information specific to the case. In the example above, the fonds description will have given information relating to the fonds as a whole (probably including provenance information, but this is a separate issue); it also gives all information common to the series which follow, in order to avoid redundancy.

The series descriptions which follow have a dual character. In so far as they are micro descriptions, they deal with each series one by one, giving specific information. Each series description then operates as a macro for the items which follow. As macro descriptions they give information which relates to the series as a whole, and common data for the items. Finally, the items give data specific to each case.

Readers who are familiar with the ISAD(G) will recognize the points at which the *MAD* rules coincide. The concept is broader in *MAD*, however, because it is essential to the structure of finding aids, but not to that of "bibliographic" descriptions used in data exchange. The Archival Description Project team takes pleasure in commending the concept to the international community, as one which has much utility in archival management.

The macro/micro concept leads on to the core of the *MAD2* guidelines, which are the models for different types of finding aid. The models for description at the various levels involve drawing on the data elements. These are listed in a table which groups them into two sectors and seven areas. Although all the data elements in the table appear also in *APPM* and *RAD*, the groupings are different, and are not consistent with library tradition. This is perhaps the point at which *MAD* is most different. Nevertheless, the team commends the *MAD* system for consideration by their Canadian colleagues. The two sectors contain information which is in the public domain (the archival description sector) and that which is not (the management information sector). We consider that this is a useful distinction for the different parts of a finding aid system. The areas provide elements of descriptive information specific to archives, not derived from bibliographic practice.

One area, the administrative and custodial history area, contains only information about background, context and provenance. Despite some occasional controversy, it is universally agreed that this information has to be included in archival descriptions, and must include access points. *MAD2* fully accepts this principle, and also states that provenance information is not attached essentially to any one level of arrangement. Thus, although naturally it is characteristic of fonds descriptions, provenance data may also sometimes be found in descriptions at any other level, down to and including pieces. *MAD2* does not explicitly use the concept of the access point. The Project team rejected it because it seemed unusable in the context of structured finding aids. This policy is now being revised in the light of experience in drafting the international standard, and it is probable that the concept of access points, subject to authority control, will be accepted for future revisions. Other concepts of library origin, however, will continue to be excluded. An example is the concept of the "chief source of information", which is not thought to have any value for the construction of finding aids, as opposed to "bibliographical" descriptions for the purpose of data exchange.

The Status of MAD2 in British Archival Practice

The historical setting outlined in the first part of this article makes it obvious that the profession has no tradition or machinery to examine and authorize any standard. A difficulty therefore arose on the publication of the successive versions of *MAD*. This has been overcome in part by the efforts of a working party of the National Council on Archives. The NCA is a voluntary body which represents the main archival interests. Its working party was under the chairmanship of Christopher Kitching, who is also Chair

of the ICA's Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards. The working party issued a report in 1991 which made two recommendations, both accepted in principle by the NCA and its participating organizations:

1. *MAD2* should be adopted as a national standard for archival description;
2. Plans for archival data exchange should not be based on MARC formats.

This decision demands some explanation for the benefit of readers in North America.

In 1989 the Archival Description Project had prepared a discussion paper on the development of USMARC AMC and its use in online databases in the USA and Canada. This paper did receive some attention from a group of manuscript curators,¹¹ but no progress was made with it because at that time the managers of UKMARC were not prepared to consider any variation from the standard format; nor was there any likelihood that an online database using MARC would accommodate British or European archival data. It was in this atmosphere that the NCA working party considered the matter.

From the beginning of 1992, however, a somewhat more relaxed atmosphere has begun to permeate the corridors of power in the library world. The British Library Bibliographic Services have indicated that they will consider variations in the format, and have laid down principles which would seem to be acceptable to archivists.

1. Where an existing UKMARC field is found to be inadequate, another field will be considered.
2. In this case, a field already used in USMARC will be preferred.
3. If there is no such field, relevant authorities will be approached to create a new field, but there must be no duplication of existing fields.

In the meantime, a small number of museums that have considerable archival holdings are proceeding with their intention to use USMARC formats for their descriptions. A leader among these is the Tate Gallery archive, which has the distinction of possessing a systems development officer who is technically qualified in library formats.¹¹

In view of these developments, and of the completion of the first draft of ISAD(G), the Archival Description Project team is looking again at the question of incorporating MARC formats into its standards. However, it should be pointed out that archival descriptions held in online databases in Britain (and these are extensive) have not used MARC formats; nor have any of the archival database projects in Europe, except Sweden, shown any interest in these formats. At the moment, therefore, it does not look likely that the archival community will adopt them.

Conclusion

At the present time, there remains one central principle of difference between the *MAD2* standard and the standards developed in the USA and Canada. The North American standards, although they accept and do their best to express the principles of archival description, are essentially adaptations of library practice, and they are aimed at supporting data exchange through bibliographic channels. *MAD2*, on the other hand, aims to support and systematize the finding aids which are produced as basic tools by archival repositories. This is a profound difference, but it is clearly possible to bring the two approaches

together. *MAD* will certainly be revised to incorporate the new features set out by the ISAD(G), such as extended authorities and access points, and probably also models for exchangeable descriptions. On the other hand, the Project team proffers its work on *MAD* as a contribution to basic archival work and practice across the Atlantic. The Canadian influence, which we have experienced both in meetings held in Ottawa and in the Canadian contribution to ISAD(G), has already been profound and fruitful. It is pleasant to see such an example of useful international collegiality and cooperation.

Notes

- 1 H. Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London, 1922); G.H. Fowler, *The Care of County Muniments* (County Councils Association, 1923).
- 2 H. Jenkinson, *The English Archivist: A New Profession* (London, 1948).
- 3 L.J. Redstone & F.W. Steer, *Local Records: Their Nature and Care* (London, 1953); E. Ralph, "The Development of Local Archive Service in England," in A.E.J. Hollaender, ed., *Essays in Memory of Sir Hilary Jenkinson* (London, 1962), pp. 57-70.
- 4 M. Cook, *Archives Administration: a Manual for Intermediate and Smaller Organisations and for Local Government* (Dawson, 1977).
- 5 National Register of Archives, *Subject Index Schema and Word List* (London, 1969). This was quickly abandoned, at least as a published instrument.
- 6 M. Cook & K. Grant, *Manual of Archival Description* (London, 1986). M. Cook & M. Procter, *Manual of Archival Description*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot, 1989).
- 7 The first and basic explanation is usually taken to be O.W. Holmes "Archival Arrangement: Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels," *The American Archivist* 27 (1964), pp. 21-41.
- 8 It is remarkable that archivists should have had so much difficulty in building on established work. It became apparent that the principle had to be proved again when the discussion of ISAD began in 1990.
- 9 There can be problems in identifying what should constitute a fonds. *MAD2* advises that administrative or political levels of dependence should be disregarded. Thus an overall or umbrella organization can be the origin of a fonds, but so can organizations which are administratively part of it. An extreme illustration would be that the government of a province could be the source of a fonds (provided that it did actually produce records as such); so could any of its departments, or even lower subdivisions, sections etc. If any organization is complete enough in itself to produce its own archives, then it can originate a fonds. This guideline should meet some of the objections expressed by those who do not wish to regard the fonds as an essential level of management for archives.
- 10 This term applies to the "Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description," issued by the Ad Hoc Commission on Archival Descriptive Standards of the International Council on Archives. The definitive version of the Statement was completed at a meeting in Madrid, January 1992. ISAD(G) refers to the "General International Standard Archival Description," the first draft of which was released by the Ad Hoc Commission in April 1992. It is published elsewhere in this issue of *Archivaria*, as is the "Statement."
- 11 The Manuscripts Advisory Committee of the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries (SCONUL).
- 12 Alan Hopkinson, co-author of Gredley & Hopkinson, *Exchanging Bibliographic Data: MARC and Other International Formats* (Ottawa, 1990).