

You Don't Need Ruby Slippers

by JEAN E. DRYDEN*

It was nearly a year ago when Heather MacNeil asked me to be the keynote speaker for this conference. I think she was expecting reluctance on my part; however, I was greatly honoured to be asked, and readily agreed. Being the keynote speaker has a number of advantages: you have neither any commentators nor the Programme Committee hounding you for your paper months ahead of the delivery date, and you generally have a free hand in deciding what you are going to say — as long as what is in the programme remains sufficiently vague so that you can keep your options open until you finally get around to serious thought about the paper. The idea of a champagne breakfast to kick off the conference was appealing — people who have been drinking “bubbly” early on a Saturday morning are unlikely to be a demanding audience. So I am grateful to the Programme Committee for this opportunity. I should also like to congratulate them on putting together a stimulating programme which takes advantage of the presence of international colleagues. My only complaint is that the time constraints have meant a number of concurrent sessions, forcing some hard choices about which ones to attend. I hope therefore that the papers will be published, so that we may all read those sessions which we could not hear. I should also like to express my particular gratitude to the Local Arrangements Committee for scheduling a skating reception this evening — how Canadian!

Although the invitation came last November, I did not start thinking seriously about what I was going to say until June. According to the programme, I am supposed to be talking about the development of descriptive standards in Canada, and some of the challenges facing archivists. Along the way, I want to share some comments, predictions and hopes for the future of this important work. Lest you be concerned that this sounds deadly serious, I am mindful that it is Saturday morning and many of you have already had a week of conference sessions — and are consequently a little out of focus. I intend to have some fun with this, and I invite you to come along.

An earlier discussion with the Programme Chair had indicated a distinct possibility that the formal title of this conference would somehow be related to *The Wizard of Oz* — something about following yellow brick roads, vaulting over the rainbow, or “We’re not in Kansas (or Kamloops) any more, Toto.” When the final programme came out,

I was somewhat taken aback when I saw the title: “Dismantling the Tower of Babel: Developing a Common Language Through Descriptive Standards.” As a church archivist, I can cope with sacred as well as secular imagery; I was puzzled, nevertheless, because my memories of the Babel story did not extend to dismantling it. Refreshing my memory was merely a matter of going to the Theological College library next door, however, and for those of you who have not read Genesis lately, let me “recap” the story for you....

The first people — who were all one tribe and spoke the same language — decided to build a city, and they wanted a splendid tower as a symbol of that city’s greatness. However, God was very displeased with such arrogance and caused the workers building the tower to speak different languages, so that nothing was accomplished because they could not communicate. The work was abandoned and the different language groups scattered to become the nations of the earth. This is a story of sin — the sin of pride, arrogance, and independence from God — and of punishment by confusion, fragmentation and dispersal of the community. This is a very unsatisfactory story if we are to try to glean any lessons about descriptive standards from it. Quite frankly, it is a difficult story even if you try to take lessons about life from it ... but that’s another matter.

The Programme Committee has taken the story still further. They have used the popular secular image of the Tower of Babel as a metaphor for the current state of archival descriptive practices — many different systems, generally incompatible, which impede communication and frustrate common purpose. Dismantling the tower presumably removes their incompatible systems; however, I was not happy with the image of dismantling or destruction, because I see the development of descriptive standards as a positive process of construction and achievement through common action. The Programme Committee would probably not disagree. However, I wanted a more cheerful and less problematic story to serve as the framework for what I want to say today.

I considered several options: this being an international conference in an Olympic year provided some possibilities. Is correctly identifying a fonds without using drugs the equivalent of a triple axel or the three-minute mile? I rejected this possibility, however, because of the competitive nature of the Olympics, where people speak many different languages — not to mention the unsavoury aspects of the Games.

So I am going back to *The Wizard of Oz*. I did research on this — I rented the video and studied it carefully. This is a very deep film which has much more to say to us than the Olympics or the Babel story — and which is also a lot more fun. In Canada, we have not yet completed the development and implementation of descriptive standards, but we are well along the way, following the course set initially by the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards (WGADS) in its 1985 report, *Toward Descriptive Standards*. Whether you have been directly involved in this work, or whether you cannot even remember what RAD stands for, I think that the development of descriptive standards has many parallels with *The Wizard of Oz* story. Like Dorothy’s adventure, it is about a journey — quite literally: I have never spent so much time in my life on airplanes or in airports as when I was a member of the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards (PCDS). Lots of frequent-flier points for those who become involved! The journey has had its moments of fun, but has often been difficult as well. The travellers have met various weird people along the way, and have felt threatened and frightened. It has been a cooperative venture; and just as in Oz, although the cowardly lion repeatedly tried to run away, his friends dragged him back, and he is ultimately glad he stayed.

With courage, brains and heart, they all accomplish a difficult and challenging task and get to where they feel safe and comfortable again.

The journey in *The Wizard of Oz* begins with Dorothy sustaining a severe blow to the head. Reading *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)* and trying to implement it may indeed feel at times like being hit on the head with a screen door, but it is also one of the most exciting and challenging developments in archives in years. *RAD* and the related descriptive standards tools and literature (published or forthcoming) will affect everything we do, some in ways that are already evident, others in ways we can as yet only dimly perceive. Obviously, descriptive standards are going to change the way we describe our holdings. They will also affect the ways we acquire material, particularly our relationship with records managers, and the ways we make our holdings available to our users and to each other. In short, this work will require us to define the skills required by archivists, and to develop the necessary training to produce those skills. Descriptive standards will change the way we organize our work and, by extension, our institutions. As we standardize, we will become more secure in our own profession, and better able to recognize commonalities with related professions. And finally, archival theory will be shaped by the new practices required by descriptive standards and automation. Although my observations are not brilliant insights, and many of them will be developed in considerably more detail by speakers over the next two days, I should like to speak further this morning on a few of the points I have just made.

I want to begin with some comments on *RAD*, which has been the main focus of the work of the PCDS. Of course the “proof of the pudding is in the eating,” and the value of *RAD* is in its implementation. I have not done a survey, but I have an impression that it is the smaller institutions which have taken the initiative in implementing *RAD*, possibly because they are small enough to have a reasonable chance of describing all their holdings, and they are furthermore not encumbered with complex decision-making structures. They have grappled with the questions raised by the implementation of *RAD* (often in conjunction with those of automation) and have developed a store of expertise. Not surprisingly, larger institutions have been slower to begin implementation; with their more extensive holdings, changing descriptive practices is a much more daunting task in virtually all respects, and the implications must be carefully thought through.

One of the implementation problems a larger institution may encounter is the prospect of running with two or more systems in place for some length of time. Older institutions may already have shifted their descriptive practices several times, and the evidence of various evolutions and revolutions can be traced in their card catalogues and lists. One such institution is the National Archives of Canada, where I assume there are still handwritten cards in those Reference Room catalogues which predate the implementation of the Manuscript and Record Group system. This past winter, I was privileged to be involved in the National Archives’ study of its intellectual control practices, and I am delighted to hear that the recommendations of this study have been accepted and that the Archives will be implementing *RAD* in conjunction with an automated system. It has begun a challenging journey, and I wish it well.

As we know, Dorothy and her friends often felt threatened on their journey. Many archivists feel similarly threatened by *RAD*, but for those who have mastered it, there may also be a sense of betrayal or deception, in that it alone does not provide all the answers. As we grapple with *RAD*, we are forced to look at name authorities, subject

indexing, authority lists and how we organize our holdings. The PCDS has already provided assistance in the area of name authorities; publications on subject indexing and the nature and definition of the fonds are now available. This, however, is just the beginning. More will be produced by others in the community as the needs become clearer; it is already obvious, for example, that we require an interpretative manual for *RAD*, and there is already a small host of people who want to write it! We also need a decent textbook on arrangement, while our professional terminology must be better defined and used more rigorously.

Descriptive standards will affect not just the way we “do” our work, but also the way we organize it. Many institutions currently function along media lines, and textual records archivists have often been able to wash their hands of anything that was not paper. The adoption of *RAD*, which follows a common pattern while accommodating the special needs of various media, will diminish the view that non-textual materials are the sole responsibility of a handful of media specialists, and that no one else needs to know anything about them. This of course does not mean that media expertise will not be required, but instead that both intellectual control over multimedia materials and the relationships among the parts will be more rigorous.

In the past few years, some large institutions have considered or completed reorganizations along functional lines, raising in at least one case considerable insecurity among staff, who feared that most of the archivists would be replaced by clerks — on the assumption that archivists are required only for acquisition, but not for arrangement and description or for many aspects of public service. This did not in fact come to pass, but was nevertheless an expression of the contempt held in some quarters for cataloguers. I have always been troubled by this assumption that the description of archives does not require professional training and expertise. It seems to be based on two seemingly contradictory beliefs: first that this is “easy” work and that, consequently, professionals need not be bothered with it. According to this belief, cataloguers are mere technicians who fill in the blanks and memorize the punctuation. Anyone who has tried to decide what a fonds is knows that this is not the case. And those who have said to me that descriptive standards are simply a matter of punctuation should be shunted off to a corner, singing, “If I only had a brain!” The second belief is that rules stifle creativity, and that the unique nature of archival material precludes the application of any strictures. It is true that *RAD* does require an attention to detail, a gift that not everyone brings to descriptive work. However, these rules do not provide all the answers, and there is plenty of challenge and opportunity remaining to interpret the rules and apply professional judgment creatively.

What seems to be happening in response to the dilemma surrounding descriptive standards is the creation of a position known as the Descriptive Standards Officer. Is this a short-term development until long-term staff “get up to speed” on descriptive standards, or does it have deeper implications, namely that some archivists will never have to develop competence in describing the records they are presumably arranging? How can you divorce arrangement from description? I hope it is a temporary phenomenon. In small shops without the luxury of specialization, everyone will of course still be expected to be able to do everything. However, in larger institutions there may well be room for specialization by function. In the minds of some, description also seems to be near the bottom of the hierarchy of archival functions. Will it move up in status as people realize it is stimulating and challenging work? Will those who like archival

description, and are good at it, become the respected experts? Time will tell.

Speaking of cataloguers and contempt, I should like also to say a word about the relationship between archivists and librarians in Canada. I speak from personal knowledge, as one who after ten years of working in archives took a year off to get a library degree — which also, in some respects, resembles a blow to the head. While working at the former Public Archives of Canada, which, as you know, shares a building with the National Library, I always had the impression that it was not going to do your career any good if you were seen having coffee with the National Library staff. When I mentioned to colleagues at the ACA conference ten years ago that I was off to library school in the autumn, one member drew me aside to a secluded anteroom and confided that she had a library degree but found it better to keep it a secret. Another colleague cried out, “Jean’s going to be a librarian,” in precisely that tone of voice; and later mentioned that his brother had a library degree, leaving me with the distinct impression that the said brother was definitely the black sheep of the family. Wondering whether I could ever show my face again at an ACA meeting, I nonetheless completed the degree — and now wish that I had done it earlier. Archivists have a lot to learn from the library profession. Librarians have already dealt with many issues archivists are only now becoming aware of — authority work, subject indexing, conversion from one set of rules to another and from manual to automated systems, and sharing of common cataloguing records — and have developed techniques to achieve all these ends. I am not suggesting that archivists have not been dealing whatsoever with such issues — indeed, they have for years — but have regrettably preferred to reinvent the wheel instead of seeking help from a closely allied profession. Instead of continuing this process of reinvention, archivists need to open their minds to new techniques in order to adopt or adapt what is relevant and to avoid the known pitfalls.

What does *The Wizard of Oz* have to say about librarians? Who are the librarians in the movie? They are certainly not the witches! There are, in fact, only two groups in the film which may be perceived as threats to Dorothy and her friends: the flying monkeys with the pillbox hats, and the castle guards with the fur hats. Librarians correspond most closely to the guards with the fur hats, who initially are frightening, but turn out to be “good guys” after all. You may recall that when Dorothy throws water on the witch and she melts, the guards are happy and shout “Hail to Dorothy!” as they kneel in homage to her. Perhaps it is symbolic that the travellers enter the witch’s castle disguised as these guards. By extrapolation, we can say that librarians are our friends, and if those of you who are determined to detest librarians get some satisfaction from the image of them on their knees, that is all right.

I have talked so far about the impact of descriptive standards on our descriptive practices and our institutions. What impact will they have on researchers? And will they know or care? It is interesting to note that the old Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association viewed descriptive standards in the context of reference service, not description. During the early 1970s, for example, it established a Reference Systems Committee which attempted to “establish professional standards and guidelines for reference systems and the place of finding aids within them.” Now with *RAD*, researchers will have, for the first time, standardized descriptions for archival material, descriptions that presumably will be familiar because they will look like library descriptions, and like the descriptions used by other archival institutions across the country. As implementation is likely to be gradual, however, researchers may be forgiven if they

do not immediately notice the change. In my experience, users want to know what the word *fonds* means, but after that they can readily assimilate the information presented. A more obvious impact resulting from descriptive standards combined with automation will be the ability to share descriptive records among institutions. This is a possibility that researchers will undoubtedly applaud without understanding the effort involved in that achievement. Increased accessibility will also increase the demands on archives. Unless we do a better job of explaining both to resource allocators and to users what we do and the resources required, we may very well have to cope with these demands without a corresponding increase in resources — since in my experience, the more users get the more they want.

One of the issues I have always been somewhat uncomfortable with is the fact that we have carried out virtually no consultation with our users in the planning and development of these rules. In fact, we have only a rudimentary and impressionistic understanding of how researchers seek information from and use archival material; this is an area badly in need of more research. On the other hand, I am not sure that such consultation would have been particularly fruitful. The recent study done by the National Archives has revealed that 91 per cent of the users surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied with the existing research tools in terms of ease of use; and 84 per cent reported a similar level of satisfaction with the tools in terms of meeting their information needs. I doubt that there are many researchers who have thought sufficiently about the issue to offer informed alternatives that serve more than their own individual needs; more research is definitely needed.

Of course the descriptive standards movement is not the only current development in the archives world which is exciting and challenging — closely related issues around education, automation and electronic records also deserve our attention. In the area of education and professional standards, however, descriptive standards have had and will continue to have a great impact. The development of such standards has forced archivists to examine their arrangement and description practices, and thus the theoretical foundations of archival work. For those who question whether archives is a profession, this should provide an affirmative answer that in order to be a successful archivist, one must indeed acquire and utilize a body of knowledge with considerable intellectual content; it is no longer sufficient to have people drift into the work and learn “on the job,” as so many of us did in the past. By the time I retire, I want the Master of Archival Science degree to be the basic qualification for entry into the profession, with a strong continuing education programme to keep archivists up to date with new developments. Descriptive standards will obviously be a focus of continuing education for the next few years, as evidenced by the fact that four out of seven workshops offered at this year’s conference are on various aspects of descriptive standards. Understandably, this topic will diminish in importance as those currently in the profession become knowledgeable in this area — or retire — and as those entering the profession are required to have a good grasp of *RAD* and its related tools.

The development of descriptive standards would not have come about without our desire to harness the potential of computers; the issues surrounding automation continue to be a challenge in which descriptive standards assist and at the same time frustrate because they do not go far enough. Getting our descriptions into machine-readable form is merely the first step to information exchange. *Toward Descriptive Standards* contained significant recommendations regarding the issue of information exchange; the PCDS

will be turning its attention to them once the basic rules have been developed. Electronic records are another challenge for descriptive standards. According to present plans, the relevant chapter of *RAD* will be the last to appear. I wonder how the combination of increasing access to automated techniques, combined with the increasing volume of electronic records, will challenge our traditional practices and fundamental assumptions regarding finding aids and concepts of arrangement.

From 1988 to 1990 I had the privilege of serving on the American Working Group on Standards for Archival Description, which gave me an opportunity to observe and reflect upon the differences between the Canadian and American way of doing things. Some of our American colleagues are especially envious of those characteristics of the Canadian archival scene which have enabled us to involve the entire professional community in our descriptive standards development. By developing our standards through a series of appropriately representative working groups, there has been a growing sense of proprietorship evident among a number of individuals and their institutions. Also, by providing an opportunity for everyone who wishes to do so to comment on drafts, we have thereby increased this sense of ownership. I must admit that, at times, involving the whole community in this exercise did not seem so wonderful; in fact, it was very cumbersome and time-consuming, particularly when translation delayed the release of a new publication. In general, however, we are enormously fortunate that everyone within our archival community can claim ownership of the issue. For a variety of reasons, descriptive standards development in the United States has taken a different road, in fact a whole network of roads. I have some concerns about the divergence of the two approaches, but I am still hopeful that the roads will remain within hailing distance and may even arrive eventually at the same destination. Significant work is being done in other countries outside North America, and this conference has provided many opportunities for us to learn about the routes which international colleagues are travelling. I hope that finally these many paths will all converge at a common international standard.

I should like to conclude with a little history. The Canadian archival community has been concerned about standardizing description for many years, but it has taken us a long time to understand clearly the enormity of the task. While doing a little arrangement and description of my own recently, I came across a questionnaire sent out by the former Public Archives of Canada in 1973 asking institutions about what we would now call the data elements they used to describe their records. The Committee on Reference Systems finally reported in 1977 that its attempts to complete a manual on the preparation of finding aids had proved "distressingly unfruitful." A Finding Aids Committee was established in 1978; it disappeared in 1979, and the Reference Systems Committee reappeared "to inquire about descriptive practices and information retrieval devices." By 1980, it had become the Task Force on Description and Arrangement Standards. By this time, a few people were getting a pretty grim idea of the futility inherent in this approach, and in 1982 a successful grant application was submitted to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which enabled the WGADS to begin meeting in 1984. WGADS's report, *Toward Descriptive Standards*, was published in either 1985 or 1986, depending on whether one is referring to the English or the French version. It is indeed fitting that we are meeting this week in Montréal, where most of the WGADS meetings were also held. Those of us who participated in that committee came to know how much work there was yet to be done, and I can remember thinking

when the report was complete, “Will all this just fizzle because we are trying again to dig the Suez Canal with volunteers using teaspoons?”

I am pleased to say that it has not fizzled. The very fact that the ACA has organized this year’s conference around such a theme is evidence of the importance accorded descriptive standards within the Canadian archival community. Although the development process has been time-consuming, the mechanism chosen has allowed the community to take ownership of the process, even though in its implementation stage many will continue to find it threatening. The work has been done for the most part by volunteers, but with the support and blessing of their institutions and as a priority of the Canadian archival community.

In conclusion, I want to leave you with a small inspirational message. As I said at the beginning, the development of descriptive standards has been and still is a journey following the course set by *Toward Descriptive Standards*. I have had the privilege of travelling part of that road. It was a rough dirt track then, and there were not a lot of people on it. I had to get off that road for a while, but when I took a look the other day, I found that it has been graded and there is even some pavement up ahead. There are also a lot more people on the road, which is now truly a highway. The descriptive standards journey is not a fantasy, nor is it a grab-bag of special effects created by a charlatan. The journey is real, and I invite you to join me on the route. Do not hold back because you have no ruby slippers! I happen to be wearing my own ruby slippers today, but nothing magical will happen if I click my heels together three times. We do not need such talismans for this journey — we have already demonstrated that we have an abundance of courage, brains and heart, plus the capacity to work together to arrive at a wonderful destination where we will all speak the same descriptive language.

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