The Concept of the Archival Fonds in the Post-Custodial Era: Theory, Problems and Solutions

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This article is about the concept of the archival fonds.[1] It is an exploration in archival theory and descriptive practice, in problems surrounding the fonds and proposed solutions to those problems. It is not a direct commentary on descriptive standards or cataloguing rules. While it is true that the fonds is the broadest and most essential unit of records to which descriptive standards will be applied, my intention here is neither to challenge nor to confirm the standards outlined in the Bureau of Canadian Archivists' *Rules for Archival Description* (*RAD*). My argument is that such rules must conform to the central theory and conceptualizations of the archival profession, rather than vice versa. A "common language" needed for "dismantling the Tower of Babel," to quote the ACA 1992 Annual Conference theme, must first be based on a common understanding of common principles. Rules confirm such understanding; they do not create it. Without such understanding, moreover, rules will be ignored or applied with hopeless inconsistency, thus undermining the essential benefit of having standards in the first place.

The printed programme for the ACA 1992 Annual Conference, the theme of which was descriptive standards, stated that "the problem of identifying the essential describable unit of archives has long been an issue in modern archival theory." This, in fact, is a severe understatement. Archival practice encompasses record groups, manuscript groups, collections, fonds d'archives, additional accession systems of control and much else besides, all competing to be that "essential unit" — and thus erecting a veritable Tower of Babel indeed. Moreover, archivists have been trying to identify that essential unit with no great success ever since 1898, when the Dutch triumvirate of Muller, Feith and Fruin, in their famous manual, first attempted to circumscribe the fonds concept in order to meet the practical realities of records creation and accumulation. Yet despite this murky and doubtful evolution, Canadian archivists are now told that the *fonds d'archives* (or 'archival fonds') has been designated "*the* theoretical foundation on which to build their descriptive systems...."[2]

This presents a major problem if Canadian archivists collectively cannot agree on how to define what has been declared to be so central to their descriptive practices, and therefore to the development and implementation of descriptive standards. Indeed, aggravating this unease in the realm of theory (as opposed to evolved descriptive

practice), Michel Duchein of France — the world's leading theoretician of the archival fonds — has written that the concept of fonds d'archives "is easier to state than to define and easier to define than to put into practice." If archivists are committed to observing *respect des fonds*, Duchein has ruefully observed, it would be rather helpful if they knew what it is that they are to respect.[3] Even the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards in 1985 conceded, in advancing a definition of the fonds, "the difficulty of defining and determining what constitutes a *fonds* for practical purposes...." My fellow panellist at the ACA in Montréal, Keith Stotyn, has been more pointed, wondering why the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists commissioned a working group to proceed in the first instance with rules for fonds level description "when it is not yet clear in archival theory what constitutes a fonds." Until these uncertainties are removed, the application of descriptive standards, Stotyn has rightly observed, "will be subject to institutional whim and administrative convenience, rather than to the records themselves from whence, supposedly, comes our wisdom...."[4] The radically different approaches to this problem revealed in the XIIth ICA commemorative special issue of *Archivaria* (Number 34), distributed gratis in Montréal, underline the danger. These various uncertainties emphasize that standardized description will succeed in dismantling the archival Tower of Babel only when the fonds concept is first properly understood, and then consistently applied, by Canadian archivists. As archivists, however, despite good progress in recent years, our time has not yet arrived.

By way of broad introduction, let me say that, in my view, the central difficulty in conceptualizing the fonds, let alone in practically applying it to descriptive or appraisal practice, rests on a central contradiction in archival theory — one which is usually only implicit. The fonds concept derives, of course, from the nineteenth-century French archival dictum *respect des fonds*. That French formulation had both an external and an internal dimension. Early practice stressed the **external** dimension of keeping archival records clearly segregated by their office of creation and accumulation (each such group of records thus being organized into a single archival fonds). The **internal** dimension of maintaining the original order or sequence of records from such offices **within** each fonds was less emphasized. Indeed, early on, there was even some subject rearrangement of files within discrete fonds. Later, in enunciating *Provenienzprinzip*, the Germans articulated with greater precision the external dimension of *respect des fonds*, which focused clearly on maintaining the integrity of the records of each records creator as distinct from those of all other creators, in all archival arrangement and descriptive activity. In English, this became **provenance**. In time, the internal dimension of the French *respect des fonds* was expressed in English as the **sanctity of original order**, the maintenance of which focused on preserving the logical structure and internal arrangement of the records of each creator.

Between the equally organic, equally natural and equally transactional nature of both provenance and original order, there rests an unresolved dilemma for archivists. This arises from the tension of viewing the fonds as a theoretical product of **both** creation (provenance) and arrangement (original order), as an embodiment likewise of both a logical and a physical reality. It is the tension between a function, a process, a dynamic activity on one hand, and a concrete product, an artefact, a record on the other. There is in these dichotomies much potential for contradiction and confusion. While this potential is most obvious, as I will show, in the new world of electronic records, the problem

is equally apparent for much traditional media of records generated by complex, modern, bureaucratic organizations — in government, business, universities, churches and similar corporate entities. In short, the usual archival assumption that the arrangement of records reveals their contextual provenance and thus is the key to their description may no longer be adequate in the Information Age.

If the concept of the archival fonds is so difficult and presents such problems, then why bother? There are two reasons. First, the fonds is an essential reflection of the essence of archival work, of what makes archival records valuable, of what defines our profession. Secondly, moreover, every suggested alternative is worse and more misleading. After exploring these two assertions, I want to focus on how the definition of the fonds can run into several practical difficulties when archivists apply it to complex records-creating entities and to complex recording media. Finally, to end on a positive note, I shall recommend a solution to these difficulties, including a general theoretical or conceptual framework within which it is hoped Canadian archivists can develop a consensus. That framework urges archivists to liberate themselves from the constraints of the "custodial era," with its focus on physical groupings of records, and to embrace instead the implications of the "post-custodial era," with its conceptual paradigm of logical or virtual realities.

Against this broader context in which the fonds must be viewed — as concept, tool, descriptive foundation — it is appropriate to demonstrate the importance of the fonds to archival work. This is not a difficult task to perform.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of *respect des fonds*, from which the fonds is derived, has been considered "the basic principle of archival science." Michel Duchein asserts that this principle "most clearly distinguished [the archivist] from the librarian on the one hand and from the professional researcher or documentalist on the other."[5] From French Canada comes the assertion that *respect des fonds* is the "cornerstone" of archival theory,[6] while the first English-speaking archival theorist declares it to be "the most important of all principles" affecting archival practice.[7]

As discussions in Montréal at the XIIth International Congress on Archives repeatedly emphasized, virtually all modern archivists across all cultures, languages and nations loudly echo these assertions concerning the importance of *respect des fonds* and the related principles of provenance and original order. By adhering to these principles, archivists are able to preserve the organic nature of archives as evidence of transactions. Through such adherence, the evidential character of archives is protected, whereby the records inherently reflect the functions, programmes and activities of the person or institution that created them, **and** the transactional processes by which that actual creation took place. Archives are not artificial collections acquired, arranged, and described in the first instance by theme, subject, place or time; rather, they are acquired, and described, in a contextual, organic, natural relationship to their creator and to the acts of creation. In thus respecting the fonds as the organic emanation of a records creator, archivists the world over add value to records as evidence and for research, as well as enhance their own identity as information professionals who understand the complexity of the unique relationship between each records creator and the resulting records, and between and among interrelated series or groupings of records.

The formal definition of the fonds reflects these organic, natural and transactional characteristics essential to the practice of archives. In *Toward Descriptive Standards*

(1985), the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards advanced a better definition of the fonds than any previous attempt in world archival literature had succeeded in doing:

> *Fonds* **may be defined as the whole of the documents of any nature that every administrative body, every physical or corporate entity, automatically and organically accumulated by reason of its function or of its activity.**

It added that "this definition may be taken to encompass documents in any form or on any medium created by agencies or persons acting in a public or private capacity."[8] The definition in *Rules for Archival Description* is almost the same, although it places greater emphasis on "creation."[9] This focus on the "creator" reflects Duchein's insistence that the fonds is "a living creation of the activity of the agency which creates it."[10]

It is my argument that the idea, process or function of "creatorship" is central to the concept of the fonds.[11] In the course of undertaking their normal functions and activities, individuals and institutions — whether they actually originate the records, receive the records or share and manipulate information that is in or could become records — **create** an aggregate of documentary material, in whatever form or medium, which reflects their juridical status as records creators. The resulting "natural" or "organic" aggregation of records is called a fonds. It is impossible, therefore, to conceive, let alone identify, a fonds without having a clear understanding of the nature, scope and authority of the **creator** of the records involved and of the **records-creating process**. I am asserting that creation (reflecting provenance) must be seen as central to the definition of the fonds, whereas the physical order, filing and sequencing of the actual records (reflecting the principle of original order via archival arrangement) should be seen as central to the description of series, files and items, rather than of the fonds *per se*. Where they are in conflict, creation must be accorded primacy.

As a corollary to the organic nature of the fonds, it cannot be artificial or synthesized after the fact of creation. For example, the "collection" or "manuscript group" is not a fonds, but indeed an "anti-fonds." Contrasting the fonds with the collection, Carol Couture and Jean-Yves Rousseau have observed that "the first is the result of a natural process, the product of clearly defined activities, whereas the latter is an artificial construct, an arbitrary creation, often the work of chance."[12] Similarly, the "additional manuscript" or "additional accession" approach to archival description also shirks the responsibility of establishing the contextual framework essential to maintain archival evidential value and provenance.

By contrast, the contents of the record group are more organic and usually linked to a records creator, at least in theory. Yet as North American archival practice has evolved, the record group has moved a long way from its provenance-based origins to become rather arbitrary and thus artificial. Critics of the record group point to a variety of problems for which there is space here only to summarize: normal, general and collective record groups (to use Schellenberg's three terms) all existing together and presenting quite dissimilar faces; centrifugal and centripetal rationales defining record group structures in radically different ways; confusion over transferring versus creating agencies as the basis for establishing record groups; and large or small record groups existing according to the administrative convenience for archives in assigning equitable workloads to their staff, controlling stack space or even producing publications.[13] These issues drove the earliest critic of the record group concept, Australian Peter Scott, to label it

"unduly limiting" and an "unnecessary complication," concluding that "instead of ena-
bling one to adhere to basic principles [such as provenance], it may actually distort the
application of such principles."[14] David Bearman and Richard Lytle assert more strongly
that the record group has "debilitated archival theory" and obscured the essential
provenance of the records, thus becoming an "albatross" around the profession's neck.[15]

Because of these practical and theoretical problems in its day-to-day application, the
record group — despite its provenancial origin — is no longer the near-equivalent of
the fonds. Considering that the fonds may also be applied to private and individual archival
entities, as well as to public and corporate ones, the record group, as a concept, should
be put aside by Canadian archivists and the fonds embraced in its place as the sole descrip-
tive unit above the series, file or item.

The case is not yet closed, however. While the fonds has the best potential for allow-
ing archival descriptive systems to reflect the natural, organic character of archival
records, its practical application can present problems. David Bearman put it best when
criticizing the recent draft descriptive principles of the International Council on Archives,
although his remarks would seem to apply to *RAD* in Canada as well. Most such recent
descriptive efforts, Bearman warns, still "reflect a records-oriented, descriptive cataloging
tradition, as opposed to the context-oriented, life-cycle data management approach."
It is essential, in his view (and mine), that archival description focus on "the conjunc-
tion of the context of the activity and the information system in the records creating
organization."[16] For Bearman, as for Australia's Peter Scott, this conjunction is at the
level of the series. That conjunction, I shall nevertheless assert, **can** be at the level of
the fonds, **but only if the fonds, as Bearman states, is truly presented as a conjunc-
tion of the creator's functions and activities on the one hand and, on the other hand,
of the records and information systems — the actual products — which proceed from
those functions and activities.**

Where there is a direct, one-to-one correspondence between the abstract notion of the
creator's activities and the concrete or physical reality of the resulting records, there
is no problem in defining and describing this conjunction, and thus in delimiting and
defining the fonds. The record series, files and even discrete items of the single records
creator are summarized by the fonds level description for that creator, which as a descrip-
tion thus represents the aggregate description of the hierarchical parts, that is, the sum
of the multilevel descriptions of the dependent series, files and items below the fonds
level. The physical reality of the records in the fonds coincides exactly with the concep-
tual understanding of the functional activities of the records creator. That was the case
in the nineteenth century, when the concept of the fonds was conceived to manage the
archival legacy of medieval and early modern records. The approach is still valid for
the records of some smaller organizations and for the papers of many private individuals.
In such cases, arrangement can indeed precede and determine description, for the arrange-
ment of series reflects, indeed illuminates, the provenance of the single creator of the
totality of records in the fonds.

Where such a one-to-one correspondence, however, does not exist between the con-
ceptual and the physical, between the creator and the record, as in the case of most large
organizations and almost all electronic records, the archivist immediately encounters
those practical problems, to which everyone refers, in applying the fonds concept in
working reality. Some examples will clearly illustrate the nature of these problems.

In the modern hierarchical organization, where there are perhaps seven levels between the top and the bottom — to say nothing of parallel and regional/field structures — is the creator of a series of records at the bottom level in the hierarchy the one which delimits the fonds, even though the six hierarchical levels above that creator also create or share in the creation of other (perhaps related) series, or is the fonds delimited at some more senior level, and if so, which one? Alternatively, put in the terms used in archival litera-ture, does one take a maximalist position, as did Jenkinson, and set the fonds at the highest, all-encompassing level of an entire department; does one take a minimalist posi-tion, as did Scott, and describe directly only the immediate creator at the series level; or does one aim for some compromise in the middle, as did Schellenberg?[17] In a mul-tilevel *RAD* description, must the fonds level description of a large creator, comprising perhaps 200 series, be changed every time a new accretion of records comes into any one of those series? The architecture of such a dynamic system, even with the aid of automation, will be cumbersome, to say the least.

As with hierarchical levels, physical location presents problems in delimiting a fonds. For example, cabinet ministers, as is well known, have an especially distressing habit of removing portions of their records from government control and then depositing them in archives across the country. Likewise, a famous author's papers may well be deposited in three university archives. Reflecting the emphasis on physical dispersion and institu-tional arrangement, these three deposits are three fonds. Indeed *RAD* supports this approach, for it focuses on arrangement of records **within** archival repositories, and leaves to those individual repositories (unwisely, the British developer of descriptive standards, Michael Cook, would say) the choice of how this information will be presented to researchers. Obviously, such an approach does not focus on the provenance of records dispersed **across** archival repositories or on promoting a common, uniform, descriptive image of the totality of records generated by the creator to researchers at each reposi-tory. Yet such physically dispersed records, if reflecting the conceptual reality of crea-tion rather than the physical reality (even mishap) of arrangement, are obviously one fonds, not three. Of course, such quirks and accidents of ownership and transfer are an important element of the records' history, and such curatorial information must be captured; it should not override, let alone obscure, provenance.

Looking at this "location" issue from the opposite perspective, a single person — for example, a missionary priest who undertook several parish postings — may well create in one medium, perhaps a large journal or daybook, official institutional records documenting several different administrative contexts and functions.[18] Although he or she physically accumulated the records, the juridical and circumstantial context of their creation makes them part of several official parish fonds, not just his or her personal one.

What about the long-lived series generated by three or four corporate creators over several decades?[19] Which one of these creators is considered to delimit or define the fonds? Furthermore, in all likelihood, the creation of the series is continuing into the foreseeable future even while the archivist is arranging and describing (and thus "plac-ing" in a fonds) the earlier transfers of portions of the same series. Five, ten, even twenty years after completing the description, the archivist may well find the same series con-tinuing to be created in a new and entirely different agency.

Indeed, the issue of frequent administrative change in agencies and functions, even within the traditional world of vertically organized hierarchical agencies, presents one

of the two greatest challenges to preserving the evidential context of creation through
the fonds.[20] Peter Scott has identified no less than thirteen separate fates that can befall
a records series, depending on whether its creator had no predecessor, one continuing
predecessor, one defunct predecessor or more than one predecessor and, conversely,
no successor, one continuing, one defunct or several successors?[21] Whether the archivist
chooses the first, the last or some intermediate agency in this long string of creators
as **the** creator, and therefore **the** administrative umbrella defining the fonds, the provenan-
cial context is obscured — to say the least.

The problem of defining the fonds or, more accurately, deciding which records belong
in which fonds, does not relate simply to the traditional hierarchical levels within a
bureaucracy, however, nor to the problem of successive, multiple creators, as in most
of the above examples. There are also the more complex issues of simultaneous creators
and of records-creating patterns in modern bureaucracies that do not conform to tradi-
tional organizational theory, and do not produce records easily amenable to traditional
views of archival arrangement.

In this regard, electronic records present the most obvious challenge to the applica-
tion of the traditional concept of the fonds. Complex databases and network systems
may serve two or more branches of a large department, or indeed the data may be inter-
departmental or even intergovernmental. Several branches, departments or jurisdictions
may thus have had an equal part in creating and using the data. In such increasingly
commonplace situations, the prospect of dividing the single resulting data file between
two or more fonds reveals the theoretical absurdity of viewing the fonds as the totality
of the "physical" records of a **single** creator. Conversely, consigning the data file to
only one fonds would obliterate important dimensions of the records' creation, their mul-
tiple provenance and their organic context. While the database may reside (or "accumu-
late") in a single branch or agency, that branch or agency does not own the data, and
often did not even create it. Who, then, is the creator? What is the fonds?

Recent developments in information technology now being applied in business and
government to "create" the archival records of tomorrow only highlight the significance
of these issues. In so-called "smart" documents, such as those in relational databases
and geographical information systems or in hypertext formats, data in various forms
are combined electronically to produce a virtual "document" on the monitor or at the
printer. This "document" can change from day to day as the attribute "feeder" data on
which it depends is continually altered. Yet that "feeder" data itself usually resides in data
files and databases controlled by other "creators" in other administrative structures.

Moreover, in such relational systems now widely in use, there is often no traditional
"record" at all, as archivists understand it, but rather a series of data tables or data
entities or sub-databases. By reason of different functions or applications, these are **related**
in different ways, using different data elements for different purposes, the amalgam of
which is deployed as a "record" but fleetingly at the terminal screen. As businesses
and governments in these circumstances adopt new information models based on cor-
porate data planning and data resource management, moreover, the idea of a record phys-
ically belonging in one place or even in one system is crumbling before new **conceptual**
paradigms, where "creatorship" is a fluid **process** of manipulating information from
many sources in a myriad of ways, rather than an action leading to a static, fixed **physi-
cal** product. In these circumstances, archival description will increasingly focus on

metadata, or "documenting documentation," and thus on preserving the contextual processes whereby data or entity or object relationships can be understood by the archivist and re-created for the researcher.[22] For all archivists, these developments signal that the custodial era is giving way to a post-custodial one where the curatorship of physical objects will define the profession much less than will an understanding of the conceptual interrelationships among creating structures, their animating functions, information systems and the resulting records. This is true now for "cutting-edge" appraisal strategies, and should also be true for the descriptive practices applied to those records appraised through these strategies as having archival value.[23]

These recent developments respecting electronic records only emphasize a problem that has existed for many years respecting traditional series of paper records — although few archivists have acknowledged its theoretical implications for many of their descriptive practices. Put starkly, the classic mono-hierarchical theory of bureaucracy elucidated by Max Weber, in which each subordinate unit is responsible to one superior unit, has long been a thing of the past. Parallel structures, task forces and project teams, joined across organizations by broken-line horizontal linkages, exercising consensus management and collegial relationships, now compete openly for power with the traditional, vertical, solid-line, hierarchical authorities, and these new "structures" all create and often maintain records. They are also attached, albeit loosely, to more formal branches, divisions, sections, offices, bureaux, and other subunits of the department or agency, all of which are appearing, merging, dividing and disappearing with alarming frequency. As in the example of the electronic record shared between two branches, into what fonds does the archivist place the many records created in the midst of this modern poly-hierarchical administrative maelstrom? Who, indeed, is the records creator?

In summary, by focusing descriptive activity on distinct levels in the traditional administrative hierarchy, on single organizational subunits, on separate registry systems, on different media, on scattered locations of records and on discrete one-to-one creator-records correspondence, archivists have for decades been pulling **apart** in archives what was once in the creator's office an organic and conceptual whole. How to treat the part without losing sight of the whole is, in a nutshell, the dilemma of all archival arrangement and description, and consequently of defining precisely the nature of the fonds.[24]

All the foregoing problems in the practical application of the fonds concept derive from viewing it exclusively as a physical entity rather than as a conceptual principle. It reflects tying intellectual description too closely to physical arrangement. Documents may well be physically **accumulated** by a single final agency, but as should be clear by now, they may collectively (at the file, series and even item levels) have been **created** sequentially by many of the agency's predecessors, simultaneously by two or more legitimate records creators, or indeed, they may as documents not exist at all.

If the fonds is first and foremost a concept linked to the creator, then obscuring the act of multiple or complex creation by assigning records physically and intellectually to a single fonds during archival arrangement and subsequent description distorts provenance, and therefore undermines a central purpose of description — to say nothing of the evidential character of archives. This approach, which is very common among archivists, reflects the profession's "custodial" or "curatorial" past rather than its "post-custodial" or "knowledge-oriented" future. Indeed, archivists have only gradually abandoned the view that the intellectual arrangement and description of records should reflect

the physical reality in storage areas. The idea that the archivist should keep together series or fonds in close physical proximity, and even physically rearrange files and records within series to re-create tangibly their original order, survived well into the 1970s — and the legacy of such physical curatorship dies hard.[25] In that old world of archival physical rearrangement, the ideal was that each record **could only be stored in one place**; in the more recent world of intellectual control of archives, the notion still survives that each record **should only be described in one place**. In the new post-custodial world of records having multiple creators, that view is simply wrong. Rather, the key lies in viewing the fonds not as a physical entity, but as an abstract concept.[26] As electronic records archivists well know, reality is often logical and functional, not physical.

The solution to this dilemma was first suggested by Peter Scott. He saw the need to separate entirely the control and description of the actual physical records — the series, files and items — from the contextual and content information about them. The latter includes not only the detailed description of records creators and their historical and administrative context which underpins provenance, but also functional, chronological, legislative and similar contextual information. Basing his argument on extensive research and experimentation in Australia, Scott proposed numerous descriptive tools to ensure that complex administrative changes among records creators are clearly recognized and recorded by archivists. He then linked these tools — "listings," as he calls them — to the actual description of archival records at the level of the series or lower. As Scott summarized his own system, there is a need for "a decreased reliance on physical arrangement by groups [including the fonds] as a means of treating multiple-provenance series and an increased acceptance of the need for multiple listing in such cases."[27] Of course, Scott's own prescription focuses on original order or the description of actual records at the level of accumulation or arrangement — the records-keeping system itself — and allows provenance (creation) to emerge through the intellectual mechanism of his multiple listings. This is quite different, however, from equating and combining the two — original order/arrangement **and** provenance/fonds — into a **single** descriptive entry, such as *RAD* does with the fonds. Indeed, Scott's insight of using **multiple** entries, combined with his **separation** of the descriptions of the administrative context from those of the physical records, is truly revolutionary. He recognized that archival description is an integrated **system** combining many elements, not a fixed description of records.

Building explicitly on the insights of Peter Scott, David Bearman and Richard Lytle, Max Evans took Scott's "multiple listings" a step further in order to invoke automated authority control as the solution for archivists trying to describe modern multiple-provenance records.[28] In Evans's approach, as in Scott's, there are two streams: one is a descriptive entry for the actual physical records (series in Evans's argument, but conceivably also files and items), while the other is an authority control entry for the creating agency (or provenance context). They are maintained entirely separately, but joined contextually by cross-linkage pointers. Using automation to combine or "relate" these elements, any combination of creators and series is possible: multiple creators to single series, multiple series from a single creator, multiple creators to multiple but related series, series to each other and creators to each other — whether up and down the traditional mono-hierarchical vertical chain or sideways through new horizontal organizational structures. As administrations and functions change, the authority record is amended or a new one created — without every time having to restructure the inventories and finding aids or rewrite scores of series and fonds level descriptions. It is a dynamic rather

than static system, and thus reflects the dynamic reality of records creation in modern complex administrations. In this way, the description of archives can enhance rather than distort the principle of provenance. Ideally, the physical, printed "inventory" is replaced by a relational database management system as the centre of archival description.[29] In fact, in the era of fluid, dynamic bureaucracies, provenance can be protected in no other way.

For a significant number of personal papers, for the vast majority of corporate and government records and for almost all electronic records (which often do not even have a "physical" existence at the record level), the straightforward relationship between a single creator and a few closed, complete series of records simply does not exist. The old physical and conceptual correlation within the simple fonds has, in short, become extremely tenuous. In such circumstances, the authority control approach of diverting description into two channels while providing numerous cross-reference pointers, will resolve these more complex interrelationships; it also addresses satisfactorily virtually every problem relating the fonds outlined above or in various recent commentaries.

In fact, this approach enhances the concept of the fonds and the sanctity of provenance; through it, the fonds (or "whole") will emerge organically through the descriptive activity of archivists. By separating the description of the administrative context of creation from the description of the actual accumulation of records, the archivist can "concentrate on mapping relationships existing within the nature of each and between the two. It is this very mapping which, bit by bit, part by part, reveals the whole...."[30]

The fonds, therefore, should be viewed primarily as "an intellectual construct."[31] The fonds is not so much a physical entity in archives as it is the conceptual summary of descriptions of physical entities at the series level or lower, **and** descriptions of the administrative, historical and functional character of the records creator(s) — **as well as** descriptions of the records-creating processes (metadata). The fonds is thus the conceptual "whole" that reflects an organic process in which a records creator produces or accumulates series of records which themselves exhibit a natural unity based on shared function, activity, form or use. It is at the heart of this process or **relationship** linking the creator to the records that the essence of provenance or *respect des fonds* can be found and must be protected. **It is at this functional heart, moreover, that archival descriptive systems should be aimed, structured and standardized.**

Notes

1 The paper on which this article is based was in turn a short summary of my much longer essay, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era," which was commissioned by the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists and which has been published, with two other essays, in a book edited by Terry Eastwood entitled *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992). I hope this shorter and rather pointed essay leads interested readers to its longer and more closely argued antecedent; beyond this advisory, however, I shall not make any further references along the lines "for more detail, see my longer essay...." My intellectual debts acknowledged by name in the latter work — I am happy to say — apply with equal force to this article, with the single addition of the useful comments made in Montréal on the ACA Conference version of the paper by Sigrid McCausland, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, which I appreciate.

2   Association of Canadian Archivists, Seventeenth Annual Conference Programme, "Dismantling the Tower of Babel: Developing a Common Language Through Descriptive Standards" (Montréal, 1992), pp. 1, 16. [Emphasis added.]

3   Michel Duchein, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des fonds* in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 64, 69 (originally published as "Le respect des fonds en archivistique : principes théoriques et problèmes pratiques," *La Gazette des archives*, 1977).

4   Keith Stotyn, Review of BCA, *Rules for Archival Description*, in *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 165-66.

5   Duchein, "Theoretical Principles," p. 64.

6   Carol Couture and Jean-Yves Rousseau, *The Life of a Document* (Montréal, 1987), p. 161 [translation and revision of *Les archives au Xxe siècle* (1982)]. Duchein refers to the concept of fonds d'archives being "universally accepted as the basis of theoretical and practical archival science": see "Theoretical Principles," p. 66.

7   Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2nd ed. rev. (London, 1966), p. 101.

8   Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards, *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa, 1985), p. 7, n. 1; p. 55.

9   Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa, 1990), p. D-3: "... the whole of the records, regardless of form or medium, automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular individual, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities and functions."

10 Duchein, "Theoretical Principles," p. 81.

11 This centrality of creatorship has finally been recognized in a recent major article on arrangement and description: Sharon Gibbs Thibodeau, "Archival Arrangement and Description," James Gregory Bradsher, ed., *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions* (Chicago, 1988), p. 68. This essay contains some of the most sensible and clear-headed thinking about archival description which is available. Debra Barr wisely made the same point in criticizing the Working Group's definition of the fonds, cited above, for its underemphasis on creation: "The Fonds Concept in the Working Group on Archival Standards Report," *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88), p. 169.

12 Couture and Rousseau, *Life of a Document*, p. 161. The term "anti-fonds" was coined by these authors as well.

13 The last reason was actually cited by Schellenberg as one advanced to justify the arbitrary nature of record group size and creation! *Management of Archives*, p. 162.

14 See also Peter Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," *American Archivist* 29 (October 1966), p. 502.

15 David Bearman and Richard Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-86), p. 20. In fairness, it should be noted that defenders of the record group concept believe that arrangement and description based on the series (as Scott advocates) would face the same problems: Gerald L. Fischer, "Letting the Archival Dust Settle: Some Remarks on the Record Group Concept," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 4 (October 1973), p. 644, *passim*. In my view, such defenders do not understand the subtlety of Scott's advocacy of series-based description. They imply that he is merely describing series; in fact, he established a **system of description based on series**, but which clearly links series to entities above and below the series level.

16 David Bearman, "The ICA Principles Regarding Archival Description," *Archives & Museum Informatics* 6 (Spring 1992), p. 20; see also his *Archival Methods* (Pittsburgh, 1989) and, most recently, "Documenting Documentation," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), pp. 33-49.

17 *Toward Descriptive Standards*, p. 56. This reflects Duchein's analysis in "Theoretical Principles," pp. 69-70. Again, this is not an entirely fair characterization of Scott's overall descriptive system, however just it may be at the level of series *per se*. I shall return to Scott in more detail, below.

18 On just such a case, see the very suggestive study by Debra Barr, "The Fonds Concept in the Work-
    ing Group on Archival Descriptive Standards Report," pp. 163-70.

19 This issue is particularly addressed in Michael Roper, "Modern Departmental Records and the Record
    Office," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 4 (April 1972), pp. 403-4, and *passim*; and in Fischer,
    "Letting the Archival Dust Settle," p. 641.

20 As early as 1940, Margaret Cross Norton stated that "it is a rule in government that records follow
    functions. That is to say, when a department is abolished, merged into another department, or other-
    wise reorganized, its functions are generally transferred to another department, which of course must
    have the old records at hand to carry on the old functions." Half a century later, archivists are only
    gradually realizing the import of these words for descriptive practice. See Thornton W. Mitchell,
    ed., *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival and Records Manage-
    ment* (Chicago, 1975), p. 110. The other great challenge, as will be seen shortly, concerns electronic
    records.

21 Peter Scott bases his landmark critiques on just such anomalies caused by the administrative shifts
    and sheer complexities of records-creating environments in modern bureaucracies. In addition to his
    summary article on abandoning the record group, cited in note 14 above, Scott's five-part series,
    of which various colleagues were co-authors, is essential reading on this subject: P.J. Scott, et al.,
    "Archives and Administrative Change — Some Methods and Approaches," *Archives and Manuscripts*
    7 (August 1978), pp. 115-27; 7 (April 1979), pp. 151-65; 8 (June 1980), pp. 41-54; 8 (December
    1980), pp. 51-69; and 9 (September 1981), pp. 3-17. The first article in this series (Part 1) contains
    charts and graphs illustrating the increasing rate of administrative change in Australian government
    agencies. Part 2, pp. 154-56, outlines the various futures which may overtake an agency. Readers
    interested in an extended case study of complex administrative change in one government agency
    may wish to consult my "Legacy in Limbo: An Introduction to the Records of the Department of
    the Interior," *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88), pp. 73-83.

22 See again Bearman, "Documenting Documentation," *passim*; and "Multisensory Data and Its Manage-
    ment," Cynthia Durance, ed., *Management of Recorded Information: Converging Disciplines* (Munich,
    1990). See also Margaret Hedstrom, "Descriptive Practices for Electronic Records: Deciding What
    Is Essential and Managing What Is Possible," paper presented at the 1992 Annual Conference of
    the Association of Canadian Archivists, Montréal, 12 September 1992, which contains an excellent
    exploration of the challenges which electronic records and especially electronic metadata pose for
    traditional archival description. Hugh Taylor in several recent articles has also emphasized the impor-
    tance of activity, deeds and processes over the concrete, physical records as society in the Informa-
    tion Age returns to the "conceptual orality" of earlier times; I have tried to capture and comment
    on Taylor's insights in my "Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal,"
    Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992),
    pp. 38-39, and *passim*. Concerning electronic records and descriptive standards, Kent Haworth approv-
    ingly cites Charles Dollar's contention that descriptive practices will have to be transformed in the
    Information Age, "shifting the emphasis from specific products ... to ... information systems and
    processes." To underline this move to the logical and post-custodial, it is asserted by both authors
    that description should occur at the information system design stage, that is, at a stage before the
    records are even created — when all the archivist has to describe are functions and processes. See
    Kent Haworth, "Standardizing Archival Description in the Information Age," paper presented at
    the XIIth International Congress on Archives (Montréal, 1992), p. 9.

23 This is not the place for a major foray into the world of new appraisal theory, despite its complemen-
    tary relationship to this article. Perhaps it is enough to say that the new work on documentation strategies
    in the United States and acquisition strategies in Canada takes a similar functional/conceptual approach.
    That is to say, the creator's mandate, functions, programmes, and activities, related organizational
    structures, and information systems are appraised at a macro-level before the records themselves are
    appraised. The new appraisal — *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92) contains several good discussions
    in articles by Hans Booms, Helen Samuels, Richard Brown, Candace Loewen, Eldon Frost and Tim
    Ericson — illustrates the international profession's attempt to cope with the stark realities of the post-
    custodial age so well-envisioned over the past decade by Gerald Ham, Hugh Taylor and David Bear-
    man. For interested readers, the new approach receives its most extensive treatment to date (accom-
    panied by suggestions for further reading) in Terry Cook, *The Archival Appraisal of Records Con-
    taining Personal Information: A RAMP Study with Guidelines* (Paris, 1991). For a more focused,

theoretical analysis relating generally to appraisal, see my "Mind Over Matter: Towards a New The-
ory of Archival Appraisal," pp. 38-70. See also Bearman, *Archival Methods*, Chapter 1.

24 David Robinson, "Theory, Practice, and *A Manual of Archival Description*," *Journal of the Society
    of Archivists* 12 (Spring 1991), pp. 1-6, offers yet more examples of the difficulties of trying to fix
    levels of description of any kind.

25 Bearman and Lytle, "Power of Provenance," p. 20.

26 For a devastating critique of Duchein's view of the fonds along these lines, see Debra Barr's article,
    "The Fonds Concept in the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards," pp. 163-70, and
    especially pp. 163-64, 169. Barr calls for more discussion of the concept in order to clarify the issues
    which she raises; I am hoping in my own work on the concept to fan the flames which she ignited.

27 The six articles by Scott and his colleagues, cited above, are the basis for this generalization; see
    notes 14 and 21 for the full citations. For the quoted phrase, see Scott, "Archives and Administrative
    Change — Part 4," p. 65.

28 See Max J. Evans, "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept," *American
    Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982), pp. 249-61. For an extension of these ideas concerning authority control
    for archival records to encompass such access points as occupation, geographical coordinates, time
    period, forms of material, and function, see David Bearman, "Authority Control Issues and Prospects,"
    The American Archivist 52 (Summer 1989), pp. 286-99. Readers wishing to understand better the
    general approach should read Louise Gagnon-Arguin, *An Introduction to Authority Control for Archivists*
    (Ottawa, 1989); and Elizabeth Black, *Authority Control: A Manual for Archivists* (Ottawa, 1991).
    Of course, many more authority controls could be added — lists of authors contrasted with creators,
    related pieces of legislation, related senior officials' names, etc.

    That an authority control system combined with descriptions of records is administratively as well
as conceptually feasible was suggested in a paper produced by Hugo L.P. Stibbe in the summer of
1990 for the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, in response to the second draft of my
larger study (see note 1 above) and the problems which it raised, and which are summarized in the
present article, concerning the application of the fonds concept: "Primary Access Point, Multilevel
Description and Authority Control: Instruments for Implementing and Controlling the Fonds." This
analysis has since been revised and published, together with many useful charts and illustrations:
Hugo Stibbe, "Implementing the Concept of the Fonds: Primary Access Point, Multilevel Descrip-
tion and Authority Control," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), pp. 109-37. While Stibbe's model is
a welcome venture into aspects of Peter Scott's world, and does address some of my concerns, it
is nevertheless incomplete. Stibbe must still account for metadata and the appropriate description
of the functionality of electronic records. That is to say, describing creators in authority records and
creating descriptive records according to *RAD* is not good enough; a third descriptive entity describ-
ing the functionality which links acts of creation to particular "views" of the records is needed. It
is also not clear whether, like Scott and Evans, the authority record in Stibbe's model does indeed
contain all the contextual historical and administrative information, or merely pointers and linkages
to it (with the minimal "see also" control of synonymous names and terms common to the library
world). If the former, like Scott and Evans's models, then it will require the revision of what Cana-
dian archivists are now being told to put in a *RAD* descriptive record versus what goes in an authority
record; if only the latter, then the model does not go so far as that of Scott or Evans. Moreover,
Stibbe's insistence on retaining the main-entry concept derived from library cataloguing — even if
more palatably renamed "primary access point" — still favours one creator over all others in cases
of multiple provenance, and does so based on the same old compromises and choices of traditional
archival arrangement. He asserts, for example, that archival arrangement decisions must "be made,
so that each series and all that belong to it is part of only one fonds" (p. 116). In my view, this
is simply wrong for the post-custodial age, and a false premise on which to construct a descriptive
information system. Stibbe's declaration, moreover, that two creators (or "fonds") equally sharing
the creation of, say, three series (his **Figure 4**, p. 118, and text, p. 116) is "an unacceptable starting-
point for archival description" is, in fact, exactly the point at which descriptive conceptualization
(in my view) must commence. For all the imaginative suggestions in his article, which **does** move the
Canadian descriptive standards discussion forward, Stibbe still cannot relinquish the fonds as a physical
reality. Like Duchein and others he ameliorates but does not ultimately resolve the dilemma. For
a view that also implicitly challenges Stibbe's model, see Susan Healy, "The Classification of Modern

Government Records in England and Australia,'' *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 11 (January and April 1990), pp. 21-26.

29 See Thibodeau, ''Archival Arrangement and Description,'' p. 75. At the Society of American Archivists conference in Philadelphia in September 1991, two fine presentations demonstrated that Max Evans's model can indeed become a working reality. Sharon Gibbs Thibodeau and Diane Hopkins, for the National Archives and Records Administration and the World Bank, respectively, unveiled database designs now being used to implement Evans's concept.

30 Letter, Terry Eastwood to the author, 13 August 1990, commenting on the second draft of my larger study (see note 1 above). Eastwood's pithy summary of the workings of the whole-to-part relationship at the centre of the descriptive dilemma seems worthy of quotation *in extenso* rather than mere paraphrase!

31 Evans, ''Authority Control,'' p. 249.