

The First Shall Be First: APPM and Its Impact on American Archival Description

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RAD ... MAD ... APPM. One is immediately struck by the lost potential for harmony and congruence in that phrase. I shall confess that I have on occasion considered changing the title of *APPM* to something which might yield a more euphonious acronym, but the only ones I could think of were *Cataloguing and Archival Description* and *Bibliographic Archival Description*. Somehow, in *CAD* and *BAD*, however, there seemed to be too much potential for untoward reflection upon the character of the author.

The appearance in a single session of the principal authors of the three Anglo-American manuals of archival description cannot help but create the impression of a sort of archival *Gunfight at the OK Corral*. What is represented are three distinctly different approaches to establishing standards for the description and control of archival and manuscript material in the United States, Canada and Great Britain: the Americans versus the Canadians versus the British. To be sure, there are many similarities in our respective approaches, and I trust that they will become more evident in the course of these presentations. At the same time, nevertheless, it is also obvious that whatever the similarities might be, they are not sufficiently compelling for any of us to concede the ultimate wisdom of the other, or to keep each of us from vigorously pressing our individual cases at the cost, I might add, of much sweat and tears.

My purpose here is not only to outline the history of the development of *APPM* and to discuss some of the underlying principles within it which have made it so widely accepted, but also, to some degree, to speculate on its future. Although I have had the opportunity in the past to review and comment publicly upon the work of both Kent Haworth and Michael Cook, such an approach seemed both inappropriate and unwise. Inappropriate because I believe my duty here is to explain myself and let *APPM* stand or fall on its own merits, not through odious comparisons with the well-intentioned work of others attempting to do the same thing. Unwise, moreover, because it is one thing to sit in the relative safety of one's office and conjure up trenchant and incisive criticism of the work of one's colleagues, while quite another to do so in their immediate presence.

Thus, in keeping with the cinematic metaphor established at the outset, instead of *Gunfight at the OK Corral*, I now propose to adduce the rather more gentle vision of *Field*

of Dreams, wherein a son of the American midwest, struggling with the frustration and confusion of trying to bring order out of, and standards into, a world where the former is non-existent while the latter contentiously spurned, decides to follow an inner voice. This voice whispers to him in the night and is heard above the din of traffic at DuPont Circle. It says, "If you write it, they will follow." "What," I ask, "is it?" "And who are they?"

"It" turns out to be a manual for cataloguing archival and manuscript material based upon the second edition of the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* (otherwise known as *AACR2*). "They" turn out to be the American archivists, manuscript librarians and others of that cloth who, while outwardly rejecting any and all past attempts at bringing order to the cheerful anarchy which had developed around archival description, were all the while secretly yearning to be brought under the yoke of library-based descriptive standards.

Although I have written extensively elsewhere on the origins of *APPM*,¹ it might be useful briefly to review those circumstances here. Between 1976 and 1986 I served as Senior Manuscript Cataloguer in the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress. In the autumn of 1977, members of the staff of the Division were first presented with a draft of the chapter on manuscripts for the then forthcoming second edition of the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*. The response to that draft was not positive. The objections were based largely on the fact that the new rules, rather than building on existing practice, seemed to ignore standards which had been established in Chapter 10 of the original cataloguing code and which were then being followed by both the Manuscript Division and the *National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections* (and, by extension, all those repositories which had patterned their own cataloguing after the *NUCMC* model). The new rules, moreover, in what appeared to be an attempt to force the bibliographic description of all types of material into a uniform and consistent structure, exhibited what could only be described as appalling ignorance about the fundamental nature of almost all non-book materials — archives and manuscripts most especially. As a consequence, *AACR2* came into the world amid great *sturm und drang* affecting that sector of the library and information community traditionally less concerned with published monographs.

Although the initial negative effects of these rules have since been considerably neutralized by the publication and acceptance of interpretive manuals and expansions such as *APPM*, as well as an official revision of *AACR2* itself (variously known as "*AACR2½*" or *AACR2R*), it is nonetheless difficult to overstate the dislocation which these rules caused. Acting under the auspices of the Council of National Library and Information Associations, a group of special materials cataloguers convened early in 1978 as the Joint Committee on *AACR2* (later renamed the Joint Committee on Specialized Cataloguing) in order to discuss various problems of *AACR2* incompatibility with the needs of special materials libraries. Included in this group were representatives from law libraries, music libraries, religious libraries, motion picture, videotape and sound recording collections, manuscript and archival collections and photograph and print collections. The only groups not represented were the cartographic and rare book librarians; the reason for this was that they had already independently undertaken revisions and/or expansions of the respective chapters in *AACR2* dealing with their materials. The single thread which bound this diverse group together was the simple fact that the Joint Steering Committee for the Revision of *AACR* had somehow failed to comprehend the

essentially bibliographic nature of the materials in their custody. Worse still, rather than streamlining and making their cataloguing easier, *AACR2* instead made it either more difficult or downright impossible.

Without going into details of the work of this group, the net result of their efforts was the production of three interpretive manuals: one for graphic materials, one for archival moving-image materials, and the one under discussion here — for archives, personal papers, and manuscripts.

At this point a fair question might be “Why bother?” “Why even attempt to follow *AACR2*?” Indeed, Michael Cook, in his *Manual of Archival Description (MAD)*, has already answered this question in a manner which very distinctly separates him from the Canadian and American approaches. Given the difficulties which *AACR2* presented for “archival cataloguing” and given the historical (and not entirely unfounded) animosity existing between the library and archival communities, it might certainly have been easier for American archivists either to develop their own set of cataloguing standards or simply to continue along the separate idiosyncratic paths which each repository had in the past set for itself. On a personal level, however, the immediate answer to this question was highly practical: the Library of Congress was one of the principal authors of *AACR2*; as a then member of the staff of LC, I was obliged to make some peace with these new rules. The best way to do so was to work within the overall spirit and structure of *AACR2* while attempting to come up with something which also reflected basic archival principles and met basic archival needs.

Far from being a case of simple toadyism or bureaucratic sycophancy on my part, the *AACR2*-based structure for developing archival descriptive standards had a more far-reaching purpose, however inadvertent it might have been at the time. Virtually coincidental with this work of attempting to “reconcile manuscript and archival cataloguing and description with the conventions of *AACR2*,” the American archival community, through the work of the Society of American Archivists’ National Information Systems Task Force (NISTF), was just beginning to explore the possibilities of establishing a national information system for the sharing of archival information. After an early, protracted and occasionally acrimonious period of discussion and debate, it was eventually concluded that the appropriate model to follow was that of the national bibliographic utilities, and that the only practical way to make this happen was through felicitous modification of the USMARC format.

Although NISTF was not entirely aware of it at the time, by accepting the notion that the MARC format (a data structure standard) could be used for the purposes of archival description, it was also accepting the imposition of standards regarding data content. The principal standard for data content in most MARC bibliographic records was the second edition of the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*.

The question now becomes how well *APPM* accommodates both the demands of archival description and the rigours of *AACR2*. Part of the answer can be found in the fact that, shared between the two major bibliographic utilities (RLIN and OCLC), are currently nearly 500,000 bibliographic records describing previously unknown and inaccessible archival and manuscript materials in hundreds of widely separated and diverse repositories. In the case of RLIN, at least, the information contained in these records is accessible to scholars anywhere in the world who possess a computer and modem. It can be reasonably argued that none of this would have been possible without the

guidance provided by *APPM* in creating archival bibliographic descriptions.

Without my sounding immodest, the success of this cataloguing manual has been little short of astonishing, particularly in a profession for whom the words “cataloguing” and “standards” have traditionally been, if not anathema, then certainly altogether too much redolent of librarianship. Now in its second edition, *APPM* was the first standard to be formally adopted by the Council of the Society of American Archivists while also going on to become one of the Society’s all-time best-selling publications. Moreover, I gave a workshop on the practical application of these cataloguing rules in Montréal for the SAA, and have given four others for the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Texas. The demand for these workshops has been quite overwhelming, and means either that I did not express myself clearly enough in the manual or that archival institutions of all sorts and sizes have not only accepted the idea of standardized cataloguing of archival material, but also are actively participating in greater and greater numbers in the bibliographic systems which require the use of such standards.

The success of the manual has nothing to do with those qualities normally associated with other “best-sellers.” It is a cataloguing manual, after all, and much of its prose has been borrowed directly from *AACR2*. What has made it so popular and useful to archivists is the way in which it synthesizes basic archival principles into the broader framework of bibliographic description, gently fine-tuning that mechanism in order to transform it into a vehicle for specifically *archival* description. The synthesis is based on three major principles:

First, *APPM* recognizes the primacy of *provenance* in archival description. This principle holds that the significance of archival materials is heavily dependent on the context of their creation, and that the arrangement and description of these materials should be directly related to their original purpose and function. This principle translates into a basic rule for choice of main entry in which archival materials are entered “on the basis of provenance, under the name of the person, family, or corporate body chiefly responsible for its creation.”² This rule is fully consistent with the *AACR2* principle that bibliographic materials are entered under the entity “chiefly responsible for the intellectual or artistic content of a work.”³ It also translates into a heavier emphasis on the use of notes in archival cataloguing, since it is difficult to capture the complexities of substance and provenance in the sort of brief formulaic encryption which characterizes most bibliographic description. Moreover, the use of notes is more consistent with archival traditions of subject analysis.

Secondly, *APPM* acknowledges that most archival material exists in collectivities or groups and that the appropriate focus for the bibliographic control of such materials is the collection level. This approach is practical not only in that it relieves the archivist of the overwhelming burden of providing item level catalogue records for series or “manuscript collections” more frequently measured in terms of linear metres, but also in that it supports the principles of archival unity, in which the significance of individual items or file units is measured principally by their relation to the collective whole of which they may be part. In fact, for many libraries today, given their ever-increasing cataloguing backlogs, the idea of collection level control of certain classes of material is being looked on with some favour. Even beyond these practical considerations, however, libraries are starting to realize that traditional, item level bibliographic control may not always be the most logical way to provide optimal access to its collections.

In fact, the Library of Congress has recently issued guidelines for collection level cataloguing in its *Cataloguing Service Bulletin* which borrow heavily and directly from the principles laid down in *APPM*. In addition, Duke University has had a proposal approved by the federal government to provide funds for a rare book cataloguing project, which would employ essentially collection level archival techniques for describing a large holding of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Italian pamphlets. Item level access would be provided in this project not through the catalogue, but through an independent and related non-MARC internal computer database.

Thirdly, and finally, *APPM* recognizes that archival materials are preserved for reasons different from those for which they were created. They are the unselfconscious by-products of various kinds of human activity, and consequently lack

the formally presented identifying data that characterize most published items, such as author and title statements, imprints, production and distribution information, collations, etc. Personal or corporate responsibility for the creation of archival materials (another way of saying provenance) is generally inferred from, rather than explicitly stated in the materials.⁴

The principal implication of this approach for the cataloguing of archival materials has been to legitimize traditional archival finding aids such as guides, registers, etc., as sources of cataloguing data, and to move the cataloguing process away from the literal transcription of information which characterizes bibliographic description.

Beyond these basic principles, the various rules laid down in *APPM* are either directly derived from their counterparts in *AACR2* or are archival interpretations, expansions, and glosses of standard *AACR2* rules — the last being particularly the case in the chapters on forming personal and corporate name headings. For those dedicated to the minutiae of cataloguing, there is little to satisfy in *APPM*. What is important is that it establishes, within modern library conventions, an essentially bibliographic framework for a certain kind and level of archival description — a level which is appropriate for sharing summary information about archival holdings in national information systems. It does not attempt to prescribe standards for local finding aids, nor does it attempt to supersede those finding aids. It simply makes possible the integration of archival description into hitherto strictly bibliographic systems.

Most important, however, has been the very real evolutionary change which this development has caused in the American national information landscape. Initially, the entry of bibliographic information about archival and manuscript materials into the national bibliographic databases was viewed with suspicion and hostility; it was seen, in fact, as a kind of Trojan horse or virus which would somehow compromise the purity of these library catalogues — at the very least, these archival cataloguing records just “looked funny” and were somehow distasteful. These suspicions were well-founded of course, but the consequences have been anything but negative. The world of research and scholarship (which most archivists serve) has become increasingly interdisciplinary and less concerned with whether the information sought is to be found in traditional printed and published forms of material or in textual records, photographs, motion pictures, videotapes, computer files or museum registers. Information of all sorts is now recognized as part of a seamless web, and it is becoming increasingly clear that service to scholarship and research is optimized when there are no artificial restrictions on the particular form which recorded information takes. The Research Libraries Group (RLG) is

formally committed to the concept of RLIN evolving into a database consisting of "cultural artifacts," a term which includes not only the more traditional textually based holdings of research libraries and archives, but also such non-textual documents as photographs, motion pictures and video recordings, and fine-art prints, as well as three-dimensional artefacts and realia.

The same process which the American archival community began more than ten years ago is currently under way in the American museum community. The Art Information Task Force (sponsored by the Getty Art History Information Project and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities) is now working to develop a MARC-compatible data dictionary and descriptive standards for "art objects and their visual surrogates"; the Common Agenda of the American Association for State and Local History is attempting to do the same for museums.

I was privileged in the spring of 1992 to attend a meeting in London of LIBER, a consortium of European research libraries and archives. This meeting was convened to discuss the topic "Information Exchange in the Age of Automation."⁵ It was at this meeting that I was able really to grasp for the first time the enormous international implications of the kinds of changes which have been made possible by the development of the MARC AMC format, and the concurrent development of MARC-compatible descriptive standards. This was in part stimulated by the then recent news that the British Library had just joined RLG. One could not help but be excited by the prospect of information on the treasures of the great libraries, archives and museums of Europe becoming available in the very same systems used for describing the holdings of American repositories. My optimism was tempered, however, by statements and presentations made by many of the participants which seemed to indicate that the animosities and suspicions between archivists and librarians, which the Americans had managed largely to put behind them, were still very much present. Europeans had not yet made that quantum leap of understanding which helps information management professionals to see the logical and vital links among libraries, archives, museums and all other such repositories and their holdings which should unite them as integral parts of a universal network of cultural information.

In the final analysis, however, I am nearly struck dumb by the irony that the very process which brought archives and manuscript repositories into the information networks is becoming increasingly irrelevant as a consequence of some of the changes which standards development and implementation have caused. As such systems move inexorably towards becoming sources of research information, and away from serving as simple bibliographic utilities fulfilling little more than the needs of copy cataloguing (a function of no relevance whatsoever for AMC records), one cannot help but be exasperated by the artificial constraints which AACR2 and the MARC formats impose upon such information. It is a fairly commonplace observation these days that, given the possibilities and power which are inherent in modern automated information systems, the "modern" library on-line catalogue is an electronic dinosaur. These catalogues are based on a database structure almost thirty years old, which, when combined with AACR2, conceptually represents little more than the automating of the library card catalogue, a manual system which has its roots in the early nineteenth century.

It seems to me that there are basically two paths which such systems can follow in order to take full advantage of modern technology while better meeting the information

needs of today's society. The first is represented in the burgeoning world of the WAIS (Wide Area Information Systems), which carries information files of all sorts (even non-MARC bibliographic information) across the national Internet. Through the use of hierarchical menus, user-friendly interfaces, and searching engines utilizing all the power of freetext and Boolean operators, such systems can be searched more easily and thoroughly than any MARC-based online public access catalogue. The second option is for the catalogue to evolve into a window or gateway to other, more detailed sources of information — such as indexes, abstracts or even full text. In such a system, the MARC/AACR2 catalogue record need not be disintegrated (though I see nothing inherent in this model which would require keeping it intact), but instead can serve as simply one level of descriptive depth of detail in a system of hierarchical pointers which leads inexorably from index terms to full text. Either option should strike fear into the collective hearts of MARBI, the LC MARC Standards Office, the Joint Steering Committee, and OCLC.

While this may seem like a desperate attempt on my part to evade any potential responsibility for an *APPM3*, I am convinced that the bibliographic control of descriptive information of cultural artefacts is poised on the brink of some momentous changes which will render largely irrelevant everything over which archivists have laboured so mightily during the past few years. The acceptance by archivists of library-based descriptive standards was a vital first step — all the more so, because it helped us to see and understand that we are part of a larger information management community. It is now time for that community to move beyond *AACR2*, and the limited vision of the card catalogue (whether automated or manual) which it imposed upon us. What is of the utmost importance now is that we archivists have finally taken our rightful place in the larger information community, and as such, we shall have an active part to play in the decisions which shape our collective future.

Notes

- * Paper presented at the 1992 Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Montréal, 13 September 1992; edited for publication.
- 1 Steven L. Hensen, "Squaring the Circle: The Reformation of Archival Description in *AACR2*," *Library Trends* (Winter 1988), pp. 539-52.
- 2 Steven L. Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1989), (hereafter, *APPM*), Rule 2.1, p. 38.
- 3 *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, 2nd ed., 1988 rev. (Chicago, 1988), Rule 21.1A, p. 312.
- 4 *APPM*, Rule 0.11, p. 5.
- 5 See Steven L. Hensen, "Standards for the Exchange of Descriptive Information on Archival and Manuscript Material in the United States," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), pp. 272-78.