# *Articles*

## *Archival Theory and Practice: Between Two Paradigms*

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### *Résumé*

Depuis 1987, lorsque Hugh Taylor alerta les archivistes qu'on assistait dans le monde archivistique à une réorientation paradigmatique, la nature et la direction de cette réorientation est devenue quelque peu plus claire. De notre perspective présente, les méthodes archivistiques semblent se réaligner d'une manière plus rapprochée de la théorie archivistique. Le principe qui donne forme à ce nouveau paradigme est celui du respect des fonds; l'adhésion effective à ce nouveau principe implique de plus en plus l'analyse des divers contextes de création des documents dans le but de mieux saisir leurs inter-relations. Cette analyse est adoptée pour des fins d'évaluation et de description et elle est d'une grande importance pour les rapports archives/gestion de documents lorsqu'associée à la notion de responsabilité. Ce principe peut également fournir des éclaircissements sur les archives comme expressions privilégiées de valeur socio-historique et, ainsi, aider les archivistes à discerner ce qu'il est essentiel de préserver. En bout de ligne, que la théorie et les méthodes s'alignent dans les faits dépendra non pas tant sur les pouvoirs de la théorie mais plutôt sur celui des individus, des organisations professionnelles, et des institutions. Individuellement ou collectivement, les archivistes doivent explorer la substance du travail archivistique et de ce travail exploratoire, développer un minimum de critères de pratique basés sur un ensemble d'hypothèses et de principes communs quant à la nature et à la valeur des archives.

### *Abstract*

Since 1987, when Hugh Taylor first alerted archivists to the paradigm shift taking place in the archival world, the nature and direction of that shift has become a little clearer. From our present perspective, archival methods seem to be moving toward a closer alignment with archival theory. The principle shaping the new paradigm is *respect des fonds*; practical adherence to the principle increasingly involves the analysis of the various contexts of documents' creation in order to better reveal their relation to one another. This analysis is

being adopted for the purposes of appraisal and description and is of considerable significance to the archives-records management relationship. When coupled with accountability, the principle may also provide insights into archives as unique expressions of socio-historical value; and, in that way, assist archivists in determining what is essential to preserve. In the end, whether theory and method are closely aligned and actualized in practice will depend not on the power of the theory, but on the power of individuals, professional organizations, and institutions. Individually and collectively, archivists need to explore the substance of archival work and out of that exploration develop minimum standards of practice built on a foundation of shared principles and assumptions about the nature and value of archives.

The first ACA Conference I attended after becoming an archivist was the 1987 conference, during which Hugh Taylor delivered his compelling keynote address entitled "Transformation in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift?"[1] The aptness of the paradigm metaphor struck me forcibly at the time; when I was invited by the 1993 Programme Committee to deliver the Keynote Address for a conference entitled "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Archival Theory and Practice," the metaphor returned to mind. When one is living in an historical period that straddles an old and a new paradigm one is bound to feel caught, occasionally, between a rock and a hard place. In the intervening years since Hugh Taylor first outlined the contours of a new archival paradigm, the nature and direction of our shift in thinking has become a little clearer; from our present perspective we seem to be moving toward a closer reconciliation of theory and practice. What follows, then, is a progress report of sorts on the transformations, or paradigm shift, taking place in the world of archival theory and practice.

There are many ways of exploring the relationship between theory and practice. The model I have chosen to use places theory and practice along a continuum; between the two, and bridging them, is methodology. Archival *theory*, according to this model, is the analysis of ideas about the nature of archives, *methodology* the analysis of ideas about how to treat them, and *practice* the outcome of the application of methodology in particular instances.[2] Because practice is almost always specific to an institutional context and therefore difficult to generalize about, I shall focus on the relationship between theory and methodology. The assumption underlying this approach is that we have to change the way we think about the nature of archives before we can change the way we act in relation to that nature.

In popular parlance a paradigm shift is a new way of thinking about old problems. It begins to take place when new observations, inexplicable in the terms of the old framework of explanation, begin to crop up and strain that framework. The paradigm shift that is taking place in the archival world has been provoked by a number of societal, technological, and professional developments that have thrown into question, if not crisis, some of the basic tenets concerning the nature and value of archives. We have had to re-think the societal role of public archival institutions now that changing attitudes about citizens' rights to information have eroded their special status as public resources of information about the workings of government. We have had to re-examine archival theory on the nature of records, as well as our methods of arranging and describing them, in light of the manipulability and

transience of electronic information, the software and hardware dependency of systems, and the failure of the information technology profession to understand and protect the integrity of records created by these systems. Finally, we have been forced to think more deeply about professional standards as it becomes increasingly clear that our lack of a common outlook is inhibiting our ability to realize professional goals. As Kent Haworth has pointed out:

> Archivists have spoken blithely of coordinated networks for the rationalization of acquisition mandates and cooperative systems for the exchange of information, while at the same time neglecting intelligent consideration of our appraisal and descriptive practices. *Systems* and *networks* are, like the word *information*, empty words ... if we cannot bring substance to them by thinking about what they mean in the context of archival principles.[3]

Re-examining the tenets of the archival profession is an essential first step toward the articulation of what Haworth refers to as "a language of purpose." From the point of view of a paradigm shift, the re-examination is also the means by which we may begin to discern more clearly the nature of the new paradigm. According to Marilyn Ferguson, "a new paradigm involves a principle that was present all along but unknown to us. It includes the old as a partial truth, one aspect of How Things Work, while allowing for things to work in other ways as well. By its larger perspective, it transforms traditional knowledge and the stubborn new observations, reconciling their apparent contradictions."[4]

 If the archival literature written over the last few years is any indication of a trend, the principle shaping the new archival paradigm is turning out to be the very foundation on which the discipline of archives was originally built, that of *respect des fonds*, which is defined as

> "the principle that the records of a person, family or corporate body must be kept together in their original order, if it exists or has been maintained, and not be mixed or combined with the records of another individual or corporate body."[5]

In this articulation, *respect des fonds* embraces both the principle of provenance and its corollary, respect for original order. As Michel Duchein explains, before the principle emerged as a legislative prescription for archival arrangement, the practice in most European countries had been to dismember archival fonds upon their transfer to an archival repository, and distribute their remnants into various subject categories, "legislative," "judicial," "historical," and so on, naturally with "deplorable results from the point of view of the integrity of archives."[6] The results were deplorable for the simple reason that the methods used to treat archives were not in consonance with their nature.

 *Respect des fonds* was a methodological principle—a distillation of understanding about how to treat archives—which grew out of a better understanding of their essential qualities. Its adoption thus drew archival method into closer alignment with archival theory (the analysis of ideas about the nature of archives). Proponents of the principle recognized that archives are created and received in the conduct of personal or organizational activity, and, as such, represent "a measure of knowledge which does not exist in quite the same form anywhere else."[7] They

carry, in consequence, a particular weight as primary evidence for suppositions made, or conclusions drawn, about that activity. Archives provide evidence of their creator because they are *interrelated* as to meaning: each archival document is contingent on its functional relations to other documents both within and outside the fonds of which it forms a part, and its understanding depends, therefore, on knowledge of those relations[8]; *authentic* as to procedure—meaning that archives are capable of bearing "authentic testimony of the actions, processes, and procedures which brought them into being"[9]; and *impartial* as to creation—meaning that archives are created as a "means of carrying out activities and not as ends in themselves, and therefore [are] inherently ... capable of revealing the truth about those activities"[10]. "From this circumstantial guarantee of reliability, intentions and actions can be compared, the accuracy of the evidence can be determined, and its historical meaning can be derived."[11]

In asserting the principle of *respect des fonds* as the only sound basis for archival arrangement, early archival theorists were asserting the primary nature of archives as evidence and, by extension, the archivist's primary obligation to protect the integrity of evidence in the methods used to treat archival fonds. That obligation is asserted more directly in Jenkinson's moral defence of archives, which refers to the fact that we protect archives not only from physical deterioration but also from loss of meaning, due to their accidental or deliberate eradication from their context.

Modern archival practice has always implicitly reflected, albeit in varying degrees, the principle of *respect des fonds*. We have always known, for example, that to properly appraise and describe archival documents—whether public or private—we must first understand the society in which the documents were generated, their creator, the activities that generated the documents, and the types of documents these activities produced. In appraisal, that understanding has been synthesized to enable an informed determination of the documents' continuing value; in description, it has been translated into the preparation of inventories that reflect structural and documentary relationships within archival fonds. What has changed and, in the process, breathed new life into the principle, is that the implicit has been made explicit. Stanley Raffel has argued that "record writing must depend on some interesting segregating procedure by which two things: a record and the "world" are first differentiated from each other and, then, related to each other so as to make the one about the other."[12] This segregating procedure is increasingly coming to typify our practical adherence to the principle of *respect des fonds* which, more and more, involves the separating out of the various contexts of documents' creation in order to better reveal their relation to one another.

As Terry Eastwood makes clear in his introduction to *The Archival Fonds: from Theory to Practice*, the terms of analysis are structure and function.[13] Structure has both an external and internal dimension. The external (or provenancial) structure identifies and explains the various administrative relationships governing the way organizations and persons conduct their business, which in turn governs the way they create and maintain their records. In formal organizations, the main relationships of external structure are established in the process of delegating authority and function: authority is reflected in hierarchies; function, in competences[14] and associated activities. Although they are not governed in the same way by authority

relations, personal archival fonds are shaped in comparably functional ways. As Eastwood points out, "teasing out some understanding of the *functional groupings of activities* engaged in by the person will reveal the equivalent of external structure, that is, how function determines the character of the documents."[15]

The internal or documentary structure of a fonds (that is, its original order) is established by the way the documents are ordered during the conduct of affairs. The internal structure identifies the relationships among the documents as they were organized by the organization or person accumulating them—that is, the genesis, forms, and transmission of the documents, the procedural relationships among them, and the purposes they served in a given administrative or personal environment.

Our understanding of the meaning of original order is currently undergoing a shift as the principle is adjusted to the reality of electronic records. In paper-based record systems, where records are physically ordered in labelled files, usually in accordance with a classification scheme, the physical and contextual aspects of the records are intimately connected; original order has tended, for that reason, to be associated with physical arrangement. That association is no longer valid for most electronic records. In their case no such arrangement and indexing system exists. In physical terms, they "are stored randomly, and generally with obscure titles that rarely identify origin, function, or status."[16] As Charles Dollar points out in his study of archival theory and information technologies, the contextual relationships are captured, not in the electronic information itself, but in what has come to be known as the "metadata" (the data about the data).[17] What has changed here is not the principle: preserving original order has always meant preserving the records' documentary relations. What has changed is its application: for electronic records, applying the principle will increasingly mean ensuring the preservation of data directories, which is where those relations will be described.

The explicit analysis of external and internal structure shines a clear beam on the network of functional, administrative, and documentary relationships that have shaped an archival fonds and its parts. Increasingly, these complementary approaches are being adopted for the purposes of appraisal and description. Their study is now an integral part of the guidelines for pre-appointment archival education in both Canada and the United States; they are also firmly embedded in the curriculum of the archival studies programme at the University of British Columbia. In student theses at UBC, the analysis of external structure has been, or is being, applied to a diverse range of creators, including visual artists, university faculty, and photographers, as well as school boards, law firms, and museums. The analysis of internal structure is reflected in the diplomatic analyses currently being undertaken on a wide range of document types, such as United Church records, broadcast archives, hospital medical records, and land registry systems.

The analyses are also being developed in the so-called real world of archives. The analysis of the external structure is detectable in, among other things, the "top down" appraisal methodology for university records proposed by Helen Samuels[18] and in the "functional-structural" approach to appraisal advocated by Terry Cook.[19] The approach serves also as the foundation of the National Archives of Canada's multi-year disposition plan for government records.[20]

Turning from appraisal to description, relationships of external and internal struc-
ture are the objects of analysis in both the Canadian standard for archival descrip-
tion, *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)*,[21] which is built explicitly on *respect
des fonds*, and in the Australian series system of description. The latter is built on
the same principle though, interestingly, with somewhat different results. In *RAD*,
the techniques of multilevel description and authority control are the means by
which internal and external structure are brought together in order to identify and
explain these systems of interrelationship and to facilitate intellectual access to
them; in the Australian series system, external and internal structure are rigorously
separated through the techniques of context control and records control in order to
accomplish the same end. The different approaches are complementary, not contra-
dictory; as archival information systems evolve, we may well witness a movement
toward their merger in a hybrid approach that exploits the strengths and alleviates
the weaknesses currently inherent in both.

One of the realizations forced by the application of *respect des fonds* to contem-
porary record-keeping systems is that our capacity to appraise and describe institu-
tional records adequately and meaningfully in their structural, functional, and doc-
umentary contexts is hindered by our lack of participation in the management of
records before they are transferred to archival custody. It is becoming clear that,
whatever we may consider their value, archival documents do not change their
nature upon being accessioned into an archival repository. Archival nature is inher-
ent in the documents themselves and derives from the circumstances of their cre-
ation in the conduct of organizational or personal activity.[22]

In light of that understanding, appraisal and description are increasingly being
recognized as part of a continuum of processes that begin at the point of document
creation, if not before. In the literature that addresses the management of electronic
records, it has become generally accepted that preliminary appraisal must begin at
the system design stage; otherwise there will be no record left to appraise. The
idea, though, is hardly a new one. In 1940, Philip Brooks argued for a coherent
approach to appraisal throughout the entire life history of records, from creation to
disposition, maintaining that "the whole appraisal function is one undertaking, and
it can best be performed with a complete understanding of the records of an agency
in their relationships to each other as they are created rather than after they have
lain forgotten and deteriorating for twenty years."[23]

In the area of description, freedom of information legislation and the develop-
ment of automated applications for intellectual control are providing the impetus
for the development of more integrated description systems built on government-
wide standards for managing information about records.[24] The value of such an
approach is unquestionable. Many of the problems identified in the process of
developing and implementing descriptive standards—the difficulty of locating the
fonds in complex bureaucratic structures or of capturing information essential to
the illumination of its internal and external structure—would be greatly alleviated
if archivists were able to participate in the creation, maintenance, and use of cur-
rent records by giving advice about documentary processes and procedures and
assisting in the development of standards for classification and retrieval systems.
These systems then have the potential of forming a more meaningful foundation

for the development of archival retrieval systems when (and if) the records are eventually transferred to an archival repository.

The intellectual direction in which we seem to be heading is of enormous consequence to the records management-archives relationship. Jay Atherton has argued persuasively that we are beginning to witness, if only in principle, the gradual erosion of the life cycle model of records and the emergence of a continuum model.[25] The life cycle model is based on the premise that it is possible to divide the life of a record into eight distinct stages, which are, in turn, grouped into two distinct phases: a records management phase and an archival phase. As records management turns its attention away from the physical control of records to the management of the information in the records, the process of managing them begins to reflect more the pattern of a continuum than that of a cycle. As Atherton describes it, the continuum model replaces the life cycle with a simpler, more unified model consisting of four rather than eight stages: creation and receipt of records; classification in some pre-determined system; scheduling of the information contained in the records and later implementation of the schedule; and maintenance and use of the information, the four stages being tied together by an ethic of "service to the creator of the records and all other users, whoever they may be and for whatever reason they may wish to consult the documentation."[26] By facilitating more informed appraisal decisions, and enabling us to build more meaningful retrieval systems, the continuum model offers perhaps the most promise in reconciling method with theory, at least with respect to institutional records. It may, ultimately provide the means by which the two solitudes of records and archives are finally bridged[27] and the means by which the now separate cultures of records managers and archivists are united.

By returning to the foundations of archival science, we are moving purposefully, if slowly, toward a reconciliation of theory and method, at least in the frameworks discussed thus far. Such reconciliation yet eludes us when we turn our consideration to current appraisal theories and methods. It is here that our historical position between two paradigms most closely resembles that uneasy space between a rock and a hard place. At the 1991 ACA Conference, participants explored the theoretical and practical issues associated with appraisal. At the end of the conference there was general agreement on a number of points: that archival holdings do not come close to representing the totality of societal endeavour; that we have difficulty acquiring even those records for which we are already responsible; and that cooperation among institutions and between institutions and records creators is needed to avoid duplication and gaps in the archival record.[28] Where we failed to reach consensus was on the issue that has plagued theoretical discussions about appraisal since the last century; how to limit and control the distortion of the documentary heritage that is caused by the subjective process of apportioning value to documents.[29] The concept of historical use as an arbiter of value, once firmly entrenched in the appraisal process, has been discredited and Schellenberg's categories of evidential and informational value have been found wanting in the face of complex record-keeping environments. We now find ourselves casting about for an alternative theoretical foundation on which to build meaningful appraisal methodologies.

The establishment of such a foundation is essential because the archival documents selected for permanent preservation will announce to future generations the socio-historical values of those who created and preserved them. Archival documents are not, of course, the only means by which socio-historical values are preserved; books, works of art, and architecture are equally revealing expressions. So the question becomes, what is unique about the archival expression of socio-historical values and, therefore, justifies their continued preservation? Answers to that question have been sought from a range of theoretical perspectives, including hermeneutics, deconstructionism, structuration, even rubbish theory.[30] At the moment, although some overlap is evident, there is little consensus and a good deal of dissonance among the competing theoretical points of view. For that reason, it is useful to step back from the debates and look at the issue from the perspective of archival theory and methodology.

We might begin by stating three basic assumptions underlying the principle of *respect des fonds*: firstly, archives are evidence of the actions of which they formed a part; secondly, the primary obligation of archivists is to protect the integrity of that evidence in the methods used to treat them; thirdly, archivists protect the integrity of evidence by protecting its impartiality. From these assumptions it follows that, whatever else it accomplishes, the appraisal process must not compromise the impartiality of documentary evidence. It is worth reiterating that impartiality refers to the unself-conscious nature of archives and is embodied in Jenkinson's assertion that archives are not created in the interest of or for the benefit of posterity, but simply "are there: a physical part of the facts which has happened to survive."[31] Because they were created as means rather than as ends in themselves, archives are capable of providing authentic testimony of the actions, processes, and procedures that brought them into being. To the question of what is unique about the archival expression of socio-historical values and thereby justifies their continued preservation, we might then answer that what distinguishes archives is the fact that they provide the most impartial reflection of those values— not the most truthful, nor the most objective, nor the most complete reflection, simply the most impartial one. If we cannot avoid addressing questions of value in the appraisal process, we can at least ensure that the process does not distort or otherwise misrepresent the value system out of which archival documents are created, accumulated, and used. That value system will necessarily be reflected in the documents since the so-called "facts" contained within them are themselves interpretations; that is, they are facts filtered through the lens of an idea or point of view. And the creator's value system will, inevitably, reflect the values of the larger society, since no individual or organization can operate in isolation from societal values and imperatives.

All of this is to suggest that, in a rather simple-minded and, perhaps, overly reductive way, rather than try to determine value *a priori* and in the process risk compromising the impartial nature of archives, we will be further ahead if we concentrate our energies on identifying and analysing the various contexts of records creation and allow our understanding of the records' value to emerge naturally as a by-product of that process. If we agree on nothing else, we at least agree on the significance of analysing relationships of external and internal structure in order to understand the nature of the beast with which we are dealing.

This is not to suggest that we ignore considerations of value altogether. At least part of the analysis preceding appraisal should be directed toward understanding the ways in which a creator's value system is made manifest through various mechanisms of accountability; and, specifically, the extent to which those mechanisms are, or are not, built into record-keeping systems and practices. Because of the circumstances of their creation, archives are evidence of societal events and actions, and of legal rights and obligations. As such they serve administrative, political, and historical accountability. However imperfectly realized, accountability—which has been defined as "the obligation of a delegate to provide explanation and justification of action"[32]—is the force that, historically, has driven organizations and individuals to preserve their records. Archival literature makes frequent reference to the need for "accountability"; however, as Jane Parkinson makes clear in her archival studies thesis on the subject, the concept remains largely undeveloped in archival theory.[33] An exploration of the relationship between documentary evidence and accountability may deepen our analysis of structural, functional, and documentary relationships within and across fonds and, in that way, assist in establishing what is essential to preserve. Parkinson offers a useful starting point by identifying some of the ways in which archival theory might develop the links between record-keeping and accountability. In the context of institutional records and administrative accountability, some of the questions to be considered include: What constitutes reasons for decisions and how well ought they to be documented? What is the nature of the distinction between working papers and official records? What kinds of controls over record-keeping exist "to ensure that those creating records know what is going to constitute evidence of their actions and therefore what their obligations are in that respect"?[34]

The concept of accountability also has some resonance for the acquisition of private fonds. The relationship to be explored in this instance is that which exists between historical accountability—"the need to provide and receive explanation and understanding from one generation to another"[35]—and the documentary evidence generated by the various individuals and groups who shape society. This relationship is, admittedly, more difficult to characterize because historical accountability is so abstruse in comparison with administrative or political accountability; and because the universe of documentary evidence to be understood is so large and multifarious. A tentative exploration might begin, nevertheless, with the following questions: What evidence is essential to the preservation of that which is vital to the identity, survival, and future development of communities, however variously those communities are defined? In acquiring personal fonds, what balance needs to be struck between the preservation of individual and collective memory?

*Respect des fonds*, coupled with accountability, proffers useful insights into archives as unique expressions of socio-historical value; those insights in turn will assist archivists in determining what is essential to preserve. The flip side of preservation is, of course, destruction. If records "speak for themselves," so too does their absence. We should accept that the act of destroying records is as expressive of socio-historical values as is the act of preserving them. The destruction of feudal titles by the French revolutionaries reveals much about the socio-historical values of revolutionary France: the destruction symbolized the eradication

of the old order and the birth of a new one. The preservation of feudal titles by the Russian revolutionaries is equally revealing: in that case, preservation provided the new regime with a concrete justification for its existence and acted as a constant reminder to the people of their previous condition of hardship.[36] In the historical period in which we currently live, the destruction of records containing personal information in jurisdictions with privacy legislation reveals much about the erosion of trust between citizens and the state in the wake of increased surveillance and intrusive information technologies. The destruction of personal information has become an essential means by which "the citizen's right to be forgotten," as the French express it, is protected. Though we may lament them, we need also to understand that gaps in the historical record in themselves constitute evidence of socio-historical values and to bear in mind Jenkinson's caveat that "we can criticize the Past only if it failed to keep up to its own standard of values."[37]

The acceptance of this caveat is necessarily a qualified one. Records creators are quite capable of destroying evidence either accidentally out of ignorance or deliberately as a means of avoiding accountability. For that reason, we need also to seek institutional and societal sanction for the preservation of records in the interests of accountability by lobbying—in our institutions and in the society at large—for stronger administrative, regulatory, and legislative controls over the record-keeping environment that will better guarantee the protection of documentary evidence. Terry Eastwood has defined the archivist as "a keeper and protector of the integrity of evidence and a mediator of the many interests vested in the positive act of its continuing preservation."[38] This characterization of the archivist's societal role suggests the foundation of principle on which defensible appraisal methodologies must ultimately be built. Once we have strengthened that foundation, we can begin to participate meaningfully in the development of clearer appraisal criteria, more coherent acquisition policies, and more effective cooperative acquisition strategies.

As we begin to change our thinking about the nature of archives, we are beginning to change the way in which we act in relation to that nature. There is a growing conviction evident in recent archival writing that archival methods must be driven by our understanding of the document-event relationship. It would be regrettable and a considerable irony, therefore, if the analysis of the event, as expressed through the analysis of relationships of external structure and function, were to become an end in itself rather than being directed toward the understanding, appraisal, and description of archival documents, the tangible evidence of the event. Terry Cook has suggested that we are moving from a physical to a conceptual paradigm of archives, one that, as he puts it, "elevat[es] mind over matter."[39] While acknowledging the insightfulness of the metaphor of mind and matter, I would argue that we need to keep in mind what quantum physics has taught us, which is that mind and matter are equal and inseparable. The discernment of the mind in the matter, therefore, must remain the bottom line of any functional and structural analysis. To express it in more straightforward terms: we do not appraise structures and functions; we analyze structures, functions, competences, and associated activities, in order to appraise and describe archival documents meaningfully.

Given the increasing complexity of the record-keeping environments in which we work, it is also important that we not lose sight of or devalue our role as custodians

of the record. The phrase "post-custodial era" has been popping up with increasing regularity in debates concerning the role of the archivist in the information age. It is not the substance of the debate with which I wish to quarrel. What I object to is the blithe assumption, latent in the phrase "post-custodial," that our custodial role is something that we must transcend if we are to survive as a profession. The Oxford English Dictionary defines custody as "safekeeping, protection; defence; charge; care; guardianship." Archival custodianship has always been linked inextricably to the protection and safeguarding of evidence. Physical ownership of the records is merely the means by which, historically, archivists have assured that protection. The advent of information technologies does not change the substance of our custodial responsibility; it simply changes the means by which we exercise it.

Archival practice must be built on a foundation of closely aligned theoretical and methodological principles, even if those principles cannot always be perfectly realized in practice. The cardinal principle on which the medical profession is built is *primum non nocere* (above all do no harm). While that principle is continually challenged, occasionally compromised, and sometimes downright eroded by the realities of escalating health care costs and limited access to facilities, those realities in no way diminish the value of that principle as a goal for doctors to strive toward and to keep in sight. The cardinal principle on which the archival profession is built is *respect des fonds*. While its proper application is also frequently undermined by a seemingly endless list of realities—inadequate resources, authority, education, training—the principle is, in its own way, an equally worthy focus of archival aspiration. Principles are not, of course, sufficient unto themselves. They need continually to be reassessed and expanded in light of experience. Practice provides the support for advancing, adapting, or rejecting theory or method.

In the end, whether theory is actualized in practice will depend less on the power of the theory than on the actions of individuals, professional organizations, and institutions. We may not control institutional resources and priorities to the extent we would like; those practical realities inevitably force compromises in the application of theory. We do, however, have control over the direction in which we move as individuals and as a profession. Much of the theoretical debate in recent years has been provoked by our growing realization that our lack of professional standards impedes our pursuit of practical cooperative goals. While we have begun the process of developing professional standards in a number of areas, we are still some distance from clearly articulating the language of purpose that Kent Haworth has described. The 1992 ACA Conference witnessed the passage of a code of ethics that is both an affirmation of shared goals and a reminder of our professional accountability. According to that code, our accountability is manifested in clearly stated and coherently rationalized acquisition mandates and policies, the documentation of appraisal decisions, the preparation of descriptive tools that accurately represent the arrangement of archival fonds and collections, and the provision of efficient and equitable reference service. A code of ethics, however, is only a guidepost. We need to explore the substance of archival accountability in our institutions and through our professional associations; and out of that exploration, develop minimum standards of practice built on a foundation of shared principles and assumptions about the nature and value of archives.

It hardly needs to be said that we need also to promote archival education in the university. As evidenced in the development of guidelines for pre-appointment archival education by both the ACA and the SAA, North American archivists are coming to realize that our lack of theoretical investigation is perhaps our greatest weakness and the most significant obstacle to professionalism. It is essential to "sustain a place for the theoretical study of archives in the university,"[40] as Terry Eastwood puts it, which will nurture and develop archival theory, promote a common outlook, and take us further along the road to becoming a true profession.

As we travel down that road, it may appear at times as though the things that divide us are more significant than the things that unite us. It is essential that we engage one another in debate over our conflicting ideas about the nature of archives and the societal responsibility of archivists because, however painful such debates may seem in the short run, they are, in the long run, constructive as a means of moving the profession forward. Prigogine's scientific theory of dissipative structures[41] suggests that perturbation and conflict are essential in pushing systems up into a higher order because the resultant instability increases the number of novel interactions within the system, brings elements of old patterns into contact with new patterns, and makes new connections. Eventually, the parts of the system reorganize into a new whole and the system escapes into a higher order.

The theory of dissipative structures describes, in short, the nature of a paradigm shift. Einstein's special theory of relativity formed the new paradigm that superseded Newton's physics. In that paradigm shift, our understanding of nature shifted from a clockwork to an uncertainty paradigm, from the absolute to the relative. In our own small paradigm shift, our understanding of archives is shifting from a physical to a contextual paradigm. Although that shift is bringing with it an increased sense of purpose, it is also creating some uncertainty and instability as old truths are challenged and new ones resisted. Now, more than ever, we need to maintain some perspective on the relativity of our individually-held truths about the meaning and value of theory and practice, however we define those terms.

In a lecture delivered at Brown University a few years ago, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., argued for an intellectual stance of relativism as against absolutism in the interests of opening the American mind. Though his arguments are directed at the world of the academy, they are apposite to the world of archives for, here too, the work of consensus-building and cooperation requires an opening, not a closing, of minds—a stance of relativism as against absolutism. Schlesinger, in supporting his position, first makes clear what absolutism and relativism are *not*: "A belief in solid education, rigorous standards [and] intellectual coherence ... is a different thing from a faith in absolutes.... Nor does relativism necessarily regard all claims to truth as equal or believe that judgement is no more than the expression of personal preference."[42] He expresses the fundamental differences between absolutism and relativism in the following way:

> Absolutism is abstract, monistic, deductive, ahistorical, solemn, and it is intimately bound up with deference to authority. Relativism is concrete, pluralistic, inductive, historical, skeptical, and intimately bound up with deference to experience. Absolutism teaches by rote; relativism by experiment.[43]

Natural and even necessary to our personal and professional formation is a certain fealty to a set of beliefs concerning the meaning and value of the work we do. Yet such allegiance should not prevent us from seeing that the validity of these beliefs—the truthfulness of our truths if you will—is necessarily constrained by the limitations of our individual perspectives: our truths are, at best, partial ones. We need for that reason to listen, attentively and tolerantly, to other, alternative, truths and as far as possible work toward their mutual reconciliation. Such attentiveness and tolerance will only enrich archival discourse, opening doors and windows for further exploration and transformations.

## Notes

\*   Originally presented as the Keynote Address at the annual meeting of the Association of Canadian Archivists, St. John's, Newfoundland, 22 July 1993. Revised and edited for publication.

1   The keynote address was subsequently published. See Hugh A. Taylor, "Transformation in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift?" *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88), pp. 12-28.

2   This characterization of the relationship between theory, methodology, and practice is taken from Trevor Livelton, "Public Records: A Study in Archival Theory" (MAS Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1991), pp. 10-13.

3   Kent M. Haworth, "The Principles Speak for Themselves: Articulating a Language of Purpose for Archives," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), p. 96.

4   Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (Los Angeles, 1980), p. 27.

5   The definition of *respect des fonds* used here is taken from the Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa, 1990), p. D-5.

6   Michel Duchein, "The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe," *American Archivist* 55 (Winter, 1992), p. 19.

7   Hilary Jenkinson, "Reflections of an Archivist," in Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds., *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice* (Washington, D.C., 1984), p. 15.

8   School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia, "Select List of Archival Terminology" (Unpublished glossary, n.d.), p. 11.

9   Ibid., p. 3.

10   Ibid., p. 10.

11   Jane Turner, "A Study of the Theory of Appraisal for Selection" (MAS Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1992), p. 28.

12   Stanley Raffel, *Matters of Fact* (London, Boston, and Henley, 1979), p. 17.

13   Terry Eastwood, "General Introduction," in Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: from Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 4-12. A detailed examination of external and internal structure is provided in another essay in the same volume. See Heather MacNeil, "Describing a Fonds and its Parts in Accordance with the *Rules for Archival Description*," pp. 195-220.

14   Luciana Duranti has explained the relationship between function and competence in the following way: "Function and competence are a different order of the same thing. Function is the whole of the activities aimed to one purpose, considered abstractly. Competence is the authority and capacity of carrying out a determined sphere of activities within one function, attributed to a given office or an individual." See Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part III)," *Archivaria* 30 (Summer 1990), p. 19, n. 10.

15   Eastwood, "General Introduction," p. 7.

16   Jane Parkinson, "Accountability in Archival Theory" (MAS Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1993), p. 92.

17   Charles M. Dollar, *Archival Theory and Information Technologies: The Impact of Information Technologies on Archival Principles and Methods* (Macerata, 1992), p. 50.

18   Helen W. Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Metuchen, 1992).

19 Terry Cook, "Mind over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 38-70.

20 See National Archives of Canada, "Government-Wide Plan for the Disposition of Records, 1991-1996" (report approved by the National Archivist, 20 November 1990).

21 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description*, p. D-5.

22 Jane Turner draws a useful distinction between the concepts of archival value and archival nature. According to Turner, "Value is a relative concept rather than an absolute or permanent one. It is not inherent in the records, but is relative to the perspective of the one ascribing value, whether it be the records creator, the researcher or the archivist." Archival nature, on the other hand, "is not relative to any perspective, but is inherent in the records themselves and is logically derived from the creation process." The circumstances in which archives are created, accumulated and used endow archives with the qualities of impartiality, authenticity and interrelatedness. These are the qualities that determine archival nature. See Jane Turner, "A Study of the Theory of Appraisal for Selection" (MAS Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1992), pp. 3, 6.

The confusion between archival value and archival nature seems to be North American in origin. It may be traced back to the distinction T.R. Schellenberg drew between *records* and *archives*, a distinction based in turn on a supposed differentiation between primary and secondary values. It was Schellenberg's view that, whereas *records* are selected for preservation by records creators for their own administrative use because of their primary values (i.e., their legal, administrative, and fiscal values), *archives* are selected by the archivist for researcher's cultural use because of their secondary values (i.e., their evidential and informational values). This view led Schellenberg to redefine archives as "records *...adjudged worthy* [italics used for emphasis] of permanent preservation for reference and research purposes and ...selected for deposit in an archival institution." See T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1975), p. 16. Archival nature thus became a quality which the archivist endowed on records during the appraisal process. For a careful examination of Schellenberg's thinking on this matter, as well as its inherent flaws, see Trevor Livelton, "Public Records: A Study in Archival Theory" (MAS Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1991), pp. 36-72.

23 Philip Brooks, "The Selection of Records for Preservation," *American Archivist* 3 (1940), p. 226.

24 See, for example, Glen Isaac and Derek Reimer, "Right from the Start: Developing Pre-Descriptive Standards at the British Columbia Archives and Records Service," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), pp. 86-98.

25 Jay Atherton, "From Life Cycle to Continuum: Some Thoughts on the Records Management-Archives Relationship," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-86), pp. 43-51.

26 Ibid., p. 48.

27 The two solitudes are described in Victoria Lemieux, "Archival Solitudes: The Impact on Appraisal and Acquisition of Legislative Concepts of Records and Archives," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), pp. 153-61. For a more general analysis of the archives/records split in archival theory, see also note 23.

28 See Luciana Duranti, "ACA 1991 Conference Overview," ACA *Bulletin* 15, no. 6 (July 1991), pp. 22-27.

29 I am indebted to Jane Turner's examination of the theoretical issues associated with appraisal, which has significantly informed and influenced my understanding of appraisal theory. See Jane Turner, "A Study of the Theory of Appraisal for Selection" (MAS Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1992). I am also indebted to Richard Klumpenhouwer's historical analysis of archival appraisal theory. See Richard Klumpenhouwer, "Concepts of Value in the Archival Appraisal Literature: An Historical and Critical Analysis" (MAS Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1988).

30 See, for example, Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 78-100; Peter A. Russell, "The Manx Peril: Archival Theory in Light of Recent American Historiography," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 124-37; and Richard Brown, "Records Acquisition Strategy and its Theoretical Foundation: The Case for a Concept of Archival Hermeneutics," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 34-56.

31 Jenkinson, "Reflections of an Archivist," *A Modern Archives Reader*, p. 18.

32 This definition appears in the Society of American Archivists' "Draft Guidelines for the Development of a Curriculum for a Master of Archival Studies," *Archival Outlook* (Chicago, 1993), p. 3, fn. 2. For a detailed examination of the concept of accountability as it relates to record-keeping

generally and to archival theory specifically, see Jane Parkinson, "Accountability in Archival Theory," pp. 6-90.

33 Since the publication of Jane Parkinson's thesis, the Graduate Department of Librarianship, Archives and Records at Monash University has published a collection of essays which explore archival documents in relation to their role as foundations of democratic accountability and continuity. See Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward, eds., *Archival Documents: Providing Accountability through Recordkeeping* (Melbourne, 1993).

34 Parkinson, "Accountability," p. 75. It has been suggested that a methodological tool that may enable us to better understand how accountability manifests itself in record-keeping systems is diplomatics. Because it is directed toward a precise understanding of the genesis and forms of transmission of elemental archival units, and the processes and procedures underlying them, the practical application of diplomatics to appraisal, particularly in the context of electronic record systems deserves further exploration.

35 Society of American Archivists, "Draft Guidelines for a Curriculum," p. 3, fn. 2. The concept of historical accountability is explored in Parkinson, "Accountability," pp. 82-89.

36 These two examples are related in Luciana Duranti, "So? What Else is New?: The Ideology of Appraisal Yesterday and Today," in *Archival Appraisal: Theory and Practice*, proceedings of the Joint Meeting of the Association of British Columbia Archivists and the Northwest Archivists Association, Vancouver, April 26-28, 1990 (Vancouver, 1990), pp. 6-7.

37 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, reissue of 2nd revised ed., 1937 (London, 1965), p. 140.

38 Terry Eastwood, "Nailing a Little Jelly to the Wall of Archival Studies," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), p. 237.

39 Terry Cook, "Mind Over Matter," p. 59.

40 Terry Eastwood, *Unity and Diversity in the Development of Archival Science in North America*, Studi sull'Archivistica, Elio Lodolini, ed. (Roma, 1992), p. 100.

41 Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures as a metaphor for the nature of a paradigm shift is discussed in Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, pp. 63-67.

42 Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Opening of the American Mind," *New York Times Book Review* (23 July 1989), p. 26.

43 Ibid., p. 26.