

Communicating Context: Commentary

by JAMES LAMBERT*

Résumé

L'auteur souligne que le système des séries ou celui du fonds, sont les deux des méthodes qui préservent le contexte, alors que l'International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR[CPF]) est un instrument pour sa communication. Puisque le même outil peut être utilisé selon chacune des deux méthodes pour communiquer le contexte, les deux systèmes peuvent être davantage compatibles qu'on ne l'a d'abord cru. Selon le système du fonds, tel qu'interprété par Michel Duchein, la méthode pour préserver le contexte consiste à faire de l'ordre original un *corollaire* du respect de la provenance. Le système des séries, selon l'explication donnée par Clive Smith, considère la provenance comme subordonnée à l'ordre original. Dans les deux méthodes, les deux types de contexte (de provenance et documentaire) sont protégés, donc susceptibles d'être communiqués. L'auteur démontre alors que séparer la description de la provenance de la description des documents (ISAAR[CPF]) est compatible avec les *Règles de description des archives* basées sur les fonds ou sur des procédures de description fondées sur le système des séries.

Abstract

The author notes that the series and fonds systems are both methods of preserving context, while the International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families or ISAAR(CPF) is a tool for its communication. Since the same tool can be used with either method to communicate context, the two systems may be more compatible than has been assumed historically. In the fonds system, as interpreted by Michel Duchein, the method of preserving context is by making respect for original order a *corollary* of respect for provenance. The series system, by Clive Smith's account, treats provenance as subservient to original order. In either method, the two types of context, provenancial and documentary, are protected, and therefore susceptible of being communicated. The author then demonstrates how by separating the description of provenance

from the description of the records, ISAAR(CPF) is compatible with *Rules for Archival Description*, based on the fonds system, or with descriptive procedures based on the series system.

Before turning to Clive Smith's article, I should like to make a distinction--which may or may not be of merely semantic significance--between the two types of systems described in the two preceding articles. The description of the session in the conference programme referred to "two different methods of communicating contextual origins of archives in the descriptive process." I think there is a distinction to be made between a method and a tool. The series system, like the fonds approach, is a method; ISAAR(CPF) is a tool. This is more clearly seen when it is realized that ISAAR(CPF) can be used as a *tool* in descriptions based on either the fonds or the series *method* of arranging archives.

This fact (that ISAAR[CPF] can be used with either a fonds or a series approach) leads one to believe that, although different, the series and fonds approaches are not worlds apart, notwithstanding the fact that little effort seems to have been expended to date to reconcile the two.

In the introduction to his article, Clive Smith writes: "As an archivist who received my basic training entirely within the Australian Archives, the series system seemed just so much common sense that I could not then envisage any other practical method of arranging and describing archives. Why, I used to ask myself, would anyone use any other method?"¹ For his part, Michel Duchein, the premier contemporary apologist of the fonds approach to archival science and practice, was so little impressed by the same series system that he wrote: "In this apparently attractive system, we recognize very quickly the scarcely touched-up face of the old system used before Natalis de Wailly: the classification by topic or *Pertinenzprinzip*, as the Germans say. Whatever the sincerity and good faith of those who propose such a deliberate violation of *fonds*, they are wrong, and we ought not to have any leniency for an error so serious and so fraught with consequences. As Sir Hilary Jenkinson has so vigorously expressed it, '...whatever else we do, we ought not to destroy the unity of fonds.'"² Since 1977, when Duchein originally wrote his comment (in French), the series system has escaped its confines in Australia and made inroads in the United States.

The principle of *respect des fonds* has not stood still either. In the 150 years since its first expression by the French archivist Natalis de Wailly, it has conquered Europe (including Britain) and the United States, although there it ran across American practicality and generated a bastard called the record group.³ The fonds concept seems to have entered Canada initially via the United States and the record group. However, the European pedigree of the original fonds concept made its adoption in this country politically and archivally felicitous. *Après tout*, how often can anglophone and francophone Canadians cite their respective traditions in defense of the same principle? The Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists (which it should be remembered represents both the Association des Archivistes du Québec and the Association of Canadian Archivists), in basing *RAD* on the fonds concept, has succeeded wonderfully in weaving together the two principal archival traditions in this country. In so doing, they have made *RAD*, I believe, a most effective tool for communicating context in archival description. I do not intend to expound at length on how this is achieved; for the present it will suffice to refer

you to Heather MacNeil's masterful article on the subject "The Context is all: Describing a Fonds and its Parts in accordance with the *Rules for Archival Description*."⁴

Duchemin rightly vaunted the fonds concept for the protection it afforded the evidentiary value of archives by maintaining the context of their accumulation and use. Sir Hilary Jenkinson based the moral defense of archives on the principle that their creation and preservation was the sole prerogative of their creator in the context of the conduct of his or her business. No document had evidentiary value--and they would add, I believe, precious little real informational value--unless the context of its creation could be determined, including the identification of its creator. The bogus Hitler diaries illustrate this truth, which (in passing) many users of the Internet have yet to learn. The context *is* all. *RAD*, by adopting the fonds approach does preserve provenancial context (and, incidentally, through the custodial history, those of control and custody). Through being based on the principle of *respect des fonds* (which is that the records of a person, family, or corporate body must be kept together and *in their original order*) and through the technique of multilevel description, *RAD* also maintains documentary context. In short, *RAD* incorporates respect for original order within respect for provenance. Indeed, to the extent that one follows the guidelines set out by Michel Duchemin, respect for original order is a corollary of respect for provenance.

However advantageous the fonds approach may be, the series system is not, as Duchemin affirmed, an error.⁵ Clive Smith's article shows that the series system merely reverses the order of importance of the two components of *respect des fonds*; that it "treats the principle of respect for provenance as being subservient to, or part of, the principle of respect for original order."⁶ Considering the order of documents more fundamental than the fact, source, and context of their creation seems to me to place the cart before the horse. Nonetheless, the series system does appear to protect both types of context, provenancial and documentary. I am reassured when Clive Smith affirms that the series system "respects the principle of respect for provenance by clearly recording each creating agency for each series, and producing inventories of series for each creating agency (a series could appear on more than one inventory, if it has more than one creating agency)."⁷ Surely this procedure is not radically different from that suggested by Michel Duchemin from the perspective of the fonds approach to resolve the problem posed by multiple creator documentary series. "The solution," writes Duchemin, "consists of reconstituting, thanks to finding aids, the continuity of *suites* of documentation which were disturbed in the arrangement of *fonds* because of changes of structure and jurisdiction relating to the agencies. The reconstitution of continuity may be carried out in several ways according to circumstances." He then goes on to indicate different ways according to different circumstances. Thus, he writes, "if we simply wish to clarify for researchers the succession of agencies which exercised a given power, we prepare a table showing the name of the agency which exercised the power during each period, with an indication of the numbering of the documents corresponding to the *fonds* of the agency. It is a question of a *guide* which directs the researcher to the *fonds* which interest him. If we wish, on the contrary, to make available to researchers at one time the whole of the documents corresponding to a given power, we prepare a *catalogue* or an *interfonds calendar* which is the equivalent, but within the finding aid only, of the 'record series' proposed by Peter J. Scott, respecting at the same time the integrity of the *fonds*."⁸

In short, the process is reversed, but the results seem to be the same. I do have three questions, however, with respect to the series approach. First, if it is possible, as Clive Smith states, “to produce inventories of series for each creating agency,” why is it so difficult to identify the fonds of any given agency? Yet he also affirms that “the general practice of agencies maintaining a single central registry for the records documenting all their functions, and the frequent transfers of records between those systems, made it impossible to identify record groups by function; in addition, the generally extremely short lives of agencies made it difficult to identify record groups by agency.”⁹ If this were absolutely so, I wonder how provenance is indeed respected? And finally, although he was at pains to establish that the series system preserves provenancial context, Clive Smith passed rapidly over documentary context and the maintenance of horizontal and vertical documentary links.

The reference by both Clive Smith and Michel Duchein to finding aids as tools that can compensate for the particular bias of each of the series system and fonds concept points to the possibility of separating description of the creating agency and description of the records. Indeed, Clive Smith states clearly that the series system “separates the description of the records, or record-keeping systems, from their context, or the record-keepers....”¹⁰ The link presumably is made through an authority control system, which could eventually be ISAAR(CPF) as described by Sharon Thibodeau. Hugo Stibbe has shown the potential for using a tool such as ISAAR(CPF) in *RAD*-based descriptions. His demonstration leaves me with at least one question, however. All the series in Stibbe’s demonstration are based on *agencies*; the internal organization of the records is structurally-based. Yet, increasingly, organizational classification schemes for current records are functionally-based: each series is composed of the records relative to a function rather than an agency.¹² However, since all functions are managed by at least one agency of some sort, reference to the ISAAR(CPF) record could possibly be had from the names of the agency or agencies having competence to carry out the function embedded in the Scope and Content Area. The practice of creating classification schemes based on functions justifies the intention of the ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards to produce authority records for government functions and business activities that lead to records creation. As to the contents of the proposed ISAAR(CPF), as revealed in Sharon Thibodeau’s article, I have no quarrel with them. I note that they include, potentially (since most are optional), all the information required by Michel Duchein for the identification of a fonds-producing agency and recommended by *RAD* in the Administrative History/Biographical Sketch Area (Rule 1.7B). The use of ISAAR(CPF) to establish hierarchical relationships in the provenancial context may in fact obviate the necessity to portray hierarchical relationships in the descriptive context through the use of sub-fonds. The use of sub-fonds has considerable potential for complication when the sub-fonds numbering system reflects that hierarchical relationship, because such relationships can vary over time. I wonder, however, if use of archival authority control records in descriptions will not always require a degree of flexibility. The standardized authority record may have to be supplemented in some cases by contextual information embedded within descriptions of the records, particularly in the Scope and Content Area, so that, while remaining standardized in the authority control system, the description of the agency when used in the finding aid would be tailored to the contextual requirements of the contents of the archival material being described.¹³

Allow me to close my remarks by congratulating the authors on the production of two articles that generate more light than heat. They have stimulated me at least to reflect on the vexed question of contextualization, however empty may appear the results of my reflections to those who have not had to go through this exercise.

Notes

- * This text is based on a commentary on the papers by Sharon Thibodeau and Clive Smith delivered at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists held in Regina, Saskatchewan, 17 June 1995. It has been revised for publication. "Conversational" passages have been eliminated, requiring modification of the order of presentation of some of the remarks, and the footnotes have been added. The opinions in this text are those of the author and do not reflect any official position of the Division des archives de l'Université Laval.
- 1 Clive Smith, "The Australian Series System," *Archivaria* 40 (Autumn 1995), p. 86.
- 2 Michel Duchéin, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des fonds* in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 71-72.
- 3 For an explanation of the distinction to be drawn between the fonds and the record group, see Terry Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era," in Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: from Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 47-52.
- 4 Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: from Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 195-225.
- 5 During the discussion period which followed the presentation of the two papers and the commentary, Marcel Caya of the Université du Québec à Montréal observed judiciously that Duchéin was led to consider the Australian series system an error because he confused the Australian series with the French series. While the Australian series is, according to Clive Smith, "a group of records that are recorded or maintained by the same agency (or agencies) and that are in the same numerical, alphabetical, chronological or other identifiable sequence or that result from the same accumulation or filing process and are of similar function, format or information content," for the French the *série* is a grouping of fonds on the basis of some common characteristic, such as their subject. (See, for example, Association des archivistes français, *Manuel d'archivistique: théorie et pratique des Archives publiques en France* [Paris, 1970], pp. 743-55). That is why Duchéin proposes describing what he believes to be Peter J. Scott's "record series" in "an *interfonds calendar*" (Duchéin, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems," p.81), whereas the proper "location" of Scott's series is *within* the fonds.
- 6 Smith, "Australian Series System," p. 88.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 8 Duchéin, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems," p. 81.
- 9 Smith, "Australian Series System," pp. 89.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 11 Hugo Stibbe, "Implementing the Concept of the Fonds: Primary Access Point, Multilevel Description, and Authority Control," *Archivaria* 34 (1992), pp. 109-37.
- 12 James Lambert and Jean-Pierre Therrien, "Le principe du respect des fonds: une synthèse des opinions et des pratiques québécoises," *The Archival Fonds: from Theory to Practice*, p. 103; Terry Eastwood, "General Introduction," *The Archival Fonds: from Theory to Practice*, pp. 11-12.
- 13 At Université Laval, for example, biographical notices in the *État général des fonds et collections d'archives privées* of professors who have a fonds in the holdings of the Division generally offer more detail respecting their career at Laval than elsewhere since the documents tend to relate most frequently to life at the university. In other cases, the biographical notice or administrative history offers more contextual detail about that aspect or those aspects of the career of an individual or the history of an organization to which the documents relate most fully. Presumably, a standardized archival authority record could not be tailored in this way to the particular contextual requirements of a fonds of a given documentary composition; see, for example, Figure 3 in Sharon Thibodeau's article.