Archival Theory and the Dutch Manual

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Abstract

The Manual by Muller, Feith, and Fruin (1898) owes much to Theodoor Van Riemsdijk (General State Archivist of The Netherlands, 1887-1912), who believed that the basis of archival theory was careful observation and analysis of phenomena and organizations, and the use of diplomatics to understand the records-creating process prior to turning to methodology proper. Muller and Fruin, however, favoured a normative approach to archival methodology, which was codified in the Manual. This codification and standardization--part of the process of professionalization of Dutch archivists--blocked the development of archival theory for a long time. Modern functional archival science seeks, as Van Riemsdijk already understood, a functional interpretation of the context surrounding the creation of documents in order to understand the integrity of the fonds and the functions of the archives.
"A most confusing text-book ... a very real tribute to its fundamental and sound theoretical basis"

Fifty-five years ago, in 1940, the American edition of the Dutch Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives by Muller, Feith, and Fruin, was published. The publication of the American edition was acknowledged by the 1940 annual meeting of the Society of Dutch Archivists, some months after the Germans had occupied the Netherlands. Apparently because of the war, only a few copies of the American edition of 1940 were imported into the Netherlands. In fact, the Dutch union catalogue knows of only three copies in the whole country, apart from the one in the library of the General State Archives in The Hague.

You can imagine my profound joy when Frank Evans in 1991, having attended the celebration of the centenary of the Society of Dutch Archivists, sent me his own copy of the American edition of the Manual as a personal gift. Frank had acquired that copy from Henry Howard Eddy, Archivist of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, who must have bought the Manual when he joined the National Archives in Washington in December 1942. Henry Eddy studied the Manual diligently, as appears from the many pencilled notes that he scribbled throughout the book. On an empty page he summed up his assessment:

For an American archivist, especially for an apprentice eager to learn the techniques of his profession, this is a most confusing text-book, chiefly because the illustrations, inserted to make the text clearer, are utterly weird and foreign and outside our American experience...

After this severe beginning, he goes on with his review, to conclude in a positive vein:

It is important to remember, that it was written for the practical instruction of Dutch archivists to help them in handling Dutch records. It is a manual for workers, not a philosophical treatise. The fact that we Americans can get anything at all from it is a very real tribute to its fundamental and sound theoretical basis.

"A most confusing text-book...a very real tribute to its fundamental and sound theoretical basis"--these words written down some 50 years ago by Henry Eddy are an appropriate starting point for my article on archival theory in the Netherlands, the homeland of the Manual that solicited this comment.

The genesis of the Manual and its coming to America have been described elsewhere. There is, however, one element that needs elaboration: the role that a fourth Dutch archivist, Van Riemsdijk, played in the development of archival theory, which was codified in the Manual of the Dutch trio Muller, Feith, and Fruin.

Theodoor Van Riemsdijk and Sam Muller were of the same age. Upon coming down from university, trained as legal historians, they entered the archival profession in their mid-twenties. In 1874, Muller started as City Archivist of Utrecht, one year before Van Riemsdijk was appointed as City Archivist in Zwolle. Before moving to Zwolle, Van Riemsdijk assisted Muller in establishing the Utrecht City archives. Muller had the advantage of having previously attended some lectures at the Paris École des Chartes. There, Muller remembered, "the professor who taught the
organization of archives, never tired of preaching the respect des fonds.” One sentence in his lecture notes reveals “Règle absolut: il faut respecter les fonds.”

Muller and Van Riemsdijk both had to find out how to arrange the archives—most of them dating back before 1800—piling up in their repositories. They had no “Starting an Archives” handbook. Each moved in unknown territory, keeping in close touch with the other, exchanging views and experiences by correspondence and in meetings. We can follow how their conceptions gradually matured.

Van Riemsdijk and Muller started with developing an archival theory: the analysis of ideas about what archives are, their essential characteristics, and common properties. As Terry Eastwood has pointed out, archival theory and archival practice are linked together by archival methodology. The three together constitute archival science. Van Riemsdijk, before turning to the methodology proper, gave precedence to the analysis and explanation of the way organizations generate and organize their memory to conduct business. Rightly, Van Riemsdijk has been called the first Dutch archival scientist. Muller was struck with awe by Van Riemsdijk’s approach. Nevertheless, Muller left the theoretical platform rather soon, impatient to apply the methodology in practice.

As early as 1877, Van Riemsdijk had come to the conclusion that archival documents should be “placed in their natural and original context, where they reveal their nature and meaning best.” He also found that the system of arrangement of an archival fonds should be based on its original organization. His view was that in general the original organization of records corresponds to the original organization of the administration. Here we notice an important difference between Van Riemsdijk and others, including the authors of the Manual of later date. Van Riemsdijk does not limit organization of administration to the structure of the administrative body, as paragraph sixteen of the Manual does. Van Riemsdijk includes also the records administration proper, the procedures, the registry system. These should be studied in detail, before embarking upon the arrangement and description of a fonds. Van Riemsdijk focused not on the actual record, but on the record-creating process. He tried to understand why and how records were created and used by their original users, rather than how they might be used in the future. This not only distinguishes him from Muller and others, it makes Van Riemsdijk also a forerunner of the modern post-custodial paradigm, in which analysis of the characteristics of individual documents is replaced by understanding the business functions, transactions, and workflows that cause documents to be created. I refer to Terry Cook’s paper for the 1996 International Congress on Archives, entitled “Archives in the Post-Custodial World: Interaction of Archival Theory and Practice Since the Publication of the Dutch Manual in 1898.” Cook puts the Dutch Manual not only in a historical and global context, but, more importantly, in the theoretical and methodological context that transcends the century under review.

Van Riemsdijk did extensive research into the original archival and administrative organization, reviewing these “in connection with the officers, to whose activity we owe the creation of the archives.” One of the finest examples of this approach is Van Riemsdijk’s book of 1885 about the chancery (the office of the clerks) of the States-General since the sixteenth century. Even today, after more than a century, scholars consider this book to be indispensable for any researcher who wants to use
the archives of the States-General. It describes in detail the administrative procedures and their outcome in the different record series of the chancery. Here Van Riemsdijk applies diplomatics—not the diplomatic science as founded in the eighteenth century for the study of single documents from medieval times, but early-modern diplomatics, what the Germans call Aktenkunde, which has as object the series, the archives as a complex of documents.

Van Riemsdijk concludes his book with a final chapter on the arrangement of archives and the construction of inventories, in which he outlines the methodology that was canonized later in the Manual: “The interconnection of the documents reveals their nature and mutual context much better than any order which an archivist may introduce later.” According to Van Riemsdijk, one is forced to take as a principle the preservation of the old order. This is what a later generation called the “structuurbeginsel” (the principle of respect for archival structure): the principle that a fonds is a whole, whose historically determined structure should not be disturbed by a system of arrangement that is foreign to that fonds, but, if necessary, should be restored. In Dutch archival theory this principle of respect for archival structure is a consequence of the respect des fonds and has precedence over the principle of provenance, which in our thinking refers only to the provenance of the individual document. In one of his drafts Van Riemsdijk added another argument in favour of preserving the original context of the documents: breaking up the original interconnection destroys the evidential capacity of the archives.

A friend and patron of Muller and Van Riemsdijk was Victor De Stuers, the powerful head of the department for Arts and Sciences within the Ministry of the Interior. As part of his total reorganization of the archival system, the repositories in the provincial capitals were gradually taken over by the nation from the hands of the provincial governments. Guelderland and Utrecht were the first two provinces where a State Archivist was appointed to succeed a provincial archives officer: Van Riemsdijk himself in 1877 and Muller in Utrecht in 1879. De Stuers prescribed in the instruction for the State Archivists the preparation of scientific inventories, according to a plan to be approved by the Minister. Of all the State Archivists only Muller and Van Riemsdijk had any idea what such scientific inventories should be, and even then Muller had to write to Van Riemsdijk asking him for a model. When the plans one after another were submitted for ministerial approval, De Stuers asked Van Riemsdijk and Muller for advice. As early as 1880 Van Riemsdijk opposed the then prevailing opinion that “there are no firm principles for the arrangement and description of archives and that for each fonds such principles have to be originated and established.” Instead, Van Riemsdijk was convinced that there is no fundamental difference between archives and “that archives principally correspond in nature. From their common properties the principles have to be inferred, which principles naturally are uniform and equally applicable to all archives.” He reasoned that “there is not so much difference in the principles as there is in their application.

In 1887 Van Riemsdijk became General State Archivist. Three years later he convened the first conference of all State Archivists (in June 1995 we had our 200th conference). Van Riemsdijk aimed at reaching agreement concerning the arrangement of the archival holdings in the repositories on the basis of the principle of respect for archival structure. He wanted to share with others his struggle to develop
a methodology on the basis of archival theory, through careful observation and analysis of phenomena. De Stuers and Muller, however, with Muller's pupil Fruin, favoured a normative approach: instead of archival theory they wanted binding directives, which in 1897 were issued by ministerial decree. The directives were, however, limited in scope. They started with a definition of archief (fonds) and prescribed the respect des fonds in distinguishing and arranging archives in a State archives repository. One year later, the Society of Dutch Archivists published the Manual by Muller, Feith, and Fruin. In the preface the authors assured their readers that they did not wish to place the rules of the Manual “like a heavy yoke on the shoulders of our colleagues. We shall not mind if there are deviations from them in certain details or even in essentials.” In fact, however, Muller desired that the Manual would influence, “even perhaps for ever would decide,” the line of conduct of Dutch archivists. Muller—a disputatious, sharp-tongued militant, who in his polemics always wanted to carry his point—was responsible for the polemic style of the Manual and for its vigorous defense against the heretics and the unbelievers.

The Manual of 1898 soon became known as “the one hundred regels”—one can translate that as “principles” (as Van Riemsdijk would have done) or as “rules” (as Muller, Fruin, and later generations understood it), rules which no one dared to challenge, especially not in front of Muller (who was President of the Dutch Society until 1920) and Fruin (who, as President from 1920 to 1932 and as General State Archivist from 1912 to 1932, in fact ruled the Dutch archives). Fruin, even according to Muller, “executed the programme very drastically and even rather one-sidedly.” What had begun as one hundred principles with explanations, guiding a starting profession, hardened into unquestionable dogmas.

The normative character of archival methodology, codified in the Manual, kept Dutch archival theory petrified for a very long time. The standardization, part of the process of professionalization of Dutch archivists, blocked the development of archival theory. This “paradox of professional quality” was characterized by the first Dutch professor in archival science, Van der Gouw, in his remark that Dutch archivists often took “how it should be” for “how it is.” Compare this with Terry Cook’s observation of North-American archivists: “Yet by asking ‘what’ and ‘how’ instead of ‘why,’ these archivists did not get behind the procedures, methods, and technologies of archival work to probe its deeper meaning, which is the study of records and their relationship to society at large.”

In the past, now and again, Dutch archivists lamented about the need to do more scientific work—as opposed to inventorying archives and managing archival institutions. By science, however, they mostly meant historiography, not archival science. Recently Theo Thomassen, director of the Dutch Archives School, remarked that the Dutch archival system is well organized, but that any intellectual discussion about the theoretical foundations of the profession is not favoured. Archival science, he continues, has not a high status among Dutch archivists, who rather present their trade as performing tricks, not to be made difficult by a lot of theory. This is not only the case in the Netherlands. Angelika Menne-Haritz from Germany remarks: “archival science ... reduced to an exercise of practical skills ... represents in the minds of archivists an aspect of professional identity that can be safely neglected.” Thomassen complains that archival theory is insufficiently supplied with input from the professions.
sional education which is outside the academic environment. This, however, will change shortly. The Archives School has allied with the University of Amsterdam, where, beginning in 1995, a four year university course will lead to a degree in library and information science, with a distinctive focus on archival science. It is hoped that the academic setting of archival education will yield more progress in archival theory than was the case with the practice-oriented training at the Archives School. I must confess that I am a bit worried about the risk that the baby of archival knowledge will be thrown out with the bathwater of practical training, when the tub is filled with information science and archival science. But I look forward to better chances to develop archival theory, "free from the constraints of direct practical application and in exchange with other scholars' ideas in discussion meetings and seminars, essays and dissertations."

Archival theory, however, should have a wider basis than graduate archival education programmes only, as Richard Cox and others have emphasized. The archival institutions, the professional associations and their journals, and individual practitioners all can be instrumental in furthering archival theory.

The contribution to archival theory by professional journals was demonstrated recently when *The American Archivist* provided a special forum on needs in archival research and publication. In order to assess where some of the leading European archival journals stand as a vehicle for archival theory, I took as a sample the 1994 issues of the Dutch *Nederlands Archievenblad*, the German *Der Archivar*, and the British *Journal of the Society of Archivists*. I counted all essential articles, omitting reviews, proceedings of meetings, publication of legal texts, etc. The German and the Dutch journal devoted 28.5 per cent and 26.5 per cent of their articles to archival theory, which is more than in the 1994 volume of *The American Archivist*--where 19.5 per cent of the articles dealt with pure archival theory--and much more than the British, who published in 1994 nothing at all on archival theory. The British are good at publishing case studies and articles on diplomatics, but their practicality seems to counteract pure archival theory. The same is true of the French. Their handbook, published last year, is called: "The Practice of French Archivology." It is a useful methodological handbook, but not a theoretical treatise.

Because the journals have a different format, I converted the pages on archival theory to the equivalent of one page of the Dutch journal. On archival theory *The American Archivist* published in 1994 the equivalent of fifty-two Dutch pages, the German journal, thirty-eight pages and the Dutch, sixty-one pages. Before American archivists pride themselves, however, I have to add that nearly all of these fifty-two pages of *The American Archivist* were written by Canadians (Duranti, McDonald, Wallot) and by our German colleague Menne-Haritz.

It was Angelika Menne-Haritz who, in her paper at the 1992 Montreal International Congress on Archives, took over the defence of functional archival science from Bruno Delmas (the French archival theorist). Functional archival science replaces descriptive archival science, with its methods of description and arrangement and the creation of finding aids. As Van Riemsdijk, more than a century ago, already understood: only by a functional interpretation of the context surrounding the creation of documents, can one understand the integrity of the *fonds* and the functions of the archival documents in their original context. The form and function of the
record are determined by the business functions that led to their creation. Therefore, before we can appraise or use records, we have to analyze and appraise the business functions. This is the new appraisal methodology developed independently but with an astonishingly common approach by both the Canadian National Archives and the Dutch State Archives. As I said in 1989, “appraise the records creators, instead of appraising the records only.”

The principle of respect for archival structure was discovered by Van Riemsdijk and codified in the Manual as the basis for arrangement and description. However, in a functional archival science it is also the basis for appraising the value of records. This makes functional archival science meaningful not only for archivists, but for all people who use archives. We have to make our users—historians, other professionals, the public at large—understand that the unique character of archives is due to their provenance as transactional records created within a functional context. This contextual approach is a powerful tool for any user to find, to use, and to interpret his/her sources properly. This presupposes, however, that the user is enabled by the archivist to answer the question: how does the original purpose of the record affect what may be done with it? Functional archival science obliges the archivist to look through the records to their contextual history. A fonds is a whole, a historically determined structure, a fabric of relationships and context. Because we have to respect that structure and to understand that fabric, we have to study its history to get insight in the historical process that determined the structure of the fonds. And so we come back to the Dutch Manual and Van Riemsdijk. Paragraph sixty-one of the Manual (“This is an imp. section,” Henry Eddy noted) prescribes an accurate and complete administrative history at the beginning of the inventory. Muller remarked (in the note to paragraph sixty-one) that “the fulfilment of this requirement will cause little trouble for the serious archivist who, if he wishes to arrange his inventory well, will first have to study the mechanism of the old administration.” This is exactly what Van Riemsdijk did, and which he did so well that it made Muller a bit jealous.

Accordingly, Dutch archivists have always considered the introduction to be one of the most important parts of the inventory. Indeed, the value of the inventory from the viewpoint of archival science is measured at the introduction. It is by the introductions to their inventories that Dutch archivists have contributed to archival science. The preeminence of research into the administrative history and of diplomatic research into the processes of records creation and contemporary use is not only a Dutch feature, it is typical for European archival science, which has its roots in diplomacy.

Archivists, however, should explore deeper. As Terry Cook has advocated, the locus of archival theory and the profession’s potential unique contribution to the broader humanities and social sciences lies in studying the deeper dimensions of the impulses in society that lie behind the creation of records. Socio-historical research in the “history of the record,” to use Nesmith’s phrase, can provide insights into the evolution of information and communication in society, as demonstrated by such studies as Clanchy’s “From Memory to Written Record” and Yates’s “Control through Communication.” For her publication, Joanne Yates was awarded SAA’s Waldo Gifford Leland Prize. Waldo Leland in 1909 presented the archival theory of the Dutch Manual to the first conference of American archivists, a very real tribute to its fundamental and sound theoretical basis.
Notes


5. In my article, cited in note three (p. 257), I wrote erroneously: Zutphen.


10. I do not comprehend how you managed to familiarize yourself with your archives so quickly and so well. I have been working here for two years now, but I assure you that it would not by far be possible for me, without special research, to present such a good account of the ancient city administration. And yet this is so highly necessary to understand the archives. Before I start with the definitive inventoryization I will have to get thoroughly acquainted with it.” Letter from Muller to Van Riemsdijk, 1 February 1876, General State Archives, The Hague, Archives of the General State Archives, Van Riemsdijk Papers, 623/27.


In the explanation to paragraph 16 there is a glimpse of Van Riemsdijk’s idea: “Only the systematic arrangement of the archival collection which is based on its old organization leads to satisfactory results....” p. 55.


15. Th. van Riemsdijk, De griffie van Hare Hoog Mogenden. Bijdrage tot de kennis van het archief van de Staten-Generaal der Vereenigde Nederlanden (‘s-Gravenhage, 1885), Preface.


ARCHIVAL THEORY AND THE DUTCH MANUAL


22 Van der Gouw, *De Handleiding*, pp. 6-7.

23 Goelema, “De Handleiding,” p. 67, assumes that Van Riemsdijk proposed this section. It replaced a more detailed section in the first draft, submitted to De Stuers by his staff, which had borrowed the prescription of the “respect des fonds” from the Belgian regulations of 1851, which had, in turn, been copied from the French circular of 1841 (see Brichford, “The Origins,” p. 89); H.J.A.H.G. Metselaars, “De totstandkoming van het rijkarchsief in Gelderland, 1876-1877,” *Bijdragen en Mededelingen der Vereniging ‘Gelre’* 59 (1976-1977), pp. 250-51.

24 Van Riemsdijk Papers, 625/16.


30 Ketelaar, “Muller, Feith and Fruin,” p. 259.


42 Ketelaar, *Voorwerp*, p. 20.


44 McKemmish, “Are Records Ever Actual?,” p. 196. Thirty years ago one of the leading Dutch archival theorists Panhuysen summoned Dutch archivists to study earnestly the history of record-creating institutions: “We have to know exactly with the fullest detail, how these modern government agencies create records and which records they produce. We have also to know how the interrelation of the competences of these agencies is, because that determines essentially the content and the value of the records they create; at the same time because from that knowledge depends a good judgment on the relationship of these records and thereby concurrently the decision which records are of enduring historical value and which records can be considered for destruction.” G.W.A. Panhuysen, “Structuurbeginsel contra beginsel van herkomst?,” *Nederlands Archievenblad* 69 (1965), p. 32.


48 Ibid., p. 177.


