The Archival Web:

Contextual Authority Files and the Representation of Institutional

Textual Documents in Online Description

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers a long overlooked issue in archival description – the problem of the representation of individual institutional textual records in archival research tools. While document studies in academic archival journals point to the value of focussed consideration of various types of such individual records, archives do not have the resources to apply such focus in archival research tools to every item in their holdings, even though individual institutional textual archival records convey massive amounts of information that are the ultimate goal many researchers seek, whether for genealogical, historical, biographical or other work. For much of the last century, archivists have rightly emphasized description of groups of records, because this provides valuable insight into the larger context in which single documents exist and the immense quantities involved left little other choice. Developments in recent decades, however, suggest that consideration of the individual document should be re-visited. Can consideration of individual records (and those seeking them) be better incorporated into descriptive systems? Where would one begin? The individual document is a key missing element in formal archival descriptive systems. This thesis focuses on how formal descriptive systems might be enhanced to allow closer consideration of individual institutional textual records. The chapters review the history of description and approaches to individual items, explore potential benefits to researchers who seek information from particular documents – the written will, for example – and explore tools and initiatives created and envisioned in response to such issues, such as contextual

authority files. The aim is to enable modern descriptive systems to provide a richer

source of knowledge for users of archives.

INTRODUCTION

> ***Archival description.*** [Definition:] *The* **creation of an accurate representation** *of a unit of description [– a document or set of documents, in any physical form –] and its component parts, if any, by capturing, analyzing, organizing and recording information that serves to identify, manage, locate and explain archival materials and the context and records systems which produced it. This term also describes the products of the process.*[1]

> ***Description.*** [Definition:] *n. ~ 1. The process of* **creating a finding aid or other access tools that allow individuals to browse a surrogate of the collection** *to facilitate access and that improve security by creating a record of the collection and by minimizing the amount of handling of the original materials. 2. Records management · A written account of the physical characteristics, informational content, and functional purpose of a records series or system.*[2]

> ***Description.*** [Definition:] *The recording in a standardized form of* **information about the structure, function and content** *of RECORDS.*[3]

Description of records is one of the central functions of modern archives and generally involves the review of archival material, capturing of a range of information about the records and the generation of various finding aids[4] to assist in intellectual, administrative and also (traditionally) physical control of archival holdings. Definitions from prominent archival organizations, such as those noted above, testify to the potential complexities

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[1] Definitions for both *archival description* and *unit of description* (emphasis added) endorsed by the International Council on Archives (ICA), in the glossaries accompanying descriptive standards. See ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: International Council on Archives, 2000), 10-11, and *ISAAR(CPF): International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families*, 2nd ed. (Paris: International Council on Archives, 2004), 10.

[2] Richard Pearce-Moses, *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), s.v. "description," http://www.archivists.org/glossary/. Emphasis added.

[3] Bureau of Canadian Archivists (BCA) Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, "Appendix D: Glossary," in *Rules for Archival Description*, rev. ed. (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 2008), D-4. Emphasis added.

[4] The term "finding aid" may be used to refer to a number of different descriptive tools developed by institutions to provide intellectual access, as a guide or "surrogate" for the records in question. While difficult to define, these typically relate to specific collections (or groups) of archival records and may include lists as well as narrative sections, providing contextual information. See Pearce-Moses, *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, s.v. "finding aid," and Su Kim Chung, "Archival Finding Aids," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, 3rd ed. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 147-153, doi: 10.1081/E-ELIS3-120044056 (accessed August 11, 2011).

involved in description, as well as some of the different approaches which have been developed to meet such challenges.

Approaches to and methods involved in description have been much debated in recent decades and, in this time, archivists have developed a variety of ways of representing records. They have expanded the range of contextual information about records that descriptions can (and are expected) to convey. They have reshaped descriptive systems around groups of records, based on aspects of provenance and larger context of creation and use, including the activities of their respective institutional or individual creators. They have also adapted traditional forms of description and research tools to address some of the challenges posed by electronic technology, the developing role of the Internet in research and the changing roles and needs of archival audiences.

Throughout the latter efforts in particular, archivists have, through national and international professional organizations, developed guidelines for the description of archival records. These standards identify what should be included in the descriptive tools developed by institutions and organizations responsible for collections of archival materials, while also providing some guidance as to how the content might be represented within formal descriptive systems, many of which are presented and accessible to users via the World Wide Web. Though developed to promote greater consistency among particular archival communities, the proliferation of standards also provided a starting point for multi-institutional, national and even international discussions of archival principles and procedures and for debates over what components are "essential" to archival description. Indeed, examination of some of the standards and approaches to representing written documents (as well as other kinds of records) highlight the elements

deemed most significant by those responsible for developing these guidelines, just as

consideration of alternative approaches to exploring and analyzing these records can

point to additional areas of interest, which hold great potential for enhancing the strengths

of descriptive tools and improving further the accessibility of archives and archival

records.

While descriptive standards may draw attention to the information (regarding

records) considered most important, they also convey much about the underlying

assumptions and approaches to different kinds of records. In some cases, the rules applied

to description of textual documents are noticeably different from those associated with

photographs, for example. While descriptions of the latter may detail content specific to

each item (who is in a photo, for example), this is not usually the case with regards to

descriptions of textual documents, which are more often represented in groups.[5]

Although this thesis will focus on textual records, such differences are revealing and help

to inform any discussion of archival description.

Description and Textual Records

Though initially the describing of records may seem a straightforward task, the

records archivists are responsible for are often numerous, potentially quite complex and,

in many ways distinctive; while in the parallel field of libraries, published items (such as

books) exist in multiple copies and can be dealt with on an individual basis, the

unpublished nature of archival records and the often large quantities involved makes a

focus on the details of individual items (such as documents or record-items involving

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[5] Discussed in several articles, including Joan Schwartz, "Coming to Terms with Photographs: Descriptive Standards, Linguistic 'Othering,' and the Margins of Archivy," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002), 142-171.

contained serial documents – e.g. a multi-page file or book) problematic, if not impossible.

Groupings of archival records, not only allow for the association of related records but also provide higher levels of organization, containing numerous individual documents, where the larger patterns and context of such groups can be described. In cases where certain records or documents occur in relative isolation, descriptions can sometimes focus on more individualized details, though this seems less common. Usually reference tools generalize somewhat about record attributes and provenance, as this is necessary to provide the contextual information; details of specific items are more likely to be found in listings used to locate documents or files, rather than the parts of finding aids explaining the kinds of intellectual features and context that might be seen in diplomatics-based analysis or document studies. Indeed, some of the contextual detail at these lower levels could become repetitive in situations involving standard types of documents (e.g. government forms), where it is primarily the informational content that varies between items.

While issues of resources and logistics currently make detailed individualized explorations of particular documents within descriptive tools unusual and not often feasible, the potential complexity and uniqueness of these same documents present a challenge to descriptive practice: the archivist must try to convey sufficient information about the records being represented (at the chosen unit-level) and address their complexities and other needs of researchers, while not focussing their efforts too closely on individual documents. At the same time, researchers themselves require access to these documents and face the challenges of finding – then interpreting – the meaning of

the relevant item (or items), which may be part of much larger complex groups of records.

Though archival research tools can provide valuable insight into the larger context, individual documents generally contain the information that many researchers seek, whether for genealogical, historical, biographical or other work, and archival descriptive systems have not traditionally devoted much attention to these. For much of the last century, archival descriptive practices have emphasized groups of records, largely because of the immense quantities involved. Developments in recent decades, however, suggest that this emphasis should be re-examined. Can consideration of individual records (and those seeking them) be better incorporated into descriptive systems? Where would one begin? The individual document is a key missing element in formal archival descriptive systems. This thesis will explore what can be done to address this problem.

Published studies and explorations of various archival records have pointed to the significance of institutional, cultural and societal contexts in shaping records, which are not merely simple "containers" of information (or visible content) but form part of larger systems of communication, carrying particular meanings and playing important roles. Textual documents have drawn particular attention and been the focus of extensive exploration, especially types of formal records influenced by significant corporate bodies as well as societal conventions. As sources that are both rich (in content and context) and abundant throughout archives, these institutional textual records will serve as the focus of this thesis. While a great deal has been done to examine particular examples of these types of records, a question that has been less considered is how the knowledge and

discussions produced might be applied to formal descriptive systems, so they might be shared with users of such research tools.

Archives, Users and Institutional Textual Records

Whether created (and/or kept) by a government department, company or other corporate entity, records regulated through formal institutions are held in various archives and may be applicable to a range of research interests. Formal records kept by a company, a government department or other corporate entity can provide researchers with the opportunity to gain insight into the workings of such an entity, the individuals involved and possibly the relationship between them and within a larger historical landscape. Similarly, formal records created through the actions of individuals, though regulated through similar means (such as legal or religious institutions), can also contribute to understanding of the individual's history, connection to others and the context in which he or she, and possibly others, acted.

A single document, such as a will, may be of interest to a particular researcher pursuing biographical, genealogical or socio-historical detail. However, the complexities of the individual record and its contextual background are not necessarily evident within the document itself, nor is the document likely to be individually discussed or explained within the descriptive tools provided by the archivist. How might such a document be approached? Archivists are far from oblivious to the significance of knowing more about individual documents – as a wealth of scholarly and professional literature would attest – but, so far, such knowledge seems to remain largely separated from the descriptive tools they create. This thesis will consider the knowledge and approaches developed in this

area, reflected in published literature, with a view to how these might be used enhance formal descriptive systems.

Writing, Records and Archives

As both a technology and a significant component of human communication, the act of writing can result in a document which appears to have a simple purpose, such as a will or legal contract, but is complex in form, history, context and individual provenance. Interpretation of such complexities, the embedded "messages" and meanings, requires understanding of the records context, their origins, purpose and significance. These deeper meanings and mysteries of documents and written communication generally have inspired curiosity and intrigued a range of individuals over the years, particularly resonating with historians and those studying communications, as well as various interconnected disciplines. Such considerations have also played a central role in the field of archives and the archival profession, since archivists themselves are responsible not only for preserving the integrity of the records in their care (as is often emphasized) but also – as specialists in the records – are tasked with capturing and sharing information about the broader context of the records history, so as to enable other interested individuals in reading and interpreting not just the visible (often written) content but also the provenance and other "messages" embedded in the record.

The analysis of written documents, their underlying structure and formal characteristics, procedure and history, has attracted interest, particularly since the 1990s, but its roots date back to the study of diplomatics, which emerged as a means of verifying the authenticity and provenance of significant medieval documents, the origins of which were disputed but largely related to claims of patrimonial rights. Formally articulated by

Jean Mabillon in the 1681 *De re diplomatica*, diplomatics developed into a distinct

discipline, which focussed on the critique of individual documents based on examination

of elements, such as media, form, language and writing, and comparison of these with the

examples and analyses established by those like Mabillon. Later centuries saw the

extension of diplomatic methods to analyze various other records, as well as changes in

the field of diplomatics influenced by nineteenth-century positivism.[6] The concepts and

methods of diplomatics were also developed for application to contemporary electronic

records, with close attention paid to various aspects of "trustworthiness," in light of the

complexities of modern workplace practices and computer-based records environments.[7]

Although historically focussed on concepts like authenticity, diplomatics offers

archivists useful tools for considering records and highlights the significance of certain

forms and features, as well as the persons, procedures and context, underlying records.

Analysis of document form takes into account both intrinsic elements – the internal

formal components, such as preamble, inscription, or invocation – and extrinsic elements

– such as medium, script and language. These elements and the diplomatics-based tools

provided to explore them may not have been developed for use by archivists or

researchers confronting the challenges of interpreting individual records, let alone

describing them, but they highlight significant parts of individual records and the value in

understanding them. Indeed, archivists in recent decades have acknowledged the benefits

of applying diplomatics-based tools to decipher elements of the complex records in their

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[6] Olivier Guyotjeannin, "The Expansion of Diplomatics as a Discipline," *American Archivist* 59 (Fall 1996), 414-421, discusses the development of diplomatics since Mabillon.

[7] Outlined by Luciana Duranti in "Diplomatics," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences,* 3rd ed. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 1593-1601, doi: 10.1081/E-ELIS3-120043454 (accessed 09 August 2011), and discussed in several of her other works.

care, including those created in electronic (rather than paper-based) environments. The complexities of ancient and modern records alike, as well as the legacy of diplomatics, highlight the potential richness of contextual knowledge of records and their history, as well as the social significance of writing and other technologies of communication.

In North America, diplomatics re-emerged among archivists in the 1980s and 1990s, catching the interest of many and inspiring much discussion and debate. Although in parts of Europe, diplomatics had been a required part of archival education over the years, this had not been the case in Canada and the United States. Among those credited with facilitating this re-emergence was Luciana Duranti, and the tools and methods of modern diplomatics she articulated were explored and tested by a number of archivists in the years that followed. In one "experiment," Janet Turner applied diplomatics (Duranti's approach) to the "Call to a Minister" document commonly found among records of the United Church of Canada; among other things, the process highlighted the utility of diplomatics not only in providing a framework for locating (and examining) predicted elements of a document but also in pointing to those elements that were missing.[8] In a broader study of the form and procedure associated with the (Ontario) Lieutenant-Governor's warrant, Tom Belton also utilized diplomatics to complement his exploration of provenance.[9] While Turner's experiment tested the basics of Duranti's diplomatics, Belton's work explored a more expansive use of diplomatics-based tools, as a means of enriching the contextual information archivists might capture and communicate to archive users.

[8] Janet Turner, "Experimenting with New Tools: Special Diplomatics and the Study of Authority in the United Church of Canada," *Archivaria* 30 (Summer 1990), 91-103.
[9] Tom Belton, "By Whose Warrant? Analyzing Documentary Form and Procedure," *Archivaria* 41 (Spring 1996), 206-220.

Studies of those like Turner and Belton underscored the value of applying

diplomatics-based tools for archival purposes but the type of approach to diplomatics

articulated by Duranti was not without critique. Articles in the 1960s through the 1980s

by notable historians Leonard Boyle[10] and Armando Petrucci had previously raised issues

regarding diplomatics and the influence of positivist interpretations and applications to

the critique of historical documents. Particularly challenged was the reductive emphasis

on the relationship between record and juridical act, which risked overlooking the

contextual complexities of the document, its function and the power dynamics

involved.[11] In so doing, they advocated what might be considered a broader document

studies approach to diplomatics.

In the 1990s, using this broader document studies approach, archivists Richard

Brown and Joan Schwartz were among those to challenge Duranti's approach,

particularly the strict and potentially narrow relationship between archives and

diplomatics. Expressing concern about the limited view of context, Brown argued for a

broader interpretation, so that social, cultural, ideological and other factors might be

considered by archivists, in addition to the administrative-juridical emphasis he observed

in Duranti's work.[12] Joan Schwartz also voiced concerns regarding the positivist

influence on diplomatics and the implications of employing such tools in archival work.

She suggested that diplomatics might best be "adopted more as a conceptual framework

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[10] Leonard Boyle, "Diplomatics," in *Medieval Studies: An Introduction*, ed. James M. Powell (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1976), 69-101.

[11] Armando Petrucci, "The Illusion of Authentic History: Documentary Evidence," in his *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy: Studies in the History of Written Culture* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1995; trans. Charles M. Radding), 236-250. (Originally published in Italian, in 1984.)

[12] Richard Brown, "Death of a Renaissance Record-Keeper: The Murder of Tomasso da Tortona in Ferrara 1385," *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), 1-43.

than as a mechanistic procedure" and, as such, could help explore archival records of many different media (photographs, for example), in combination with other "contextualizing strategies."[13]

The value of close consideration of particular records can be seen in the studies, discussions and challenges that emerged in North America surrounding "modern" diplomatics. Experimental applications of diplomatics-based tools and efforts to push the boundaries of narrower interpretations of context suggest there are insights to be drawn from adapting diplomatics to postmodern archives and archival work, but these must be balanced with other methods in order to enable interpretation of records and their complexities. Test cases offered for individual documents and types of documents (based on similar form and procedure) have pointed to the knowledge which might be gained through adapting diplomatic methods to various situations. However, the question of how such knowledge might be shared with users of archival resources is less frequently discussed, perhaps in part due to the different focus of diplomatics and archival description and the historical circumstances in which each developed.[14]

Despite the usefulness of document studies and diplomatics-based tools for archivists, questions remain regarding their compatibility with descriptive practice. In particular, given the level of detail often associated with diplomatic analysis, how might diplomatics-based tools be used to enhance description? Drawing from these discussions, this thesis will consider how approaches and tools from diplomatics and document

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[13] Joan Schwartz, "'We Make Our Tools and Our Tools Make Us': Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomatics," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), 64.

[14] Belton is one of the few who considers the next step -- of sharing the resulting rich contextual knowledge through descriptive tools as an "obligation" of the archivist. Belton, 219.

studies might be effectively applied to (and incorporated into) formal archival descriptive systems.

Archives and Archival Description

Alongside the rich historical development of diplomatics and document studies, the roots of archives and underlying practices can also be traced back to the activities of "keepers of the record," in ancient Sumer, Greece and Rome. Just as early writing systems are thought to have arisen from token-based accounting systems, with early "documents" developing from the abstract markings on containers of "tokens," representing physical possessions, the precursors to written description (or representation) of records may have developed from inscriptions on the containers enclosing certain documents, summarizing their contents, and later leading to separate "descriptive" records. These early archival practices of representing certain records through other (external) written documents appear primarily to have been intended to create tools for summarizing or locating original records.[15] Unlike the audience for many contemporary descriptive tools, however, the intended audience would likely have been closely connected (or responsible) to the entities that created the "archive"– it is only in later centuries that the needs of private (external) individuals or researchers in the archives seem to have gained prominence.

Indeed the shift in archival practices, particularly description, to take into account external (or public) user-needs is one of numerous developments that has influenced the focus and direction of recent archival discussions, approaches and tools. Contemporary

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[15] The early history and origins are further discussed in Luciana Duranti, "Origins and Development of the Concept of Archival Description," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), 47-54.

archives and those responsible for maintaining their holdings have several approaches to choose from and numerous variations possible even within prescribed standards, adopted by professional organizations and government or state bodies.

The shift to standardization of description and wider Internet-based availability of research tools representing records (and their provenance) for a broader archival audience has brought to the forefront a range of questions and issues confronted by archivists on a regular basis, sometimes resulting in the re-examining of longstanding principles and approaches. Among these are questions of the role of the archivist in (physically and intellectually) arranging records and providing descriptive information sufficient to accurately and adequately represent them to researchers. Closely tied to description in the process of this representation, arrangement plays an important part in showing the relationships between the records, their creators and context – elements less central to the cataloguing of published records researchers might find in library collections. Both arrangement and description require the intellectual organization of records into archival units, such as item, file or series, and such work can greatly influence the kind of information and level of detail provided in the tools developed through the latter. Though not subject to the same level of discussion or direct efforts at standardization as description, it should be remembered that issues relating to the representation of records in descriptive tools are inextricably connected to underlying concepts of arrangement, which continue to evolve in response to the changing contexts of records but are complicated to convey within traditional descriptive structures.

Alongside issues raised by standardization efforts, postmodern challenges to traditional archival practices have inspired a re-thinking of archival work, not only

highlighting the role of archivists in activities like arrangement and description but also

undermining ideas of "neutrality" and opening the door for broader considerations of

records, their context and how they might be represented through description. Concerns

over the potential narrowness and positivist leanings of diplomatics have not prevented

archivists from adopting – and adapting – elements of this discipline. Similar concerns

regarding description and descriptive standards have also pushed archivists to reconsider

the representation of records and look at new options and directions for developing

descriptive systems, so that more of the rich contextuality of records might be

communicated to users of these systems.

New Directions for Description

> *Archivists today are caught between an expanding volume of records and a growing public expectation that every page in every document is online and indexed. With so many records and so few resources, ... archivists must fundamentally shift the way they think about their roles and develop alternative means for doing archival work.*[16]

In an era of limited resources and changing audiences and expectations, dilemmas

regarding the representation of records (and sometimes lack thereof) in online archival

research tools have provoked a re-thinking of certain aspects of archival work, including

description. Some issues – and proposed solutions – have centred on the content and

organizational elements of archival description but others have focussed on the ways in

which archivists approach their work, particularly regarding problems of quantity and

how the accessibility of records might be improved. Highlighting these in a 2005

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[16] Max J. Evans, "Archives of the People, by the People, for the People," *American Archivist* 70 (Fall/Winter 2007), 387.

article,[17] Greene and Meissner questioned existing practices relating to the processing of archival materials and suggested how these might be shifted to make the most of limited resources. With regard to description, their "more product, less process" – or MPLP – approach emphasized providing researchers with (more generalized) higher-level information, at least as an initial step, so they might become aware of previously inaccessible materials. (Certain records could then be prioritized, based on "market forces" of users.) The appeal of MPLP-like approaches can be seen in the continuing responses and discussions in recent years.[18]

Though providing basic information may enhance access, enabling users to access meaningful contextual information about certain records might be argued to be equally important as finding a brief and superficial reference to it. Thus the priorities of archival description (and its potential depth) remain a matter of contention. This thesis will not attempt to address the full range of unresolved issues here, but rather respect the challenges that such debates have exposed.

Given the quantities archivists are responsible for, representation of records within descriptive tools generally focuses on groups, though it has been acknowledged that item-level detail can be of great benefit to users as well. Studies into particular types of records have pointed to the intricacies of individual documents, but also to recurring patterns of form and features, explanation of which might assist users, while also

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[17] Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005), 208-263.

[18] For further discussion of MPLP strategies (and their applications), see Meissner and Greene, "More Application while Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP," *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no.3-4 (2010), 174-226, as well as Evans, "Archives of the People, by the People, for the People," and Matt Gorzalski, "Minimal Processing: Its Context and Influence in the Archival Community," *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, no.3 (2008), 186-200.

fulfilling archival obligations to convey contextual information. Within a larger group of records, it may benefit a researcher to know that there are a number of wills and contracts and to have easy (online) access to information as to what these might entail. Not all documents would be equally suitable for this sort of added descriptive attention, however, and the immediate usefulness of such an effort is tied to the interests of archival audiences – selection may depend upon user interest, as well as the significance of the document and its prevalence within archival holdings.[19] Complexity is also a factor to consider, as many types of records in archival holdings may involve forms and features entirely unfamiliar to new (or even established) archival audiences.

While studies and discussions have pointed to the potential of incorporating new approaches and further contextual detail into description, there is another issue to consider: what about the records we do not (or cannot) know as much about? Though diplomatics and other approaches to the study of documents aim to learn more about particular records, this is not a goal that can be met for every individual record. What should be done in these cases? Some archivists have put forward ideas for re-thinking traditional processing activities, in order to confront the often immense quantities of records involved and make individual records more accessible to users.[20] It must be acknowledged, however, that not everything will be known about every individual document – what does the archivist do then? Postmodern approaches to archives have highlighted the importance of acknowledging what is not known, particularly through traditionally authoritative tools, such as descriptive systems. At the same time, it has been

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[19] Records featured in current available research guides suggest archives are accustomed to such decisions.
[20] Evans' approach – in "Archives of the People, by the People, for the People" – suggests users might be mobilized (as volunteers) to assist in adding content to descriptive tools themselves.

suggested that some explanation of the approaches and methods used by archivists to explore records in general, might be beneficial to users researching particular records, whether or not detailed information is available for them.[21]

In addition to questions of descriptive content and representation, the very notion of the archive "user" and his or her role in the archive has undergone scrutiny and inspired archivists to re-think how these individuals themselves might interact with and contribute to descriptive tools. While archivists like Robert McIntosh have highlighted the role of the archivist in shaping the archives, others like Tom Hyry and Michelle Light have suggested purposeful inclusion of users in descriptive entries, as part of a scheme to increase the "voices" heard.[22] Indeed, the past twenty years have seen increasing calls for pursuing greater participation from individuals and communities involved with particular archival records.[23]

The numerous challenges to description in recent decades have provoked discussion and a number of innovations, in North America and abroad, with archives and organizations in Canada, the United States, Italy, the United Kingdom, Holland and Australia (among others) testing and implementing approaches and projects that push the

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[21] Postmodern considerations, such as the transparency of archival work, have been much discussed by those including Wendy Duff, Verne Harris, Michelle Light, Tom Hyry and Tom Nesmith. See: Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings." *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 263-285; Light and Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 65 (Fall/Winter 2002), 216-230; and Nesmith, "Reopening Archives: Bringing New Contextualities into Archival Theory and Practice," *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005), 259-274.
[22] Robert McIntosh, "The Great War, Archives and Modern Memory," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998), 1-31; Light and Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations."
[23] Among these are those arguing generally for increased transparency and "poly-vocality," are Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names." Others suggest (and discuss the implications of) the inclusion of target communities in "participatory archiving." See: Isto Huvila, "Participatory archive: towards decentralised curation, radical user orientation, and broader contextualisation of records management," *Archival Science* 8 (2008),15–36; Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections,"*Archivaria* 63 (Spring 2007), 87–101; and Michelle Rydz, "Participatory Archiving: Exploring a Collaborative Approach to Societal Provenance," (Master's Thesis, Department of History, Archival Studies, University of Manitoba/University of Winnipeg, 2010).

bounds of archival description. Several of these initiatives will be discussed in the following chapters, along with the discussions and debates which inspired them.

Archival description has been a subject of much discussion, especially in recent decades, with the spread of computers, development of the World Wide Web, expansion of potential audiences for archives and creation of various formal systems and multi-institutional standards for representing records. Challenges to and reshaping of archival approaches and methods have pushed archivists to consider new ways of presenting contextual knowledge and interacting with users – some institutions have incorporated these ideas into descriptive systems, others have not. While individuals may be seeking particular information or records in an archive, the focus of description has often been on large groups of records. Though some contextual knowledge may be communicated to the researcher at this level, archivists have acknowledged that a great deal more may be explored and revealed about particular records and types of knowledge than has traditionally been included in descriptive entries. Document studies over the last twenty years have pointed to the value of focussed consideration of particular records. However, archives are unlikely to have the resources to apply such focus to every item in their collection. Given such circumstances, and the tension between professional obligations of archivists and the needs of their institutions and researcher-clients, a central question becomes: how can better access to archival records and their contextual information be provided for archival documents when they are immense in number and variety?

This thesis will address the challenge of how description and formal descriptive systems might be enhanced to allow for closer consideration of particular records, while further developing the content provided for users. The focus here will be on individual

institutional textual documents, as these kinds of records are extensive in archives.

Chapter 1 will explore the development of description, several issues that have provoked debate and re-thinking of descriptive practices in archives, and some of the initiatives that have been undertaken to add to the research tools offered for users.

Chapter 2 will take a closer look at the representation of records in formal descriptive systems, typically accessible through institutional websites. The written will, as an example type of institutional textual record, will be used to consider how such records are represented in archives and what features might be usefully incorporated into current descriptive systems.

Chapter 3 will consider how the ideas and opportunities discussed – the results of decades of debate and innovation – might be assembled to take advantage of archival knowledge and expertise, in order to expand the bounds of description and provide meaningful additions to the research tools offered to present and future archive users.

As diplomatics-based analysis and document studies have shown, individual records can have complex histories, yet the multitude of such records in archives makes the description of each record an impossible task. What, then, should be done? Are there other ways of presenting the complexities of characteristics, procedure and provenance – previously only seen in document studies and analyses – through current descriptive tools? How can the responsibilities to assist clients and generate descriptive entities (to enhance access to records) be balanced with the resource limitations and practical restrictions of an archive? The following chapters will discuss the nature of this challenge and what might be done to address it, particularly in the typically web-based descriptive systems used in many Canadian archives.

CHAPTER ONE

The Many and the One:

Archival Description and the Dilemma of Representing Documents

[R]ecords must be placed in context – in time and place – by fashioning descriptive entities and documenting relationships .... To understand the record and derive evidence, it must be interpreted ... by understanding the circumstances which existed at its creation and the changes since.[1]

This statement from Australian archivist Chris Hurley neatly summarizes the imperative of archivists responsible for describing records, representing their features, functions, relationships and histories to archive users. More than simply helping to identify and physically locate items, the role of the archivist also involves providing enough contextual information so that archive users might knowledgeably be able to interpret and understand them, with a view to the processes and circumstances which influenced their creation and use.

Context is essential to the work of the archivist, as the records in their care are not usually self-explanatory – in contrast to most books and other library materials, the documents in archives were (arguably) not written with a view to future research and many were not constructed to directly relay information to individuals outside of the initial context. Even documents that appear straightforward may, in fact, be the products of complicated activities, dynamics and relationships that would not be immediately evident if records are taken at face-value. Conveying sufficient information about the records thus poses a challenge for those concerned with reference tools and information retrieval, while, at the same time, interpretation of them requires the researcher to be knowledgeable about the processes and entities behind their creation.

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[1] Chris Hurley, "The Making and the Keeping of Records: (1) What Are Finding Aids For?" *Archives and Manuscripts* 26 (May 1998), 74.

While the basis of description identified by Chris Hurley is not altogether contentious, it is the practices behind description, the approaches used to accomplish this that create challenges for archivists, provoking much discussion and re-examination of past developments and ideas for the future. The wealth of professional literature on description shows it to be an area of archives that has undergone tremendous shifts since becoming a central part of the archival focus. Changing audiences and technologies have been among the significant influences, enhancing the role of reference tools and significance of description, while increased quantities of records entering archives have made a focus on individual items increasingly impractical.

Given the responsibilities of the archivist to provide the tools and information necessary to help archive users identify and interpret records, and the limitations of time and resources usually preventing individualized attention to specific items, archivists have devised alternative ways of representing records and their complexities. A number of approaches have emerged that aim to increase or otherwise improve the content of reference tools, while restructuring and streamlining descriptive systems, so that an element that is common to several records or groups of records, such as the administrative history of the entity creating that record, can be linked to descriptions of numerous records at once. This kind of reorganization, with a move towards providing greater detail in descriptive tools, has also been put forward for enhancing other elements of records – including form and function – and suggests that logistical challenges might be mitigated by similar reconsideration of how other aspects of records and their context are described.

The developments in descriptive tools and practices in recent decades have both challenged archival traditions and built from many of them, with a view to the needs of new audiences and the opportunities offered by new technology. Meanwhile, continuing critiques from some archivists suggest that there is still much to be done to fully adapt descriptive practices to new realities – such changes require some re-thinking of certain conventions but also understanding of their history and the various past and present directions that have been taken in the archival representation of records.

Describing Description

Throughout a number of traditions and interpretations, the concept of archival description has consistently been linked to *representation* and the creation of "surrogate" documents to enable records to be identified and at least partially understood prior to (or entirely without) direct handling or individual viewing.[2] This encompasses a range of tools that assist archivists and archive users, providing "information about the structure, function and content of records"[3] and further explanation of record features, history, provenance and relationships, allowing for individuals to consult archival tools and holdings with greater independence – often remotely.[4] Recent discussions have added further complexity to the concept of description, as many have raised issues of transparency in the archivist's arrangement, representation and "re-creation" of records,

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[2] Drawing particularly from International Council of Archives (ICA) definitions for *archival description* and *unit of description*, as well as those endorsed by the Society of American Archivists (SAA). See ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: International Council on Archives, 2000), *ISAAR(CPF): International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families*, 2nd ed. (Paris: International Council on Archives, 2004), and also Richard Pearce-Moses, *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology,* 2nd ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), http://www.archivists.org/glossary/.

[3] Bureau of Canadian Archivists (BCA) Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, *Rules for Archival Description*, rev. ed. [RAD2] (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 2008).

[4] Some explanations of description have emphasized its role for users in providing tools to help those "who want to use the records know where to look to find the answers to their questions." Jeff O'Brien, *Basic RAD* (Saskatchewan Council of Archives, 1997), 3.

as well as the role of description in "representing the multifaceted contextuality (or history of records) that enables records and knowledge to be made through archiving."[5]

While early descriptive tools were likely created primarily for administrative purposes, facilitating access to the content of certain documents by agents of the institution managing them, these eventually developed into reference aids conveying additional information regarding arrangement of the records and their contextual histories for individuals outside of the usual bureaucratic structures.[6] The intermediary tools created to represent records and elements of their structure, function, content and "multifaceted contextuality" can take the form of inventories, file lists, box lists, basic (skeletal) descriptive outlines, or tools that incorporate detailed narratives of the records history and how they came into being; some of these help to physically locate records, while others are intended to assist researchers in their search and provide additional guidance in interpreting the content and context of certain documents.[7] With the development and widespread adoption of the Web, a number of these descriptive tools have been made available through the websites of archival institutions, often presented as elements of a formal online descriptive system.

The emphasis on user access has become a significant part of modern discussions of archival description and was a significant motivator in the discussions surrounding

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[5] Tom Nesmith, "Reopening Archives: Bringing New Contextualities into Archival Theory and Practice," *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005), 262.

[6] Greater discussion of early developments is featured in several notable articles including: Wendy M. Duff and Kent M. Haworth, "The Reclamation of Archival Description: The Canadian Perspective," *Archivaria* 31 (1990-91), 26-35; Haworth, "The Voyage of *RAD*: From the Old World to the New," *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993), 5-12; Duff, "Discovering Common Missions or Diverging Goals: The State of Archival Descriptive Standards in Canada and the United States," *International Information & Library Review* (1998), 227-247; and Luciana Duranti, "Origins and Development of the Concept of Archival Description," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), 47-52.

[7] For the purposes of this chapter, terms such as "finding aid," "research tool" and "descriptive tool" are mostly interchangeable and used generally (unless otherwise noted) to refer to the tools developed by archivists which provide information about records.

standardization in the 1980s but approaches to the records themselves and their representation have varied through the many preceding decades. Among the predominantly English-language archival traditions, description draws from over a century of theory and practice in Europe, particularly England, as well as Australia, the United States and Canada. It was in such a context that current approaches to description took shape, laying the groundwork for the discussions and debates that followed.

Historical Developments in Archival Description

The history of archival description in Canada (alongside that of the United States, Britain and Australia) is closely tied to nineteenth- and twentieth-century European, American and Australian practices and principles. Central to these was the European emphasis on "the idea that archival documents could only be understood in context, or in relation to their origins and to other documents, not as self-contained, independent items" and the importance of "knowledge of the provenance of documentation or the origins, original purposes and organic characteristics of documentation."[8] As registers, indexes, lists and other aids grew to facilitate physical retrieval in archives, description – the writing about records – in Europe began to centre on "illuminating provenancial and contextual relationships."[9]

The role of *provenance* in archival description can be traced back to the work of archivists in France, Germany and the Netherlands but it was most notably articulated by the Dutch trio of Samuel Muller, Johan Feith and Robert Fruin in their 1898 *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (published by the Dutch Archivists

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[8] Tom Nesmith, "Archival Studies in English-speaking Canada and the North American Rediscovery of Provenance," in *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance*, ed. Tom Nesmith (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1993), 2.

[9] Duranti, "Origins and Development of the Concept of Archival Description," 51.

Association). Though formative elements of the *Manual* were based on established archival practices, it was this Dutch publication, translated and widely disseminated, which became internationally influential, though not universally adopted.[10] The *Manual* emphasized arrangement and – to a lesser extent – description, with principles (and practices) focussed on ideas of provenance and original order. Certain aspects of this approach became problematic for later archivists to apply in modern archives but the archival theory and methodology set out in the *Manual* had a great impact on subsequent generations of the archival profession and prominent individuals in several countries, including the Briton Sir Hilary Jenkinson of the Public Record Office and the American Theodore Schellenberg of the US National Archives.

Early Descriptive Tools and Individual Documents

Some of the formative influences on archival description drew from intellectual developments of the seventeenth century, including document analysis and the discipline of diplomatics (involving scrutiny of internal and external features, such as structure, script and physical form, as well as procedures and practices). A regular part of archival training in Europe through to the twentieth century, diplomatics had originally been developed as means of detecting forgeries; as such, it carried with it a focus on individual documents. This focus was also reflected in the descriptive practices which pre-dated the Dutch *Manual* and the further development of descriptive tools in Europe.

Through to the late-nineteenth century, the focus of archival description in Europe, particularly in Britain, was on the information content of individual records,

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[10] For more discussion of the influences on the Dutch trio and opposition to the ideas of the *Manual* (particularly the *fonds*), see Peter Horsman "The Last Dance of the Phoenix, or the De-Discovery of the Archival Fonds," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002), 1-23.

published in the form of transcripts or calendars – the latter involved summaries of the

content of select records (pertaining to certain letters, for example). These were often

large multi-volume works, which could be organized by subject or chronology.[11]

In the Netherlands, prior to the Dutch *Manual*, the type of archival *calendar*[12]

used appears primarily to have helped archivists maintain administrative control of

records, in conjunction with inventories listing archival holdings and other tools. The

calendars proved to be poorly suited to archival requirements of the (late) nineteenth and

twentieth century and Dutch description shifted to centre on a new kind of tool: an

inventaris (inventory) that included more detailed descriptions of administrative context

and interrelationships between archival records than had earlier administrative finding

aids. The *inventaris* became "the backbone of the Dutch finding aid system"[13] and the

increasingly context-centred approach, influenced by diplomatics and archival

developments in France (through the work of Muller particularly) and the Netherlands,

arguably became the basis for a number of principles outlined in the *Manual*.[14]

As with developments in the Netherlands, archival description in Britain was

influenced by the Dutch *Manual* and a tradition of diplomatic analysis. However, aspects

of the micro-level and content-centred approach to description became increasingly

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[11] The practice of calendaring appears to have continued into the twentieth century. Until 1949, the Public Archives of Canada was still engaged in creating calendars, as described in Terry Cook, "An Archival Revolution: W. Kaye Lamb and the Transformation of the Archival Profession," *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005), 185-234. For a detailed outline of calendaring methods (and their benefits), see Morris L. Radoff's two-part article "A Guide to Practical Calendaring ," in *American Archivist* 11, no.2 (1948), 123-140 [part 1], and continuing in *American Archivist* 11, no.3 (1948), 203-222. Also discussed in Nesmith, "The North American Rediscovery of Provenance."

[12] Discussed in Peter Horsman, "Samuel Muller, the Inventaris, and ISAD," in *The Power and the Passion of Archives: A Festschrift in Honour of Kent Haworth,* eds. Ruben Ware, Marion Beyea and Cheryl Avery (Saskatoon: Association of Canadian Archivists, 2005), 215. Further detail also in Peter Horsman, Eric Ketelaar and Theo Thomassen, "New Respect for the Old Order: The Context of the Dutch Manual," *American Archivist* 66 (Spring/Summer 2003), 249-270.

[13] Horsman, "Samuel Muller, the Inventaris, and ISAD," 220.

[14] For closer exploration of the complexities which influenced (and informed) the development of these principles, see Horsman, "The Last Dance of the Phoenix."

problematic by the mid-twentieth century, as archivists like Jenkinson were confronted

by a growing number of records generated and brought into archives. Though working

with historical documents in Britain did require the ability to read and decipher meanings

from old documents, some going back to the Middle Ages, Jenkinson concluded that "the

methods of the Conventional *Diplomatique* and Paleography, invented to deal with early

and sparse documents, break down when applied to the large mass of records" and that

these methods would be best confined to sections of the larger Administrative History,

which Jenkinson thought was undervalued.[15] His approach came to focus on larger

administrative histories over extensive analysis of individual document features, though it

did not rule out some document-level detail to facilitate access.[16] However, the growth of

records and the responsibilities of those like Jenkinson to arrange and describe them

generally resulted in a situation where available resources could not keep up with the

volume, so that "the massive extent of archival documentation made transcripts and

calendars virtually pointless as means of making documents available."[17]

The twentieth-century boom in bureaucratic records affected archives and

archival practices in several countries, Britain, the United States and Canada among

them. As consideration of a limited number of medieval and early-modern documents

(and detecting forgeries) became a less central concern in archives than managing and

arranging the significant volume of new records entering archives, the offices and

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[15] From a paper Jenkinson delivered in 1913; cited in Jenkinson, "Archives and the Science and Study of Diplomatics," in *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, ed. Peter Walne (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishers, 1980), 347.

[16] Among other things, he identified indexes and "Descriptive Lists," or even "Texts or Calendars" for certain series of records; see Jenkinson's 1947 lecture, "The English Archivist: A New Profession," as published in *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, ed. Peter Walne (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishers, 1980), 255-256. Jenkinson also hinted at the development of "formularies" for certain types of records across several archives in England.

[17] Nesmith, "The North American Rediscovery of Provenance," 2-3.

archivists responsible for the records put aside some of the previous (micro-oriented) approaches and opted instead for those that focussed on collective (macro-level) arrangement and representation of record groups.

Provenance and Collective Descriptive Systems

In Europe, the turn to collective description of records generally focused on the *fonds* – a group of records linked to a single creator and circumstances of creation. The concept of the *fonds* was among the principles and practices articulated in the influential (1898) Dutch *Manual* and such a grouping allowed for records to be organized and described in terms of larger functions and interrelationships, instead of individual content. Though a formative work, there were limitations in the effectiveness of principles and practices set out in the *Manual*, a result (among other things) of the trio's experience "either with limited numbers of medieval documents, susceptible to careful diplomatic analysis or with records found in well-organized departmental registries within stable administrations."[18] Despite the limitations of the *Manual* and challenges of applying some of its principles, concepts such as the *fonds* were influential in early-twentieth century developments in archival description, many of which maintained a focus on the *fonds* and *fonds*-like groupings of records.

Dilemmas presented to the archival profession by aspects of the Dutch *Manual* and the European emphasis on provenance prompted alternative suggestions from archivists including Jenkinson and Schellenberg. Jenkinson's 1922 *Manual of Archive Administration*, commissioned out of concern for preserving the records of World War I, not only outlined archival practices but also reflected on foundational principles behind

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[18] Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), 21.

them – at a time when such an approach was uncommon among British archivists.[19]

Confronted with increasing quantities of state records at the Public Record Office,

Jenkinson was faced with a problem: though arrangement in accordance with provenance

preserved the integrity of records and provided "a necessary starting point for

understanding the information contents of documents," conveying the contents of records

to researchers became increasingly impractical.[20] Basing his work on principles set out in

the Dutch *Manual* and influenced by European concepts, such as the *fonds d'archive*,

Jenkinson put forward the "archive group" as an alternative unit, a group formed from the

entirety of records from a single (potentially large) administrative body, such as a

government department.[21] Though Jenkinson himself did not account for all the

complexities of modern records, his work would prove influential on later developments

in archival theory and practice, in both Europe and North America.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Theodore Schellenberg faced similar dilemmas as

Jenkinson, caused by the volume of records. Drawing from both Jenkinson's work and

the Dutch *Manual*, Schellenberg accepted provenance "as the only means of protecting

the integrity of the information in records and as an essential means of initiating the

research process," but he also emphasized access to information by researchers over other

elements of the European-based provenancial description. Believing that modern records

and record-keeping (and their standardization) would facilitate easier access to

information content, he maintained that "traditional European skills" (including

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[19] Terry Eastwood, "Jenkinson's Writings on Some Enduring Archival Themes," *American Archivist* 67 (2004), 34-35.
[20] Nesmith, "The North American Rediscovery of Provenance," 2.
[21] Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 24.

diplomatics) were not needed by the "modern archivist."[22] As his solution to the growing

volume of records, Schellenberg put forward the "record group," a unit smaller than

Jenkinson's "archive group" but similarly based on records-creating organizations, which

would contain within it series of records arranged within particular filing systems or by

virtue of common physical form or common subjects or activities.[23]

Schellenberg's 1965 manual, *The Management of Archives*,[24] acknowledged a

range of necessary descriptive practices and outlined various reference tools that might be

created, including catalogues (mostly for internal use) and guides for the repository,

indexes and item catalogues, published lists and calendars; some contained general or

specific descriptions of smaller record-groupings (or individual "entities"). Many of

these were designed for use by genealogists and historical researchers looking for

references to particular individuals, places or things, and few appear to provide the

contextual information or analysis discussed for higher-level descriptions.

The manual also identified *attributes* that might be described, differentiating

between the *structure* and the *substance*, the former including consideration of record

types.[25] The level of description depended on the extent of the particular finding aid

being produced; at a higher (macro) level, he suggested inventories, describing "records

series within large or significant groups and of individual collections,"[26] as a starting

point for archival description, emphasizing the collective (at least at the early stages of

archiving). However, despite advocating for the "record group" as the *primary* level of

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[22] Nesmith, "The North American Rediscovery of Provenance," 3; paraphrasing opinions articulated by T.R. Schellenberg in *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (1956), 46-51, and "Archival Training in Library Schools," *American Archivist* 31 (April 1986), 155.
[23] Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 205.
[24] T.R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).
[25] Ibid., 119-122.
[26] Ibid., 112.

description – as Jenkinson did for the "archive group" – it does not seem that Schellenberg was attempting to replace other methods of providing control and access to the records, merely focussing collective description as an archival priority, with other finding aids to be created according to the resources and research requirements of the particular archival institution. In practice, the lower-level (potentially more detailed) lists, inventories or descriptions of other sets of records, generally would continue to be useful following the implementation of higher-level descriptive models, whether based on the archive group, records group, or the *fonds*.

The approaches of those like Jenkinson and Schellenberg, drawing somewhat away from the Dutch *Manual*, gained influence among Canadian and American archivists in particular but the concepts of Muller, Feith and Fruin remained influential to archival work in various areas of Europe. Canadian developments in description and reference through to the later part of the twentieth century were largely influenced by British and American approaches,[27] as institutions utilized a variety of manuals to direct the description of records (in some cases, these approaches varied within the same institution). Reference services, particularly at larger archives, would have been tailored to the needs of historical researchers primarily, who made up most of their audience – not unlike British and American archives.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the renewal and wider acceptance of various European-based archival concepts in countries such as Canada. Much of Canada's introduction to these concepts is attributed to Michel Duchein of France, whose 1977 article (translated into English in 1983) has been credited as being the "trigger" to North American

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[27] For an account of the developments in the Public Archives of Canada, in the 1950s and 1960s, under W. Kaye Lamb – including the adoption of the American record group concept – see Cook, "An Archival Revolution."

consideration of the *fonds* and who arguably played a role in the "rediscovery" of provenance, which took on momentum in the 1980s, aided by the work of prominent figures, including Hugh Taylor, and eventually contributed to the integration of this provenance-focus into various standards of archival description.[28] In Canada, the *fonds* was eventually recommended and widely adopted as the primary unit of arrangement and description (replacing the *record group*).

Ideas such as the *fonds*, "archive group" and "record group" were influential on archival theory and practice in several countries in the mid-twentieth century, including Australia, the United States and Canada. In the 1960s, American Mario Fenyo and Australian Peter Scott questioned the traditional archival model of description, as articulated by the Dutch trio and (to some degree) both Jenkinson and Schellenberg. Though their concerns were initially overlooked by the archival community, other voices joined Fenyo and Scott in the 1980s and 90s, including Max Evans and Chris Hurley, David Bearman and Terry Cook. A primary concern of the group regarding conventional description was the emphasis placed on the records relationship to a single (administrative) creator; among other things, the constant changes in the modern institutions creating these records resulted in multiple provenance relationships with several administrative entities, not simply the single association traditionally assumed – and reinforced through the fonds- or record-group-based approach.[29]

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[28] Horsman, "The Last Dance of the Phoenix," 11, cites Michel Duchein, « Le respect des fonds en archivistique : principe théoriques et problèmes pratiques,» *Gazette des Archives* 97 (1977); translated into English as "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des Fonds* in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), 64-82.

[29] Such issues are discussed in greater depth in articles that include: Peter J. Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," *American Archivist* 20 (Oct.1966), 493-504; Mario D. Fenyo, "The Record Group Concept: A Critique," *American Archivist* 29 (April 1966), 229-239; Max J. Evans, "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept," *American Archivist* 49 (1986), 249-261; Terry Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds in the Post-Custodial Era: Theory, Problems and

Concern about the limitations of the Schellenbergian model in adequately representing provenance prompted Scott and others to advocate the abandonment of such groups as the *primary* unit of representation, opting instead for a *series*-centred approach to arranging and describing archival records. This alternative to both European and American models involved the separation of information about records from that of records creators, with each records series linked to as many administrative "authority records" as shifting provenance required. The Australian series-based approach and the work of its advocates pointed to the problems associated with the hierarchical *fonds*-centred model and offered a focus on alternative groups of records. Though not specifically looking at individual documents, this model offered an opportunity to expand the contextual knowledge provided to users and challenged the foundation of descriptive practice at the time and proved influential in Canadian archival discourse regarding description (and descriptive standards).

Description and Standardization

In North America, the earliest *rules* for cataloguing records have been traced as far back as 1888[30] but the development of personal computers and electronic technologies to manage and share information about archival collections contributed to growing efforts to standardize description in the 1970s and 1980s.[31] Inspired by the potential of integrated systems incorporating bibliographic entries, American developments included the work of the National Information Systems Task Force (NISTF) and the 1983 and 1989 editions of *Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts*

Solutions," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), 24-37.
[30] Duff, "Discovering Common Missions or Diverging Goals," 227.
[31] Nesmith, "The North American Rediscovery of Provenance," 5.

(APPM) – a manual providing guidance for creating catalogue records for archival materials that could be integrated into automated bibliographic systems based on the 1978 edition of *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* (AACR2).[32] APPM was developed with a focus on summary information and, although description of items was permitted, the manual built on the primacy of provenance and focussed on collective-level description of records, with a framework designed for consistent multi-level description.[33]

Parallel to archival developments in the United States, considerable variation in descriptions produced by different institutions in Canada, combined with the renewed interest in provenance, led many to favour "a major Canada-wide national initiative to develop a system of [provenance-centred] descriptive standards" with codified rules, "structur[ing] description in a general-to-specific, multi-level, multi-media relationship for all record entities within a single fonds … [and] protect[ing] provenance further through authority files to illuminate multiple-creator relationships."[34] As a result of this movement, the Bureau of Canadian Archives Working Group on Descriptive Standards was formed and published their recommendations in its 1985 report *Towards Descriptive Standards*. Developed from this was the Canadian (content) standard, *Rules for Archival Description* (RAD), first published in 1990, which emphasized provenance and centred on the *fonds* for arrangement and description.

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[32] Stephen Hensen, the author of APPM, stresses in later articles that this manual was *not* developed as a standalone rulebook for description but rather worked best in the context of integrated systems for which it was designed; he locates cataloging *within* the larger "apparatus" of description but not as the sole centre of description itself. See Stephen Hensen, "'NISTF II' and EAD: The Evolution of Archival Description," *American Archivist* 60 (1997), 284-296.

[33] Ibid., 290; Stephen Hensen, *Archives Personal Papers and Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1989).

[34] Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 37.

Much like APPM, RAD was based on the structure of AACR2 and allowed for some variation in descriptive practices. However, RAD derived from slightly different traditions and was tied closely to *fonds*-centred rules, including a hierarchy which started at the most general (collective) level of description. At its highest level, RAD description – at its simplest – involves five key information elements: *Title, Dates, Extent, Administrative history / Biographical sketch* and *Scope and Content*; additional elements include *Custodial history* and *Physical description* and *Arrangement* notes.[35] From there, lower-level descriptions might include details specific to the grouping of records involved, though not repeating previous information, and these entries would have to hierarchically follow other higher-level entries. Guidance regarding discrete items – not part of a *fonds* – was not specifically provided in the first edition of RAD, though the preface suggested that the primary rules could be applied to these.[36] RAD was not primarily designed for (nor perhaps often used for) describing individual documents.

Descriptive standards in Canada and the United States also had international counterparts: 1986 saw the publication of the British *Manual of Archival Description* (MAD) and, as of the late 1980s, descriptive standards became a priority of the International Council on Archives (ICA). In 1994, the ICA published the *International Standard on Archival Description (General)*, or ISAD(G), based on approximately 20 elements found to be common to MAD, APPM and RAD. Developed by the ICA Ad Hoc Committee on Descriptive Standards (ICA/DDS) and heavily influenced by RAD principles, as well as elements of American and British approaches, ISAD(G) said the purpose of archival description is "to identify and explain the context and content of

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[35] Prioritized and summarized in O'Brien, *Basic RAD*, 8.
[36] Kent Haworth, "Preface to the 1990 Edition," in *Rules for Archival Description*, rev. ed. (2008), xix.

archival material in order to promote its accessibility"[37] and outlined general rules to guide the creation of descriptive tools. The international standard identified the *fonds* as the primary level of description, much like RAD (but not APPM), and this focus attracted discussion and criticism in the years that followed.

The most prominent early critiques of both RAD and ISAD(G) focused a great deal on the *fonds*, its application and limitations in representing relationships between records, as well as records creators. Concerned by the limitations in presenting information and the potential obscuring of provenance through assignment of a single creator-based *fonds* to large groups of complex records, David Bearman, Deborah Barr, and Bob Krawczyk were among those supporting the incorporation of aspects of the Australian series-centered approach. The disentangling of information about records-creating entities from that of the records themselves was seen as particularly useful for showing relationships between the activities, organizations, agencies and information systems contributing to the creation of records.[38]

In 1993, in response to concerns – some of which he shared – Terry Cook pointed to the difficulties inherent in a strict interpretation of the *fonds* as a limiting physical entity that would restrict the ability to represent complex records relationships. He suggested that the *fonds* be interpreted as an abstract concept, noting that if it was "truly presented as a conjunction of the creator's functions and activities on the one hand and, on the other hand, of the records and information systems … which proceed from those functions and activities" the concept itself could allow for series-based descriptions and

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[37] International Council on Archives, *ISAD(G),* 2nd ed., 7.

[38] David Bearman, "Documenting Documentation," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992); Deborah Barr, "The *Fonds* Concept in the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards Report," *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88), 163-170; Bob Krawczyk, "Cross-Reference Heaven: The Abandonment of the Fonds as the Primary Level of Arrangement for Ontario Government Records," *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), 131-153.

separate descriptions for physical records and records creators.[39] In more recent years, with the development of CAIN (Canadian Archival Information Network) to integrate descriptions from multiple institutions, the *fonds* has remained problematic, as its characterization as an "organic whole" is undermined by the varying depictions by different institutions.[40] The issues and discussions raised by those like Bearman, Barr, Krawczyk, Cook and various others, spurred on the Canadian discourse on description , contributing to the evolving approaches taken to representing archival records.

Description and Archival Authority Files

Alongside discussions, critiques and debates concerning *fonds*-based description, the approaches taken by the institutions and archivists implementing RAD also influenced the direction of descriptive practices in Canada. In the years following its release, RAD was adopted as a standard by a number of Canadian archives but faced some challenges within the archival community. In response to the problems identified with applying RAD guidelines, the Archives of Ontario incorporated aspects of the Australian series-based approach into their descriptive system – including the use of separate (but linked) descriptions for records and their creator-entities, along with RAD elements – in a move towards "refinement, rather than outright rejection of RAD."[41] The Archives of Manitoba also incorporated a similar series-centred approach into its new descriptive system, with the creation of the Keystone Descriptive Database, as have the Saskatchewan Archives Board and the Yukon Archives. These adaptations, incorporating

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[39] Terry Cook "The Concept of the Archival Fonds in the Post-Custodial Era: Theory, Problems and Solutions," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), 24-37.

[40] An effective challenge to the more rigid concept of *fonds* as an "organic whole," when, in reality, different institutions construct different *fonds,* was presented in Laura Millar, "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002), 1-15.

[41] For further details on the change to series-based description at the Archives of Ontario (and the underlying arguments), see Krawczyck, "Cross-Reference Heaven."

elements of *fonds-* and series-based description into hybrid systems provided a necessary and relatively flexible approach for representing the functions, activities, creators and groups of records and their changing relationships to one another – a complexity frequently significant for the records of large complex bureaucracies, such as government or private corporations.

In 1996, the ICA published an additional supplementary standard: the *International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families*, or ISAAR(CPF). While preceding standards focussed on a collective description which incorporated information on records creators, ISAAR(CPF) allowed for the creation of separate archival authority records focussing on "descriptions of entities (corporate bodies, persons and families) associated with the creation and maintenance of archives."[42] The intellectual separation of information on records creators and that pertaining to the records was a key element of the series-centred approach to archival description and had been a point of contention when it came to standards like RAD. While the parallels in library practices (and their *authority file*) had been pointed out by Max Evans in 1986,[43] the *archival authority file* was based on the ideas put forward by Australians including Peter Scott, as part of the proposed series-system.

The adoption of the series-centred approach at the Archives of Ontario and Archives of Manitoba highlights the benefits of this conceptual separation of administrative or biographical information from that of the records themselves – in complex cases, separate (linked) descriptions better allow for the representation of "multidimensional and multilevel relationships between entities," whether these entities

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[42] International Council on Archives, *ISAAR(CPF)*, 2nd ed.
[43] Max Evans, "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept," 249-261.

are administrative bodies or groups of records.[44] As contextual information is central to archival description, the archival authority file includes explanation of relevant history, functions and organizational structures associated with the corporate bodies or individuals involved. As archivists already were responsible for capturing similar information, much of the content of the authority file could arguably be considered a redeployment of information normally captured within traditional descriptive tools.

Following the publication of ISAAR(CPF) and the new edition of ISAD(G), in 1996, Canadian and American standards also came to allow for the concept of the archival authority file. The revised edition of *Rules for Archival Description* (RAD2) was published in 2008, acknowledging series-based approaches and cases of isolated items held in archives, broadening the applicability and flexibility of RAD to "reflect the needs expressed by the Canadian archival community."[45] This followed the 2001-2003 Canada-U.S. joint task-force on description, known as CUSTARD,[46] which had uncovered "widely divergent opinions" from the archival communities in both countries.

In 2004, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) published *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS). Based in part on the outcome of CUSTARD, DACS was created to provide guidance for archival finding aids generally, rather than simply catalogue records – in this it moved away from the APPM model. In structure and content, it was similar to ISAD(G) and RAD, but also incorporated aspects of ISAAR(CPF) and strongly endorsed the creation of separate entity-based authority

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[44] Kathleen Roe, "Enhanced Authority Control: Is it Time?" *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), 120-121.
[45] Sharry Watson, "Preface to the 2008 Revision," in *Rules for Archival Description*, rev. ed., xiv.
[46] Initiated to explore the potential of harmonizing Canadian and American descriptive standards, the resulting 2003 draft document formed the basis of revised standards in Canada (RAD2) and the United States, as *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004).

files.[47] Like its predecessors, DACS allowed for item-level information but the underlying principles emphasized description at (higher) collective levels.

The standards produced by archival organizations in Canada, the United States and Britain articulate the basic elements considered essential (by members of archival communities) for outlining and contextualizing archival records. These generally focussed on collective description and were intended to ensure some consistency in the basic information provided about records in archival custody. Interestingly, the development and publication of such standards rather served to highlight the significant differences of opinion and practice within archival communities and provoked a great deal of insightful debate, discussion and critique in recent years – they have proven to be just starting points in the discussion, as they were and continue to be challenged, adapted and revised to reflect new developments.[48]

In the years since the widespread implementation of national and international standards, ideas and arguments put forward have pointed to new ways of representing records and their context and to aspects of these which showed potential for expansion and improvement. Some of these have been successfully integrated into practices of arrangement and description within certain systems – one example is the move to series-centred description of records, sometimes with the addition of separate "authority files" for describing records created. Other ideas and suggestions have pointed to significant

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[47] Society of American Archivists (SAA), *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* [DACS], 85-87. The endorsement of authority files in DACS seems to be worded more strongly than those of its Canadian and international counterparts, pointing to the potential economies of this model (especially if institutions shared their contextual information).

[48] According to Sharry Watson, one aim (of RAD2) was to provide a common conceptual framework and "inform the evolution of standardization," rather than excessively restrict descriptive practices. Sharry Watson, "Preface to the 2008 Revision," in *Rules for Archival Description*, rev. ed., xiv.

areas in which existing tools might be strengthened through adaptation of descriptive practices and standardized elements.

The Re-emergence of Diplomatics and the Study of Documents

While developments surrounding descriptive standards brought forward challenges for archivists and inspired much debate, particularly in Canada, the re-emergence of European concepts in the 1970s and 1980s also had a significant effect on archivists, particularly on their approach to the study and interpretation of records. The discipline of diplomatics, which had influenced early archival work in Europe, re-entered North American archival discussions alongside the "rediscovery" of provenance. These gave rise to increasing interest in the characteristics, history and other contextual features of individual and types of documents – interestingly, though such developments apparently ran parallel to standardization efforts, concepts such as *provenance* inspired different results in each case.

Among the influential figures in the resurgence of European concepts and particularly the development of document studies in Canada was Hugh Taylor. Drawing from his experience in various British and Canadian archives, Taylor supported the expansion of records analysis and description beyond simply subject or content. Among other things, he was in favour of administrative histories, arguing for the importance of understanding the history and internal dynamics of administrative (bureaucratic) records-creating entities, in order to interpret the records and their place within the organizational environment.[49] With a view to the complexities of government departments in particular,

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[49] Hugh Taylor, "Administrative History: An Archivist's Need," in *The Archival Imagination: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor*, eds. Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds (Oxford: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2003), 44-51. Originally published in *Canadian Archivist* 2 (1970), 4-9.

an exploration of administrative bodies, both historical developments and the internal dynamics that influence the creation (and maintenance) of records, could help archivists in their arrangement and description efforts, particularly where aspects of provenance are unclear. At the same time, the knowledge of the administration and procedures that gave rise to archival records could also be passed on to researchers, providing valuable insight and guidance (especially for those unfamiliar with the organization).

In addition to supporting the role of administrative histories in the interpretation of archival records, Taylor also pointed out the need for a "modern diplomatics" in archives, one that could leverage the tools of traditional (historical) diplomatics to further assist in the study and interpretation of modern documents. Encouraging the study of how and why records were created, Taylor was significant in the archival shift towards a revived interest in the study of the history of records.[50] Archivists including Barbara Craig, Tom Nesmith and Terry Cook also contributed to the legitimacy of the study of individual records, record types and their histories – by 1985 such studies had been given their own section in the Canadian journal *Archivaria* by its then editor Nesmith. Among articles appearing in this journal, several have focussed on the historical developments of certain genres or types of records, including (business) journals and ledgers; departmental (government/state) records, such as pension and welfare records; land records; diaries and (personal) journals; correspondence; photographs; albums; and maps[51] – in some cases

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[50] Discussed in Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 34-37.

[51] Studies have included: Hugh Grant, "Bookkeeping in the Eighteenth Century: The Grand Journal and the Grand Ledger of the Hudson's Bay Company," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), 143-157; Guy St.-Denis, "Passing the Means Test: The Old-Age Pension Applications of Norfolk County, Ontario, 1929–1948," *Archivaria* 34 (Spring 1994), 75-95; Alex Ross, "The Records of the Hudson's Bay Company Land Department, 1879–1963" *Archivaria* 22 (Summer 1986), 114-119; Brian Masschaele, "Memos and Minutes: Arnold Heeney, the Cabinet War Committee, and the Establishment of the Canadian Cabinet Secretariat During the Second World War," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998), 147-174; Tom Belton, "By Whose

these have intersected with diplomatics-centred approaches to records analysis (seen in articles by those like Tom Belton). Interest in particular types of records and the North American "rediscovery" of the importance of historical and contextual knowledge drew attention to the record and its role in communication.[52] This focus was tied to renewed interest in European archival theory and methods, including diplomatics, but also connected with issues that were emerging regarding records generated (and maintained) in electronic environments.

Support for the analysis of record characteristics and form was significant in early attempts to understand and confront the challenges to archives posed by electronic records. Despite the medieval focus of Mabillon's diplomatics and earlier document-analysis practices, the discipline has persisted, evolved and been adapted to serve the needs of archivists and researchers. By the early 1990s, diplomatics had provoked discussion in North America, with professional journals featuring a number of diplomatics-oriented articles, involving European as well as Canadian and American contributions. Since then, prominent – often critical – voices in the dialogue have included Luciana Duranti, Joan Schwartz, Tom Belton and Robert McIntosh.

The potential uses of the diplomatics approach and methods, not only for historical but also modern – including electronic – records were outlined by Luciana Duranti in a series of six articles published from 1989 to 1990.[53] Duranti's articulation of diplomatics introduced a number of North Americans to the discipline and became the basis for many later document analyses, as interest in the discipline and its potential

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Warrant? Analyzing Documentary Form and Procedure," *Archivaria* 41 (Spring 1996), 206-220, to name a few.
[52] Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 36.
[53] Published in *Archivaria* 28-33 (1989-1990); later published as the single volume *Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press Ltd, 1998).

applications grew. Setting out a modern role for the discipline, Duranti highlighted the importance of form, purpose and relationships of records, pursuing (in particular) issues of authenticity and reliability in the age of electronic records. For those endorsing diplomatics – particularly as a set of methodological tools – diplomatic analysis was adaptable to the challenges posed by non-traditional records, such as those generated in digital (computerized) forms. With increasing numbers of "virtual" documents and the shifting focus of archival analysis towards larger groups of records, rather than individual documents, Duranti argued that identifying aspects of records – such as form and method of creation, preservation and transmission – could provide critical clues for determining records and creators, particularly for documents generated or preserved electronically.

Canadian and American interest in the predominantly European discipline of diplomatics led to much discussion among archivists and numerous articles explaining the methods, history and issues involved in analyzing modern records. In 1996, the *American Archivist* published a special section on "Diplomatics and Modern Records", the content of which resulted from a joint seminar held by both archivists of the University of Michigan and faculty of the French *École nationale des chartes*. Centring on the question of how Mabillon's work might be applicable in a modern era, this issue included both American and French (translated) articles by Bruno Delmas, Francis Blouin, Olivier Guyotjeannin and Elizabeth Yakel, among others. Articles featured in this section discussed not only the history and methods behind diplomatics, but also some of the challenges of adapting the discipline for use with contemporary records and the

potential of a diplomatics-centred approach in helping archivists better understand the records in their care.[54]

Alongside a number of articles emerging in the 1990s, acknowledging the usefulness of diplomatics-based analysis of archival records, significant critiques were also offered, pointing to potential pitfalls in adapting methods developed for records of a different century as well as the limits of approaches articulated by Duranti and others. In a 1998 article, Robert McIntosh questioned the limits of the "neo-Jenkinsonian" assumption of impartiality in records creation and subsequent archiving – an assumption he saw as shared by many of those utilizing diplomatic analysis for archival records.[55] In his study of Canadian World War I records, he discovered that neither their creation nor later selection for archiving was as "unselfconscious" or "impartial" as an approach focussing on strict ideas of "recordness" and "evidence" (requiring authenticity, reliability and accuracy) would suggest. McIntosh pointed out the significance of not only the role played by records creators, but also that of the archivist, in portraying the past, and he argued that these aspects of contextual information – particularly the often invisible role of the archivist – should be made evident and articulated to archive users.[56]

McIntosh was not the first to caution against the limits of a strict adaptation of diplomatic principles – concerns over the risk of narrow applications and a reductive view of records, acts and significant relationships, were also voiced by archivists including Richard Brown, Joan Schwartz, Terry Cook and previously by historians like

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[54] Articles in *American Archivist* 59, no.4 (Fall 1996) include: Francis Blouin's "A Framework for Consideration of Diplomatics in the Electronic Environment," 466-479; Bruno Delmas' "Manifesto for a Contemporary Diplomatics: From Institutional Documents to Organic Information," 438-452: Olivier Guyotjeannin's "The Expansion of Diplomatics as a Discipline," 414-421: and Elizabeth Yakel's "The Way Things Work: Procedures, Processes, and Institutional Records," 454-464.
[55] Robert McIntosh, "The Great War, Archives and Modern Memory," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998), 18-20.
[56] Ibid., 19-20.

Armando Petrucci and Leonard Boyle. Although diplomatics seemed to have the

potential to benefit modern archivists, the methods and practices behind the discipline

had evolved as a means of addressing issues surrounding the documents and technology

of medieval records. As such, the transition to a "modern diplomatics" required both

interpretation and adaptation.

In a formative 1995 article,[57] Joan Schwartz cautioned against the rigid (or

positivistic) application of diplomatics, since the form and technology of modern

communications – as well as our view of these – had evolved a great deal since the 1681

publication of the formative *De re diplomatica*. Supporting a "creative" (rather than

rigid) application of diplomatic principles and procedures, which she applied to the

analysis of photographs, Schwartz argued for diplomatics to be used as

> not a wedge, but a bridge between archival and historical methods ... if
> adopted more as a conceptual framework than as a mechanistic procedure,
> then diplomatics can reveal a great deal about documents, both public and
> private, in all media .... Because functionality and context do not emerge
> solely from the diplomatic analysis of form and structure of photographs,
> diplomatics must be used in conjunction with other contextualizing strategies
> to return documents to the action in which they originally participated.[58]

Although Schwartz's focus at that time was primarily on photographs, her observations

on visual literacy and archival records in general can be applied to visual aspects of

written documents and raise important issues about the various strategies that archivists

should consider when exploring (and describing) archival records. As an analytical

method of inquiry, diplomatics can provide valuable tools to support archival description,

by illuminating patterns in form and procedure relevant to a wide range of records (even

groups of records), regardless of their means of transmission (virtual/electronic or not).

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[57] Joan Schwartz, "'We Make Our Tools and Our Tools Make Us': Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomatics," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), 40-74.
[58] Ibid., 64.

Applying these "creatively" as Schwartz suggested, avoiding positivistic assumptions of truth and objectivity, would require that aspects of diplomatics be utilized in conjunction with other elements of current archival theory, in order to broaden the provenance and contextual aspects and histories of archival records.

Interest in diplomatic analysis and document studies, as a means of considering various aspects of records provenance, has been significant in adding to the range of possibilities that might be explored by archivists for the purposes of understanding and representing the "multifaceted contextuality" of the records in their care. The numerous works produced have not only created a wealth of sources on which further study may be based but also one from which archivists might draw to enhance the description and the content provided in formal description systems. As Schwartz pointed out, however, the benefits that might be gained from utilizing diplomatic methods could be undermined by rigid application of a single approach or set of analytical procedures.

While diplomatics and studies of documents have pointed to the significance of form, structure, characteristics, procedures, histories, relationships, and other contextual features, a number of archivists have also pushed the envelope further, pointing to aspects of records not captured in much of conventional practice. In particular, they have raised questions relating to communication, the symbolic significance of documents and their relationship to the individuals and societies which created them. Generally, such qualities can be associated with the concept of *intrinsic value* – that is the usefulness or significance inherent to an item, generally independent of both informational (content) and evidential value; a document written by a famous person is one example of this.[59]

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[59] Based on Pearce-Moses, *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, s.v. "intrinsic value."

The idea was familiar to archivists by the 1970s and became the subject of a committee of the U.S. National Archives and Records Service (NARS). However, as late as the 1990s, there were concerns that archivists were often focussing on practical and utilitarian influences on records histories, while overlooking the embedded more symbolic elements.[60]

Canadian Hugh Taylor was a prominent figure in drawing attention to the embedded qualities and complex contexts of archival records. As early as 1976, he had cautioned archivists to try to understand the characteristics of the media of the records in their care, the embedded "messages" beyond the literal content expressed to the reader.[61] Drawing inspiration from developments in the study of communications, medieval history, anthropology and sociology, he drew attention to the complexities of archival records, beyond the traditional content or evidential focus, and to challenge archivists to explore these other aspects of provenance and meaning.

In a 1988 article, Taylor examined the role of written records in society and the relationship between these and previously dominant oral forms that they had absorbed. Medieval records in particular pointed to the integration of aspects of older forms (oral traditions) into new media (such as written documents), one example being the shifting uses and appearances of seals – originally an important and sometimes large physical appendage to a document and now a smaller image that remains significant only to some types of modern records, mostly in legal or religious settings. Medievalists, including

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[60] Notably articulated in James M. O'Toole, "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993), 234-255.

[61] Hugh Taylor, "The Media of Record: Archives in the Wake of McLuhan," in *The Archival Imagination: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor*, eds. Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds (Oxford: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2003), 63-73. Originally published in *Georgia Archive* 6 (Spring 1978), 1-10. According to Taylor himself, in a reflection following the 2003 reprint, his earliest attempt to convey the importance of media, as a conveyor of a message, was at a 1976 Society of American Archivists conference.

M.T. Clanchy, studying literacy and medieval documents, have contributed a great deal to the study of records and the development of particular forms of documents, many of which are still used today (such as wills, contracts and charters).[62] Taylor recognized the value of such cross-disciplinary exploration of records, their creation and use, and was significant in bringing forward important questions regarding aspects of records that lay outside of their literal interpretation – such ideas were further explored by later archivists.

In a 1993 article, James O'Toole explored some of the symbolic complexities of archival records, drawing not only from the work of prior archivists but also from medieval historians. Pointing out that the strictly utilitarian approach to understanding records may have had more to do with the government records focus of the archivists involved, rather than the records themselves, O'Toole raised the idea of symbolic significance and non-utilitarian motivations in creating records. Insights drawn from both classical and medieval historians supported the idea that writing had a more complex role in many societies, particularly those for which oral communication was a central element. In this context, as O'Toole points out, there may be a greater meaning and significance in the symbolic nature of written records – tied to their creation, value and later use – than can be seen in the surface text (or informational content), read literally. This approach to exploring the "symbolic significance" of archival records points to physical attributes, as well as considerations of the language and form of the documents themselves, as indicators of other "messages" being conveyed.[63]

The postmodern turn to consider the complex messages, symbolic power and social interaction with records, offered archivists further opportunity to engage in

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[62] M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993).
[63] O'Toole, "The Symbolic Significance of Archives."

document-centred studies and employ elements of diplomatic analysis in a creative (yet still critical) way. Given the immense possibilities put forward for the creative application of diplomatic-based tools and approaches, as well as the exploration of many aspects of records, archivists have many options and complexities to keep in mind, as they strive to fulfil their responsibilities. Yet the question remains: how might such possibilities and resources – used mainly in document studies and analysis – be applied to benefit archive users?

Numerous contributions have been made to archival knowledge of the form, structure, characteristics, procedures, histories, and relationships involved in many documents, from photographs to maps to legal documents to corporate ledgers and government forms (and others in between). But individuals searching for a particular document may only have access to the descriptive tools provided on archival websites, particularly if they are less familiar with the records in question and are conducting most of their research from a distance. Archivists and those similarly familiar with the complexities of archival records know that contextual knowledge can provide valuable insight and that documents in any form contain patterns and cues that can cloud – or clarify – their meaning. In some cases, such knowledge might be shared through one-on-one interaction with the user but new archival audiences may rely on remote access to archival research tools; in such cases, the descriptive system needs to be the intermediary for the archivist, providing as much assistance as possible to enable independent research.

Document Studies, Descriptive Systems

While archival literature in North America suggests that the complexities of records (and their contexts) have been widely recognized and discussed since the 1980s,

this seems to have had a limited effect on how the same records are represented in formal descriptive systems. Standards developed to guide description, including RAD, ISAD(G) and DACS, seem to acknowledge (to some extent) features of some parts of the fonds, series or other grouping of records being described, such as intellectual characteristics and documentary forms – noted in relation to Scope and Content sections, as well as titles.[64] However, the detail provided for individual items (or identification of common features) depends on the level of arrangement and description involved, and the frequency of characteristics or forms within the arranged groupings; titles and summary statements (even lists) may include mention of items according to their forms, referring to "wills" or "minutes" or "logbooks," for example. Processes and procedures may also be noted at series-, file- or item-level description, and formal descriptive systems developed for archival institutions (based on these standards) may contain additional detail within their descriptive entries, but much of this is discretionary and likely still at a very summary level. Many of the examples provided within the standards seem to reinforce a somewhat minimalist approach, in which types of common items may be referred to – alongside some (brief) explanation of provenance – but not particularly explained. While current standards point to many significant (and useful) areas of information and have allowed for the development of innovative archival descriptive systems, the wealth of analysis and exploration of archival records point to ways in which descriptive tools might be further enhanced and developed into more comprehensive resources for researchers, enabling greater sharing of knowledge regarding archival records.

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[64] For rules and examples, see *Rules for Archival Description*, rev. ed. [RAD2], ch.1, 20-21, 59-62; *ISAD(G)*, 2nd ed., 22-24; and Society of American Archivists (SAA), *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* [DACS], 21, 35-39.

Traditional archival practices have been complemented, challenged and enhanced over many years through the integration of tools and concepts from disciplines like diplomatics. Though diplomatics-based tools and approaches have been adopted for use in analyzing and researching textual and photographic records alike, and in developing criteria to assist archives in dealing with records from electronic environments, these do not appear to have yet been fully leveraged in such a way as to help archive users to make sense of records they might find within archival holdings. The challenge may lie in the gap between archival enthusiasm for document-based study and the primarily collective focus of descriptive tools and formal archival description systems. However, archivists have long had to reconcile the competing demands of individual item-level attention and collective-level focus; concepts such as provenance allow for the collective representation of some common aspects of certain records, such as their administrative and custodial histories. At the same time, much of diplomatic analysis is based on the patterns inherent in certain types of written communication (despite different content). A middle ground would seem to require an approach which acknowledges the individuality of the documents within descriptive units, yet points out to users the characteristics, histories and other contextual features shared between them.

Diplomatic analysis and document studies have highlighted many complex qualities of archival records, yet also provided precedents (and tools) for identifying common features and qualities. Postmodern rethinking of archives and the role of the archivist has pointed to the dangers of relying on an inflexible positivistic approach to records, while the responsibilities of archivists for immense quantities of records make individual analysis and description of each item in their care impractical and undesirable.

Yet, at the same time, the richness of the various studies and explorations of many different individual documents and groups of records compare starkly with the comparatively minimal information made available to the public, through formal descriptive systems.

While "modern diplomatics" and the study of particular documents may not obviously lend themselves to integration with descriptive standards, perhaps some of the underlying elements could be creatively applied to enhance descriptive systems. Future developments could not only draw from descriptive standards and document studies but also take into consideration the way institutions have adapted these standards in the development of formal descriptive systems and some of the proposals put forward to enhance them.

Directions for Enhancing Description

In the years since their initial publication, standards for archival description have been frequently challenged and, in some cases, revised to address concerns and developments within archival communities. The adoption of the archival authority file into Canadian, American and international standards is one example of this, which followed increasing interest in the Australian series system, particularly in Canada, and incorporation of aspects of this into the descriptive systems of archives in Ontario and Manitoba. The increasingly prominent role of functional analysis in archival theory and practice, especially surrounding appraisal, seems to have had a similar effect: in 2007 the ICA published *International Standard for Describing Functions* (ISDF) and made provision for (optional) function-based authority records within their descriptive model. Revisions, modifications and expansions such as these have resulted in a useful

conceptual framework and broadening range of resources which may be used to guide the description of archival records.

User-Archives Interactions and Social Provenance

> *[Archival] Description should be seen as the action mediated by archivists of researching and representing the multi-faceted contextuality (or history of records or "archival narrative" about them) which enables records and knowledge to be made through archiving.*[65]

More than a decade after the publication of the (complete) first edition of RAD – as the Canadian-U.S. task force considered areas of common ground on description – a number of ideas came forward from the wider archival community to further discussion of representation and provenance in archival description. In a challenge to traditional practices, emerging issues included the role of the archivist and archive user, and the assumed objectivity and invisibility of archival activities.

In a 2002 article, Verne Harris and Wendy Duff questioned the assumed objectivity of descriptions prepared by archivists (their "narratives") and pointed to the power dynamics involved in archival processes like description. Duff and Harris argued that "descriptive architectures" should not dictate a single interpretation but rather be more inclusive and incorporate a wider variety of narrative voices, providing greater transparency and permeability (for input from outside users).[66]

The same year as Duff and Harris raised their concerns, Tom Hyry and Michelle Light also acknowledged the subjectivity of archival practice and suggested that finding aids could invite and incorporate the "multiplicity of voices" called for, while also noting archival interventions and encouraging the "self-conscious perspective" traditionally

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[65] Nesmith, "Reopening Archives," 270.
[66] Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 21-43.

lacking in archival description. Hyry and Light outlined two additions (to the finding aid) to accomplish this: the colophon and the annotation. The colophon, added at the end of descriptions, was proposed to include information about the collection and particularly feature notes on its production, allowing for the "self-conscious perspective" presently lacking. The annotation could serve as a mechanism for including a variety of user voices, through such forms as (virtual) user bulletin boards, while also allowing information to be added by the archivist, as knowledge of the records expanded.[67]

Further concerns regarding the shortcomings of descriptive practice and potential improvements were raised in the early 2000s. In 2005, Tom Nesmith observed that "most formal systems of descriptive standards for archives now lack key components of information about the context of creation of the records, or do not use them very effectively if they are there" – while limited information is provided for the functions and administrative structures or persons behind the initial creation of records, the limited coverage of "the related societal, procedural, record-keeping, and organizational culture contexts … 'the way things work' to shape initial records inscription" was a particular source of concern.[68] Favouring Duff and Harris's "user-friendly" architecture, Nesmith also highlighted potential for description to incorporate more information (and broader narratives) regarding the "societal provenance" of the records[69] themselves – including complex social interactions and influences affecting records creation and use – and their "multi-faceted contextuality" (particularly through more extensive records histories). He proposed that more extensive provenance information (such as societal context) could be

[67] Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 65 (Fall/Winter 2002), 216-230.
[68] Nesmith, "Reopening Archives," 270, and citing Yakel, "The Way Things Work."
[69] Nesmith, "The Concept of Societal Provenance: Implications for Archival Theory and Practice" *Archival Science* 6 (2006), 351-360.

added in the form of a range of optional essays, providing further assistance to researchers and other interested users.[70]

With increased attention given to advancing archival tools (to assist researchers with accessing and interpreting records), certain institutions have undertaken efforts to offer additional enhanced web-based resources. The approaches and goals have varied, as have the ways in which the tools are connected (or not) to the formal archival descriptive systems. The National Archives of the United Kingdom has been among those institutions incorporating user input into their online resources; virtual visitors are invited to contribute to the *Your Archives* wiki their own articles, transcripts or collective projects relating to British archival sources.[71] Additionally, resources available online include user-oriented explanatory documents and tutorials, designed to assist less-experienced (virtual) visitors with examining and interpreting certain types of records, such as wills and probate records. While this form-specific focus was most likely devised to support independent research by those unfamiliar with the script and conventions (and often language) of British documents – perhaps genealogists from overseas – the resulting tools not only explain record features, with examples and illustrations, but also provide some contextual background, similar to what has been identified as lacking within a number of North American institutions.

Another innovative approach was tested in the United States, with the "Next Generation Finding Aid Project," which explored possible archival application of social navigation features, including user-based commenting, collaborative filtering,

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[70] Nesmith, "Reopening Archives," 271–273.
[71] The *Your Archives* wiki is connected to the website of the National Archives of the United Kingdom, http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Home_page (accessed January 2012). Note: UKNA was in the process of closing the *Your Archives* wiki, as of February 2012, in favour of the more "seamless" system being developed, named *Discovery* (in beta-testing, at the time they noted this).

bookmarking and visitor awareness.[72] Designed as an experiment, the project centred on

a well-documented collection of records and the archives team was able to observe how

the added applications were used by researchers, putting to the test some of the ideas for

"multiple voices" in archival description which had been suggested in the early 2000s. In

the years since, archivists such as Yakel (especially in two 2011 articles) have continued

to discuss the relationship between archivists, users and records, and have further

challenged the way in which authority plays out, particularly on the Web.[73] Reflecting on

the Next Generation Finding Aid Project, Yakel particularly points to the benefits of

shifting from a paradigm of description as being predominantly mediated by archives

(and archivists) to one involving shared authority and collaboration on web-based

descriptive tools and projects.[74]

Records Forms and Authority Files

Alongside suggestions of how to incorporate further contextual detail and

multiple (narrative) voices into archival descriptive practices, some of the ideas that

emerged since the discussions of the 1980s have also pointed to the benefits of added

focus on features of the records themselves. While histories and analyses of records, their

form and characteristics, have been featured in several journals and publications since the

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[72] Developed for the Polar Bear Expedition Collection, at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library. Official *Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collection* website at http://polarbears.si.umich.edu/index.pl?node_id=1163&lastnode_id=1163 (accessed August 2011). The project itself is described in Elizabeth Yakel, Seth Shaw and Polly Reynolds, "Creating the Next Generation of Archival Finding Aid," *D-Lib Magazine* 13, no. 5-6 (May/June 2007), available at http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may07/yakel/05yakel.html (accessed August 2011).

[73] Reviewed by Yakel as part of two follow-up articles: "Balancing Archival Authority with Encouraging Authentic Voices to Engage with Records," in *A Different Kind of Web: New Connections Between Archives and Our Users*, ed. Kate Theimer (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011), 75-101; and "Who Represents the Past? Archives, Records and the Social Web," in *Controlling the Past: Documenting Societies and Institutions – Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels*, ed. Terry Cook (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011), 257-278.

[74] Yakel, "Who Represents the Past? Archives, Records and the Social Web."

1990s, the integration of specialized "form of material" information into archival description has varied, with what appears to be less success than functional and creator-based (authority) descriptions. However, the integration of series-based description and authority files (for records creators) into RAD and ICA-guided approaches have demonstrated the potential for expansion and provided precedents for enhancing current practices through adoption of additional means of representing records and provenance.

In an influential 1985 article, David Bearman and Richard Lytle offered a critique of provenance that not only pointed to the defects in its applications but suggested a number of ways in which it might be used to enhance archival retrieval tools. Firmly in favour of using authority files to separate contextual information about records from that of their creators, the authors saw provenance information as a source of access points, the "intellectual handles" or characteristics "used in conjunction with other characteristics to identify a set of objects for examination."[75] Since records were often created as a result of administrative entities fulfilling prescribed functions (particularly in government or institutional settings), these functions were identified as key elements of provenance – an approach which at that time had been supported by some archivists from Australia but was only later adopted by American and Canadian archivists, later still incorporated into national and international guidelines.

For Bearman and Lytle, however, function alone was not enough and the closely connected "form of material" was needed for providing better access points ("intellectual content descriptors") for retrieval systems. Based in commonalities in structure, these forms of material were already identified by archivists in their designations of record type

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[75] David A. Bearman and Richard H. Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985–86), 21.

(e.g. correspondence, day books, central registry files), a "cultural shorthand" pointing to the informational content of such records without requiring the archivist (or researcher) to read each one.[76] As certain types of records generally follow certain patterns and contain particular kinds of information, allowing for some change over time, Bearman and Lytle pointed to the potential for universal descriptions of "form" – controlled in separate authority files. As additions to existing description, these would not only help with retrieval systems (in part by standardizing terminology) but also provide a space to offer better explanation and analysis of records, including their social provenance and even additional user-focussed guidance.

In 1987, continuing to make the case for the importance of record form and characteristics, an article by David Bearman and Peter Sigmond explored *broncommentaren* – source commentaries created for archival records in the Netherlands, which incorporate "form of material" analysis. Of particular interest was the Dutch approach to record types and description: working with definitions of record types that had been defined in lists published in Holland in 1962 and revised in 1983, Dutch description of records could take advantage of this set of standardized terms – the first step in a broader (even cross-institutional) system of description envisioned by the authors. Intended "to expand existing knowledge about sources that are important for the history of the Netherlands and to stimulate the critical use of sources," the *broncommentaren* were developed under the governance of a committee of archivists and historians (after Dutch historians indicated that they were also interested in the "regularities" of certain types of records) and published in groups according to themes,

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[76] Ibid., 22.

such as property registration.[77] Bearman and Sigmond identified several required

information elements:

- the jurisdiction, purpose and appearance of the records;
- the administrative and juridical history, including legislative authority, juridical decisions and administrative determinations regarding use, as well as the reliability of the records;
- locations where such records might be found (e.g. the type of archives),
- related forms of material (that might confirm information content), and
- literature pertaining or referencing the record type; and lastly,
- advice on how the information content of the records might be used.

While Dutch inventories were generally "not supposed to contain details of the contents

of specific records, regardless of the potential value of such information to researchers,"[78]

the *broncommentaren* were designed to capture much of the knowledge of the records

developed by the archivist through processing but left out of the descriptive tools. Several

aspects of this initiative appealed to Bearman and Sigmond, especially the potential of

such commentaries, if generated and shared between institutions.

In a later article,[79] Peter Sigmond continued in this line of exploration by further

looking at some of the benefits – for archivists and researchers alike – of considering the

structure, forms and functions of institutional records. Drawing attention to approaches

employed and emerging from the Netherlands, he pointed to the use of "forms" and

formalized types of documents within institutions (along standardized procedures) as

indicative of the internal patterns of decision-making within a bureaucracy. As it is record

forms or types that often form the basis of Dutch archival *inventories*, these are not

"easy" tools for the casual user, as they are based on common characteristics rather than

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[77] Available through the Institute of Netherlands History (Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis) website, http://www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/Broncommentaren/index_html_en.

[78] David Bearman and Peter Sigmond, "Explorations of Form of Material Authority Files by Dutch Archivists," *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987), 250.

[79] J. Peter Sigmond, "Form, Function and Archival Value," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-1992), 141-147.

specific content;[80] however, knowledge of these formalized types of records can, in many cases, shed light on the range of information likely to be included in them. Based on examination of special types of records (and their procedures) used by nineteenth-century organizations, the Dutch series of *broncommentaren* serves as an example of how consideration of types of formal records could be used to share with researchers the knowledge gained by archivists of the characteristics (form, structure), function, procedure and provenance of archival documents.

The commentaries developed by Dutch archivists and historians provide an intriguing example of the kind of separate authority files argued for by those like Bearman, Lytle and Sigmond. Written by (external) experts selected by the editorial committee, the source commentaries included sections for describing the historical context of the form of material, features of its appearance and evolution of these over time, the administrative and juridical history – including mention of whether (or when) the form was or was not a reliable source of information – reference information as to locations, related forms of material, related readings, and advice on using the type of record. In Canada and the United States, the complexities of numerous types of records and their historical development have been subjects of study for archivists, historians and scholars representing a number of related fields. The Dutch project suggests that these resources, if drawn together, could significantly enhance archival reference tools, through similar multi-institutional authority files.

The idea of developing separate "form of material" authority files did not seem to catch on – at least in Canada or the United States – in the years following the articles by

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[80] Ibid., 146.

Bearman, Lytle and Sigmond. As Dutch archival practices put greater emphasis on form

of material, providing a natural starting point for the *broncommentaren*, Bearman and

Sigmond suggested that these archivists were more accustomed to using "forms of

material" as terms of description than as potential access points.[81] In Canada and the

United States, the wealth of literature emerging in recent years regarding certain forms or

types of records suggests that there might now be the interest and expertise required to

enable a similar focus in description, particularly as such analyses and explorations have

grown to involve records generated in electronic environments.

Advancements in the area of electronic records and their environments seem to

have contributed significantly to interest in record characteristics and history. It has been

observed that while media of communications (particularly written) may change with

technological developments, many of the records themselves can still be recognizably

linked to their predecessors – Bearman and Lytle noted:

> A bank cheque, written on a watermelon, is nonetheless a cheque and even
> negotiable! Less extreme, but equally interesting to the authors, is the fact
> that memoranda are recognizably memoranda, even when circulated as
> electronic mail.[82]

The growing prominence of electronic records, particularly within the archival

profession, provides added incentive to consider the significance of elements and features

of the records being described. Upon reflection in recent years, Bearman has further

suggested that analysis of these forms (and their "structural formalisms") could provide

the basis for a scholarly "markup" of digital records, which could be developed into a

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[81] Bearman and Sigmond, 251.
[82] Bearman and Lytle, 22.

mechanism to add contextual information to the representation of certain types of records, one that could facilitate, through automation, various archival activities.[83]

As Bearman and Lytle pointed out in 1985, a specific term used by archivists to identify a type of record (e.g. registers, contracts, wills, logbooks) can serve as a "cultural shorthand" that points to the information content of that record.[84] However, the usefulness of this shorthand to those attempting to navigate reference tools and access archive holdings depends upon the consistent application of such terminology and the user's prior knowledge of these record forms, their creators and potentially the changes in both over time. This becomes more challenging with the shift in media, where certain forms historically manifested on paper (such as correspondence or register books) are adopted into electronic communications environments. American archivist and educator Margaret Hedstrom noted that although records in both electronic and paper formats require descriptions that include information sufficient "to render them available, understandable and usable," the requirements for electronic records may equal or exceed those of their paper or analogue counterparts – for example, when the electronic records involve data values that require the "code-book" to decipher.[85]

Hedstrom's analogy – and its source – draws attention to the "representational schemes" found in various record types (regardless of media), where users may require a contextual "code book" to interpret content and identify external reference points, such as other records or events in the socio-historical context. Regardless of format, the

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[83] He highlights the benefits in determining the appropriate retention and disposition of records. David Bearman, "Structural Formalisms in Documentation: Reflecting Function and Supporting Meaning," in *Controlling the Past*, 241-256.

[84] Bearman and Lytle, 22.

[85] Margaret Hedstrom, "Descriptive Practices for Electronic Records: Deciding What is Essential and Imagining What is Possible," *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993), 55, 57.

information or data provided to users will affect their ability to use records. As Hedstrom

notes, in the case of email,

> to understand the meaning and significance of electronic email messages,
> future users will need contextual information about an email system, such as
> who used email and whether an organization considered the email system a
> mode for official communications, in order to determine whether the
> electronic messages are authentic reflections of events and transactions.[86]

Authority files focussed on record forms appear to be well-suited to assisting users with

the challenges of identifying and interpreting records found in various media formats. In

the case of persistent forms, the connection between newer and older versions of certain

types of records, as well as changes to these over time, is a significant part of their wider

provenance and knowledge of these could prove useful to researchers. Moreover, a

"source commentary" that considered such developments and also offered explanation of

the features, structure and issues associated with complex record types could provide

guidance to help the independent user interpret the records they find (and their content),

regardless of their media of origin.

     While authority files have the potential to enhance the descriptive tools provided

to users, they do involve challenges. The adoption of new authority files based on record

types or "form of material" is an idea that has not gained a great deal of traction since the

arguments of Bearman, Lytle and Sigmond, among others. However, since that time,

there have been a number of shifts within the archival profession and description in

particular which may provide a firmer footing from which to start. Among these changes

has been the development and increased use of "enhanced authority files," augmented

with further information than found in their traditional library counterparts – for

describing records-creating entities.

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[86] Ibid., 57.

In the 1980s, the separation of information regarding records creators from description of the records themselves represented a major challenge to the single descriptive narrative approach. However, systems incorporating these have since been developed and have shown that such reorganization is both technologically possible and potentially quite useful and economical. Authority files for administrative entities, such as government departments, enable the representation of complex multi-level relationships within an environment of ever-changing functions and responsibilities. At the same time, a single authority record, linked to multiple descriptive entries for records, means that only the main authority file requires updating to reflect changing administrative dynamics.[87] So far, such authority files have primarily been used for describing records-creating entities, but the available literature suggests these might have wider potential applications.

Archives, Description and Documents

The changing role of the archivist and the significance of description are challenging archivists to reconsider traditional practices and the approaches they have taken in representing records. The breadth and depth of discussions and explorations pursued within the archival community underline the complexities and challenges of intellectually arranging and describing archival records, so that tools provided to researchers not only help identify items, but also contextualize these records by illuminating their history, purposes and relationships with other records and the individuals or groups of people who were part of these processes.

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[87] For further discussion of the background and development of ISAAR(CPF), see Sharon Thibodeau, "Archival Context as Archival Authority Record: The ISAAR(CPF)," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), 75-85.

Studies and analyses of documents point to the complexity but also contextual richness of various documents, consideration of which could benefit archive users, if integrated into archival descriptive systems. Adaptations undertaken and enhancements suggested for these systems highlight the future directions for development, to better accommodate new ideas and the widening boundaries of provenance. The following chapters will use the example of the will to explore further the challenges and potential of representing the characteristics and contextual features of individual documents, with a view to suggested adaptations of descriptive systems, such as the "form of material" authority file, and what elements would be necessary to adequately represent such record types within archival descriptive systems.

CHAPTER TWO

Exploring Records Forms and Features in Archival Description:

Using Wills as a Case Study

Since the 1980s, archivists in several countries, including Canada, have witnessed growing interest in both archival description and in the contextual features of records themselves. The resulting discussions and the development and implementation of various descriptive standards, systems and practices (with their accompanying critiques), have challenged archivists to find new ways to represent records and to reconsider their role and relationship with archive users, especially given the movement towards electronic reference resources and the widening of their potential audiences. Critiques and calls for expansion of the descriptive tools provided for users have led to innovative responses, particularly the reorganization and refocusing of descriptive content, and the adoption of the archival (enhanced) authority file, which is similar to those used in representations of library materials but adapted to suit the needs of archival description.[1]

Currently in Canada, quite a number of archives provide access to their collections and reference tools, including various descriptive finding aids, through the World Wide Web, with large organizations managing customized descriptive databases. Descriptions created for online access through these systems are intended to represent records and their creators in such a way as to assist users in finding the records that they seek. However, the tools provided can take many forms and the content of tools provided has been subject to much examination and discussion since the implementation of

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[1] The archival authority file generally takes on additional fields to present contextual information – in the case of ISAAR(CPF), this includes the history, functions and relationships of a particular records creator. Within this thesis, the term "authority file" will be used to refer to the enhanced version employed by archives (interchangeable with "archival authority file"), unless otherwise indicated.

standards. Several archivists (many cited earlier) have called for further development of

the content and structure of description, so as to better help users interpret and make

sense of records, through an understanding of their context of creation and use. Taking

into consideration several of these arguments, this section takes a closer look at the kinds

of information that might be captured pertaining to record types (or "form of material"[2]).

As the range of records in archives and their various physical media provide too

wide a scope for one thesis, the records and their representations within archival

databases explored here are limited to types of records which are: (1) primarily textual in

nature; and (2) involve structure and content features which are regulated through the

influence of larger institutional[3] entities, such as the governing body of a business or

other juridical entity.[4] These institutional records include many types of complex

documents (and groups of documents) and create challenges for comparing and

explaining them – the will is one such example, which will be examined in further detail,

as a type of record for which a focussed descriptive tool, such as an authority file, might

be created. Document-centred studies and histories point to some of the significant

features of such records, while archival work and discussion (in North America and

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[2] This was the term used by Bearman and Sigmond in their article "Explorations of Form of Material Authority Files by Dutch Archivists," *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987), 249-253; the practice was carried on in later articles, including Bearman's "Documenting Documentation," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), 33-49, and Sigmond's "Form, Function and Archival Value." *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-1992), 141-147. For present purposes, "record type" is preferred but both terms will be used interchangeably.

[3] According to Duranti, an institution is a "social body firmly built on common needs, and provided with the means and power to satisfy them." Duranti, "The Fact, the Act, and the Function of Documents," in *Diplomatics*, 60-61.

[4] Drawing from the field of diplomatics, the term "juridical person" is used to identify "an entity, constituted either by a collection or succession of natural or physical persons, that can take part in legal actions." Richard Pearce-Moses, *Glossary of Archives and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), s.v. "juridical person," http://www.archivists.org/glossary/.

abroad) provide a useful starting point for imagining the content, structure and role which may be taken by additions to current descriptive systems.

Institutional Types of Records

> *Every social group ensures an ordered development of the relationships among its members by means of rules. Some of the rules of social life arise from the ad hoc consent of small numbers of people; others are established and enforced by an "institution," that is, by a social body firmly built on common needs, and provided with the means and power to satisfy them.*[5]

Records influenced by the rules of institutional bodies, such as government or judicial entities, are often somewhat formal in structure (following a prescribed pattern), preserving features and remnants of historical traditions. Individual document examples of these include those created for private legal purposes, such as contracts or wills. Other examples involving multi-part records include financial accounts, logs or journals, which are physically separate but may continue the same formal structure over multiple volumes.

The range of document-based explorations and analyses produced by archivists and specialists in various fields has brought to the fore the significance of complex elements of written communication, including form, process and socio-historical developments, in the interpretation of records. Given the growing recognition of such complexities, archivists and individuals in other fields are increasingly calling for the consideration of these details and, where possible, their inclusion in research tools provided to archive users. Among the best candidates for form-based archival authority files are records with formal structures regulated by institutional entities, which often form a substantial part of areas of business, law and government.

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[5] Duranti, "The Fact, the Act, and the Function of Documents," in *Diplomatics*, 60-61.

Large collections of institutional records can be found in the holdings of a number of Canadian archives. Though frequently associated with functions and activities of governmental entities, these records can also originate and play a significant role in the functioning of private businesses, as is represented in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) at the Archives of Manitoba.[6] Among these records are several formal types of records, created and maintained through company practices and regulated by the Governor and Committee. HBC records, including logbooks, post journals, ledgers and even the annual official correspondence (involving reports from posts) were part of a complex web of communication and control of overseas operations by the London committee and agents.[7]

In addition to documenting transactions and other business activities, the HBC was also involved in the creation of a number of types of formal records relating to the personal affairs of company employees. Among HBCA records are marriage contracts and wills of employees, which have formal features and procedures, regulated through legal entities and customs, but also contain personal content. While many examples of institutional types of documents can be found in HBCA collections, it should be noted that several of these can also be found in other kinds of archives, particularly among government records. The recurrence of such record types across multiple institutions suggests that separate explanation of forms such as the will could not only help

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[6] The Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), as part of the Archives of Manitoba, is represented within the Archives of Manitoba's descriptive database (known as Keystone).

[7] Connections between communication, record-keeping procedures and control in the HBC are discussed more fully in Michael O'Leary et al., "Distributed Work Over the Centuries: Trust and Control in the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1836," in *Distributed Work*, eds. Pamela J. Hinds and Sara Kiesler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 27-54. Joanne Yates also studies the interaction of the technology of writing with turn-of-the-century American businesses, in *Control Through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

researchers navigate the complexities of such a document in one archive but could draw

connections across several, expanding the view of the document, while at the same time

providing a central point of reference for information on a particular type of record.

Collaboration on and virtual unification of authority records seems to be the

direction in which the ideas articulated by Bearman, Lytle, Sigmond and others are

pointing. However, challenges facing such efforts may arise from the organizing and

formulating of appropriate authority files and determining if enough is known about a

particular type of document to complete one. As a means of exploring this territory, in the

next section I will take a closer look at one example record type – the will – its history

and complexities, and consider how they might contribute to description based on this

type of document.

For the purposes of this thesis, the focus will be on the will that developed in

England and was adopted in Anglo-Canadian practices.[8] The following section explores

the development of the will in its historical context, looks at wills in archival collections,

and considers the formal elements of the will from these examples.

Example Document: the Will

> *Things had to be done right, and she directed me to place a finger tip on a little red dot while I intoned, 'This is my very act and deed,' as I appended my signature next to the dot... Here was a human decision, an 'act' limited by the nature of the medium so that the medium absorbed the deed as in 'title deed' to become a memory. What exactly was that decision and to what extent did the medium of record affect its meaning?*[9]

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[8] Thorough exploration of French and French-Canadian legal traditions and wills would likely require more space and attention than can be provided within the scope of the current work.

[9] From a 2000 reflection written by Hugh Taylor, regarding the circumstances which inspired his 1988 article, " 'My Very Act and Deed'," and appended to the article for the 2003 collection, *The Archival Imagination: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor*, eds. Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds (Oxford: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2003), 144-145.

The concept and practices allowing individuals in countries like Canada to determine how their belongings will be distributed and responsibilities taken care of in the event of their death, have led to the development of a group of formal documents which are closely tied to historical traditions, yet at the same time occupy a significant place in modern practices. Most prominent among these documents is the written *will*, which contains the statement of what the individual (the *testator* or *testatrix*) has decided should happen to their property, as well as their preferences in other matters (such as guardianship arrangements for dependents) and sometimes declarations or parting words for the intended audience, generally made up of friends and family members.

In some ways, the will may seem a simple and uncomplicated written statement (especially in cases where the content is brief and pertains to a small estate), but it is also a type of document which has developed over multiple centuries, adapted to the changing ideas and needs of the surrounding communities, and become an important part of many European-based systems of (legal) inheritance, in countries including the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. The modern will is a *dispositive* document, that is, it puts into existence an act (to bequeath, in this case) "the effects of which [are] determined by the writing itself"[10] (in the expression of the testator's wishes); in this way, the action is not only closely tied to the resulting document and its medium but, as Hugh Taylor observed, is absorbed by it.

The historical origins of the will – particularly in its British and Canadian articulations – have been traced back to Anglo-Saxon oral traditions and subsequent developments in medieval England. Within a predominantly oral society, the ancestor of

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[10] Duranti, "The Fact, the Act, and the Function of Documents," in *Diplomatics,* 65.

the modern will began as an evidential document, noting that an act (such as the gift of certain possessions) had taken place and identifying the individuals involved. Only later did the writing of the document become a central part of the action, as the written articulation of the testator's wishes.

The modern will of English tradition, adopted in Canada as well as the UK, is a type of document that is created and probated according to rules and procedures determined by government (and interpreted by judicial) entities, yet many elements were developed long before the will was declared legally binding and before its validity was determined by secular courts. Historically rooted in medieval Europe and particularly the social and legal developments within Anglo-Saxon England, this written will and practices associated with it emerged within a complex environment that involved changing Germanic customs of inheritance and concepts of property, as well as increasing involvement of the Catholic Church in such affairs and the development of a central role for written records within what had been a predominantly oral society.

Early Origins of the Will

Exploring the history of the English will, medievalist Michael Sheehan[11] has pointed to the role of Christianity as an integral influence in shaping the practices and traditions surrounding it. Though the pre-existing customs of inheritance among the Germanic inhabitants of pre-Norman Britain are not altogether known, the distribution of property seems to have included the idea that a property owner could enjoy use of (or

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[11] Michael J. Sheehan, *The Will in Medieval England: From the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to the End of the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1963).

control over) his possessions, even after his death.[12] It appears that Christianity introduced the further concept that the deceased might put his possessions towards securing his future after death, freeing a portion of his belongings from custom-based inheritance claims of his family and diverting it towards the charitable giving of alms. These sorts of donations would have supported the social and liturgical obligations undertaken by the Church, and the fifth century saw excommunication used as punishment against those who failed to distribute alms according to the wishes of the deceased.[13]

Sheehan connects the origins of the will to a "profound change" amongst Anglo-Saxons, with the idea of giving alms leading to the notion of a right to make bequests and the corresponding legal instruments allowing individuals to do so.[14] The development of church courts provided not only the ability to enforce charitable bequests, but also other bequests and instructions from the deceased regarding distribution of property. Though Anglo-Saxon traditions of bequest were primarily oral, written documents were created describing the act (generally after the fact), to serve as evidence.[15] These documents would have (for a long time) been created by priests, who were in a position to remind testators as to their charitable obligations and the transgressions they might atone for through their bequests.[16]

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[12] Sheehan based his interpretation on accounts of the dead being buried or burned along with their possessions; ibid., 6.
[13] Ibid., 11.
[14] Ibid., 3.
[15] Ibid., 20, 54.
[16] Karen Grannum and Nigel Taylor, *Wills and Other Probate Records* (Kew: The National Archives, 2004), 7.

The Will in Medieval England

After the Norman Conquest of 1066, Anglo-Saxon traditions diminished and by the 13th century, a new form of will had gained acceptance – this was a *testament*, to be precise, since it only pertained to movable property. (When it came to land, although leases could be bequeathed, before the 1540 Statute of Wills was enacted, freehold land could not be bequeathed but had to be inherited through laws of succession.[17]) The will of post-Conquest Britain has been characterized as a statement issued by an individual, not unlike a recognizance (or bond) concerning the payment of debt and potentially similar in form to charters (conveying property). These all could be considered "letters" but they were not generally addressed to specific recipients in the way that communication of day-to-day matters (missives) were.[18]

Although the written *testament* gained prominence in the centuries after the Norman Conquest, oral practices likely continued informally, without always being recorded in writing. The English system of Common Law (based on the rulings of judges) does not appear to have conflicted with either oral or written wills at this point and creation and probate of wills fell within the jurisdiction of the Church – responsibility for probate in particular remained with ecclesiastical courts until the mid-nineteenth century. Such courts, which included the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC), administered probate under a combination of canon and civil law (together comprising English ecclesiastical law), as well as common and statute law.

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[17] Ibid., 9.
[18] M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 85-89.

By the end of the fourteenth century, the ancestor of the modern will had already assumed some of the characteristics which persist into the present day. Among other things, the will had become a dispositive document, in contrast to earlier evidential wills of Anglo-Saxon tradition. Innovations from Roman law, the study of which had been revived in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were also incorporated into English practices, including specific roles for executors and witnesses.[19] Over time, as it also became possible to bequeath land, the terms *will* (for land) and *testament* (for movable property) came to be used interchangeably and the documents eventually merged into the familiar "last will and testament" (often shortened to "will"). Interestingly, though increasingly formalized and used, it was not until the 1677 Statute of Frauds that the will was declared a legally binding document. With the 1837 Wills Act, requirements for a valid will were "refined and simplified," and methods for disposing of land and chattels were unified.[20] In 1858, the conveyance of both land and movable property after death (through the combined written *will and testament*) became the jurisdiction of the secular Court of Probate.

Wills and Legal Systems in North America

Colonization spread many aspects of English (and other European) traditions to settlements overseas in North America. In the case of Canada, a mix of British and French settlements resulted in the adoption of legal practices based on both British and French systems, through various regions and governing entities. French colonial settlements, particularly in the area that became Québec, adopted aspects of the French

[19] Gabriella Del Lungo Camicotti, "Performative aspects of late medieval English wills," *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 3.2 (2002), 207.

[20] Daryll A. Kreel, "The judicial reconstruction of wills in Manitoba," (Master's thesis, Faculty of Law, University of Manitoba, 1999), 12.

legal system, including the *Coutume de Paris* (published 1580) and other customary laws,[21] as well as the 1804 *Code Napoleon*. The 1866 *Code Civil* for Lower Canada and the civil system later established in Québec were based on the French legal system, as were some of their practices surrounding the will.

While many British settlements adopted aspects of Common Law and English legal traditions, it has been noted that the form of law adopted in British colonies would have been neither uniform nor unified but rather made up of local customs, combined with royal and ecclesiastical decrees, as existed in English and Scottish municipalities through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[22] In the case of Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) settlements, the 1670 Company Charter stipulated that the area granted to the company was to be governed under English law, though this was administered by company officers and came to involve a degree of individual discretion.[23] Employees of the HBC, largely English and Scottish in origin, may have been familiar with the legal traditions and customs of their home regions and the wills held in the HBC archives suggest that will-making was one practice that was continued in certain settlements.[24]

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[21] As with many continental European countries, France's system of Civil Law drew from Roman law and Germanic traditions, as well as ecclesiastical, commercial, feudal and customary law. Murray Greenwood, "Lower Canada (Quebec): Transformation of Civil Law from Higher Morality to Autonomous Will, 1774-1866," *Manitoba Law Journal* 23 (1995), 132-182.

[22] Louis Knafla, "Introduction: Laws and Societies in the Anglo-Canadian North-West Frontier and Prairie Provinces," in *Laws and Societies in the Canadian Prairie West, 1670-1940*, eds. Louis Knafla and Jonathan Swainger (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 16-17.

[23] Discussed further in Paul C. Nigol, "Discipline and Discretion in the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Hudson's Bay Company Private Justice System," in ibid., 150-182.

[24] Similar customs relating to wills do seem to have been maintained in other British colonies, even in the absence of practising lawyers. According to Lawrence Meir Friedman, existing wills of seventeenth century colonial settlers, in what would become the United States, point to a popular knowledge of wills and (roughly) how they were constructed. Lawrence Meir Friedman, *Dead Hands: A Social History of Wills, Trusts, and Inheritance Law* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 62.

Until 1858, probate of English wills remained the responsibility of ecclesiastical courts, including the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC), and it appears that – prior to Confederation – the wills of some individuals living in what later became Canada were also brought before the PCC for probate. In 1858, jurisdiction over English wills was assigned to a secular national Probate Court, itself made up of various local courts where wills could be presented.

In Canada, wills generally became the responsibility of provincial and territorial bodies, with the exception of those created by Aboriginal persons residing on reserves, which would be administered by the federal government, through the Minister of Indian Affairs. English laws regarding wills were adapted or incorporated into provincial law and practices as required – in Manitoba, for example, portions of the 1837 Wills Act were adopted by the legislature in 1871, along with other elements of the English law of succession.[25] Despite the multiple jurisdictions involved, there is some congruence in the criteria set out for a valid will: it generally has to be written by hand or typed (oral wills are not valid), signed by the testator or testatrix, and witnessed by at least two people who are not named as beneficiaries.[26] (There are exceptions to the requirements for witnesses in some jurisdictions however, under certain circumstances. Among several Canadian

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[25] According to Kreel, most of these provisions were not greatly changed after their adoption by Manitoba. Kreel, 8, citing Manitoba, Law Reform Commission, *The Wills Act and the Doctrine of Substantial Compliance*, report no. 43 (Winnipeg: Queen's Printer, 1980), 2.

[26] Similar requirements can be seen within the laws of Manitoba and several other Canadian jurisdictions. For examples, see: *Wills Act*, Continuing Consolidation of the Statutes of Manitoba (CCSM), c.W150, s.3-4, retrieved 2012-03-12, http://canlii.ca/t/k9c6; *Wills Act, 1996*, Statutes of Saskatchewan (SS) 1996, c.W-14.1, s.7(1), retrieved 2012-03-12, http://canlii.ca/t/h6md; *Wills and Succession Act*, Statutes of Alberta (SA) 2010, c.W-12.2, s.14-15, retrieved 2012-03-12, http://canlii.ca/t/lfmc; *Wills Act*, Revised Statutes of British Columbia (RSBC) 1996, c.489, s.3-4, retrieved 2012-03-12, http://canlii.ca/t/ldgh; *Succession Law Reform Act,* Revised Statutes of Ontario (RSO) 1990, c.S.26, s.3-4, retrieved 2012-03-12, http://canlii.ca/t/l0gg; *Wills Act*, Revised Statutes of the Northwest Territories (RSNWT) 1988, c.W-5, s.5(1), retrieved 2012-03-12, http://canlii.ca/t/kd9v; *Wills Act*, RSNWT (Nu), 1988, c.W-5, s.5, retrieved 2012-03-12, http://canlii.ca/t/khhb; *Wills Act,* Revised Statutes of the Yukon (RSY) 2002, c.230, s.5(1), retrieved 2012-03-12, http://canlii.ca/t/kfqf.

jurisdictions, for example, *holograph wills* – those written, signed and dated entirely in the handwriting of the testator – can be accepted without witnesses.[27])

Legal validation of a will is generally accomplished through probate courts and prospective testators and testatrices across the country may consult legal professionals, such as lawyers, in drawing up a will, so as to avoid misinterpretation of their intent and transgressions of the rules, and thus increase the chances of the document being successfully "proven" – and their wishes appropriately carried out – after their death. Drawing from its civil system, Québec laws also allow for the involvement of a professional notary (sometimes referred to as a Latin notary, as distinguished from others in North America) in the drafting of wills. The *notarial will* in Québec is similar in form to other wills except that these avoid the need for probate, as they can be automatically considered valid.

Modern Uses and Interest in Wills

Alongside the modern role of the will and its initial uses in settling matters of estates and inheritance, the combination of personal and pragmatic choices and statements embodied in a written will can also attract later audiences, such as those conducting genealogical or historical research. The combination of pragmatic and personal elements, along with sometimes highly detailed accounts of property and kinship between the deceased and individuals identified in the will, can prove quite useful

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[27] *Wills Act*, CCSM, c.W150, s.6; *Wills Act, 1996*, RSS, c.W-14.1, s.8; *Wills and Succession Act*, SA 2010, c.W-12.2, s.16; *Succession Law Reform Act,* RSO 1990, c. S.26, s. 6; *Wills Act*, RSNWT (Nu) 1988, c. W-5, s. 5.1(2); *Wills Act,* RSNWT 1988, c.W-5, s.5(2); and *Wills Act,* RSY 2002, c.230, s.5(2). In places like Manitoba, exceptions to witness requirements are also possible in cases of *privileged wills*, for members of the armed forces on active service or sailors at sea. Manitoba, Law Reform Commission, *Wills and Succession Legislation,* report no. 108 (Winnipeg: Queen's Printer, 2003), 8-10.

in reconstructing relationships and the society in which these people lived.[28] Given the interweaving of written documents, practices and social changes, written wills (of any age) are not neutral information containers but records produced through human action, influenced by social practices and legal norms; wills (and associated records) should be considered in light of these complex relationships and contexts.

With audiences that include historians and genealogists, the tools created for those conducting research in archives have the potential to both familiarize newer users with the prominent features of these types of records and provide valuable insights into the larger picture of how such documents fit into (or deviate from) the rest of the landscape of historical records. There are historical continuities in some aspects of written wills, such as the requirements and procedures necessary to confirm their validity in the eyes of the responsible legal entity, but there are also variations, as wills were adapted for use over time and in populations with different needs and resources. In some cases, these wills and other associated documents were transferred to various archives – institutions which themselves changed in their resources, approaches and technological capabilities – allowing for sharing of diverse collections with a wider variety of audiences, often greater distances away.

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[28] While not the subject of an overwhelming number of socio-historical studies thus far, wills have been looked to for insights into social relations (within certain historical settings), patterns of testation, and the larger area of succession and the social implications and dynamics involved. In addition to Sheehan's work, Friedman provides a useful (if broad) socio-historical overview of wills in and discussion of (American) succession practices, in his book *Dead Hands*. A small number of articles have also looked at wills in certain social and historical contexts, including David E. Narrett, "Preparation for Death and Provision for the Living: Notes on New York Wills (1665-1760)," *New York History* 57, no. 4 (Oct. 1976), 417-437.

Wills in Archival Collections

The existence of wills in multiple archives provides an interesting opportunity to look at the continuity and variation of particular types of records, as well as different strategies for describing and making them accessible. Alongside numerous wills, accessible in digitized form via their website, the National Archives of the United Kingdom provides several research guides and tutorials to assist remote (and presumably less-experienced) researchers in finding, reading and interpreting the meaning of such documents. Many of the wills in the UK Archives are found within series of records associated with probate proceedings, including numerous wills "proved" through the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC), between 1384 and 1858.[29] Other original wills (digitally accessible) within the archives include those of Warrant Officers and seamen in the British Royal Navy from between 1786 and 1882, some of which were entirely handwritten, others with only certain (specific) information filled in on a pre-set form; jurisdiction in these cases appears to have rested with the (naval) office of Inspector of Wills.[30]

In the holdings of Canadian archival institutions, wills and associated records (such as registers and estate documents) may be found among the probate records of provincial courts, as is the case in Manitoba, where they are associated successively with the Court of Queen's Bench (1871-1880) and with the later subordinate Surrogate Court (1881-1983) and Probate Division (1984 onwards). The corresponding archival series,

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[29] Original PCC wills are mainly in series PROB 10 (some in PROB 1), with court copies in PROB 11. See National Archives [UK], *Documents Online* website, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/default.asp (accessed May 2011).

[30] National Archives [UK], "Wills of Royal Naval Seamen (1786 - 1882)," in *Documents Online*, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/seamenswills.asp (accessed May 2011). The wills of Royal Navy Seamen formed part of series ADM 96.

however, do not necessarily include wills for *all* individuals holding property in

Manitoba; there were cases in which wills were missing or invalid, in which case the

court could grant administration and also situations where no will was registered at all,

thereby leaving no estate file among court probate records.

Archives of government records are not the only possible location of wills and

other estate records; a number of wills are also included in collections of private records,

such as those in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. Of the wills in the HBCA, several

are attributed to HBC servants and officers,[31] others associated with certain company

acquisitions, some as separate documents and others apparently copied into special

registry books. Several of the wills included in HBCA collections were probated in

England, under jurisdiction of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC). These wills,

alongside those found in government records archives, provide examples that allow for

some exploration of consistent and changing features of the will (in the Anglo-Canadian

tradition), as well as the implications of these for contextualizing this type of record.

Form and Features of Written Wills

The form of a document reveals and perpetuates the function it serves.[32]

The environment of the document is not a passive container of "content" but active processes in the manner of preliterate words, designed for action... [33]

Context has been an important focus within discussions of how to describe

archival records and the challenges and complexities of contemporary records have

inspired some to look to the longstanding discipline of diplomatics for approaches and

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[31] Examples can be found in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives series *Officers' and servants' Wills* (1763-1921) and *Rigolet wills of servants and residents* (1903-1929).

[32] An observation Luciana Duranti points to as the basis of diplomatics in her *Diplomatics*, 133.

[33] Hugh Taylor, "'My Very Act and Deed'," in *The Archival Imagination: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor*, 143-144.

tools that allow for a step back, to consider the relationship of the parts of a document to the whole of its content and meaning, in light of what can be learned from the form and features it contains. Given that records are not created and maintained in isolation from their surroundings, exploration of a type of document, like a will, can point to patterns which persist and aspects of the "message" which are embedded in the record form itself.

Wills are of particular interest in discussions of types of record, as their significance in conveying the wishes of the *testator* or *testatrix* is (and has long been) closely associated with the formal characteristics and procedures required for such documents to be formally accepted by the relevant institutional entities. In the case of English wills – and subsequent Anglo-American adaptations – basic procedures and framework have generally been the responsibility of legislative bodies. However, succession laws do not provide detailed directions for all of the components of the will, as a document; in the province of Manitoba, for example, the *Wills Act* lays out rules for creating (and changing) a will, identifying procedural requirements and certain mandatory components (such as signatures), but the validation of the resulting document is the responsibility of the probate courts, where legislation is applied and the intentions of testators interpreted.[34] Given the significance of courts and judicial decisions (within Common Law traditions), some of the patterns in the language and structure of wills

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[34] Other succession legislation may come into play here. In some cases, modern courts not only have some discretion when it comes to interpreting *intent*, they also may "re-make" a will or override certain parts of it by ordering "reasonable provision" for dependents, for example. Discussed further in Kreel's thesis.

might be seen as efforts to ensure clarity, completeness and validity;[35] others may point to ceremonial features that were once mandatory elements in testamentary practices.[36]

In addition to legislative and judicial decisions, it is customary and personal elements which seem to set the will apart from other types of legal documents. Generally written "in contemplation of death," the will can reflect certain personal, religious or philosophical views, sometimes belonging to the individual and sometimes to the larger social group – the "vaguely poetic" phrases observed in some historical (colonial) wills, alongside standard clauses, suggest the influence of "folk memory" and custom, [37] while gender-specific conditions (restrictive to women) may point to socially accepted views.

Karen Grannum and Nigel Taylor warn about the distinction between the conventional aspects of wills, the traditional wording for example, and those parts which may be more meaningful, at least in terms of the details provided regarding day-to-day life, family history and relationships, as well as the personal messages conveyed from the testator or testatrix.[38] Although the wills and documentation Grannum and Taylor worked with at the UK National Archives were particularly rich in information to interest genealogists (and biographical researchers), the increased access to these documents, through digital copies and online research tools, seems to have also sparked greater

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[35] From the standpoint of a legal professional, the use of standard patterns and clauses may be a strategy for avoiding serious omissions. Noted in David A. Chatterton, "Precedent Clauses," chapter 5 in *Wills* (Taylor & Francis, 2003), 41. http://lib.myilibrary.com.proxy2.lib.umanitoba.ca?ID=16750.

[36] Such features are most likely to appear in older wills, as attitudes seem to have become less strict (and less formal) since the twentieth century; this sentiment is noted often by Friedman and Kreel, among others.

[37] Friedman, *Dead Hands*, 62-63.

[38] Grannum and Taylor, *Wills and Other Probate Records* – this was a recurring sentiment, paraphrased from examples included on pages 1, 83.

interest by those searching for local or occupation-specific historical information.[39] The

potential audience of individuals who may be interested in these documents thus appears

to be growing along with the ability of archives to provide access.

Given the widening interest in and improved access to the wills held in archival

institutions, it is ever more important that structural elements be identified and outlined,

to clarify significant components and central ideas.[40] As a type of record that requires

validation from a legal body, wills are generally created according to established

conventions and practices; while these may have shifted over time, certain characteristics

remain fairly consistent. Based on examples from the National Archives (both PCC and

Naval Records), English wills of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could – but did

not always – include the following: [41]

1) An opening statement, establishing the identity of the person for whom the will was made (*testator/testatrix*), where they lived and, in some cases, their occupation;
2) Religious preamble or invocation, sometimes accompanied by bequest(s) to particular charitable institutions;
3) Statement of health and/or mental capability;
4) Instructions for burial;
5) The naming of individual *beneficiaries*, such as family members, and description and details of the nature of the bequests (e.g. stipulations for conditional bequests);
6) The naming of the *executor*, who would carry out the conditions of the will;
7) An affirmation of the document's status as the "last Will and Testament" and a revocation of prior wills (primarily present in examples of Navy wills);

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[39] Ibid., 4. The *Documents Online* program at the UK National Archives and the array of connected guides speaks to the institution's acknowledgement of the assistance needed by their contemporary audiences, not only to access records but also to understand their form, purpose and context, in order to interpret them.

[40] For current purposes, I will focus primarily on the documentary traditions tied to English wills, many of which were adopted in Canada.

[41] National Archives [UK], "Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills (1384 - 1858)," in *Documents Online*, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/wills.asp#structure (accessed January 2012). These elements are noted in relation to historical wills (often in research guides) but some are also noted in sources concerned with contemporary wills, particularly those providing guidance on how to write a modern will.

8) The (witnessed) signature of the testator or testatrix;
9) The naming and signatures of witnesses;
10) The date of the will;
11) A *codicil* (or possibly several), containing later additions to the will;
12) A *Memorandum*, confirming the codicil;

In addition to the religious preamble, it appears common for wills to begin with the phrase "In the name of God, Amen" (in large characters) – this not only appears in PCC and Navy wills but also among those from the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. This suggests it was one of the common formulae included by the writer of the document, who could have consulted (and copied phrases from) collections of *pro-forma* wills. The Navy wills appear to have involved standard printed forms, with specifics filled in by the testator.

If the will had come before the probate court, the document itself could also contain a statement that the will had been proved, as well as an additional note of the sentence of the court, if the case had involved a dispute. Probate clauses were largely formulaic and the grants of probate from ecclesiastical courts were initially attached to the original document by a special seal; this later became a simple formal notation made at the bottom of the will.[42]

Comparing wills from the HBC Archives to examples from the UK National Archives, certain similarities become apparent. The 1828 will of Richard Grant, a clerk of the HBC (stationed at York Factory), begins with the proportionately large heading, "In the name of God, Amen," and proceeds with the statement of Grant's location, occupation and affirmation of his physical and mental state – much like the British

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[42] Grannum and Taylor, 75-78.

examples, particularly the Navy wills. Foregoing the sort of religious preamble seen in other (PCC) wills, Grant's document goes on to outline bequests to his children and their mother, providing she did not "place herself in the care of any other protector," and appoints as executors two of the Company's Chief Factors. The will concludes with the revocation of previous "Testaments, Wills, Legacies, Bequests and Executors," the confirmation of the new document's status, Grant's last statement (in the present tense) of the date and his action of signing of the will, his actual signature, and the statement and signature of two witnesses, affirming his actions.[43] Comparing Grant's 1828 will to that of Royal Navy Seaman Henry Walker Thorpe (1880), the features appear quite similar, though Thorpe's initial invocation is less prominent and the name of his assigned ship is included, as part of the identification of his name and occupation.[44]

Legal practices and a shared system of English law in the eighteenth and nineteenth century make the similarities between these documents not altogether surprising, although there was some variation in jurisdiction – up until 1858, the PCC had authority over the wills of many English women and men but wills of Naval officers were the responsibility of the Inspector of Wills, an office established in 1786 within the larger Naval structure. In Canada, the charter granted to the Hudson's Bay Company gave the company authority to enact English law in Rupert's Land. However, given that English law still assigned wills to the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical courts, HBC authority figures may not have concerned themselves with probate at all, beyond that which pertained

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[43] Archives of Manitoba, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Officers' and Servants' Wills: Richard Grant (A.36/7, fo.37), 1828.
[44] National Archives [UK], Will of Henry Walker Thorp (ADM 48/107), 1880. Digital copy available at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/dol/popups/adm48_2.htm.

directly to them, such as debts and pensions of employees.[45] Whatever authorities were responsible for establishing and regulating the form and content of wills in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those of the contemporary legal systems in Canada and the UK and the inclusion of many of these features suggest that perhaps their significance is more complex than immediately apparent.

Comparison of certain features of historical wills with modern practices and features highlights the fact that many of the common elements from earlier centuries have remained significant to contemporary wills in Canada as well as the UK. Generally, wills in Canada can be created by the individual themselves, though provincial and territorial legislation sets out what procedures and formalities (such as signatures of witnesses) are required for such a document to be considered valid, and probate courts provide the venue (and precedents) for "proving" it. For Aboriginals living on reserves, authority for establishing the validity of wills rests with the minister responsible for Indian Affairs.

Although creating a will may be as simple as filling in the spaces in a standardized form, sometimes there are complex issues connected to estates that lead individuals to involve legal professionals (lawyers or notaries) in the writing of their will. In either case, there remain a number of standard elements which may be included:[46]

    1)   Opening "domicile clause," identifying the testator/-trix and location in which the will was created (quite similar to the earlier example wills);

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[45] The subject of law and legal authority in HBC territory in Canada is further discussed in Knafla and Swainger, eds., *Laws and societies in the Canadian prairie west, 1670-1940*. Generally, there appears to be no mention of internal probate processes for inhabitants of the company's territory and the wills in the HBCA appear to have been probated by the PCC in England, if at all.

[46] Elements such as these are featured in sources designed to guide individuals constructing their own (contemporary) wills. For examples (and sample clauses) see: Chatterton, "Precedent Clauses," in *Wills*; also Greater Vancouver Law Students' Legal Advice Society, "Wills and Estates," chapter 6 in *U.B.C. Law Students' Legal Advice Manual, 34th ed.* (2010), http://www.lslap.bc.ca/main/?manual.

2) Revocation clause, cancelling previous wills (as was found at the end of the Navy wills);
3) Appointment of executor(s), trustee(s) and alternates;
4) Guardianship arrangements, if dependents are involved;
5) The "vesting clause," establishing the powers invested in appointed trustee(s);
6) Specific directions to the trustee(s) and/or executor(s) regarding disposition of the estate, for example the payment of debts, funeral expenses and taxes;
7) Details of specific bequests, including items (usually with personal significance) and cash legacies (for spouses, children or other family and friends);
8) Administrative provisions regarding the estate, such as those relating to bequests not immediately to be received (e.g. for underage children), or to the valuation of the estate;
9) Naming of particular potential beneficiaries to be excluded from inheritance and reasons for this (given that disinherited individuals may challenge the validity of the will in court);
10) Directions as to preferred funeral arrangements (not binding); and
11) Final execution and attestation clause, including signed statements from the testator/-trix (confirming their actions of signing the will), and from witnesses present at the time of signing.

In the case of contemporary wills, the testator or testatrix can, at a later time, add a supplementary *codicil*, to make changes or corrections to the existing will, as could earlier centuries of will-writers; sometimes this component is identified as a type of testamentary document itself,[47] even though the codicil can be treated as part of the will, since it modifies one or two clauses but does not replace the whole document. In order to properly execute the instructions contained in the codicil, some of the elements similar to the will are required, including a final attestation clause (with signatures and statements supporting the codicil).

Wills and the Study of Documents

Within a contemporary archival context, exploration of document types may be aided through consideration of diplomatics, as articulated for North American audiences

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[47] Greater Vancouver Law Students' Legal Advice Society, "Wills and Estates," 17.

by those like Luciana Duranti. The formal parts of the will (as a type of record)

demonstrated through English and Canadian examples, parallel the *intrinsic* elements of

documentary form, divided in three sections:

- The *protocol* is the part of the will containing the opening clause, religious invocation (often found in public and private documents of the Medieval period), the identification of the individual and/or action involved;
- The central *text* of the document contains the "manifestation of the will of the author, the evidence of the act, or the memory of it,"[48] namely the specific bequests and instructions left by the author of the will (including those given the power and responsibility to enact these wishes);
- The *eschatocol*, which includes the necessary *clauses of corroboration*, noting the means by which the action contained within the document may be validated (through witnesses, for example), and the attestation, identifying the individuals witnessing and signing the document.

While not all of the elements of a document may be the same in every case, it is these

common features which allow us to distinguish one type of document from another.

Some contemporary documents identify the individual and/or action in a heading which

precedes the protocol section, rather than in the protocol itself; however the intrinsic form

may still remain consistent. While examples drawn from archives provide a point of

comparison and show various commonalities between wills of different contexts and

centuries, diplomatics provides a framework within which we can consider the will

overall, as a type of record, with a relatively consistent internal structure.

Alongside intrinsic elements, diplomatics also brings attention to a number of

extrinsic features, and the relevance of these to analysis of the document as a whole.

Duranti characterizes the relationship between these, the intellectual form and the

physical form, as the connection between those (intrinsic) elements which make a

document complete and those (extrinsic) elements which make the document capable of

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[48] Duranti, *Diplomatics*, 145.

fulfilling its administrative purpose.[49] The significant extrinsic elements pursued in

diplomatic analysis are:

- The *medium*, or material, in which the "message" of the document is carried, such as the physical makeup of the kind of paper, ink and other materials used, as well as the technology required to create these (of particular importance in authenticating medieval records but considered somewhat less relevant as common materials were adopted by large bureaucracies);
- The *script*, not only as it relates to the time and type of writing but also (in diplomatics) the layout of the written content, the presence of different hands within a document, and other features relating to grammar and conceptual relationships;
- The *language* used, historically including composition and style of writing, as well as evidence of rules and formulae specific to certain groups or professions (such as lawyers and notaries), communicating in specific settings (i.e. formal vs. colloquial);[50]
- Special *signs* – intrinsic elements formerly associated with extrinsic – including seals, monograms, initials, stamps and other inscriptions connected to the writer or the associated bureaucratic entity or office;
- *Annotations*, such as those included as part of the process of authenticating or registering (transcribing into a register) a document, the marks or initials added to a document indicating associated actions, or identifiers (i.e. numbers) on the document associated with registration, classification, cross-reference or locating purposes.

Many of the external features have been important parts in the diplomatic analysis of

medieval documents and though some may be less relevant to the more recent records

found in archives, the increasing role of electronic systems in creating, managing and

using contemporary records suggest that such elements may again provide important

insight for archivists in future, especially in cases where other contextual clues are

limited.

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[49] Ibid., 134.

[50] Peter M. Tiersma provides some interesting discussion of legal language and its role (and surrounding myths), in his article "Some Myths About Legal Language," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 2 (2006), 29-50.

Archivists have increasingly taken note of many of the extrinsic elements of records, particularly in discussions of media and technological influences on the creation and use of records.[51] In the case of wills, such considerations have a role to play in the contextualization of these records for archival users, especially in the case of distinguishing between wills created under different circumstances or with different technology, or in cases where provenance is unclear – diplomatic analysis has traditionally played a role in filling in these blanks and confirming or denying claims of legitimacy (particularly in the case of medieval documents). Indeed, wills like those previously considered, may not be the same in terms of external features; materials and scripts used for wills could vary, though legibility would have been important, the language would have generally been Latin or English, with a formal and likely legal focus (especially where wills were drawn up through a third party familiar with the rules and conventions of the time), and annotations would vary, depending on the specific history and custody of particular wills. In the case of the PCC wills, most of these documents were written on paper or parchment, in English (by the seventeenth century preferred over Latin), though other languages were also used occasionally, in which case a translation might accompany the document in question.[52]

Generally, consideration of external features can provide considerable insight into the provenance of many individual documents or groups of records. Regarding wills, however, the details of such features could vary a great deal and, in some cases, these may only be shared within series or smaller groupings, presenting a challenge in how to

[51] Contributors to this discussion include: Ala Rekrut, "Material Literacy: Reading Records as Material Culture," *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005), 11-37; and James M. O'Toole, "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," *American Archivist* 56, (Spring 1993), 234-255.
[52] National Archives [UK], "Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills."

include these within descriptive tools focussed on record types. With the exception of some aspects of language and special signs, the external features of wills appear to be far less standardized than their intellectual (internal) features, in the English and Canadian contexts. Moreover, it would appear that the dominant characteristics of the written will lie primarily within the realm of intrinsic elements, characteristics which themselves identify what a will actually *is* (regardless of media) and what distinguishes it from other types of records. This might be compared to the workings of a spoken language, in which pronunciation and even vocabulary (the external articulation) may shift over time but where fundamental elements of the underlying grammar and pattern of how words are created and used (the intellectual structure) remain distinct, recognizable features of the language in question. As with any language, knowledge of the structure underlying documents, such as wills, must be clear if meaningful knowledge is to be gained from them.

Drawing from diplomatics, a number of features could be highlighted in an exploration of the will (as a document type), if such a focus were to be incorporated into formal descriptive systems. Internal features and associated contexts together seem to be what sets the will apart from other types of documents, while some of the external details and particulars also suggest smaller groups of wills, sharing commonalities of purpose, creator, use and role. Such commonalities may provide a basis for document-based reference tools, as are provided by some institutions – including the UK National Archives – but as diplomatics was not developed for archival purposes, flexibility would be necessary in its application, so that it not limit the potential of document-centred

("form of material") description to enhance the tools and information made available to users.

Wills and Archival Description

Study of particular documents, records-centred histories and approaches put forward for the focussed exploration of record types suggest a number of significant internal, external and contextual features connected to many of the records commonly found within archival collections. Archivists are increasingly aware of the issues surrounding how they represent records and information regarding formal types of documents such as wills. An individual searching for the will of an ancestor or prominent individual may not find more than a passing reference to the specific item in the descriptive database of an archival institution but is likely to find information pertaining to the group of records associated with the document and – in some cases – further tools provided to assist their research.

In the case of wills, the explanations offered within formal descriptive systems are sometimes complemented by other reference tools offered by archives responsible for the records. In Canada, both the Archives of Ontario and Archives of Manitoba provide research guides that include basic information about the wills and explanation of where such records might be found.[53] The latter archives also provides some explanation of the procedures and context associated with the creation of various wills in the HBC Archives, generally within the series-level descriptions provided through the formal descriptive database (Keystone).

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[53] Examples include Archives of Ontario research guide #206, *How to Find a Will,* www.archives.gov.on.ca/english/guides/rg_206_find-will.aspx, and Archives of Manitoba, *A Guide to Probate Records at the Archives of Manitoba*, www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/probate/guide.html.

The UK National Archives also provides some information regarding wills within its online catalogue, generally at the series or sub-series level. However, the Archives provides additional detail in other web-accessible tools, including an in-depth research guide, which explains the involvement of the different courts in proving the validity of the wills, the various holdings in which they might be found and advice as to further information and reference materials.[54] In addition, the Archives also provides access to digitized copies of a number of records, including wills, through the *Documents Online* catalogue, which itself contains entries providing greater detail, in a format which appears designed with external remote users in mind: the basic identification of and introduction to a certain group of wills – including PCC wills and those of Royal Navy Seamen – are accompanied by sections advising users on how to search, interpret and learn more about these records. The tools not only provide (narrative) information, but also link to digitized examples of wills, the main series-level catalogue record associated with the particular type of will, a glossary for terms such as "testator," Latin and palaeography tutorials, and additional recommended (outside) publications.

Consideration of the complexities of wills and the various descriptive tools offered by archives in Canada and Britain provides a starting point for exploring the future potential of formal descriptive systems. Wills in the UK National Archives and the Archives of Manitoba are largely identified at the level of record series, which allows some leeway for explanation of features and guidance regarding context and interpretation, but the wider applicability of information regarding the written will (as a

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[54] National Archives [UK], *In Depth Research Guides*, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guide-listing.htm. Also see: "Changes to in-depth research guides," news release, 18 October 2010, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/news/502.htm.

type of record) suggests that descriptive entries separately linked to relevant series or items might be more efficient, while also drawing associations which could help users locate and interpret specific wills held within larger collections. Some of the tools of the UK National Archives offer a wider view of documents like wills and point to significant features and challenges in locating and interpreting them. However, they are not altogether comprehensive, missing several of the elements suggested by archivists. Alongside further description of intellectual and contextual features, drawn from professional and academic document studies, histories and guides, such tools suggest a foundation for potential future enhancements and additions to current descriptive systems, to leverage archival expertise and technical innovations, so as to provide enhanced online resources for individuals seeking to find and interpret archival records.

> *Living as we do in a culture so dominated by literacy and the written word, we sometimes overlook the multiple layers of meaning which are inherent in most acts of record making and in the records that are made. Each of us makes so many records in the course of a day that we cease to take much notice when we do. We write cheques to pay bills or we sign credit-card receipts; we execute contracts and other legal documents, affirming them with signatures... We take for granted that others can read these writings and that, if they cannot, they should learn how to do so.*[55]

Written documents require not only knowledge of content, but also structure and context, in order to be clearly understood. The structure involved may be more or less formal – usually formal, in the case of institutional records created or used according to rules established by their governing entities. Exploration and comparison of wills in Canada and the UK suggest that the will, as a type of document, has maintained a

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[55] James M. O'Toole, "Cortes' Notary: The Symbolic Power of Records," *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 47.

surprisingly stable internal structure, given the complexity of its history and distance between the locations of the example wills.

While the modern will may be a document familiar to many, it is generally the legal aspects and purpose that are prominent in the modern perception of the will as a document – much emphasis is given to the rules and procedures surrounding the creation of a valid will, so that property is adequately accounted for and properly disposed of by the appointed person(s). However, the social values and moral (if not religious) underpinnings of such a document are less commonly emphasized, from the right to control one's property after death to the obligations and responsibilities of testators, beneficiaries and others with a role in the process. Some of these complexities are deeply embedded in the document itself, absorbed along with the act of bequeath, as the will became the action, rather than a mere record of it. Other features, such as personal religious statements, may provide unique insights into the author of the document, as would the details offered regarding the testator, his possessions, and his relationship with beneficiaries and other individuals mentioned. These aspects of the will may be what appeal to those seeking them out in archives, as the will is both formal and personal, a potential window into the life of an individual and his or her community at the same time.

Amid enthusiasm for the kinds of information that might be drawn from reading a specific will, it is easy to forget that not all content should be accepted at face-value. Even a researcher familiar with the will in one context may be mislead, in cases where certain elements – religious statements, for example – are merely part of the formula or conventions used, rather than indications of personal conviction; as Karen Grannum and Nigel Taylor (of the UK Archives) pointed out, it is necessary to learn what is important

to such a document and what is not necessarily significant.[56] Exposure to multiple examples of the will can help illuminate such patterns and research tools based on a collective view of such documents could highlight more patterns and add further explanation of structure and context to assist researchers in their work.

The ideas and arguments put forward over the last three decades in discussions regarding authority records based around "form of material" (record type) have never been more relevant, as archives make more of their collections accessible online and as web-based tools increasingly are needed to convey the expertise of an archivist to new audiences, often at a distance. Whereas once the mere reference to a type of record may have been sufficient, clarification of such items is ever more needed, if audiences are to expand beyond traditional professional, cultural and demographic groups. Archives have adapted to meet many challenges in recent decades, rethinking their approaches to description and expanding the tools provided to assist researchers. At the same time, both the demands of and opportunities afforded by technological innovation on the web point to the necessity and viability of further enhancing such resources and implementing additional creative solutions – including some of those put forward decades ago. How these ideas and opportunities might be assembled to take advantage of archival knowledge and expertise is the question that will occupy the next chapter.

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[56] Grannum and Taylor, 1.

CHAPTER THREE

The One and the Many:

Documents, Context and the Future of Descriptive Tools on the Web

Records must be placed in context – in time and place – by fashioning descriptive entities and documenting relationships. This is how we locate them into a time-bound, evidential cocoon of meaning. To understand the record and derive evidence, it must be interpreted ... by understanding the circumstances which existed at creation and the changes since.[1]

As complex context-bound message-carriers, archival records have been the focus of various studies, by archivists, historians and others, which have highlighted the importance of contextual knowledge in enabling their interpretation. The will itself is one example of a type of document with a long and complicated history, absorbing more than just content along the way. The entities involved in the creation and use of such a record, the characteristics and features that define it and the changes in the place of the will in its social context may all influence its meaning. Such factors must necessarily be considered part of how to "read" any will and its content.

A great number of documents that would qualify as "wills" can be found in many archives in North America and Europe, where similar traditions of bequeath have remained prominent since the Middle Ages. An individual seeking information on economic history or social patterns or even looking for evidence of his or her ancestors might seek out a particular will held in one of these archives. Whether he or she is familiar with the internal complexities or developments that coloured the creation and history of the particular document will depend on his or her knowledge and previous research experience. Without background information on the purpose of the document,

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[1] Chris Hurley, "The Making and Keeping of Records: (1) What are Finding Aids For?" *Archives and Manuscripts* 26 (1998), 74.

the roles it fulfilled and certain historical and social influences, the individual could be easily misled, interpreting (for example) a statement of faith as evidence of religious beliefs, rather than social convention, or could miss the clues that would lead them to further relevant documents and sources. These are the kinds of risks that archives and archivists, as specialists in records themselves, attempt to mitigate, through various strategies and tools meant to convey the information necessary to enable the individual's independent research.

For the individual seeking a document, or likely the information it contains, discovering and locating the document may be a focus of their work. However, the approaches and tools employed by archivists must necessarily consider records from more of a birds-eye view, in part on account of the large quantities of files, documents and other items that make up archival holdings, but also because the relationship between records is part of the context that gives meaning to the individual document. This appears to be the paradox embedded in archival description. Given that individual documents will not often receive special attention from archivists or be individually analyzed and described within formal descriptive systems, how can the archivist make the most of such limitations? How can the individual researcher seeking a specific item be aided in their work, beyond the initial locating of the record?

A number of strategies have been suggested and, in some cases, implemented to mitigate the different factors that make archival description problematic. Many archives offer additional resources (outside of formal descriptive systems), such as research guides, and the personal assistance of reference staff, though the latter is itself changing form as more and more research is conducted remotely, rather than on-site. The

increasing need for the researcher to be able to operate independently has also inspired suggestions for greater explanation to be provided to users regarding archives themselves, their descriptive systems and how to effectively research and analyze the document in question, with or without the in-person mediation of an archivist. Another possibility which has engaged many archivists and institutions is the re-configuration of archival description itself and the design of formal descriptive systems to represent archival records and context in a different way than was traditionally employed. As part of this, archives and archivists have looked to the developing capabilities of computers, databases and web-based technology, as possible sources for innovative solutions. As social interaction and crowd-sourcing of projects have developed on the web, these too have suggested alternative ways in which archives might resolve some of these issues.

So where might the "best" solution lie? Which strategies offer the best opportunities to leverage technology, knowledge and innovation to mitigate the challenges archives face? From the examples provided by projects and systems developed in Europe and North America, it seems that a combination of them is preferable. The issues connected to archival description have long been the subject of discussion, particularly in recent decades, as electronic technology and the widespread use of the Internet and World Wide Web have provoked a rethinking of archival theory and practice.

Archives, Context and Individual Records

Archival description is a means by which archivists can provide some explanation of records and place them in context, so as to assist those interested in accessing and interpreting them. While the user may be seeking an individual record, the tools created

to convey contextual information all have some limitations and most of them do not provide much detail at the individual-item level. The ideas and projects undertaken in recent decades testify to archival efforts to build and enhance web-based formal descriptive systems and to bridge the gap left in the content and tools provided for users. While archivists cannot study and describe each document, item or file, they may still assist users by providing some direction as to the common features, contexts and patterns that are associated with records and might help interpret them. To some degree, archivists already do this, through basing their arrangement and description on *provenance*. The provenance-based groupings employed in archives (such as the *fonds*), allow for description of the group to also be applied somewhat to each member of the group. In more recent years, archives in North America (particularly Canada) have discussed and experimented with the incorporation of multiple interconnected descriptions of context, including those centred on records-creating entities and functions. Alongside these, "form of material" has been suggested as a candidate for similar incorporation into descriptive systems, possibly as an additional set of archival authority files (parallel to those for record-creating entities).

Renewed interest regarding the features, structure and history of various records have provided archivists with a wealth of work to draw from, when it comes to exploring types of records. Much of this cumulative knowledge could be shared with archive users, through incorporation into formal descriptive systems. Additionally, the methodology and considerations that have contributed to the research, analysis and document studies could also be shared with users, perhaps included in the descriptive system as part of a

general overview, associated with each larger family or "broad class"[2] of records. Aspects of diplomatic analysis have proven useful in the exploration of certain documents and can provide a framework for considering the structure and patterns involved; while the discipline of diplomatics was developed for other purposes, such considerations can highlight differences and similarities between related records and these useful elements may be adapted to suit archival purposes and enrich any tools offered to researchers. By providing general guidance for users less familiar with archival records, such overviews could help with the interpretation of individual records, particularly those for which other resources are limited.

While general overviews may provide guidance as to some of the key features and elements researchers should look for, as potential cues (and clues) for interpreting individual documents, there are some types of records which remain relatively stable in form and features, often through regulation by institutional bodies. For the most common of these types of documents, archivists could create more detailed "form of material" authority files, similar to those for entities, which could be incorporated into formal descriptive systems. A remarkable amount of information on certain types of records, such as wills, can already be found on and off the web and these resources could all be brought together through use of authority files within the descriptive systems already employed by archives. The following section will take a closer look at some of the kinds of resources available and how these might be incorporated into an enhanced descriptive system.

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[2] These "broad classes" are used in RAD to distinguish between textual records, graphic materials, sound recordings, etc. Bureau of Canadian Archivists (BCA) Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, *Rules for Archival Description*, rev. ed. (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 2008).

Research Sources and Archives: Present and Future

Despite the challenges presented for existing approaches and formal description systems employed in archives, exploration of certain record types, as well as explanations and guidance for those needing to interpret their meanings, have not been altogether neglected. In the case of the will, such information, discussion and exploration of form and features were generally found within or outside of archival resources (with varying levels of detail), particularly:

1) *Contained within the existing (formal) descriptions* – sometimes noted as part of the background of the entry provided for a particular group of records;
2) *As part of separate reference tools* (internal publications or web-documents) provided by the archival institution to assist researchers but not part of the formal descriptive system *per se*;
3) *Within external resources* (user guides or websites) provided through organizations or associations of individuals with common research interests – this includes historical, genealogical and other special interest societies;
4) *Embedded within largely academic and professional-focussed literature*.

In the case of the more formulaic (and temporally stable) types of documents, such as wills, these sources can provide quite a wealth of useful information, whether developed through formal scholarship or through less formal methods of sharing professional expertise and the contributions of various communities of users.

Though a great deal of information can been discovered by casual, professional and academic researchers alike, the variety of sources, forms and intended audiences for these present challenges. Access to the most useful and insightful knowledge regarding the types of records the archive user needs to know about may be undermined by the potential difficulties in discovering or otherwise locating and verifying reputable sources

on the web.[3] Even in cases where information sheets explaining certain contexts or common issues are provided on archival websites, they may be missed if they are not located where a researcher (possibly a newcomer) can easily find them.

As specialists, archivists might be aware of – and able to share with individual interested researchers (traditionally in person) – where to find the resources that might best suit their interest or work. However, the shift towards remote access and the new audiences that have accompanied technological development and the World Wide Web make it increasingly necessary (and feasible) for such professional expertise to be shared via online research tools and documentation they provide. Given the benefits that might also be gained from the input of the knowledge of individuals not on the staff of a given archives, it seems that a great deal of description and reference-oriented interaction would be enabled through a more integrated system of tools, one designed to provide and accept more than the traditional descriptive content. In essence, this is a return to the "finding aid" but in a newer form – one that not only builds on the developments of present and previous generations of archivists and the wealth of existing professional knowledge (inside and outside the archival community), but also one that leverages technical and social innovations in entering, gathering, manipulating and otherwise presenting information on the web.

Data, the Web and the Future of the "Finding Aid"

> *Archivists have been early adopters of Internet technologies, first mounting archival inventories on gophers, later employing HTML and most recently using XML, specifically Encoded Archival Description (EAD), to display finding aids online. Despite the transition from paper to electronic form,*

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[3] Still other potential sources, such as archival appraisal reports, created and maintained by institutions as internal documents, may be rich in contextual information but are generally not shared with those outside the organization itself.

*online finding aids retain much of the look and functionality of their paper counterparts and make only minimal use of available technologies, usually for browsing and searching. **Document genres need to evolve in response to changing technological environments and social cultures.**[4]*

With the advent of electronic systems, spread of personal computers and development of the Internet and the World Wide Web, archives were challenged to adapt their practices and tools to a new virtual environment but at the same time were offered a new means to share their knowledge and attract new audiences. However, those like Yakel, Shaw and Reynolds (above) point out that archives have not truly exploited the full potential of such innovations in description. Recent years have seen the re-thinking of description and the modelling of descriptive systems which leverage some of the web-based opportunities that exist.

Some of the limitations of description itself can be tied to the legacy of the traditional archival finding aid and the difficulties encountered in trying to move away from a document-centred model of description. In archives, the traditional "finding aid" historically took the form of a written document, which was organized hierarchically to reflect particular arrangement principles and included narrative explanation of the records and their provenance – the informational content of the finding aid, its internal form (including human-readable "markup," such as grammar) and its appearance, when referred to by interested individuals, were all closely intertwined in the document itself.[5] With the development of the web and the ability to create digital equivalents of these sorts of descriptive documents, the distinction between these three aspects has taken on

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[4] Elizabeth Yakel, Seth Shaw and Polly Reynolds, "Creating the Next Generation of Archival Finding Aid," *D-Lib Magazine* 13, no. 5-6 (May/June 2007), doi:10.1045/may2007-yakel. Emphasis added.
[5] There still appears to be some confusion (on occasion), in discussions of current tools: sometimes the three components are conflated, overlooking the distinctions between them and the different ways in which the issues associated with each might be addressed.

new significance, particularly given the role of computer-readable markup (which enables some consistency in how the data is treated by various systems) and the fact that the form of presentation for such information can be designed and reorganized to appear for users in different configurations than were seen in traditional paper-based finding aids. When archival description was adapted for this new environment, the form which this took did not greatly *evolve* but remained rather similar to the traditional finding aid (as Yakel et al. point out).

In the years since standardization became the focus of much archival description, the world of computer and web-based technology has undergone significant changes, not only in what has been made possible for the sharing of information on the web but also in the perception of what is desirable and, increasingly, what is to be expected from this data – and the institutions responsible for it. At the same time, the archival profession saw significant challenges and changes to theory and practice, in response to the changes in records environments and to the broadening of their audiences, their abilities and expectations. Development of standards for the content of descriptive finding aids (including RAD, ISAD, ISAAR and APPM) followed, as did standards for the encoding of descriptive documents for web-based access. The latter focus in the United States gave rise to EAD (Encoded Archival Description), a "document type definition" (DTD) standard, which built on the widespread pre-existing "extensible markup language" (XML) and enabled web-access to traditional finding aids.

Both the adaptation of archival finding aids to an electronic environment and the development of standards for archival description represented turning points for how

records would be represented. However, these (arguably) provoked less change in

archival processes than it might appear. As Chris Hurley explains,

> Approaches to descriptive standardisation have mirrored early attempts at automation. A paper-based work process was "automated" merely by encoding the forms to carry out that process in a paper environment. They were transformed into electronic versions of their paper counterparts and the same data were simply manipulated faster and in more imaginative ways. The work process which the paper forms represented was not re-engineered in any meaningful or useful way. Instead it was merely duplicated electronically. The possibility of achieving the desired outcome in a different manner – or achieving new outcomes – was not realised until a second or third generation of users began to understand the possibilities for re-engineering the processes themselves, instead of just duplicating them.[6]

While innovations such as EAD did improve the accessibility of the content of the

converted document-tools, as it was intended to do, electronic and web-technology

continued to develop as well, with new approaches – and expectations – emerging as to

how data available on the web should be structured, accessed and related to other data.

The developers of EAD based it on the traditional structure and characteristics of the

paper finding aid, choosing "markup" because it supported traditional documents, rather

than the alternative database technology, which supported "information with complex

many-to-many relationships" (though archival description was characterized as

occupying a middle ground between these models).[7]

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[6] Chris Hurley, "What are Finding Aids For?" 67. This seems to be a view shared by several archivists, particularly those critical of the current place of EAD in description.

[7] Daniel V. Pitti, "Encoded Archival Description (EAD)," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences,* 3rd ed. (Taylor and Francis: New York, 2009), 1702-1703, doi: 10.1081/E-ELIS3-120044047 (accessed July 21, 2011). The issues with EAD have been dissected and discussed (at great length) in several other articles, notably in Matthew Young Eidson, "Describing Anything That Walks: The Problem Behind the Problem of EAD," *Journal of Archival Organization* 1, no.4 (2002), 5-28, and Daniel V. Pitti's "Technology and the Transformation of Archival Description," *Journal of Archival Organization* 3, no. 2-3 (2005), 9-22. It has also been argued that retaining print conventions in online presentations of finding aids is not only problematic but is "at the heart of the ongoing problems experienced by users" – from J. Gordon Daines III and Corey L. Nimer, "Re-imagining Archival Display: Creating User-Friendly Finding Aids," *Journal of Archival Organization* 9, no.1 (2011), 4-31.

The document-centric approach to archival description embedded in EAD is one that seems at odds with the more recent envisioning of archival descriptive systems, with the addition of archival authority files (drawing from Australian approaches) and its implementation in "descriptive databases," such as those of the Archives of Ontario and Archives of Manitoba. While traditional finding aids (such as those created for paper-based access) may have suited the needs of those consulting analog research tools, research and discussion regarding web-based data and its presentation suggest that this approach will be increasingly problematic, as the ways in which people access information on the web require more flexibility and representations of data involve more complex relationships. Already, developments regarding web-based data and efforts to create a "semantic web" have pushed forward newer approaches to data *objects* (in many fields) and ways in which their interrelationships can be meaningfully represented.

While aspects of modern web-accessible archival descriptive systems remain tied to their paper-based ancestors, the future potential offered by electronic and web-based innovations is increasingly drawing the attention of archivists. In response to archival discussions and the development of content standards regarding (separate) descriptions of entities, such as ISAAR(CPF), an additional encoding document-type definition (DTD) standard, *Encoded Archival Context* (EAC) was released in 2004, to be used alongside EAD. Archival feedback regarding EAD, gathered in 2010-2011,[8] also points to many of the significant challenges posed by the traditional focus of EAD and descriptive

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[8] Society of American Archivists (SAA) –Technical Subcommittee on Encoded Archival Description, "EAD Revisions: Digest of Comments," [2011-09-23] from SAA's *Encoded Archival Description (EAD)* website, available at http://www2.archivists.org/groups/technical-subcommittee-on-encoded-archival-description-ead/encoded-archival-description-ead (consulted Nov. 2011). Revision schedule from Library of Congress – EAD site, at http://www.loc.gov/ead/eadrevision.html.

practices, suggesting that the next revision, EAD3 (set to be published in 2013), may allow for new developments in archival descriptive tools to move away from a document-bound model and towards more integrated data-centred descriptive systems.

Conceptually, there appear to be clear parallels between changes in the representation of information on the web and the shift towards a re-envisioned "description" of records and their context: both put heavy emphasis on relationships, as the basis for drawing meaning out of a web of information or data (not unlike the complexities of archival provenance, in its broader sense) and both gravitate towards making such relationships *explicit*, rather than relying on the implicit meanings and cues embedded in a typical yet complex narrative.[9] This is central to the idea of a "semantic web," as part of the move towards data that can be interpreted by machines in a meaningful way. For archival description, the separation of different aspects of context into authority files, interconnected with each other and other descriptive elements, has provided the foundation for an archival "web" of relationships.

Descriptive Systems and Access through "Form of Material" Authority Files

Given the inclination in archives towards a "web" of knowledge, made up of meaningfully-connected contextual descriptions, the model of the archival authority record seems the natural starting point for "form of material" descriptions, maintained separately but connected to records-centred descriptions. Description in archives may still be seen in terms of documents created – written by archivists, seen by researchers – but it should be remembered that in a web-centred environment, the flexibility of "data objects"

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[9] David Bearman has looked even more closely at structural "cues" in certain documents and pointed to some of the benefits of these in a "semantic web" environment. See: Bearman, "Structural Formalisms in Documentation: Reflecting Function and Supporting Meaning," in *Controlling the Past*, 241-256.

depends on how the larger systems of archival information are designed. Within a flexible (formal) descriptive system, the concept of the archival authority record is not limited to a hierarchically organized document but rather it provides a central point to which archivists may add meaningful contextual information.[10]

At present, few archives appear to include distinct "form of material" authority elements in their formal descriptive systems, though form and media are featured in (content) standards and archivists do sometimes provide brief explanations of certain document features. Indeed, even the concept of the archival authority file, despite having been the subject of much international professional discussion, appears to have only slowly gained traction in North American archives, with some notable exceptions. However, the use of authority files to present certain elements of context, such as information about the records-creating entities, has been increasingly endorsed by archivists and in content standards, including RAD, ISAD(G), ISAAR(CPF) and the recent American DACS. The last of these strongly supports the use of authority files, not only for their usefulness in representing context but also for the potential efficiencies they could create, by allowing a single archival authority file (containing separate information, in this case regarding entities) to be linked to multiple records-centred descriptions within an archives – and potentially between institutions.[11]

In Canada, the Archives of Ontario and Archives of Manitoba were prominent early adopters of the authority file for presenting separate descriptions of entities

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[10] Exploration of the full complexities of content, markup and web-based presentation of modern archival description could be the content of several chapters alone, so for the purposes of this section, discussion will focus on the "form of material" authority file and how this might fit into archival descriptive systems.

[11] Society of American Archivists, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004), 86-87.

involved in records creation. Broadening the contextual information offered to those making use of descriptive tools would seem to require such a division of context, in order not to overwhelm the casual user with pages and pages of narrative text.[12] In addition, separate sections of information allow for clearer division between particular records (and groups) and important elements of context, such as entities, functions or form, in essence making explicit distinctions (useful for archivists and archive-users alike) between these elements, their interrelationships and their connections to other records and contextual elements. This approach not only allows for the efficiency of connecting one authority file to several entries, but also builds the groundwork for future shared multi-institution authority files, a longstanding promise it seems but one that may be supported by the move towards the interconnected data envisioned for the "semantic web."

If archival authority files were to be implemented on a wider scale, incorporating various contextual elements into a larger data-centred web of archival description, what might the resulting descriptive system look like? If many of the proposed enhancements to description, offered over recent decades, were to be incorporated into such a system, what might be included? And how could archivists approach such a task, in order to leverage technology with the wealth of knowledge and expertise at their disposal, in order to develop a system to draw from the best of these worlds?

Critiques of description systems are numerous, but suggestions and examples of enhancements have been relatively few. Perhaps many of the most innovative ideas required time to consider and time to allow for the emergence of the technology capable

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[12] Problems associated with large quantities of text discussed in greater detail in Daines and Nimer, "Re-Imagining Archival Display."

of fully realizing these ideas in archival descriptive systems. Recent years have seen some promising developments, particularly as increasing attention is given to the ways in which archival holdings and contextual information are presented to users, what information is present or lacking and how such information, which may occur in various access tools, is (or might be) interconnected within larger systems.

Recent Approaches to Context and Description

Although archival description tends to focus on groups of records, and detailed information about specific documents or the otherwise small segments might be elusive, archives and archivists are not condemned to ignore the difficulties that may be faced by users needing to access and interpret such items. Indeed, given their professional focus on context, archivists are well equipped to provide assistance with such endeavours, though through different channels than their predecessors.

One way of enabling researchers to recognize the significance of contextual factors and understand both content and the mediating circumstances involved is to provide descriptions for specific aspects of context, particularly those associated with frequently occurring types of records. As earlier consideration of context and characteristics discovered, many types (or "forms of material") have been studied by archivists and individuals from other fields and information on them can be found in many locations, inside and outside of formal descriptive systems. The emerging challenge seems to be the question of what information should be brought into archival resources and how it should be integrated. Some institutions have already pushed the boundaries of traditional description and incorporated newer approaches and broader contextual descriptions into their systems.

The National Archives of the United Kingdom

The National Archives of the United Kingdom provides an interesting example of an institution which has redesigned its web resources to appeal to an audience which is not necessarily familiar with the records in its holdings. The website offers "in-depth" research guides on a range of topics,[13] providing guidance on certain types of records, such as census returns, land conveyances and wills and probate records, but also broader themes, such as education, immigration, and the armed forces. The guides for certain (standard) types of records provide background information on where such records might be located, the sort of information they might be expected to contain, closely associated records (such as indexes) and references to other sources for further information. Efforts to improve the guides have also resulted in the addition of quick links to other research guides, as well as to the catalogue itself (containing the formal records descriptions).[14]

The descriptions of records within the main catalogue of the Archives can themselves be brief, depending on the level of description, but significantly more detail can be found if the records have been digitized and connected to the *Documents Online* program. Within this particular catalogue, entries for records such as "Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills (1384 - 1858)" and "Wills of Royal Naval Seamen (1786 - 1882)"[15] not only provide greater detail but also offer explanations and examples of the form and features of such documents (and how to "read" them). *Documents Online* entries also

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[13] See National Archives of the United Kingdom, *In-depth research guides* [index], http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guide-listing.htm. Developments noted in "Changes to in-depth research guides" news (Oct. 18, 2010), http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/news/502.htm.

[14] The interconnections are not restricted to archival descriptive entries either – links from "Further Reading" section of the user guide also connect directly to the item entry in the Archives online bookstore.

[15] National Archives of the United Kingdom, *Documents Online* [guide], http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/default.asp (accessed July 2011).

contain links back to related research guides and other relevant web-based resources offered by the institution, including a "Your Archives" section (launched in 2007), containing transcriptions and information contributed by other users.[16]

The "web" of information provided by the National Archives (online) provides an interesting example of the ways in which separate groups of resources can be interconnected to provide meaningful guidance to archive users: research guides, main catalogue, *Documents Online* catalogue, and *Your Archives* sections were linked together, along with directions to other available resources, to allow the user to move between them, as necessary. The understanding of the records and their context is drawn from all these sources together but is not primarily represented within the formal descriptive system itself (which still maintains a hierarchical organization among descriptive entries).[17]

"Keystone" Descriptive Database (Archives of Manitoba)

The Archives of Manitoba (which in addition to the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, includes records created by private individuals and institutions and Manitoba government bodies) offers an approach somewhat different from the UK National Archives. Drawing from Australian ideas regarding description, the descriptive system at the Archives of Manitoba – named Keystone – centres on the series and is less constrained by the hierarchy that characterizes many of the systems and standards employed in North America and Europe. Records are grouped in series based on their

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[16] Available at http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Home_page. (Note: Plans have been announced to close this section in 2012, coinciding with the launch of a new system. See January 9, 2012 announcement "Closure of Your Archives," at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/news/659.htm.)

[17] National Archives of the United Kingdom, "About the Catalogue," in *The Catalogue*, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue/about.asp (accessed July 2011).

functions and the entities that contributed to the creation of the records are described in separate entries; both of these are linked to each other, allowing for the user to navigate between them. This not only avoids the all-to-easy confusion between descriptions of records (their particular contexts and relationships to other records) and descriptions of individual or corporate entities, which are part of different (sometimes hierarchical) relationships and influenced by circumstances which may not directly affect the records. Both descriptions of records and descriptions of records creators can serve as entry points into the system, through the initial search screen.

Keystone and similar descriptive systems depart somewhat from traditional archival practices. Acknowledging the potential challenges for those needing to access their holdings, the Archives of Manitoba provides on its website some explanation of its approach and system (including the relationship between creator- and records-based entries), as well as user-focussed recommendations for searching Keystone.[18] In addition, the descriptive content available via Keystone is supplemented by several guides for researchers, some of which very briefly address certain records (such as those associated with probate) but primarily focus on how specific examples of these might be found.[19] Such guidance may include references to further resources (published research guides, for example) but these tools vary with regard to the detail provided.

While the user guides and various tools available to researchers appear more numerous in the case of the UK National Archives, the approach taken by the Archives of

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[18] Available on the Archives of Manitoba *Keystone Descriptive Database* website, under "Keystone Help," http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/keystone/orient.html (accessed November 2011).

[19] Examples include the information sheets provided on the Archives of Manitoba website, at http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/info_sheets/index.html, including *Guide to Probate Records*, http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/probate/guide.html.

Manitoba embodies a different vision of the formal descriptive system itself.[20] Both

institutions have taken into consideration the needs of remote users for tools to assist

them in independent research but the resulting web-based resources offer different ways

of conveying pertinent contextual information to users.

"Archives Investigator" (City of Sydney Archives, Australia); Public Record Office Victoria (Australia); "RecordSearch" (National Archives of Australia)

Among the interesting Australian counterparts to Keystone, the systems offered

by the City of Sydney Archives, the Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) and the

National Archives of Australia (NAA) are based on many of the same concepts as other

series-centred systems. However, not only do these provide separate descriptions of

records and records creators, they incorporates separate descriptive "entities" for other

elements of context, including functions, organizations, agencies and persons.

Investigator also includes activities, ministries, and portfolios. These entities and their

interrelationships are explained (and presented visually) on the respective websites.[21]

While similar in some ways to Canadian approaches to series-based description

and archival authority files, these models for description point to even wider possible

applications for the archival authority file, to provide a more complex representation of

records, creating entities and their contexts of creation.

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[20] In Keystone, it is interesting to note that records descriptions can include some explanation of their features, history and contextual elements linked to "form of material" – this may (arguably) be due in part to the separation of records-centred description from that of creators and the rethinking of archival records and description that was entailed.

[21] Systems accessible via http://tools.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/investigator/ (for Sydney); http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/SearchScreens/AdvSearchMain.aspx (for NAA); and http://prov.vic.gov.au/ (for PROV). Explanation of PROV accessible at http://www.access.prov.vic.gov.au/public/PROVguides/PROVguide066/PROVguide066.jsp.

SIASFI Project and Online Guide (Florence State Archives, Italy)

A further approach to developing an archival descriptive system can be seen in the project undertaken for the Florence State Archives in Italy with the development of the "complex, flexible and modular" information system, SIASFI (Sistema Informativo dell'Archivia di Stato di Firenze), as explained by Stefano Vitali, in 2005.[22] Taking up a "broad vision" of context, the system not only included descriptive "entities" to represent groups of records (fonds or series, for example) but also linked these to a number of other entities, focussed on contextual elements that included creators, places, political contexts and forms of documents. These entities could all serve as access points and the system was also designed with a view to the larger web environment, in which the sharing and reuse of data has become increasingly significant – and expected.

The SIASFI system model appears to have integrated contextual description (through authority files) in a way that shows some of the complex relationships between creators, document types, records and other contexts. However, in the case of document types, the interconnected descriptive entities do not provide a great deal of detail (beyond basic information) but rather provide points of connection to the particular occurrences of such types within the archival collections. Compared with this, the UK Archives seems to provide a great deal more guidance to users, as do other sources of such information (including the Dutch source commentaries).[23]

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[22] http://www.archiviodistato.firenze.it/siasfi/index.html. Discussed in Stefano Vitali, "What Are the Boundaries of Archival Context? The SIASFI Project and the Online Guide to the Florence State Archives, Italy," *Journal of Archival Organization* 3, no.2-3 (2006), 243-260.

[23] At this point, it is difficult to say whether the content limitations of the SIASFI descriptive "entities" are due to the nature of the project (in which record type was not a high priority) or the intention of the design team. Either way, the inclusion of "form of material" in a formal system represents an important step in efforts to implement a broader view of contextual description.

Numerous sources of form-based information can be found outside of archives, from the Dutch *Broncommentaren* project to the myriad of tools developed by other organizations and communities, the members of which share an interest in particular types of records. Valuable information may be drawn through the experience and personal research of such individuals and this insight has led a number of archivists to propose mechanisms to allow those outside of the archives to contribute to the resources available for others – the UK Archives is one example of this. The approaches implemented and projects undertaken by the institutions discussed can provide useful insights as to how additional descriptions of context may be integrated into future "web(s)" of archival description.

Integrated Archival Description

In the 1990s and early 2000s, several interesting and innovative ideas emerged to shed light on the challenges of archival description and its future directions, particularly through the addition of user-generated annotations, more extensive contextual information, and an acknowledgement of the "voice" of the archivist. Envisioning a newly extended role for archives and formal descriptive systems, Tom Nesmith imagined a narrative interface, offering users a range of essays, which would be connected to records descriptions but at the same time provide more detailed introductory, overview explanations of the holdings of an archives (and the approach taken to archiving them), as well as some of the complex histories and contextualities of the records, bringing what

archivists already know into the formal descriptive system, while also allowing for users to add their own contributions.[24]

Vitali's account of the SIASFI Online Guide seems to draw from a similar set of principles, in which description is not limited to a narrow set of information about particular records and the relationship of parts (smaller groups of records) to the whole but also encompasses "description of contexts" – in this case, utilizing a number of interconnected context-based descriptive entries. While the range of tools may vary, the design of and changes to descriptive systems in recent years suggest areas of shared vision, particularly when it comes to the role of context in the representation of archival records. Examples such as these suggest useful directions for developing an integrated descriptive system – one that offers greater explanation of records context and general guidance to assist users in accessing particular records. Considering the possibilities for enhancing description through a focus on the features and form of certain document types, the following section will begin to explore what such entries might look like and what they might provide, as part of a larger descriptive system.

Descriptive Systems and "Form of Material" Information

A part of contextual authority files which may be easily overlooked is the foundational identification and clarification of the things or concepts they represent. Archival authority files for entities rest on an assumed set of conventions and rules for identifying and naming the people or organizations to be described; in the parallel library profession, authority records are connected to pre-defined classification systems. While

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[24] Tom Nesmith, "Reopening Archives: Bringing New Contextualities into Archival Theory and Practice," *Archivaria* 60 (2005), 271-273.

"form of material" authority files would not centre on individual *names,* they would require a common set of terms (and definitions) for identifying types of records and limiting ambiguity; this was acknowledged in the arguments for "form of material" authority files put forward in the 1980s by Bearman, Lytle and Sigmond. The sparse examples offered by SIASFI could be seen to represent an early stage in development.

Interestingly, in the years since the idea of "form of material" authority files was proposed, archival organizations themselves have developed and shared their own glossaries, including the large *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* published by the Society of American Archivists, which embraced a descriptive (more expansive) approach to the lexicon, rather than the traditional prescriptive methods.[25] Sources like these, many available online, and the range of research guides and published articles on certain records, can provide a valuable foundation for "form of material" archival authority files. Building from an accumulated lexicon of sorts, descriptions of certain types of records may be expanded beyond their skeletal description to more closely resemble the expanded authority files that are increasingly used for entities, generally within series-based descriptive systems.

Existing archival descriptive systems which already incorporate authority files for entities, such as the Keystone Descriptive Database at the Archives of Manitoba, offer a useful starting point for considering the place of authority files focussed on other contextual information associated with certain records. As a series-centred system, information about records creators is viewed through connected (but separate) archival

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[25] Richard Pearce-Moses, "The Archival Lexicon," in *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005). Bearman himself had cautioned against an overly narrow – or prescriptive – approach, supporting inclusion in a way that resembles that of Pearce-Moses. David Bearman, "Authority Control Issues and Prospects," *American Archivist* 52 (Summer 1989), 286-299.

authority files. Entries for records and creators, as well as file- or item-level listings, can serve as points of access to information.[26] Following in the footsteps of the archival authority file, separate descriptions of certain types of records might be similarly integrated into such a system, linked to other levels of description but also serving as a possible entry point, as similar "entities" were in the SIASFI system. Authority files in both cases could also be accessed from inside other areas of the system, particularly from links embedded within particular records (i.e. series) descriptions or other authority files.

Within a descriptive system like Keystone, authority files could be developed for particular types of records (such as wills), based on their history and characteristics. However, context in most archival situations seems to be complicated and documents like wills are no exception, as there are layers of context and history involved, much of which may need to be acknowledged in the proposed authority files, especially as there may be significant variations among different examples of a single type of record. For example, the Archives of Manitoba holds wills that are part of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, as well as others that are part of the collection of government records. Likewise, the UK National Archives holds wills submitted to the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, as well as those of Royal Navy seamen, which would have gone through the office of the Inspector of Wills, rather than the PCC. How might such differences be respected, within a system of authority files based on the commonalities of such records, rather than differences? One approach to this would be to maintain a general authority file for the larger "family" of wills, based on shared features or characteristics, but also to

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[26] Interestingly, the website for the HBCA Archives *does* offer written explanation of the current descriptive system used for the HBC records, as well as previous classifications applied; this is in keeping with the arguments made in favour of explaining the context associated with *archiving* the records, not simply the context which pre-dated their addition to archival collections.

acknowledge distinctly different sub-groups of wills, as required; separate authority sub-files could even be employed for such purposes, connected to the more general description. Such a web of interlinked descriptions would not only provide navigation (and exploration) options for users but also exploit the system of interconnected descriptions to represent the intellectual relationships between certain types of documents.

When it comes to the potential content for "form of material" authority files, many of the arguments and discussions put forward among archivists over the years have pointed to a number of possibilities as to what might constitute useful or essential elements. These generally fit into the following categories:[27]

- *Identity*
- *Appearance and features*
- *Function and administration*
- *Content and Structure*
- *Historical development and use*
- *Social context and relationships*
- *Access to and use of the record type*
- *Recommended (additional) resources.*

Within this framework, the content of potential authority files may be further expanded, depending on the nature and circumstances of the document types being examined.

The main sections (listed above) provide a general intellectual structure, for the benefit of human reading, but it should be remembered that confining formal descriptive systems to traditional document-centred models merely limits the potential of such systems to interconnect with other sources, internal and external. While content should be

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[27] Many of these are drawn from the Dutch *broncommentaren* initiative, as described for English-speaking archivists in Bearman and Sigmond, "Explorations of Form of Material Authority Files by Dutch Archivists," *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987), 249-253.

presented to users in reader-friendly form, developments associated with the "semantic

web" point to the importance of organizing and structuring such data so that computer

and web-based tools may also draw connections and assist human navigation.

The broad categories for describing records types provide a map for authority files

and are intended to answer some of the general and more specific questions provoked by

the records.

Identity

- What is it? This sets out the scope of the authority file by identifying the type of record in question and provides preliminary information (similar to ICA-based descriptions).

- What common name(s) and terminology are used in identifying it? As the example of the will has highlighted, such terms are not always consistent and unambiguous, therefore establishing the identity of the type of document in question necessarily involves some explanation of terminology, particularly in cases of overlapping and changing meanings as seen in the usage of the terms "will" and "testament" at different points in time. (Parallel and closely-related terms could also be identified, in order to situate the record type in relation to other records.[28])

Appearance and features[29]

- What characteristics define the record type (and distinguish it from others)? In the case of the will, this would include common recurring features, such as the religious preamble, statement of health and mental capability, or the codicil.

- What are the common external features and physical properties (if any) associated with the record? For example, the length or usual dimensions (or range), if known – this can vary significantly, in the case of wills. Similarly, wills (as an internal form) may sometimes be found as isolated documents, sometimes transcribed into large volumes, and in other cases transferred to a different media.[30] Attached images of

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[28] In this section, links could be used to navigate between related authority files, in cases where certain types (or sub-types) are separately described.

[29] Some of these elements would not necessarily be exclusive to the document type, nor necessarily occurring in all examples, as similarities and differences between them can point to common or divergent contexts, purposes and intents.

[30] Historically, the legal preference has been for a physical written document but increasing consideration is being given to wills contained in other media and (external) forms – electronic wills, for example – though significant issues remain. Acknowledgement may be necessary, particularly as researchers may not be

example documents could further enhance the section (an approach used by the UK National Archives).

Function and administration

- What is/was the primary purpose or intended function of the record? (What does it do?) For example, the will outlines the division of an estate, according to the wishes of the testator.

- What entities had jurisdiction over (or regularly influenced) the creation of the record? (This could include legal bodies that exerted control over formal requirements to ensure legitimacy.). In the case of the will, such entities might include courts and government entities.

Content and structure (internal)

- What sort of information-content is usually featured in this type of record? (For example, a researcher might want to know if a written will may include reference to family members.)

- How is this type of record generally organized? Where applicable, the main features of the underlying structure and parts of the record could be outlined (making use of tools drawn from modern archives-adapted diplomatics).

- How was the record created? Where known, the underlying procedures could be explained.

- How consistent and/or reliable were the structures and procedures involved? (How much variance can be expected between different examples of this type of record?)

- Issues? For example, if it is known that the practices and/or content of this type of record has been discredited or caused serious challenges for other researchers.

Historical development and use

- What are the origins and history of the record (if known)? This could include what has been documented or explored (by various professions) regarding significant developments in administration, juridical authority, and decisions (e.g. legislative responsibilities).

- How has the record been used or consulted in the past?

- What has been the relationship between the record and custodial institutions (including archives)? For example, were such records always of interest to archives?

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familiar with the traditional "expression" of the will, as a physical document. Legal discussion (in the Manitoba context) is included in Manitoba, Law Reform Commission, *The Wills Act and the Doctrine of Substantial Compliance*, report no. 43 (Winnipeg: Queen's Printer, 1980), section 7(b).

- Issues? For example, are there serious debates or unresolved questions regarding the record?

Social context and relationships

- Relationship to other records? For example, the relationship between wills and certain registers or documents related to procedures, such as probate. (This can be of particular help in pointing users towards other related record-types and sources.)

- Symbolic or non-evidential uses of the record? For example, the symbolic role of certain records and their significance in ceremonies, communities, etc.

- Further background relating to societal context, beyond the creator.[31]

Accessing and using these records

- Where is this type of record commonly found? (What kinds of archives or other institutions?)

- What skills and/or additional knowledge are needed to interpret such records? Some wills, for example, may require the ability to read a particular script and/or language, such as Latin.

- How has this type of record been used in research (if known)? Has it been featured as subject or source of recent publications or studies, for example?

Further (recommended) resources

- Additional sources of information? For example, user guides and other web- or paper-based resources maintained separately from formal descriptive systems (some originating from communities with shared interests, such as genealogy.)

A number of the elements and questions identified may be addressed in various research tools, user guides, professional or scholarly publications, though these may often be dispersed or not accessible (or known) outside of professional communities. In some circumstances the knowledge necessary to offer complete explanations of certain contextual elements may also be elusive – this is a reality of archival work that has been

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[31] Based on the idea of "societal provenance" proposed by Tom Nesmith, and explored through articles including: Nesmith, "The concept of societal provenance and records of nineteenth-century Aboriginal–European relations in Western Canada: Implications for archival theory and practice," *Archival Science* 6 (2006), 351-360.

raised within the profession.[32] Consistency in the organization of content among

descriptions of different document types could be helpful in making visible some of the

gaps in information which may occur in cases where research or available data is limited.

In addition to the content which has been the focus of description and the focus of

debates, several meta-elements are also needed to enable effective documentation and use

of descriptions. Often found in top (header) or specific control sections, these include:

- A unique identifier (such as a number), to differentiate the authority record from others, regardless of shifts in terminology or naming conventions;[33]
- Name of the institution responsible for the creation and maintenance of the file
- Creation, revision, deletion dates
- Rules and conventions used (including standards)
- Status (e.g. complete)
- Language and script used
- Sources consulted

Many of the elements identified for administrative or control purposes have the added

benefit of providing greater transparency of the active role taken by archivists in

activities such as description – something that has been brought forward as an issue

within the archival community. There are also elements that may not significantly change

the way that users read the information but could have an impact on how "machine-

readable" the content is; while previous efforts to transfer descriptions to the web

focussed on identifying data and encoding it so that it might be identified for display,

web-based data is increasingly expected to be harvestable, for use in other creative

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[32] It has even been suggested that archivists should make note of the "silences" that occur, alongside other narratives – discussed particularly by Rodney G.S. Carter, in "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006), 215-233.

[33] The issues caused by changing names and terms have been experienced in archives and libraries alike, and the International Council on Archives made a point of including such identifiers in their descriptive standards.

endeavours, semantically machine-readable, and interconnected (and interconnect-able) to other web resources.

The list of potential content elements covers a variety of information pertaining to record types. Some of these merely identify specific details that would often be found in user guides or document studies, while others constitute areas of research still in development. Archivists describing context have a difficult balance to maintain, in determining how much detail would be helpful for users, without becoming overwhelming; the desire to attract new audiences, with varying abilities and expectations adds to this challenge. Display design and the layering of information offer potential solutions for accommodating such a range of users and allowing users to choose what they want to see. Similarly, the infinite possibilities of linking information (and sources) to each other will also continue to play a role in parsing the representation of larger contexts into smaller sections. Perhaps even authority files will become nodes in a web of information and resources, rather than the self-enclosed documents they were once perceived to be.

Descriptive Systems and Other Resources

While archival description often focuses on the interconnection of descriptions and information about records in context, a number of other useful resources designed to assist individuals accessing particular types of documents have taken the form of extensive guides (with a "how-to" focus) and tutorials. At the UK National Archives, these are more inclusive and comprehensive sources than the formal descriptive entries. What is the best way to connect and interact with such sources? Should descriptive systems be designed to merge user guides with descriptions of records? Knowledge

drawn from these (and the user-focus) would be beneficial if incorporated into descriptive entities, if the goal was a "one-stop shopping" approach to archival access. However, it seems that one of the great advantages of a web-based environment is the ability to draw many links between different things and navigation between linked tools can lead to useful discoveries. As such, an effective self-enclosed guide or tutorial would probably be most useful if it was linked to relevant authority files. A similar approach might be applied to other (external) reference materials, such as publications and articles in various academic or professional journals. In this way, the integrity of each could be preserved, while still adding to the whole.

Record-Type Descriptions and the Future of Formal Descriptive Systems

Within the larger context of archival records, individual items – whether a single document or a multi-document unit (such as a file or volume) – pose challenges for description, yet are significant to the work of many archive users. Description within various archives has generally focussed on larger descriptive units. However, the structure and composition used by some institutions to represent archival records has changed, taking advantage of the relative flexibility provided by the development of databases and web-based research tools. In Canada, the implementation of separate but connected descriptions of records and entities, at provincial archives in Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan and the Yukon, suggest that the information hierarchy adopted from traditional paper-based practices is no longer needed in a web-based (rather than document-based) environment. Within Keystone, users can navigate between entities, records series and listings – such a model suggests that authority files for describing

aspects of context might be created to parallel those used for describing records-creating

entities, similarly linked to various descriptions of records.

Just as newer approaches to description have moved towards more flexible

representations of archival records and presentation of descriptive data, technological

innovation has provided opportunities for representing complex relationships (whether

between people, ideas or things) and collaborating on and sharing resources. The

potential of collaboration between archival institutions has long been among the

justifications for descriptive standards and, more recently, for the addition of archival

authority files to descriptive systems.[34] Combined with the potential of the "semantic

web," the idea of shared authority files offers intriguing possibilities; while there may not

yet be sufficient interest among archives, the library-based experimental Virtual

International Authority File (VIAF) joint-project is putting such ideas to the test.[35] In

addition to the potential of institutional collaboration, the move from paper-based to web-

accessible description has also inspired discussion of user involvement (and dialogue)

within description, not only regarding the benefits of collaboration but also with a view to

the future relationship between archives and their users.

Questions surrounding the best use of emerging technology for descriptive

systems emerge again when considering the role of users. How not to lose sight of users

and, ideally, how to incorporate their voices might become part of such a resource are

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[34] Interestingly, it appears that library cataloguing rules may also be opening the door for greater use of archival authority files, with the incorporation of more recent concepts into standards such as *Resource Discovery and Access* (RDA), released in 2010 to replace AACR2. Cory L. Nimer, "RDA and Archives," *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no.3-4 (2010): 227-243, doi: 10.1080/15332748.2010.550799.

[35] Official project site (including demo) at http://www.oclc.org/research/activities/viaf/. (Note: As of April 2012, the VIAF research project became an OCLC web service. OCLC, "Virtual International Authority File service transitions to OCLC; contributing institutions continue to shape direction through VIAF Council," news release, 4 April 2012, http://www.oclc.org/news/releases/2012/201224.htm.)

prominent in the discussion. Suggestions have included the incorporation of "annotations," for user comments and contributions.[36] The UK National Archives does encourage user contributions but the forum provided has been quite separated from the whole. While this does not exactly seem like the kind of involvement that some archivists imagined, the interaction of users with archival materials on the web seems to be a difficult issue for archives to address – in many archives, there is little incorporation of the user's "voice" at all.[37] However, there have been efforts to explore such possibilities outside of formal descriptive systems, as was undertaken in the "Next Generation Finding Aid Project" (for the Polar Bear Expedition Collection).[38] A central part of this experiment involved the application of social navigation features, including user-based commenting, collaborative filtering, bookmarking and a visitor awareness mechanism, all with the goal of leveraging more fully the interactivity of the web. Though still an early experiment in engaging users in a virtual environment, this implementation suggests that the integration of similar features of social navigation in future is quite possible and could enable a new level of interaction with users. Indeed, later reflections on this (and similar projects) have pointed to the potential for developing an entirely more collaborative dynamic between archivists and users, one involving shared authority.

The engagement of users in archival activities and with archival descriptive systems could not only provide a new forum for reference, discussion and collaboration

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[36] Light and Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations".

[37] To their credit, the UK National Archives announced in 2012 the development of *Discovery*, a new system to incorporate many of their previous elements, particularly *Your Archives* (which is to be replaced). National Archives (United Kingdom), "Closure of Your Archives," news release, 09 January 2012.

[38] Official website of the *Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collection*, http://polarbears.si.umich.edu/index.pl?node_id=1163&lastnode_id=1163 (accessed August 2011). The project itself is described in Elizabeth Yakel, Seth Shaw and Polly Reynolds, "Creating the Next Generation of Archival Finding Aid". See also Yakel, "Who Represents the Past? Archives, Records and the Social Web," in *Controlling the Past*, 257-278.

but will likely offer future benefits for archives and users alike. Social navigation features

can provide a level of customization for the user, while feedback on content and

organization can alert archivists to parts of the system that work well or need

modification. User-generated content also has the potential to expand the scope of what

such tools can offer, allowing users to interact with and help other users, and ideas like

crowd-sourcing (for specific tasks) may prove useful to archivists facing a combination

of limited resources and what appear to be limitless expectations.[39] In addition, some

suggest that integration of "social web" elements into description and engagement with

communities online could fundamentally change the way in which archival records *and*

archivists are represented on the web.[40] The potential engagement opportunities that have

arisen from social and technical developments are still largely untapped (and only

partially tested) but could provide fruitful areas for additional expansion of web-based

descriptive systems.

Innovative approaches to data, interaction and accessibility on the web have and

continue to offer archivists some significant opportunities to enhance archival description

and build descriptive systems that not only draw from existing research tools and

professional resources but also incorporate creative approaches to user engagement and

ideas of how to leverage technological and professional capabilities in the effort to assist

individuals to access and interpret particular records with as much independence as

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[39] This approach has been used for other online tasks, such as tagging. For example, the steve.museum research project looked at tagging "folksonomy" and museum documentation – discussed in J. Trant, "Tagging, Folksonomy and Art Museums: Results of steve.museum's Research," *Archives & Museum Informatics* (2009), http://conference.archimuse.com/files/trantSteveResearchReport2008.pdf (accessed January 2012). In addition, a similar approach of mobilizing volunteers to facilitate archival work (though not relating to online "crowdsourcing," per se) was discussed in Evans, "Archives of the People, by the People, for the People".

[40] Particularly Yakel, in "Who Represents the Past?" and "Balancing Archival Authority."

possible. The need of many users to consult individual documents presents a challenge for archivists, made additionally tricky by the distance between some users and the archives, as well as the range of audiences and abilities. However, this has inspired several strategies, among them the provision of comprehensive research tools, greater effort to provide general guidance as to how to approach interpretation of records, their features and contexts, and a rethinking of the current descriptive tools and systems, not only so that content might be further expanded to encompass "form of material" descriptions, but also to use to greater advantage the social and technological innovations offered by developments in web-based data. Projects and experiments implementing many of these ideas point to a more central role for descriptive systems and archives, as a place where a range of records, contextual information and various resources connect.

CONCLUSION

> *Archivists today are caught between an expanding volume of records and a growing public expectation that every page in every document is online and indexed. With so many records and so few resources ... the problem seems intractable. More money alone is not the answer .... Instead, archivists must fundamentally shift the way they think about their roles and develop alternative means for doing archival work.*[1]

Pointing out (in 2007) the significant dilemma faced by archives and archivists, in an era of limited resources and increased expectations, Max Evans was perceptive but not alone in his concern. His was among a growing number of voices suggesting that the most promising solutions lay in the incorporation of relatively new social and technological innovations into archival work. At the same time, discussions surrounding the "more product, less process" approaches to archives[2] also raised questions regarding the role of aggregate-level descriptive tools and pointed to the efficiencies made possible through the implementation of contextual (archival) authority files. Alongside these, reconsideration of archival principles and representational issues in archival description has contributed to innovation and the adaptation of archival research tools to better suit their modern environment. This thesis has sought to highlight some of the emerging ideas and approaches, many of which have great potential for benefitting archivists and users of archives alike, providing further enhancements of the descriptive tools and formal systems they are involved in creating.

The re-evaluation and re-imagining of the relationship between archivists and users has been among the common threads of recent discussion, particularly the potential

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[1] Evans, "Archives of the People, by the People, for the People," 387.

[2] Most notably Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005), 208-263. Responses to their initial article are discussed in Meissner and Greene, "More Application while Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP," *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no.3-4 (2010), 174-226.

incorporation of the latter into web-based resources. From arguments for the value of the user "voice" and the development of multiple voices in description, to the experimental "Next Generation Finding Aid Project" and user-generated content (on archive sites), archivists have looked for ways to consider users in reference tools. Recent years have also seen questioning of the relative positions of the archivist and users, in their creative and potentially collaborative roles in representing archival records.

While archivists must often view a large number of records with more of a "birds-eye view" than an individual seeking the contract or will signed by their ancestor or an important figure to their research, this does not prevent them from lending their expertise to assist the user in their work. Traditionally, the archivist might have accomplished this through in-person interaction, in an archival reference room; with increasing resources available remotely, through institutional websites and other on-line resources, the research tools provided by archives are important mechanisms for facilitating the work of remote users. With this in mind, an important question becomes: what can archives and archivists do to enable users to conduct their research more independently (and remotely) than before? Given the role of description in representing records and context, it follows that expanding the content and capabilities of those tools used to convey these descriptions is at the centre of many proposed solutions.

Description and Documents

Though describing records for researcher reference may seem a straightforward task, the records archivists are responsible for are often numerous, potentially complex and, in many ways, unique. Isolated or special items within larger collections may receive special attention but generally archival records are described as parts of larger groups.

However, a great deal more research and exploration of records can be found outside of archives, focussing on the histories, characteristics, procedures, and other contextual features of particular records; in Canada, much of this was due in part to a rediscovery of European concepts in the 1980s and renewed interest in documents themselves, as subjects worthy of study.

While archival practices often discourage a focus on individual items, the articles and publications by historians, archivists and various others have not had such limitations. Articles focussing on socially or historically significant documents often provide valuable contextual information and analysis regarding the history of the type of document involved; some consider closely the common shared characteristics, and sometimes the role of such documents in certain historical, and socio-cultural contexts. Document-focussed guide books are another source of information, providing accessible explanations and addressing issues particular to users less familiar with the material. Such insights may be of great interest to those seeking the same (or related) examples of these documents in archival institutions, yet individuals seeking particular records may not have access to (or be aware of) the wealth of existing resources familiar to archivists or specialized researchers.

One example of a complex yet well-examined document is the written will (discussed in preceding chapters). With a long history in Anglo-Canadian traditions and origins tied to pre-Norman Britain, the written will (of the English tradition), as a type of document, can not only provide insight into the lives and possessions of the individuals identified within it, but also clues to historical, religious and socio-cultural circumstances. The documents can be of great interest to genealogists, biographers and historians, as

well as less traditional audiences, such as those conducting population studies or looking

at other patterns. The modern descendant of the medieval (English) will maintains a

number of characteristics tied closely to its origins and underlying concepts, yet the

historical – and sometimes social – significance (or insignificance) of one part or another

is not necessarily evident from viewing its content.

The will serves as a striking example of a type of record that occurs in various

archives, across different collections, which may be consulted for a range of different

research interests. The observations of historians and archivists alike suggest that closer

consideration of such a document would be justified within an expanded descriptive

system. The challenge remains for archives and archivists to determine how current

systems and approaches might be adapted to allow for such expansions, while balancing

the issues presented by changing technology, user needs and the demands of describing

the records in their care.

Description and Archives, Past and Present

Central to the dilemma of description faced at numerous archival institutions is

the issue of quantity, often resulting in backlog. While basic information may be

documented for items within a larger group of records (for administrative and control

purposes), the sheer number of records held by archives makes individualized description

in many cases impractical for archivists, as well as problematic to the representation of

such records in relation to other records and their larger context. While the former might

help access and retrieval, the latter is central to situating and interpreting the items in

question. Concepts associated with the representation and contextualization of records,

such as provenance and the *fonds*, remain at the core of a great deal of descriptive work

in archives, yet the environment in which such description takes place is not the same in which these concepts were developed and integrated into archival practice; changing technology and approaches to records have provoked discussion and re-evaluation of how these are used. In addition, the development of electronic databases, the Internet and web-based technology have allowed for broader and multi-faceted descriptive systems, as well as new means of capturing and presenting information.

Among the innovations that have interested archivists in recent years are the various web-based communities that have appeared and, in some cases, can have an impressive effect on the amount of content generated (for projects like Wikipedia). The "commons-based peer production" model of user-added (and user-driven) content, along with other online annotation and interactive possibilities, does present archives with interesting options for developing future research tools and broadening (formal) descriptive systems yet, at the same time, archivists (at present) remain responsible for representing numerous records and their relationships.[3] The idea to bolster the resources offered by archivists with "peer-produced" content points to promising areas for inviting the participation of web-based archival audiences, with great potential benefits. However, it is not a complete solution in itself. Web communities may well increase the capture of metadata and establishment of data-based access points for specific documents, but the "fundamental shift" required needs to also take into account the benefits and efficiencies offered by the authority file approach to broadening contextual description and the promise of developments surrounding the "semantic web."

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[3] Or at least enabling such representation to take place. Some have noted a shift towards shared authority in description but, at present, it (arguably) appears that this responsibility still largely rests with archivists.

In recent years (in some cases decades), several innovative projects and programs implemented at archives in Canada, the United States, Australia and Britain, in particular, have pointed to important shifts in the way that records are represented in descriptive tools. It seems that those involved have seriously looked at the ideas and suggestions that arose from previous decades of debate and attempted to implement some of the most significant: the archival authority file and series-based approach to description can be seen most notably in the descriptive databases of the provincial archives of Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan and the Yukon Archives, as well as in a number of Australian archives, broadening the breadth of context offered to users; experiments like the "Next Generation Finding Aid Project," through the University of Michigan, have tested how social navigation might contribute to archival access tools; and the National Archives of the United Kingdom has developed a broad base of knowledge and educational tools to assist users in understanding, accessing and interpreting records, many of which can be viewed as digital copies. In addition to this, innovations in Europe, including the long established Dutch *broncommentaren* and the newer Italian SIASFI project, have highlighted areas of contextual information that have been featured in publications and academic research, but are not often a focus of (traditional) descriptive tools in Anglo-American practices.

The evolution of descriptive documents into electronic web-accessible tools has brought new capabilities for archivists describing records (in large or small units), while also doing justice to shared areas of provenance, as seen in the use of archival authority records. At the same time, the accessibility of such tools online has also allowed for wider discussion and examination of initiatives undertaken by institutions and archivists

from different professional traditions, responsible for different collections in different continents. Efforts in Holland, Italy and the UK point to the value of incorporating contextual information regarding types of records into reference tools. The archival authority file model, in particular, (as in SIASFI) presents an application of the concept of "record type" description that could enhance descriptive systems by adding pathways users could follow to learn about the features and context of a given type of record, such as the will. Many publications have already analyzed records with a view to contextualizing them. The adaptation of these approaches and insights to enhance the (formal) descriptive systems already accessible online would provide a new avenue for archivists to share the knowledge and research at their disposal.

The large and complex body of knowledge at the core of archival description highlights its significance as a primary function of archives and its continued importance, particularly as archival audiences develop and grow to include individuals with different interests and experience. The technological innovations of recent decades have not only provided the means for archives to provide remote access to digitized information, they have also laid the groundwork for archives to re-think traditional practices and re-engineer descriptive tools to better serve the needs of the institution and its varied user communities. Traditional models of archivists and archival work, including description, have been challenged by new approaches and many significantly reshape the future representation of records.

The Future of Archival Description and Descriptive Tools

Despite the transition from paper to electronic form, online finding aids retain much of the look and functionality of their paper counterparts and make only minimal use of available technologies, usually for browsing and

searching. **Document genres need to evolve in response to changing technological environments and social cultures.**[4]

New models for archival description, in formal systems and various reference tools, have raised important issues for archives and archivists, particularly relating to their roles in developing content, determining what (and how much content) should be included and re-thinking the way such information might be presented. Descriptive standards such as RAD, MAD, DACS, ISAD(G), ISAAR(CPF) and ISD(F) have provoked discussion and, in some cases, given added profile to certain approaches, particularly the use of separate authority files, while the necessary standardization of data-structure (often encoding) practices has enabled the migration of traditionally paper-based description to a digital environment. Interestingly, however, the degree to which digital technology and the advent of the web changed *how* records are described is debatable. Prominent archivists on several continents have argued over the years that in general descriptive documents, in terms of their functionality (and their "look and feel"), were not fully growing into their new roles or living up to the new possibilities imagined for them.[5]

Standardization efforts which took place around the 1980s and 1990s in several countries, including Canada, were intended to provide some consistency and continuity between (and within) institutions, to improve digital accessibility, though a common encoding language, as well as human accessibility, for archival audiences. While it may be acknowledged that such standards laid the groundwork for greater consistency in the content, focus and form of descriptive tools (not to mention a common forum for debate

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[4] Yakel, Shaw and Reynolds, "Creating the Next Generation of Archival Finding Aid," Emphasis added.
[5] Prominent critics voicing such opinions include: Hurley, "The Making and Keeping of Records: (1)", 58-77; and Yakel, Shaw and Reynolds, "Creating the Next Generation of Archival Finding Aid."

in the years that followed), those like Hurley have argued that early efforts in particular had the effect of electronically duplicating traditional paper-based practices, rather than significantly changing the process involved. [6] Since the early years of descriptive standards and early digitization of descriptive tools, however, encouraging developments in the areas of descriptive standards (for content and digital encoding), through subsequent additions and revisions, and institutional web-based projects and initiatives, suggest that archives and archivists are incorporating less traditional ideas and approaches into descriptive practices and into the tools that are offered to assist in web-based research.

While initially appearing quite rigid, the practices and standards developed for description have been adapted to include: emerging ideas regarding the relationship of records to entities and each other; the significance of many elements of provenance and layers of meaning embedded in documents and their traditions; and the role of archivists and archive-users in representing and interpreting them. Hurley notes this in his critique of the development of automation (paralleled with descriptive standardization):

> The possibility of achieving the desired outcome in a different manner – or achieving new outcomes – was not realised until a second or third generation of users began to understand the possibilities for re-engineering the processes themselves, instead of just duplicating them. [7]

More than twenty-five years after the formative reports from the American NISDF and the Canadian Working Group on Descriptive Standards, changes to the development and structure of descriptive tools have been accompanied by growing acknowledgment that there is still much potential for adapting the traditional model and means of representing records to better leverage technological developments and professional knowledge, so

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[6] Hurley, 67.
[7] Ibid.

that the user can be offered a descriptive system which serves as a central point of

connection for a range of records, contextual information and other resources.

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