

**PETER J. SCOTT AND THE AUSTRALIAN ‘SERIES’ SYSTEM:  
ITS ORIGINS, FEATURES, RATIONALE, IMPACT AND CONTINUING  
RELEVANCE**

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**Session Description**

During the 1960s Peter J Scott and colleagues at the then Commonwealth Archives Office (now National Archives of Australia) devised a new approach to archival intellectual control, which separated descriptive information about the creators of records from information about the records themselves. This approach – which became known as the ‘series’ system’ – rejected the rigidities of the ‘record group’ approach to archival description, which required contextual information and information about records to be combined in single hierarchical descriptions. Scott and his colleagues argued that the record group method did not adequately reflect the realities of records creation and use in environments of complex administrative change, where multiple provenance is a common phenomenon. Scott’s system has since been adopted by all public records institutions in Australia and New Zealand and by a number of other archival programs around the world. It has also fundamentally influenced the development and evolution of international archival descriptive standards.

The papers presented in this session feature the Editor and two of the contributors to a recent monograph of essays by and about Peter J Scott, published by the Australian Society of Archivists in 2010. Adrian Cunningham provides an overview of the major features of Scott’s system, placing it in its historical context and exploring its impact on the development of international archival descriptive standards. Laura Millar explores international reactions to the Scott system, while Barbara Reed explores its influence on the evolution of records continuum theory in Australia and also considers contemporary implementation issues, particularly in relation to describing and controlling digital records.

# PETER J SCOTT AND THE AUSTRALIAN 'SERIES' SYSTEM: MAIN FEATURES AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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## **Peter Scott – Australia's best known, but least well understood archivist**

This ICA Congress session is, quite simply, a tribute to Peter Scott – who is arguably Australia's best known, but least well understood archivist internationally. The three of us who appear before you today proposed this session because we felt it would be terribly remiss for the first ever International Congress on Archives not to feature a session focussing on the work of Australia's greatest archivist. It is our hope that, by the end of today's session, delegates will have a deeper understanding and appreciation of the nature and ongoing influence of the innovations pioneered by Scott and his colleagues during the 1960s and 1970s.

The three of us had the honour of working with Peter Scott between 2005 and 2010 to produce the landmark and award-winning Australian Society of Archivists monograph *The Arrangement and Description of Archives Amid Administrative and Technological Change: Essays and Reflections by and about Peter J. Scott*. I had the privilege of being editor of the volume, which for the first time assembled in one place all of the published and some of the unpublished writings of Peter Scott, together with an entirely new 23,000 word magnum opus by Scott which constitutes his valedictory review of the archival meaning of life, the universe and everything. Laura Millar and Barbara Reed contributed stimulating and erudite new essays which assess the ongoing relevance of Scott's innovations to recordkeeping practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – Millar from an international perspective and Reed from an Australian perspective. We commend the book to you, noting that copies can be ordered over the Australian Society of Archivists' website or from the ASA's trade stand at this Congress.

My job over the next twelve minutes is to provide an overview of the major features and underpinning rationale of Scott's system, placing it in its historical context and exploring its impact on the subsequent development of archival descriptive standards. Laura Millar will explore international reactions to the Scott system, while Barbara Reed will explore its influence on the evolution of records continuum theory in Australia and also consider contemporary implementation issues, particularly in relation to describing, controlling and providing access to digital records.

## **The complex reality of provenance**

As every archivist knows, the thing that separates archives from other forms of information is that they derive their meaning and value from their provenance. If you do not know the provenance of a document, then the document can be no more than a decontextualised source of information – an information object that is largely devoid of wider meaning and evidential value. Knowledge of the provenance of a document enables that document to be used as evidence of activities, for it is essential to know who created or received the document and for what purpose. As the international records management standard states, records are:

*Information created or received and maintained as evidence and information by an organization or person in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business of the conduct of affairs.<sup>1</sup>*

One of the main aims of archival description, therefore, is to document this provenance in archival description and in our systems of intellectual control and access. In other words, our archival descriptive systems have to document archives in context. This contextual view of archives is supported by the International Council on Archives, which defines provenance as:

*The relationships between records and the organisations or individuals that created, accumulated and/or maintained and used those records in the conduct of personal or corporate activity.<sup>2</sup>*

Archival descriptive tools and systems have to document and communicate the relationships between recordkeeping activity and the archives created by persons and organisations. Moreover, documentation of provenance can itself be a useful point of access to archives in archival control systems.

While all archivists agree that provenance is a defining feature of archives, the reality of provenance is, I believe, poorly understood. Many of our descriptive standards and systems are based on the simplistic assumption that there is axiomatically a simple one-to-one relationship between a given provenance entity and a given body of archives. This view was articulated as long ago as 1898 with the publication of the so-called Dutch Manual of Muller, Feith and Fruin.<sup>3</sup> Muller and his colleagues certainly had good reasons for emphasising the importance of not mixing up archives that have different provenance in archival arrangement projects. They had to convince archivists that it was vital to not obscure the provenance of archives by cavalier mixing and sorting. In retrospect, however, it is clear that the rigid adoption of the Dutch rules for arrangement and description led archivists to believe stubbornly that a given body of archives could only ever have one provenance – a belief that, as we shall see, simply does not reflect reality.

Archives reflect and document life and activity in the real world. The real world is a complex place. Relationships in the real world are rarely one-to-one, on the contrary they are usually many-to-many. In the real world archives reflect the complex reality of dynamic inter-relationships between different records-creating entities. A common example of this complexity is the incidence of administrative change in governments and in large corporations. In archival terms this can be understood as successive multiple provenance. But multiple provenance can also occur simultaneously, where more than one entity is simultaneously involved in the creation and use of a given body of archives. This phenomenon has always existed, but is becoming even more prevalent and apparent with digital records, where shared systems often create a single body of archives for multiple separate entities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> International Standards Organization, *ISO 15489.1 Records Management Part 1: General*, Geneva, 2001. p.2.

<sup>2</sup> International Council on Archives, *ISAAR (CPF) International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed., Paris, 2004, p.10.

<sup>3</sup> S. Muller, JA Feith and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives: Drawn up by the direction of the Netherlands Association of Archivists*, English translation of the second edition by Arthur H Leavitt, Chicago, Society of American Archivists, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Hurley, 'Problems with provenance' in *Archives and Manuscripts: Journal of the Australian Society of Archivists*, 23(2), November 1995, pp.234-259.

Given this complex reality, how then should archivists document provenance? First and foremost we should design and build archival systems that reflect rather than distort the complex reality of recordkeeping activity. In a relational database environment this is not a difficult challenge. All that is required is a system that supports separate but linked descriptions of archives and the different entities that create archives. In such systems the data inputs need to be standardised, but the outputs (or the ways in which the inputs can be rendered for human interface and presentation) can be infinitely varied to suit different user requirements. One of the great advantages of computers for archives is that the inputs for our descriptive control systems no longer need to be identical to the user interfaces (or finding aids) to those systems, nor do they need to be constrained by such limited and clumsy tools as card catalogues, calendars and inventories.

### **Evolution of the Australian ‘Series’ System**

Australia is a young nation with an even younger archival profession. When the Dutch Manual was published in 1898 Australia did not even exist as a nation – we had to wait another three years for that particular milestone. We had to wait almost fifty years before a national archivist was appointed, albeit as a rather minor functionary within the Parliamentary Library. Indeed, it was not until the 1960s that the archival profession in Australia reached any sort of critical mass. Moreover, we had to wait until 1975 before our archival professional association, the Australian Society of Archivists, was established.

When the Australian Government’s Archives Division was established in the 1940s it had the distinct advantage of working with a clean slate. Although the Australian bureaucracy and many of its recordkeeping practices were based on the centuries-old model of the British civil service, our archival control systems had to be built from nothing. Of course, at first the Archives Division was more pre-occupied with identifying records worthy of preservation, rescuing them and placing them in reasonable storage facilities. But by the mid-1950s the Division began to turn its attention to how best to bring these records under intellectual control.

The then Commonwealth Archivist, Ian Maclean, and his colleagues had familiarised themselves with the writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson and the model of archival practice developed by the Public Record Office in London. Early attempts at achieving intellectual control consisted of trying to impose the so-called ‘record group’ approach onto the records of the Australian Government. This thinking was reinforced in 1954 when TR Schellenberg of the US National Archives was brought to Australia to advise on the development of our archival systems.

While all governments experience administrative change, Australian politicians have elevated it to a fine art. The Australian bureaucratic landscape is an ever-changing one, with the constant reallocation of functions amongst an extremely unstable array of administrative units, government agencies and portfolio departments. While this trend has become more noticeable over time, complex administrative histories have always been a feature of Australian bureaucratic endeavour. When functions are reallocated the records are usually reallocated with them. For example, between 1916 and 1945 the Australian government’s immigration restriction function (and the records documenting the performance of that function) was transferred between ten different government departments: External Affairs; Home and Territories; Home Affairs; Prime Minister’s; Markets and Migration; Prime Minister’s; Transport; Interior I; Interior II; and Immigration.

It is this problem of multiple provenance that gave Maclean and his colleagues headaches when trying to apply the record group approach to intellectual control.

Instinctively, they knew that complex administrative histories required assiduous archival documentation of the context of records creation. They continued with increasing difficulty to try to do this into the early 1960s when a young linguist by the name of Peter Scott was appointed to the Archives. In 1964 Scott made the radical suggestion of abandoning the record group as the locus of intellectual control and instead adopting the function-based series as the means of controlling records.<sup>5</sup>

This focus on the record series led perhaps inevitably to Scott's strategies being referred to as 'the series system'. As Chris Hurley<sup>6</sup> and others have since pointed out, however, it was not so much the focus on the series that was the defining feature of Scott's strategies, as it was his insistence on the need to separately document records description and administrative context. Series to Scott provided the most efficient vehicle for documenting records description. As such, series descriptions became free-floating entities that are connected as required to descriptions of all the agencies of government that have contributed to their existence.

Far from being an attack on the principle of provenance, Scott saw his approach as being a more efficient means of documenting the true and often complex nature of provenance and recordkeeping systems than is possible using the record group approach. It is the Australian view that provenance cannot be reduced to a simple one-to-one relationship between records creator and records. The simplistic view of provenance, which is embodied in the records group approach to archival description, to us represents a debasement of the archival principle of *respect des fonds*. To many of us in Australia, the record group is more a case of *disrespect des fonds*! Records can, and more often than not do, have multiple provenancial relationships, either simultaneously or successively. It behoves us as archivists to design descriptive systems that reflect the dynamic and complex realities of recordkeeping.

In essence the Australian system consists of two inter-related component parts:

1. **Context Control**, which is achieved by the identification and registration of records creating and other ambient entities and the documentation of the administrative and biographical histories of those entities, their functional responsibilities and their relationships with each other and with the recordkeeping systems they maintain(ed); and
2. **Records Control**, which is achieved by the identification, registration and documentation of record series and/or the items that make up those series.

In the Australian system the contextual entities that need to be documented and linked to descriptions of records include individuals, families, organisations, project teams,

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<sup>5</sup> M. Wagland and R. Kelly, 'The Series System – A Revolution in Archival Control' in S. McKemmish and M. Piggott (eds), *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives first fifty years*, Ancora Press, Melbourne, 1994, pp.131-149. Scott's first publication on the Series System was P. Scott, 'The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment' in *The American Archivist*, 29, October 1966, pp.493-504.

<sup>6</sup> C. Hurley, 'The Australian ('Series') System: An Exposition' in S. McKemmish and M. Piggott (eds), *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives first fifty years*, Ancora Press, Melbourne, 1994, pp.150-172.

government agencies and portfolios, governments themselves, functions and activities. It is the complex web of dynamic relationships between these various entities that underpin the transactions that cause the creation of records. It is therefore essential to capture documentation of these relationships in order to provide the contextual knowledge necessary to understand the content of the records themselves. In Australian continuum thinking – and in the words of my fellow-panelist Barbara Reed – records are not seen as ‘passive objects to be described retrospectively’, but as agents of action, ‘active participants in business processes’.<sup>7</sup>

As can be seen, the Australian system constitutes a dynamic approach to the intellectual control of records. Using this system any particular set of records can be viewed simultaneously or successively through multiple contextual prisms, thus mirroring the dynamic and contingent nature of records creation itself. The structural elements of the system provide the conceptual and documentary building blocks from which traditional or non-traditional finding aids can be constructed as and when required.

### **Post-custodialism and the records continuum**

There is another centrally important feature of the Australian approach to the intellectual control of records. Unlike traditional post-hoc approaches to archival description that focus on the static description of non-current records, the Australian approach can be and is used to achieve intellectual control over all of the records, both current and non-current, in a recordkeeping domain. Right from the earliest days of his appointment Ian Maclean was committed to the pursuit of an integrated approach to managing all of the records of the Australian government, not just the small subset of records that have been transferred to archival custody.

Under this philosophy of intellectual control, the custodial arrangements under which records are held are no longer of great significance. Certainly it is important to know where records are held at any one time, but they do not have to be in archival custody for the Archives to have a strategic responsibility for and interest in bringing them under intellectual control.

In the words of Canada’s Terry Cook:

*Scott’s approach was to move away from describing records in the custody of an archival institution and arranged there in a single group for a single records creator, and to move towards describing the multiple interrelationships between numerous creators and numerous series of records, wherever they may be: in the office(s) of creation, in the office of current control, or in the archives ... Scott’s fundamental insight broke through not just the straight-jacket of the record group, but all the ‘physicality of archives upon which the record group and so many other approaches to archives are implicitly based. In this way, as is finally being acknowledged, Peter Scott is the founder of the post-custodial revolution in world archival thinking. Although he worked in a paper world, his insights are now especially relevant for archivists facing electronic records, where – just as in Scott’s system – the*

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<sup>7</sup> B. Reed, ‘Metadata: Core Record or Core Business?’ in *Archives and Manuscripts*, 25(2), November 1997, pp.218-241.

*physicality of the record has no importance compared to its multi-relational contexts of creation and contemporary use.*<sup>8</sup>

And as David Bearman has said, ‘archivists should find, not make, the information in their descriptive systems’<sup>9</sup> – in other words we should reuse and add contextual value to the metadata dynamically created in the records systems of records creators. This is a very different mindset to that of static post hoc cataloguing, which might be regarded as the traditional approach to archival description.

### **What about functions?**

Archives are created when people or organisations perform functions and activities. It is not unreasonable, indeed it is arguably extremely useful, to regard functions as entities in their own right – entities that require separate description with links to both the records that document the function and to the records creators that perform the function.<sup>10</sup> Functions are not mere aspects of the life of a records creating entity – on the contrary records creators such as government agencies can often be regarded as nothing more than episodes in the life of a function. The relationships between the three recordkeeping entities can be illustrated as follows:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> T. Cook, ‘Archives in the post-custodial world: interaction of archival theory and practices since the publication of the Dutch Manual in 1898’, paper delivered to the XIII International Congress on Archives, Beijing, 1996. See also T. Cook, ‘What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift’ in *Archivaria* 43, Spring 1997, pp.38-39.

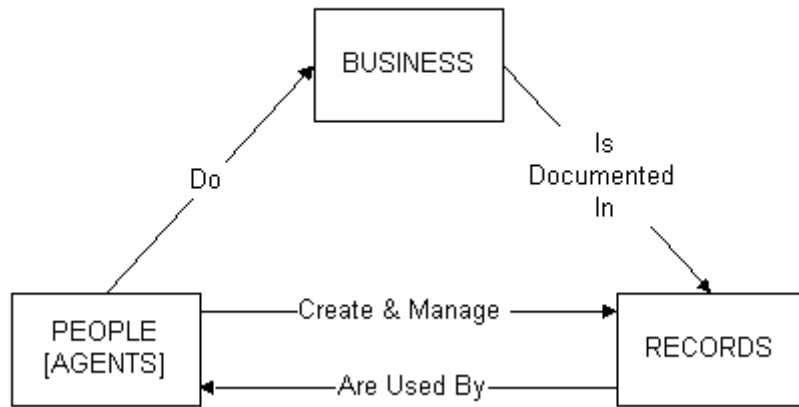
<sup>9</sup> D. Bearman, *Archival Methods*, Archives and Museum Informatics, Pittsburgh, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> C. Hurley, ‘What, if Anything, is a Function?’ in *Archives and Manuscripts*, 21(2), November 1993, pp.208-220; C. Hurley, ‘Ambient Functions: Abandoned Children to Zoos’ in *Archivaria* 40, Fall 1995, pp.21-39.

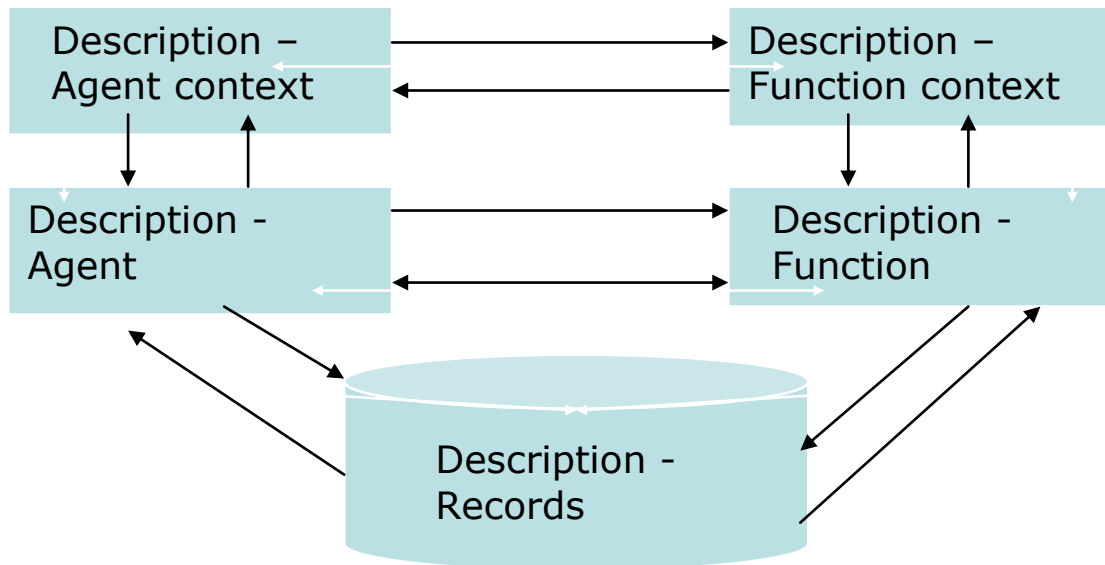
<sup>11</sup> Source for Figure 1: ‘Conceptual and Relationship Models: Records in Business and Socio-legal Contexts’, a deliverable from the 1998-1999 Australian Research Council funded Monash University research project, called ‘Recordkeeping Metadata Standards for Managing and Accessing Information Resources in Networked Environments over time for Government, Commerce, Social and Cultural Purposes’, Chief Investigators Sue McKemmish, Ann Pedersen and Steve Stuckey. <http://www.sims.monash.edu.au/research/rcrg/research/spirt/deliver/conrelmod.html>; model developed by Sue McKemmish, Glenda Acland, Kate Cumming, Barbara Reed, and Nigel Ward.

The Australian RKMS was a deliverable from the 1998-1999 Australian Research Council funded Monash University research project, called ‘Recordkeeping Metadata Standards for Managing and Accessing Information Resources in Networked Environments over time for Government, Commerce, Social and Cultural Purposes’, Chief Investigators Sue McKemmish, Ann Pedersen and Steve Stuckey. Versions of both models were published in the following article: Sue McKemmish, Glenda Acland, Nigel Ward, and Barbara Reed, ‘Describing Records in Context in the Continuum: The Australian Recordkeeping Metadata Schema’ in *Archivaria* 48, Fall 1999, pp.3-43.

**Figure 1: The Business**

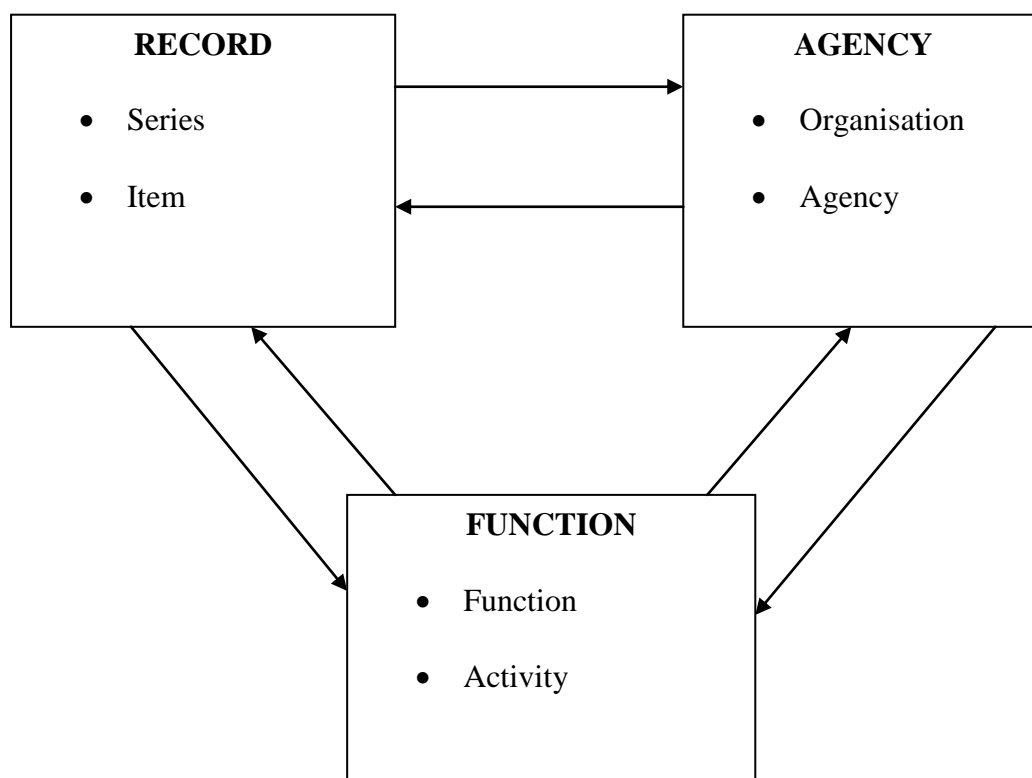


In terms of archival description, this model can be represented as follows:



Within series systems implementations instances of each of the three main entities may be described at different levels of granularity, with relationships between the different levels described accordingly.





### The Series System and standards for archival description

Those familiar with older guides and standards to archival description would find the Series System to be a very unfamiliar if not incomprehensible approach to intellectual control. I am referring here to such standard sources as the 1898 Dutch Manual, the British *Manual for Archival Description*, the Canadian *Rules for Archival Description* (first edition), the American *Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts*, and the first 1994 edition of the *International Standard Archival Description (General)* or ISAD(G).

More recent publications, however, are much more accommodating of the Series System approach. I refer here to such recent publications as the second edition of the *Rules for Archival Description* (RAD2) and the US guide *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*.<sup>12</sup> There has been an international swing towards the logic of having intellectual control systems based on separate but linked descriptions of archives and the context of the creation of archives. Most significant of all has been the publication by the ICA of the second editions of its two companion standards for archival description, ISAD(G) in 2000 and ISAAR (CPF) in 2004. Very largely, the deployment of these two standards in tandem provides the basis for a series system implementation. Records description is governed by ISAD(G), while the description of records creators and their various relationships is governed by ISAAR (CPF). The more recent creation by the ICA of a third standard for the description of functions – ISAF – potentially completes the triangle, although arguably more still needs to be done to articulate the complete conceptual model.

<sup>12</sup> Society of American Archivists, *Describing Archives: a Content Standard*, SAA, Chicago, 2004.

While Australians have actively contributed Scott's perspectives to the evolution of these international archival descriptive standards, we have not been remiss (though we were perhaps a little slow) in developing our own formal nationally codified archival descriptive standard. This work came to fruition in 2007 when the Australian Society of Archivists' Committee on Descriptive Standards published *Describing Archives in Context: A Guide to Australasian Practice*. Finally practitioners had access to an authoritative and user-friendly reference guide to implementing the series system. This book is still in print and can be purchased from the Australian Society of Archivists.

Archival description has come a long way since Muller, Feith and Fruin and the influence of Peter Scott in that journey continues to reverberate over 40 years since he shared his initial conceptual insights with his colleagues in Australia.

# **‘AN UNNECESSARY COMPLICATION’: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON PETER SCOTT’S SERIES SYSTEM**

**Laura Millar<sup>1</sup>**

## **Scott’s Proposal**

As Adrian has outlined, Peter Scott proposed significant changes to the description of archives, proposing in 1966 that archivists abandon the record group as the ‘primary category of classification’ and instead use the record series as the primary entry point for arranging and describing archival materials. Scott, at the time Archivist in Charge of Records Administration at the Commonwealth Archives in Australia, argued that the record group was ‘an unnecessary complication’ that did not take into account the often frequent changes in the composition, responsibilities and functions of the agencies responsible for creating the records in question. Scott believed that, by focusing on the series, archivists would be able to represent the dynamic nature of records and identify not just the last creator in line but all the agencies responsible for the records over time.<sup>2</sup>

The real shift behind Scott’s proposal was to separate the description of records from the description of creators, functions, and activities. Scott’s proposal challenged archivists to rethink their role in the management of modern archives. Was the archivist the custodian of ‘dead’ records, or the administrator of current records? Was it possible to identify archives based on their status at a particular point – at the end of their ‘active life’ – or was the process of creating, keeping and using records so fluid that any ‘snapshot’ description would misrepresent the recordkeeping reality?

My task on this panel is to consider the international reception to Scott’s proposal, which was, for the most part, muted and negative. Many archivists outside of Australia, and particularly in North America, generally rejected Scott’s solution, even though some of them agreed with his assessment of the problem. To understand why, we must first review the environment in which archivists functioned in the decades leading up to Scott’s pronouncement, an environment that promoted the idea of single provenance as the centre of archival work.

## **The evolution of the record group**

By the time the Dutch archivists Samuel Muller, Johan Feith and Robert Fruin published their landmark *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an abridged version of ‘“An Unnecessary Complication”’: International Perspectives on the Record Group, the Series and the Fonds’ published in Adrian Cunningham (ed.), *The Arrangement and Description of Archives Amid Administrative and Technological Change: Essays By and About Peter J Scott*, Australian Society of Archivists, Brisbane, 2010. This discussion of ‘international’ reaction to Scott’s proposal focuses primarily on reactions from Europe and North America, which was home to the bulk of archival literature up to the latter years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is hoped that further exploration of the evolution of archival thought on this topic will include ideas from other corners of the world.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Scott, ‘The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment’ in *The American Archivist*, 29(4), October 1966, p.502.

1898<sup>3</sup>, the notion of the record group, framed by the principles of *respect des fonds* and original order, had been articulated by many European archivists. The focus throughout was on the historical record, not on current administrative files.<sup>4</sup> As Muller, Feith, and Fruin noted, ‘the archivist resembles the palaeontologist,’ reconstructing historical archives to recreate a past documentary reality.<sup>5</sup>

As the Dutch manual found its way across Europe, the Dutch term ‘*archieff*’ evolved into ‘*fonds d’archives*’ in France, ‘*Provenienzprinzip*’ in Germany, ‘*fondo*’ in Italy and Spain, and ‘archive group’ in England.<sup>6</sup> With each change in terminology, each translation and redefinition, came a greater emphasis on a custodial vision. Archivists managed the materials in hand, and the provenance of those materials was tied to a single creator, most often the last responsible person or agency. As the English archivist Hilary Jenkinson noted, the archive group was that body of records that remained as evidence of the work of ‘the last Administration in which it played an active part.’<sup>7</sup>

As the notion of the record group crossed the Atlantic, it was embedded further in the post-hoc, historical tradition. In 1940, while deliberating the best approach to description for the new United States National Archives, Theodore Schellenberg and other members of the Archives’ ‘Finding Mediums Committee’ vetoed the term ‘collection’ because it ‘smacked of library practices’ and discarded the term *fonds* on the grounds that ‘no one was quite sure what the word meant, not even the French.’<sup>8</sup> The solution was the ‘record group,’ which the National Archives defined as a

major archival unit established somewhat arbitrarily with due regard to the principle of provenance and to the desirability of making the unit of convenient size and character for the work of arrangement and description and for the publication of inventories.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> S Muller, JA Feith, and R Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives: Drawn up by Direction of the Netherlands Association of Archivists*, 2d ed. Translated by Arthur H. Leavitt, H.W. Wilson, New York, 1968. For a detailed overview of the role of the Dutch Manual and subsequent works by Jenkinson and Schellenberg, see Terry Cook, ‘What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift’ in *Archivaria*, 43, Spring 1997.

<sup>4</sup> This point is noted particularly by Cook, ‘What is Past is Prologue’ pp.21-25.

<sup>5</sup> Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *op. cit.*, p.71. As Peter Horsman noted a century later, ‘Muller & Company were not interested in recordkeeping systems; their scope was the past and its relics.’ Peter Horsman, ‘Dirty Hands: A New Perspective on the Original Order’ in *Archives and Manuscripts*, 27(1), May 1999, p.52.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Duchein, ‘Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des fonds* in Archival Science’ in *Archivaria*, 16, Summer 1983, p.66.

<sup>7</sup> See Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, revised edition 1937, Percy Lund, Humphries and Co., London, 1937, pp.101-4.

<sup>8</sup> See the minutes of the meeting of the Finding Medium Committee, 6 August 1940, quoted in Mario Fenyó, ‘The Record Group Concept: A Critique’ in *The American Archivist*, 29(2), April 1966, esp. pp.229-30. See also TR Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1965, p.85.

<sup>9</sup> National Archives, *Seventh Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1941*, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1942, p.65. See also the discussions in Duchein, ‘Theoretical Principles,’ p.70, and Carl Vincent, ‘The Record Group: A Concept in Evolution’ in *Archivaria*, 3, 1976/77, pp.3-4.

The record group, therefore, was a discrete body of historical records, with an identifiable, but not necessarily precise, provenance.

In a moment of practicality with significant intellectual consequences, the committee also developed the concept of the ‘collective record group,’ which soon became a catch-all for archives related by some tenuous subject connection.<sup>10</sup> The US National Archives, for instance, developed a long list of record groups, some quite specific, some more expansive. Record Group or RG 1 was “Records of the War Labor Policies Board,” and RG 2 was “Records of the National War Labor Board (World War I): each representing fairly definable single provenance. But how does one distinguish between RG 11: General Records of the U.S. Government, 1778-1992 and RG 269: General Records of the General Services Administration, 1922-1997? Or RG 44: Records of the Office of Government Reports, 1932-1947 and RG 287: Publications of the U.S. Government, 1790-2006? These broad assemblages validated the archival role: to manage archival materials in the repository, by placing groups of like materials into defined, if rather large, boxes, with titles to serve as quasi-bibliographic containers.<sup>11</sup>

Canadian archivists, having begun in 1872 with a federal archival repository that did not even have responsibility for government records, never felt terribly bound by a rigid distinction between records or archives, or public or private. Consequently, it was easy to take the concept of collective records to even greater heights of ambiguity. Canadian archivist Arthur Doughty, and Doughty’s colleague James Kenney, rejected *respect des fonds* as a fundamental component of arrangement and description, suggesting that ‘no terrible disaster need be feared ... even though occasionally the laws of Hilary Jenkinson be flouted.’<sup>12</sup>

And so they formalised the category of ‘manuscript group,’ bringing together ‘collections that are alike in kind or in period or, occasionally, in subject matter.’<sup>13</sup> For example, Quebec provincial and local records were put under Manuscript Group (MG) 8; records related to the Colonial Office were under MG 11; and religious archives under MG 17. There was even a manuscript group – 21 – for transcripts of papers in the British Museum.

### **International reaction to the series system**

Thus, by the time Scott was proposing to separate the description of records from the description of creating agencies, the archival community outside of Australia was

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<sup>10</sup> See Fenyo, ‘The Record Group Concept: A Critique,’ esp. pp.233-35. See also the later discussion by Schellenberg on the concept of the collective record group, which he defined as follows: ‘[t]he records may have a similarity because they emanate from a like kind of person or corporate body, or because they are of the same record type. The purpose of establishing a collective archival group is to bring together similar records that are received from many different sources.’ Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives*, p.164. See also Michael Cook, *The Management of Information from Archives*, Gower Publishing, Aldershot, 1986, p.83.

<sup>11</sup> See also Oliver W Holmes, ‘Archival Arrangement – Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels’ in *The American Archivist*, 27(1), January 1964, pp.21-41.

<sup>12</sup> James Kenney, Speech, 1940, Kenney Papers, Library and Archives Canada, MG 30, C176, vol. 7, File: 8/19.

<sup>13</sup> W. Kaye Lamb, ‘The Changing Role of the Archivist’ in *The American Archivist*, 29(1), January 1966, p.9. The term ‘manuscript’ had also been adopted by libraries and historical societies in the United States to identify non-government materials.

deeply entrenched in a cataloguing method that focused on sole provenance or on quasi-subjects. The French *fonds d'archives* had transmuted into the Dutch *archieff*, and from there to the English archive group, the American record group, the Canadian manuscript group and the 'collective' group. In the attempt to overcome the 19<sup>th</sup>-century method of physically sorting archives by subject, place or time, archivists had gone full circle: creating artificial 'groups' of archives based on a broad range of 'likenesses.' And those likenesses, if they were tied to creators and not to subjects, were invariably associated with the person or agency which had the records in hand last, not who was responsible for functions and activities over time. Archives became closely linked with that became known as the life cycle: their care a custodial act coming at the end of a linear records process.

So when Scott introduced his ideas in his 1966 *American Archivist* article, the international reaction was not positive. Many asked, simply, why change? Meyer Fishbein of the U.S. National Archives saw no need to alter the status quo. Instead, in a moment of foresight for 1967, he proposed the development of an 'automatic information retrieval system,' which would allow subject access to information in archives.<sup>14</sup> In England, Michael Roper noted in 1972 that Scott's 'radical' Australian solution would not work in the Public Record Office: Jenkinson's archive group was just fine for the PRO's collection of older records. Besides, Roper added, the British were used to the existing record group system, 'which has been used and cited by several generations of scholars.'<sup>15</sup> Canadian Carl Vincent summed up the general desire to leave well enough alone, suggesting that the record group was 'a serious distortion of the traditional concept with nothing whatsoever to recommend it except that it functions extremely well.'<sup>16</sup>

### **Focus on custodial care**

But perhaps the record group did not actually function that well. In the 1980s, North American archivists took a fresh look at the concept which, as Americans David Bearman and Richard Lytle suggested, had become 'an albatross.' But the solution, many archivists argued, was not Scott's series system but instead a return to the purity of *respect des fonds*. As French archivist Michel Duchein argued in 1983, the record group concept as defined by the US National Archives was 'vague,' but the series system was 'wrong,' and Duchein cautioned archivists against 'an error so serious and so fraught with consequences.'<sup>17</sup> He proposed returning to the French notion of the *fonds*, which, he argued, worked just fine: the problem was that it been misapplied. *Respect des fonds* was the fundamental principle of archival management and must be first level of archival identification.

Despite a modicum of debate in the archival literature, Duchein's proposals won the day, and by the late 1980s archivists in Europe and North America generally settled on the *respect des fonds* as the basis for the description and management of archival materials. Whether or not the term *fonds* itself was adopted, the essence of the approach was custodial: description would commence 'at a point after the archival

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<sup>14</sup> Meyer H Fishbein, Letter to the Editor in *The American Archivist*, 30(1), January 1967, p.240.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Roper, 'Modern Departmental Records and the Record Office' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 4(5), April 1972, p.403.

<sup>16</sup> Vincent, 'The Record Group: A Concept in Evolution,' pp.4-5 and 13-15.

<sup>17</sup> Duchein, 'Theoretical Principles,' p.70, 71-72.

material has been selected for permanent preservation and arranged.’<sup>18</sup> Archival materials would come from an identifiable creating agency and arrive into the waiting hands of the archivist, ready to be described as a (seemingly) complete whole.

Thus, as Canadian and then international descriptive standards were developed, a custodial approach was assumed: *RAD* and *ISAD (G)* both adopted the *fonds* as the primary level of description. The Americans, striving to reconcile their popular archival descriptive manual, Steve Henson’s *Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts* with the equally popular *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR2)*, did not adopt the term *fonds* but did focus on single provenance and custodial management, requiring, in their 2004 publication *Describing Archives: a Content Standard*, that “a descriptive system must be capable of representing together all the records of a single creator held by a single repository.”<sup>19</sup> The British, who preferred terms such as ‘papers,’ ‘archive,’ ‘manuscript,’ and ‘records,’ also conceived of description as a custodial responsibility.<sup>20</sup> The resulting descriptive tools shared a common quality, one which has thwarted the development of dynamic and fluid records descriptions: they all required a title, assuming the materials in question were static and complete, like or artefacts or works of art, and not the evidential by-products of dynamic organisational or personal work.

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<sup>18</sup> International Council on Archives, ‘Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description’ in *Archivaria*, 34, Summer 1992, p.10. See also See International Council on Archives, ‘ISAD (G): General International Standard Archival Description’ in *Archivaria*, 34, Summer 1992, pp.17-32 and International Council on Archives, *ISAD (G): General International Standard Archival Description*, International Council on Archives, Madrid, 2000. Canadian Council on Archives, ‘Glossary,’ *Rules for Archival Description*, Canadian Council on Archives, Ottawa, revised edition 2003. Available at <http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/archdesrules.html>.

Critics of the *fonds* included Debra Barr, ‘The *Fonds* Concept in the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards Report’ in *Archivaria*, 25, Winter 1987-88, and Dan Zelenyj, ‘Linchpin Imperilled: The Functional Interpretation of Series and the Principle of Respect des Fonds’ in *Archivaria*, 42, Fall 1996. Terry Eastwood, Terry Cook, Heather MacNeil, Tom Nesmith, Hugo Stibbe, and many others wrote extensively about the concept of the *fonds*, the relationship between theory and practice, and the challenge of interpreting and defining different levels of records. See, for example, Eastwood (ed.), *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice*, Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Ottawa, 1992, which includes Terry Cook’s ‘The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era,’ James Lambert and Jean-Pierre Therrien’s ‘Le principe du respect des fonds: une synthèse des opinions et des pratiques quebécoises,’ and Heather MacNeil’s ‘The Context is All: Describing a Fonds and its Parts in Accordance with the Rules for Archival Description.’ Also see MacNeil’s ‘Weaving Provenancial and Documentary Relations’ in *Archivaria*, 34, Summer 1992, pp.192-98. See also Terry Cook’s ‘The Concept of the Archival Fonds in the Post-Custodial Era: Theory, Problems and Solutions’ in *Archivaria*, 35, Spring 1993, pp.24-37, and Hugo Stibbe, ‘Implementing the Concept of Fonds: Primary Access Point, Multilevel Description and Authority Control’ in *Archivaria*, 34, Summer 1992, pp.109-37; Tom Nesmith, ‘Introduction,’ in Tom Nesmith (ed.), *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance*, Scarecrow Press, New Jersey, 1993; and Hugh Taylor, ‘The Collective Memory: Archives and Libraries as Heritage’ in *Archivaria*, 15, Winter 1982-83, pp.118-30, and “‘Heritage’ Revisited: Documents as Artifacts in the Context of Museums and Material Culture’ in *Archivaria*, 40, Fall 1995, pp.8-20. These are only a sample of the various articles written on the idea of the *fonds*.

<sup>19</sup> See Society of American Archivists, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 2004. See also Steve Hensen, ‘The First Shall Be First: APPM and Its Impact on American Archival Description’ in *Archivaria*, 35, Spring 1993, p.66.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Cook, ‘MAD2: Reassessing the Experience’ in *Archivaria*, 35, Spring 1993, p.16.

## Acknowledging the series approach

In the early 2000s, some forty years after Scott's original proposal, there were signs in Europe and North America of a quiet acknowledgement of the fluid nature of records and recordkeeping. In its revised edition of *ISAAR (CPF)*, published in 2004, the ICA incorporated a discussion of how to link authority records with actual archival materials, acknowledging the validity of multiple provenance.<sup>21</sup> As Canadians considered revisions to *RAD*, they also made a concession to the series, allowing that 'either the *fonds* or the series can serve as the highest level of description.'<sup>22</sup>

In 2006, in an effort to create 'flexible archival descriptive systems,' the ICA developed *ISAF: the International Standard for Activities/Functions of Corporate Bodies*, intended 'explain how and why records were produced and used and show their relationships with the function or activity and with other records.'<sup>23</sup> In 2012, the ICA published a progress report on revising and harmonising descriptive standards, noting specifically the need to articulate more clearly the relationship between archival materials, actors, and events, which were 'lost in a weak link' between archival descriptions and authority records.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See International Council on Archives, *ISAAR (CPF): International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families Second Edition*, International Council on Archives, Paris, October 2004, esp. p.5. Available at <http://www.ica.org/10203/standards/isaar-cpf-international-standard-archival-authority-record-for-corporate-bodies-persons-and-families-2nd-edition.html>.

<sup>22</sup> See Canadian Council of Archives, *Toward a Second Edition of RAD: A Report*, Canadian Council of Archives, Ottawa, 2005, esp. pp.8-9. Available at [http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/RAD2\\_Addendum.pdf](http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/RAD2_Addendum.pdf). See also Canadian Council of Archives, *Rules for Archival Description: Report to the Canadian Archival Community*, Canadian Council on Archives, Ottawa, 2004. Available at [http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/RAD2\\_FinalReport.pdf](http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/RAD2_FinalReport.pdf) and Laura Millar, *Seeking Our Critical Vision: Speculations on the Past, Present, and Future of CAIN*, Association of Canadian Archivists, Web Publication No. 3, Ottawa, May 2003. Available at <http://archivists.ca/content/aca-occasional-papers>.

<sup>23</sup> International Council on Archives, *ISAF: International Standard for Activities/Functions of Corporate Bodies: Draft, Developed by the Committee on Best Practices and Professional Standards*, International Council on Archives, Paris, May 2006, draft 7 January 2007, p.6. Available at [http://www.gobcan.es/cpi/igs/temas/archivos/docs/isaf\\_ingles.pdf](http://www.gobcan.es/cpi/igs/temas/archivos/docs/isaf_ingles.pdf). The committee responsible for *ISAF* also suggested that the ICA should revise *ISAD(G)* and should prepare a statement 'explaining the role of the different descriptive standards and formats.' While these revisions have not come to pass as of 2012, the ICA has considered regularising the range of descriptive standards. See also page 4 of the International Council of Archives Committee on Best Practices and Standards (ICA/CBPS), *Reports to the 2006 Annual General Assembly*. Available at <http://www.wien2004.ica.org/sites/default/files/CBPS%20Annual%20report.pdf>. It is also worth mentioning that librarians have expanded the flexibility of bibliographic description to accommodate the need to link different entities: the products of intellectual or artistic endeavor – the works, expressions, or manifestations – and the people or agencies responsible for creating, producing, disseminating, or preserving those works. See the new edition of *AACR*, called *Resource Description and Access (RDA)*, which has expanded this flexibility and which is defined as a 'metadata content standard' rather than a cataloguing standard, American Library Association, *RDA: Resource Description and Access*, ALA Editions, Chicago, IL, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> International Council on Archives, Committee on Best Practices and Standards, *Progress Report for Revising and Harmonising ICA Descriptive Standards*, ICA, n.d., p.15. Available at <http://www.ica.org/13155/standards/cbps-progress-report-for-revising-and-harmonising-ica-descriptive-standards.html>.



## Speculating on the future

I will leave it to Barbara Reed to talk about the influence of Scott's series system on the evolution of records continuum theory and on the implementation of description and control mechanisms, particularly with regard to digital records. Let me end with a few speculations by way of summary.

Scott's goal in proposing the series as the entry point for arrangement and description was to overcome the idiosyncrasies of the record group. Ultimately, Europeans and North Americans continued to focus on this static entity: the *fonds* by some, archives, papers, or records by others, but materials in archival custody to all. Whereas Scott's ideas highlighted the reality that both archival materials and creating agencies change; Europeans and North Americans continued to focus on the vision of archival arrangement and description as what I might call a post-hoc 'archivo-bibliographic' activity, one that takes place after the last agent involved with the records has left the scene.<sup>25</sup>

To Scott and his successors, waiting for a static, stable, and elusive 'fonds' to emerge was to abdicate a critical recordkeeping responsibility, particularly in an organisational environment. Support for the series system was fairly strong in Australia, given the country's dynamic socio-political circumstances. Today, the Australian continuum concept, which grew out of the flexibility afforded by Scott's series approach, recognises the importance of working not from cradle to grave but rather, as Sue McKemmish has argued, as a 'complex multi-layered recordkeeping function.'<sup>26</sup>

But British, American, and Canadian practitioners – and their various colonial or socio-political partners – still focus on the management of historical records, which come to an archival institution at the end of a life cycle. Those who manage current records are seen as doing a different job: administrative records management, not historical archives management. The long history of collecting, the library orientation, and the decades of neglect of government records in Europe and North America have turned archivists into salvagers and, sometimes, scavengers. They have had to rescue what they can and make sense of it after the fact. It has taken decades and more for archivists to intrude themselves sufficiently into the 'recordkeeping' environment to participate more actively from the beginning and not perpetuate the records/archives divide. Archivists, therefore, have invested heavily in the description of repository holdings, but not in the documentation of organisational functions.

But records exist to document functions. As Adrian has stated so eloquently, 'functions are not mere aspects of the life of a records creating entity... records creators such as government agencies can often be regarded as nothing more than episodes in the life of a function.'<sup>27</sup> And while I as an individual like to think I am

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<sup>25</sup> The discussion that follows draws in large part on the author's examination of the concept of the *fonds* in Laura A. Millar, 'The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance' in *Archivaria*, 53, Spring 2002, pp.1-15.

<sup>26</sup> Sue McKemmish, Glenda Acland, Nigel Ward, and Barbara Reed, 'Describing Records in Context in the Continuum: The Australian Recordkeeping Metadata Schema' in *Archivaria*, 48, Fall 1999, p.8.

<sup>27</sup> Adrian Cunningham, 'Peter J Scott and the Australian 'Series' System: Main Features and Historical Context,' Presentation to the International Congress on Archives, Brisbane, Australia, 23 August 2012, p.6.

more than a function, I do hope that anyone considering my archives a century from now considers the complexity of the ‘functions’ of my life: archival consultant, editor, writer, gardener, amateur photographer, daughter, wife, friend. When confronted with a static archival collection, archivists need to describe what is there, but are we not really trying to describe who was there? What were the functions they performed, who were the others involved or affected by those functions, and, finally, what were the documentary products? How can we summarise that complexity in a single title, as if people and governments and societies were books, all written up, bound in cloth, ready to be put on a shelf?

Focusing on functions and agents opens the door to another valuable outcome. In an age where governments are constantly found at fault for performing functions but not documenting them well, how valuable would it be if the recordkeeper could report that, in fact, this function was performed and here are the records, but that function was performed and no documents were generated? The agents responsible could then, we hope, be held to account, at least for the lack of evidence. What a different approach that would be to records care, especially in the public sector.

In the end, we should not linger on ‘series’ versus ‘record groups’ or *fonds*. All those terms are unnecessary complications, obscuring the real issue. What we need to do is agree that, regardless of when it is prepared, any description of documentary evidence will capture three core elements:

1. the work performed: the functions and activities performed, whether regulated and public or idiosyncratic and personal
2. the agents responsible for and affected by that work: including information not just about the one or many creating agencies involved with the functions but also about the people or organisations at the receiving end – the subjects, if you will
3. the materials generated by the work performed: broadly interpreted to include not just information about the creation and use of records in organisational settings but also about the management of those records in physical or virtual repositories. Descriptions should include information about appraisal, preservation, reproduction, and dissemination. If a function is defined and no records seem to have been produced, that fact should become apparent, either through the absence of logical linkages or through the identification of gaps.

To this list, I would add a fourth element. What is the context in which records are used? Who studies the records and why? What consequences result from the use of those records? How are records tied to new or different functions or to new or different creators or subjects?<sup>28</sup>

Archivists are moving, slowly, in this direction. But we still cling to bibliographic aspirations: we focus on fixed descriptions, even though we deal with changing

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<sup>28</sup> For example, climatologists use personal diaries to track weather patterns, and lawyers use church records to prove or disprove claims of abuse or mistreatment of church members, aboriginal people or children. Historical records are at the core of land claims research, especially in British Columbia, Canada. Archivists should seriously consider whether such information about the use of records ought to be tracked much more closely, as part of the story of the record and of changing functions.

functions and mutable entities. Blending, but not confusing, descriptions of materials with information about their context will help elevate us from the confines of taxonomies and nomenclatures and allow us the freedom to ‘mix and match’ our understanding of records, creators, and functions.

There is, of course, no one simple solution. Flexibility is key. Recordkeeping in a government bureaucracy will demand one approach; the management of personal papers another. But in the digital age archivists in all realms simply cannot wait for archives to age in order to create custodial descriptions; linger too long and we will have nothing left to describe. For the sake of records preservation, never mind arrangement or description, records professionals must play a bigger role in all stages of the recordkeeping function, whether corporate or personal. A fixation on the series/continuum versus the *fonds*/life cycle is not helping the cause. Instead, a recognition of the complex dimensions of records care, supported by robust standards of practice for different aspects of that care, will move us forward. In that way, records professionals can hope to achieve the multitude of recordkeeping responsibilities we face: to creators, records, users, and society.

## **‘STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS’: THE LEGACY OF PETER SCOTT’S ARCHIVAL THINKING**

**Barbara Reed**

It is worth pausing and reflecting that many of Australia’s most prolific and influential thinkers of the past generation have been those that actively engaged with the series system in its glory days at the then Australian Archives, and many were directly trained by Peter Scott himself. What was it in those circumstances that created the extraordinary Australian Archives ‘gene-pool’? I myself was lucky enough to be at the 1979 student lecture, described as ‘near legendary’<sup>1</sup> and reproduced in this collection. Was it the man himself, and we all owe a debt of gratitude to Peter Scott, or is it the elegance of the series system that he bequeathed us? The current book of Peter Scott’s collected essays which we are celebrating provides an opportunity for all to access the power of his writing: it is detailed, precise and rigorous. The proposition that I put to you is that it repays the effort of engagement. The intellectual ferment of individuals with the recordkeeping discourse at the time of the definitive definition of the series system was palpable. So, what is the legacy of the series system as articulated by Scott? What can we learn from and apply in our current practice faced with the tsunami of digital recordkeeping in increasingly fragmented systems, volatile and dynamic organisational structures, and technologically driven imperatives?

The series system was designed for practical application within an archival institution facing particular issues – a very young institution, dealing with predominantly twentieth century paper records, and not too bothered by the requirements for access as it operated within a 50 year (progressively shortened) closed period. While the practical application was foremost, it would be a mistake to dismiss the series system as the Australian version of ‘much ado about shelving’ or an attempt to ‘oversimplify that which is complicated and to overcomplicate that which is simple’<sup>2</sup>. Peter Scott was a conceptual thinker. He brought insights from his disciplinary background in linguistic theory (particularly concepts of diachronic and synchronic) to bear, in addition to the thinking of the structuralist Saussure. In addition he consciously pursued archival theory – from Natalis de Wailly through German archives practice to Muller Feith and Fruen and onto Jenkinson. His very conscious engagement with archival theory is reflected in the title of this current publication echoing as it does the ‘Dutch manual’. In his introduction to the work, Peter references tutorials with Ian Maclean ‘– a true *archiviste philosophe* and a pioneer of modern archives... Possess[ing] a wide-ranging and in-depth knowledge of archival theory and practice’<sup>3</sup> – with prescribed readings, a tradition Peter carried on to his immediate successors. So in part I am arguing for the far reaching and creative consequences of a adopting and applying a sound conceptual framework for recordkeeping practice.

So what is the series system and why have I argued that it proves a terrific grounding for understanding digital records, as well as fertile ground for further development and

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Cunningham, ‘Preface and biographical note about Peter J Scott’ in *The Arrangement and Description of Archives Amid Administrative and Technological Change: Essays and Reflections by and about Peter J. Scott*, Australia Society of Archivists, Brisbane, 2010, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Roberts, ‘Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving’ in *The American Archivist*, 50(1), Winter 1987; and ‘Archival Theory: Myth or Banality’ in *The American Archivist*, 53(1), Winter 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Scott, ‘Introduction’, in *The Arrangement and Description of Archives Amid Administrative and Technological Change*, op cit., p.10.

exploration of ideas vital to digital recordkeeping? In my contribution to the publication I examined the system through the refracted lens of 7 characteristics of the system which I suggest repay attention in the digital world. These are:

- Coherence across the whole of record
- Virtuality
- Inheritance
- Scalability
- Recordkeeping system
- Adaptability/flexibility and
- Relationships

Rather than restate these, I propose to muse over how some of these concepts and the system itself have particular resonance for digital recordkeeping.

### **Understanding the system**

Core to appreciating the simple elegance of the system is to achieve a real grasp on what it is doing. It is based on a simple and elegant data model, familiar to many. This identifies stable entities of description for recordkeeping and provide flexibility by enabling changing relationships between these entities to be recorded as the need arose over time. The result is a dynamic system that records accurate point of time representations of records in relationship to creators. Peter Scott himself refers to the notion of ‘progressive description of archives...the progressive compilation of finding aids’.<sup>4</sup>

It is a framework for respecting the coherence of recordkeeping systems. The system is an extension of individually dispersed recordkeeping systems, placing a layer of contextualisation on top of existing recordkeeping systems, using a conceptual model itself derived from recordkeeping systems. Because it is so integrally linked to the formation of recordkeeping systems, the insights into managing records at the higher aggregate levels, the model proves scaleable – suitable for application in managing aggregate recordkeeping systems wherever this is needed. In Peter Scott’s words: ‘Of the links within each element [entity] and between the different elements [entities], we saw great similarities from one element [entity] to another, from individual record documents up to whole organisations. So in small, so in large’.<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of scaleability in turn led to another key feature of the system – it was designed to operate over the whole of the records of an organisation (a term deliberately used, with a specific meaning). This included records that physically resided within the repository walls of the archives, and also those still in current/creating environments. The system was inherently capable of supporting a custody-neutral application of its premise. Implicit in this is also an understanding that archival systems can create a virtual, rather than physical, representation of the whole.

When combined, these insights from the series system prove applicable to records in all environments, in all times, not restricted to government or a particular organisation – but extensible, scaleable and suited to complex digital environments.

While not yet embraced by our manuscript libraries or other archives-collecting institutions, the system was conceptualised with entities for Families and Persons. The implementation

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

environment was that of the Australian government, so these entities played a minor role. The system works for these entities too. As Peter Scott says ‘the system, as devised, was attempting to provide for all manner of archives’.<sup>6</sup> The lack of engagement from our collecting colleagues has long been cause for regret, although recent indications of adoption are emerging in Australia. A variation (kind of) of the system is implemented at Alexander Turnbull Library and the Hocken Library in New Zealand.

As Eric Ketelaar highlights in his comments on the launch of the Peter Scott book, there is a difference between the ‘vintage CRS system’<sup>7</sup> as articulated by its designers, and the implementation realities brought about in the wake of any number of practically based compromises introduced through automation. In Australia, too, we need to revisit the core concepts of the system, rather than rely on its representation in automated systems currently employed in archival institutions.

### **The influence of the series system on key Australian recordkeeping thinkers**

Experience with, and extrapolation from the basic premise of the series system has been one of the core influences in the development of Australian recordkeeping theory. Without wishing to diminish, even remotely, the creative contributions of continuum thinkers in their own right, the debt to Peter Scott’s series system is clear. Continuum theorists are generous in their acknowledgement of influence of the designers of the system – Ian Maclean and Peter Scott. Records continuum theory has its grounding in understandings derived from the conceptual series system. Frank Upward’s tour de force explication of the records continuum theory is generous in its acknowledgement of the influence of Maclean and Scott.

Many of Sue McKemmish’s major contributions to our literature can trace influence of the conceptual basis of the series system. Perhaps most obviously, her seminal essay ‘Are Records ever Actual’ clearly identifies the writings of Scott as a key influence.<sup>8</sup>

Chris Hurley, ‘has taken on the Scott mantle and provides inspired guidance on realizing the full potential and power of the Australian series system. His writings and innovative practice have extended the conceptual basis and principles of the system to encompass the challenges of describing context and records entities and their complex, multidimensional relationships in the virtual world of the beginning of the twenty-first century’.<sup>9</sup>

The work in the standard setting domain has been indirectly influenced by the series system. The ability to argue from a conceptually coherent stance has been a powerful tool in the articulation of recordkeeping practice relevant to all organisations. The influence is more directly evident in the ISO 23081 metadata standard with its inheritance of the work of Monash University’s research project into recordkeeping metadata. Aside from the models inherited from that project, the conscious introduction of recursion and scalability of recordkeeping metadata elements across multiple domains of implementation is a clear inheritance from the series system concepts.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.36.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Ketelaar, ‘Launch of ‘*The arrangement and description of archives amid administrative and technological change: essays and reflections by and about Peter J. Scott*’, 14 October 2010’ in *Archives and Manuscripts*, 38(2), November 2010, p.109.

<sup>8</sup> Sue McKemmish, ‘Are records ever actual?’ in S. McKemmish and M Piggott (eds), *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives first fifty years*, Ancora Press, Melbourne, 1994, pp.187-203.

<sup>9</sup> Sue McKemmish, Barbara Reed, Michael Piggott, ‘The Archives’ in S. McKemmish, M. Piggott, B. Reed, F.Upward (eds), *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, 2005, p.173.

## Recordkeeping systems

In the world of galloping complexity in which we now practice our profession, the concepts of the series system remind us that it in very pragmatic ways that our view of the world is not just the same as other views of the information universe. What distinguishes our view of the information world is the emphasis on recordkeeping systems, systems which capture and maintain evidence of action. Our emphasis on those core concepts of authenticity, reliability, integrity and useability reflected in systems that serve to maintain those characteristics is our core professional competence. This understanding reinforces and provides conceptual basis for the notion of tracing both business actions and recordkeeping actions in contemporary systems purporting to be recordkeeping systems. Different from audit trails, the requirements for accurate and continuous documentation of activity on records, is still a challenge to system vendors to provide, despite the existence of these traces of activity within all information systems.

‘Recordkeeping systems are at the ‘heart’ of archives and basic to everyone’s understanding of how to use and interpret records’<sup>10</sup>. This emphasis is core to the series system as defined by Peter Scott. To quote Adrian Cunningham, ‘In effect, the series system is a means by which archives can carry records systems forward through time and across domains without doing damage to the organic integrity of those archives’. Understanding, maintaining and ensuring our key professional focus of interest is core in these days of rampant complexity. To quote Peter Scott, only slightly out of context, ‘Gentle education of the public is called for, not ‘dumbing-down’. Archives are different, and we should not only acknowledge but celebrate this difference, not attempt to minimise or obscure it’.<sup>11</sup>

## Documenting digital recordkeeping

Faced with the ever increasing complexity of the technologically driven pace of change in today’s evolving information ecologies, how can understandings drawn from the series system assist? Perhaps working from specific examples, while not comprehensive, may illustrate some applications.

We are all struggling with the conceptualisation of records in complex information systems being deployed: consider (supply) chain management, linked systems, or collaborative systems shared by multiple organisations. Apart from the difficulties of identifying the records at the most granular level, how should we conceptualise the provenance and systems themselves? The series system can be extended to manage these relationships – standing outside the environment of application (that is attempting to contextualise the system) the series system is capable of describing the system itself, and its contemporaneous relationships. For example, in an integrated children’s justice system, many individual agencies, both public and private, can share a single case management or integrated information management system. How do we describe this system in our archival systems – the records are both organisational, and pan organisational. There may be one single creator for a part of the record, but across the management of a case, there may be any number of creators. For the series system, this problem would be resolved by documenting many contemporaneous co-creators – multiple simultaneous provenance. The concept of the recordkeeping system was a virtual construct in Peter Scott’s articulation of the system - an amalgamation or view of the independent liked parts. Jettisoning the requirement to put labels to the aggregation – this may equate to a series or another form of aggregate recordkeeping container and enabling virtual provenance entities (such as ‘the juvenile justice system’) is

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Scott, *op cit*, p.39.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.28.

also an option to enable documentation of the whole. Extending the series system thinking enables us to depict the reality, not the reality forced into structures which may be embedded in our archival automated applications.

Similarly, the concept of item at the other end of the granularity spectrum is a problem for dealing with digital records. Archivaly, we tended to deal with items as things that physically needed to be managed as independently locatable objects. And these usually equated to the file or volume. In a digital world, the requirement is well beyond this level of depiction. We need to delve much further down into considerations of documents as containers, emails as containers, documents disaggregating into data or xml encapsulated paragraphs. We have not yet reached the end of this. In the workplace this is an issue. It is also an issue for archival descriptive systems. It is not necessarily a particularly new issue, as audio-visual formats have perhaps raised this problem to us before but we were perhaps able to deal with them as a special case, not affecting general documentation rules. Now the issues of multiple linked objects contributing to a single useable presentable representation of a document is a descriptive reality. And guess what? The same basic tenets of records structuring from the series system apply – albeit at much deeper degrees of granularity. This requires rethinking our archival system data model to enable the linking of this deeper granularity. Recently considerable work has been done in just this area by the digital archives units of State Records NSW and Archives New Zealand, both operating within the broad church of the series system, and both finding creative mechanisms to extend conceptualisations of the system to apply to realities of digital recordkeeping<sup>12</sup>. While pausing here, it is also the answer to how to link images of digitised pages of a record into a system previously only geared to managing at the aggregate level of item.

The series system can also be extended to document parallel provenance – that is, quite different perspectives on a single record/recordkeeping system held by multiple agents at the same time. This powerful notion has been articulated by Chris Hurley<sup>13</sup>, and has immediate relevance to enabling the voices of the ‘subjects’ of records to be respected, documented and revealed. Extending the concepts in this way has immediate relevance for documenting diverse and divergent views of multiple communities, and also to manage user contributed tagging of records.

So, the system can be used to inform evolving needs of description at different layers of aggregation. Does it matter what we call these layers? As Chris Hurley says: ‘For those of us, struggling with the application of the System to new materials and in new circumstances, reconceptualisation is inevitable and this involves re-examining practices Peter recommended for dealing with the different circumstances that he had to deal with. As our experience of changing circumstances broadens, the underlying conceptual framework deepens and strengthens. We can now see that there is nothing special about series... [there] can be any one of a number of ways of understanding how records are structured (how they exist in relation to each other and to context).’<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> These ideas were discussed publicly at the Recordkeeping Roundtable Workshop ‘*Drawing insight and inspiration from tradition: Digital recordkeeping and the Australian series system*’, held in Sydney on 25 October 2011. Archives NZ’s initiatives were discussed by Hywel Williams and Anna Morris; State Records NSW initiatives were discussed by Dr Richard Lehane and Cassie Findlay.

[recordkeepingroundtable.org/2011/10/27/digital-recordkeeping-and-the-series-system/](http://recordkeepingroundtable.org/2011/10/27/digital-recordkeeping-and-the-series-system/)

<sup>13</sup> Chris Hurley, ‘[Parallel Provenance \(If these are your records, where are your stories?\)](#)’ First published in *Archives and Manuscripts*, 33(1), May 2005 and 33(2), November 2005, available at [www.infotech.monash.edu.au/research/groups/rcrg/publications/](http://www.infotech.monash.edu.au/research/groups/rcrg/publications/)

<sup>14</sup> Chris Hurley, ‘Hunting the Snark’, 2011 available at [http://recordkeepingroundtable.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/hunting-the-snark\\_10.pdf](http://recordkeepingroundtable.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/hunting-the-snark_10.pdf)



## Expanding our universe

Out there on the web, there are many initiatives that require recordkeeping contextualisation to enable them to be understood in a web of complex interactions. Why not export our conceptual documentation systems to provide just this service. Because the system, in all of its implementations proactively documents agencies – not necessarily waiting until the records of an agency are received in custody as the complexities of documenting this retrospectively are too great. This provides a ready-made resource for different agencies and services to use as contextual information for a wide variety of resources. The series system and its fundamental concepts enable just this type of thinking. We already have in place the building blocks for such expansion. In some jurisdictions explorations of using this resource as the prime source for documenting the current structure of government has been suggested.

This could apply to our own particular domain – linking archival systems to provide better expansion of the contextual documentation network across individual archival institutions and beyond. To use an historical example, multiple Australasian jurisdictions share organisational entities. For example, in the National Archives of Australia, the Commonwealth of Australia is CO (Commonwealth Organisation) number 1. In the system of the Archives New Zealand, it is A0028. Or, as a further example, the state of NSW shares a role in the colonial history of many other, now separate jurisdictions. So the provenance of NSW is documented in a number of independent archives systems. In State Records NSW system, the state is documented both as organisation 1, Colony of NSW, 1788-1901 and as organisation 2, the State of NSW, 1901-. In the National Archives of Australia's system, the exact same delineation is made as CO 2, Colony (territory) of NSW, 1788-1901 and CO 24, State of NSW, 1901-. In New Zealand, however, the requirements to document NSW are as a component of the government of New Zealand, and it appears twice – as organisation A0002, NSW, 1788-1855 and in a different reflection as A0003, New Zealand Dependency of NSW, 1839-1841. Different refractions of the same thing – with huge benefits potentially available through linkage.

This is the basis for a joined up network of archival description in Australia – rendered slightly less achievable by the failure of many archival technology applications to understand and incorporate the notion of organisation. However, the prospects of building a network from existing work, based on functions and services, rather retrospective subject based analysis developed to service a library based community, is possible. Building creatively on existing data is just what we are seeing from the amazingly creative digital humanities scholars (and a particular vote of thanks is due to the prolific, talented and chronically underfunded Tim Sherratt<sup>15</sup>.) A little more creative thinking around the existing publically available resources to build such context based portals across government and private would in fact go a long way to constructing the national archival portal or register of records already given a mandate in the 1983 Archives Act. Not that it is new – again Chris Hurley has been advocating just this type of synthesis for many years.

Another need to contextualise can be seen in the many disconnected initiatives to publish 'open datasets'. These datasets are typically published on the web disconnected from organisational provenance and the poorer, and less usable for this. Using archival descriptive systems, already in existence, to virtually provide the contextualisation, linked to explanatory statements of agencies mandate for the information they create, including datasets as legitimate records wherever they happen to reside, is well within the bounds of our current imagination. Again, not a big step, but perhaps a step that is too challenging as it clearly

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<sup>15</sup> Dr Tim Sherratt has been responsible for some amazingly creative interfaces and uses of digitised material and archival systems. For further information see Tim's blog at [discontents.com.au](http://discontents.com.au)

would need to extend the reach/application of the archival system beyond the custodial boundaries of the archives. Neither Peter Scott, nor Ian Maclean would have any conceptual issue with such extension. Indeed, Peter says ‘The implications of the concept for the registration of Commonwealth records not yet in archival custody also became obvious...It was Ian, and also Keith Penny, far more than myself, who immediately grasped the post-custodial implications of the idea’.<sup>16</sup>

### **Thinking virtually**

Now located in a digital world where many of our practices are slowly being revealed as a consequence of physicality, we are having to re-examine which of the practices should be retained, and which re-conceptualised and replaced in a virtual digital world. The series system provides us with models to think beyond the physical. The system broke the nexus of physical arrangement in ways that were, at that time, quite challenging to many implementers. However, the legacy of that break was the empowering capacity to operate with some confidence in the early evolution of the digital world. Determining what to jettison as a physical manifestation of how we applied an underlying principle, stripping back practice to reveal the reasons we do things, and what we really need to defend and fight for, is a very powerful means of ensuring appropriate influence in the development of recordkeeping requirements. As an example, argued recently in our professional discussion forums, the concept of digital signature is one that has been disambiguated into multiple quite different requirements, many of which are shorthand remnants of a physical world.

### **Relationships**

The series system teaches us to think in terms of relationships. This is probably one of its most powerful features, and one which will repay much more intense concerted effort and thinking from recordkeeping academics. Separating the contextual entities from records entities meant the centrality of relationships to bind the entities together. Inheriting from linguistics (Peter Scott’s original disciplinary training), the series system depicts synchronic (point of time) and diachronic (over time) relationships. Those terms and concepts reverberate through the Australian recordkeeping work, just take for example, the definition of recordkeeping metadata, ‘Structured or semi-structured information which enables the creation, management and use of records through time and within and across domains in which they are created. Recordkeeping metadata can be used to identify, authenticate, and contextualize records; and the people, processes and systems that create, manage, maintain and use them.’<sup>17</sup>

Relationships are so core to managing digital information, it took the definition of the http (hypertext transfer protocol) based firmly on linking (relationships) to enable the development of the web. Data relationships are integral to all database management systems. The semantic web and linked data initiatives show that relationships are likely to be the future of the web. We know something about relationships. But our use of relationships is not transitory, but persistent. Recordkeeping can potentially be recast to be all about relationships – everything radiates from the core relationship entity. As we move towards componentised, service based construction of information systems, the importance of articulating and working out our requirements for documenting relationships grows more complex, more demanding and more critical.

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Scott, *op. cit.*, p.15.

<sup>17</sup> This definition is usually attributed to David Wallace, 'Archiving Metadata Forum: Report from the Recordkeeping Metadata Working Meeting, June 2000' in *Archival Science*, 1(3), 2001, pp.253-269, however this attribution is misleading as it was a definition that I presented to the Working Meeting, and has its origin in the definition written by David Roberts, then of State Records New South Wales.

As recordkeeping professionals we have large challenges confronting us to make fleeting and intangible relationships required by the information technology community, a documentable, robust and stable component of information systems design. Recordkeeping relationships are a huge and ongoing challenge, which has yet to be embraced in recordkeeping research. But working with clever information technology researchers, it is not difficult to enthuse them with our quite different requirements for relationships. Relationships, persistent stable relationships in a dynamic world are a challenge we have yet to rise to.

## **Conclusion**

The work of Peter Scott and his colleagues in defining the series system has been a core influence on Australian recordkeeping thinking and practice. It has profoundly influenced our most creative thinkers. While written for a paper world, the ideas animating the series system can be rearticulated as format independent ideas. As such, they provide a fabulously fertile ground for future articulation of recordkeeping concepts in a digital world. This embraces recordkeeping in all its formats, and in all its implementation environments. Retrospective application of the ideas may not be possible, as argued by Laura Millar, but the opportunity to find new ways of implementing its powerful insights into recordkeeping apply prospectively, not only retrospectively. Understanding the animating concepts underlying the series system proposed by Peter Scott is a foundation course for digital recordkeeping in the twenty first century. We all stand on the shoulders of giants, and Peter Scott's shoulders have helped recordkeepers, in Australia and around the world, see beyond the limits of current approaches and explore tantalising prospects for the future of digital recordkeeping.