MULTIPLE NARRATIVES, MULTIPLE VIEWS: OBSERVING ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION

Jennifer Jane Bunn

UCL

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I, Jennifer Jane Bunn, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis

ABSTRACT

This thesis takes a grounded theory approach in an attempt to seek, articulate and communicate a deeper understanding of the practice known as archival description. In so doing, it also seeks to allow readers to experience for themselves the process through which this thesis took shape, the research journey through which emerged both the questions and the answers. A more detailed exposition of the stages within this process is given in chapter three, which thereby acts as one route map to the whole. Another such map is provided here, in the following brief summary.

Undertaking this journey, the questions that emerged included; what does autonomy mean, how is it possible to communicate, to bridge the gap between the separateness of individuals, and ultimately, how is it possible to have separateness without being separate? Then again, the answers that evolved concurrently seemed to lie in using a cybernetic perspective, and employing the concept of autopoiesis or self-production, whereby it is thought possible to become separate without being so.

Further, as a result of the questions and answers explored above, a thesis took shape, that practicing archival description is a point of view, one from which it is difficult to lose sight of the observing within the observation, that is to say it is a point of view about how we look at the world and form a point of view in respect of it, about how we know what we know. It is this thesis which will be laid out in later chapters of this work, but first will follow introductions to both the substantive area of interest (archival description) and the approach taken (grounded theory).

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To Jessie Campbell
who gave me the job that started me down this road
and Jess Lister
who gave me the courage to really explore it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EAD	Encoded Archival Description
EAC	Encoded Archival Context
ISAAR(CPF)	International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families)
ISAD(G)	General International Standard Archival Description
ISDF	International Standard for Describing Functions
ISDIAH	International Standard for Describing Institutions with Archival Holdings
MAD	Manual for Archival Description
MARC-AMC	Machine Readable Catalogue for Archives and Manuscripts Control
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MLA	Modern Language Association
NISTF	National Information Systems Task Force
PRO	Public Record Office (now The National Archives)
RAD	Rules for Archival Description
SAA	Society of American Archivists
TNA	The National Archives (United Kingdom)

EDITORIAL CONVENTIONS

The citation system used in this thesis is MLA (Modern Language Association) Style.

CHAPTER ONE – ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION

At the beginning of the twenty first century, the practice known as archival description suffers from a lack of definition, which causes difficulties for those undertaking it in the face of a rapidly changing environment. To rectify this situation a deeper understanding of the practice must be sought, articulated and communicated.

The premise that archival description is suffering from a lack of definition may, at first sight, appear unlikely. Certainly, there is no shortage of definitions for the practice. For example, according to the second edition of the *General International Standard Archival Description* (hereafter *ISAD(G)*), it is;

> The creation of an accurate representation of a unit of description 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. (ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards 10)

Then again, other definitions of archival description may be found in "Origin and Development of the Concept of Archival Description", in which Luciana Duranti quotes definitions, which variously define archival description as; 'the process of establishing intellectual control over holdings through the preparation of finding aids', 'the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, and organizing any information that serves to identify, manage, locate, and interpret the holdings of archival institutions and explain the context and records systems from which those holdings were selected' and 'the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, controlling, exchanging, and providing access to information about 1) the origin, context, and provenance of different sets of records, 2) their filing structure, 3) their form and content, 4) their relationship with other records, and 5) the ways in which they can be found and used' (47-48).

In this article, Duranti makes no attempt at a definition herself, but rather addresses the question of 'Has description always been a major function in the processing of archival material?' (48). Her answer to this question is in the negative, rather she states that, instead, archival description 'has been one of the means used to accomplish the only two permanent archival functions', which she gives as '(1) preservation (physical, moral and intellectual) and (2) communication of archival documents' (52). Furthermore it is in this conclusion that she sees 'the reason why there is no universally recognized conceptualization of archival description, no steady progress in its use, and not even linear development in its application' (52-53). The exact logic behind this causal link asserted by Duranti is not entirely clear, but could it be that there is no universally recognised conceptualisation of archival description, not because it is a means to an end, but rather, because that is how it has been treated and considered? Either way, Duranti would appear to perceive a similar lack of definition to that perceived by this thesis. This thesis, however, will place the emphasis less on what it is archivists are trying to do when they undertake archival description - that is on archival description as a means to an end - and more on archival description as the end in itself.

Additional evidence to support the idea that there is a lack of definition surrounding archival description can be found, for example, in the way in which Chris Hurley, one of the most vocal and visible recent thinkers on archival description, has stated that 'The purpose and basis of description remains unclear' (Parallel Provenance 6). Then again, there is the way that archival description remains very much a live issue within the international archival community. For example, recent articles on the subject have focused on the arrangement of personal papers (Meehan, Rethinking Original Order 27-44; Douglas and MacNeil 25-39), parallels between archival arrangement and textual criticism (MacNeil, Archivalterity 1-24; MacNeil, Picking Our Text 264-278) and ways of making the process of archival description more transparent (Meehan, Making the Leap 72-90). There has also been extensive discussion within the United States of America of an approach to archival description known as 'More

Product, Less Process' (Van Ness 129-145; Greene 175-203; Greene and Meissner 208-263).

LOSING DEFINITION

Given then that archival description currently seems to lack definition, is it also the case that it has always lacked definition or, if not, can a point be found at which it can be seen to have started to lose some previous definition. For the researcher personally, the latter is the case, and archival description has lost definition. This loss can be traced back to the early years of the twenty first century. At that time the researcher's work at The National Archives (in the United Kingdom) forced her to consider some of the practical problems involved with cataloguing websites and born digital records. The latter, in particular, challenged the boundaries with which she had previously been able to define archival description for herself. For it was brought clearly into focus that archival description was not a practice solely undertaken by archivists within the confines of the archival institution. Rather, everyone giving a file a name when they saved it, or creating a folder structure in which to organise the files on their computer, was potentially creating the archival description of the future.[1] Indeed such creation was also being carried out automatically every time the computer recorded the date a file was last updated, or the place on the hard disk where it was located. The horizon became infinite and it was this feeling of being lost in the open that fuelled the desire to undertake the project of which this thesis is the culmination.

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[1] Of course, it could be argued that those naming a paper file or instigating a paper filing system were doing the same, but in the case of born digital records, there seemed to be even less input by the archivist. Archival description seemed to become more a process of managing the transfer of metadata, rather than producing something new (even if in reality the something new had always been recycled from the descriptions and structures of the original creators).

Then again, looking at the profession more widely, it appeared that there had also been a point at which archival description started to lose its definition. Or at least, there seemed to be a point, in the 1970s and 1980s, at which the definition of archival description became a concern. For, as Duranti notes in the article mentioned above, 'the issue of what the concept of archival description involves was non-existent until the 1980s, and [...] the term was not even defined until the 1970s' (Origin and Development 47).

The perception of a need to bring archival description into sharper definition dates back to the same period at which automation, that is the introduction of the computer, came to the fore. For example, it was in 1977 that the Council of the Society of American Archivists established a working group to investigate the implications of, and opportunities offered to the profession by, early attempts to create national information systems based on new database technologies. This working group became known as NISTF (National Information Systems Task Force) and it was later responsible for the development of MARC-AMC (Machine Readable Catalogue for Archives and Manuscript Control), an encoding schema which allowed for the inclusion of archival description within the large bibliographic databases being developed in the United States at the time (Sahli). Then again, as the 1980s progressed, more and more individual archival institutions started to employ the new technologies of the digital age to their own descriptive practice.[2] Is it the digital then that is the catalyst for archival description losing its definition? This question will not be addressed directly, since it lies outside the present scope, but it remains very much in the background, for example, in the shift from paper to digital archival description alluded to in the title of this work.

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[2] Articles reporting these efforts began to appear in United Kingdom archival journals in the late 1980s. See, for example, C M Woolgar reporting on 'The Wellington papers database' in a 1988 issue of the *Journal of the Society of Archivists* (1-20).

More certain however, is that the move towards automation had a corollary in the move towards standardization. It was quickly recognized that, 'Descriptive standards development, implementation, and maintenance are essential if archivists and archives are to be effective in making their holdings available and in taking advantage of the opportunities for automation' (Dryden and Haworth 14). As Duff and Harris have since pointed out, when writing on the subject of archival description and its standardization, 'early twenty-first-century technological realities make it impossible to build a complex collective project without standards' (283).

Standardization has then, with regards to archival description, been a major project over the last twenty to thirty years. Is this just the corollary of the move towards automation, or is it possible to see it also as an expression of something larger? Duff and Harris, for example, add that;

> The standardization of archival description, we would argue, must be seen as part of a more generalized push for standardization - in the view of some analysts, a late modernist endeavour to find order and sanity in increasingly chaotic tumblings of reality. (281)

Could then, the loss of definition with regards to archival description be merely one manifestation of a wider loss of 'order and sanity' in an 'increasingly chaotic' world? Again, this question lies outside the scope of this thesis, which starts from the premise that there is a lack of definition and does not address in any detail the issue of how or why it came about.

STANDARDIZATION

The major project that is the standardization of archival description does, however, require further attention, since the starting premise may seem to be brought into doubt in the light of the fact that, just as there are many definitions

for archival description, there are also now many standards for it. Some of these are national in scope and others international.[3] Again though, it is this very proliferation that serves, to some extent, as evidence of the very lack of definition being asserted.

For example, on the international level, two distinct suites of relevant standards may be discerned. The first of these contains *ISAD(G) (General International Standard Archival Description), ISAAR(CPF) (International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families), ISDF (International Standard for Describing Functions)* and *ISDIAH (International Standard for Describing Institutions with Archival Holdings)* (ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, *ISAD(G)*; ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, *ISAAR(CPF)*; ICA Committee on Best Practices and Standards, *ISDF*; ICA Committee on Best Practices and Standards, *ISDIAH*). The second includes the various parts of *ISO 23081 Information and Documentation –Records Management Processes – Metadata for Records* (International Standards Organisation).

The existence of these two distinct suites of international standards is mentioned here to introduce the idea that further evidence for the current lack of definition can be found in the way in which, as Duff and Harris put it; 'Disagreement has issued in the emergence of two dominant approaches - and concomitant descriptive architectures - to capturing and presenting information about records' (266). The first of these approaches commonly traces its origins back to nineteenth century Europe and is associated with a way of describing which developed at about the same time in about the same place and will be termed

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[3] It lies outside the scope of this project to provide an account of the development of these standards, or to go into great detail about what each standard entails. Those who are interested in discovering more are referred to the standards themselves; e.g. for the United Kingdom, Cook and Procter's *Manual of Archival Description*, and also to articles about standards development, such as those by Michael Cook (Description Standards 50-57), Kent Haworth (The Development of Descriptive Standards 75-90) and Wendy Duff (Discovering Common Missions 227-47).

here fonds based archival description.[4] The second also traces its origins back to the same roots, but is associated with the series system, a way of describing which developed in Australia in the 1960s.[5]

The development of two different suites of standards has been one way of managing the differences underpinning the emergence of the two approaches outlined above. These differences came to the fore at the XIIth International Congress on Archives held in September 1992. At this event an open forum on the results to date of the International Council on Archives' efforts to standardize archival description was held. These results consisted of a Statement of Principles and the draft of what was to become *ISAD(G)*. The following account of that forum is taken from a history of the International Council of Archive's Committee on Descriptive Standards;

> There was great interest as the room set aside for the forum proved to be too small to accommodate all. There was opposition to some of the principles, from the United States and the UK but mainly from Australia. In particular that of the concept of the fonds and the departure point of application of the standard of description taking place after arrangement and after the archives has taken custody of the material. Right in the middle of the heated discussion, all power in the building went out due to a raging thunderstorm over Montreal and the room went totally dark. This cooled the discussion down somewhat. The end result was that a member from Australia, Chris Hurley, was added to the Commission to represent the divergent views. (ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, History of ICA/CDS)

Agreement remained elusive however, and the following year, as Hurley notes, debate about the Statement of Principles 'was discontinued' (Parallel

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[4] See pages 22-24 for a more detailed exposition of this way of doing archival description.

[5] See pages 25-27 for a more detailed exposition of this way of doing archival description

Provenance 6). It is for this reason that he believes 'there is no unifying elaboration of purpose upon which different implementation strategies can be based' (Parallel Provenance 6). The disagreement then, was, to his mind, 'not about the merits of different methods for achieving the same purpose', but 'about differences of purpose' (The Making and Keeping of Records (1) 62).

Perhaps then it is to a failure to deal with these 'differences of purpose', that the current lack of definition with regards to archival description can also be traced? And yet, how can this be, if, as is asserted above, the approaches on either side of these differences can be traced back to the same roots? What are these roots and how is it that two different approaches seem to have sprung from the same spot?

ROOTING OUT THE ROOTS

Few histories of descriptive practice have been attempted to date, which is a state of affairs that ought to be rectified. One brief attempt was made by Luciana Duranti, in which she traced the practice back to 'a repertory of documents on clay tablets found in a private archives of Nuzi (Yorgan Tepe) in Assyria and dated 1500 BC' (Origin and Development 48). It is not the aim of this thesis to attempt such a history, but if it was, a more recent starting point could be found in the formulation of an idea, an occurrence which took place in nineteenth century Europe. This starting point suggests itself, since it is to this point to which both of the dominant approaches mentioned above trace their origins. This idea shall be referred to, within this thesis as, provenance.

Many individuals from many present day European nations, including Italy, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Denmark, are seen as having played a part in formulating this idea (Duranti, Origin and Development 50; Horsman, Taming the Elephant 53). Consequently, the degree to, and manner in which, that idea was articulated, varied. The articulation which has received the most

attention however, is the one which is most commonly available and widely translated into English and other languages, that is the so-called Dutch Manual of Muller, Feith and Fruin, which was published in the Netherlands in 1898.[6]

This volume has come to be widely regarded as the starting point for archival theory. Thus, John Ridener writes in his recent history of archival theory;

> The basis for most archival theory in North America and beyond is Handleiding voor het Ordenen en Beschrijven van Archieven, (Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives), or the Dutch Manual, as it would come to be known (21).

And, then again, Terry Cook, in examining the idea that 'What is past is prologue' chooses the publication of the Dutch Manual as the starting point for his 'History of Archival Ideas since 1898' (17-63).

THE DUTCH MANUAL

The Dutch Manual contains a series of rules to govern the arrangement and description of archives. It outlines a system of arranging and describing archives under which archival collections were to be kept separate and their individual internal arrangements were to be 'based on the original organization of the archival collection, which in the main corresponds to the organization of the administrative body that produced it' (Muller, Feith and Fruin 52).[7] In outlining

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[6] An English translation of the Dutch Manual first became available in 1940. It was translated earlier into other languages such as German (1905), Italian (1908) and French (1910).

[7] Archival collection is the term used in the 1940 English translation for the word 'archief' which is defined as follows (again this being from the English translation) 'the whole of the written documents, drawings and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials, in so far as these documents were intended to remain in the custody of that body or of that official' (Muller, Feith and Fruin 13).

this system and laying down these rules, the articulation of the idea of provenance that the Dutch Manual provides is, therefore, an articulation in the form of an application; an implementation of the idea, rather than the idea itself.

This last point is highlighted by Eric Ketelaar's article "Archival theory and the Dutch Manual" in which he contrasts the normative approach taken by the authors of the Dutch Manual with that of their contemporary, Van Riemsdijk, who worked more to develop the ideas. Ketelaar seeks to demonstrate the debt the Manual owed to Van Riemsdijk and quotes from that man's work as follows; '"The interconnection of the documents reveals their nature and mutual context much better than any order which an archivist may introduce later"' (qtd in Ketelaar 34). Here then is another contemporaneous articulation of the idea formulated at this time, but it is contained within a work *De griffie van Hare Hoog Mogenden. Bijdrage tot de kennis van het archief van de Staten-Generaal der Vereenigde Nederlanden* unfamiliar to the traditional canon of archival literature. Thus, as Ketelaar indicates 'instead of archival theory', the legacy of the Dutch Manual should perhaps be seen more as the rapid and large scale adoption of 'binding directives' for a certain practice, known at the time as arrangement and description (Ketelaar 35).

For example, at the first International Conference of Archivists and Librarians held in Brussels in 1910, a number of resolutions were passed, including the following;

> Le principe de provenance est le meilleur système à adopter pour classer et inventorier un fonds d'archives, non seulement au point du vue du classement logique des pièces mais aussi dans l'intérêt bien compris des études historiques.[8] (Cuvelier and Stanier 635)

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[8] The principle of provenance is the best system to adopt for classifying and cataloguing an archival fonds, not only from the point of view of the logical ordering of items but also in the best interest of historical studies (author's translation).

And, in the debate preceding the passing of this resolution, M L Pagliai from Florence is reported as speaking as follows;

> Qu'il me soit permis de declarer ici que c'est avec joie que les archivistes Italiéns ont accueilli le *Handleiding* de nos collègues hollandaisé, traduit en italien. Ils sont presque unanimement d'accord pour proclamer que le principe de provenance [...] a toujours été considéré par eux comme la seule façon scientifique de classer des fonds d'archives.[9] (Cuvelier and Stanier 634-35)

Le meilleur système or *la seule façon scientifique* here equated with *Le principe de provenance* was, what has been termed here, fonds based archival description, which involves arranging and describing archives broadly in line with the rules laid down by the Dutch Manual. The way in which the conference seemed to equate this method with the principle of provenance, provides further evidence for the suggestion made earlier that what the Dutch Manual articulates is not so much the idea as an application of the idea. It is however, the idea that is the root and the idea that is under examination at this time.

THE PRINCIPLE OF PROVENANCE

Getting to the idea however, can be difficult. Archivists from across the world still consider themselves to be bound by something called the principle of provenance, but what do they mean by the principle of provenance? Asked to

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[9] Allow me to state here that it is with joy that Italian archivists greeted the 'Handleiding' of our Dutch colleagues, translated into Italian. They are in almost unanimous agreement in proclaiming that the principle of provenance [...] has always been regarded by them as the only scientific way to classify archival fonds (author's translation).

state it, it is unlikely that they would today speak in terms of 'le meilleur système à adopter pour classer et inventorier un fonds d'archives' (Cuvelier and Stanier 635). Rather they would be more likely to speak as follows;

> The **principle of provenance** or the ***respect des fonds*** dictates that records of different origins (provenance) be kept separate to preserve their context. ("Provenance")

Then again, some of them might instead comment that;

> The principle of provenance has two components: records of the same provenance should not be mixed with those of a different provenance, and the archivist should maintain the original order in which the records were created and kept. (Gilliland-Swetland, *Enduring Paradigm, New Opportunities* 12)

And so, there would not appear to be universal agreement on the matter. One possible reason for this confusion can be found in the fact that, as Peter Horsman pointed out at a conference dedicated to the principle of provenance, which was held in Stockholm in 1993; 'Besides the Principle of provenance there are Respect des fonds, Principle of original order, Registry principle, Principle of pertinence, a whole babel of tongues' (Taming the Elephant 51). Nine years later, in 2002, he was still apparently wrestling with the issue when he asked the question;

> What then [...] is wrong with this principle of provenance, which lies at the heart of archival theory, or with archival theory in general, or with the archivists' theoretical competencies, that they cannot articulate a firm consensus on so central a concept to their identity and work? (The Last Dance of the Phoenix 5).

From the rest of the article it would seem that the thing which Horsman finds 'wrong' is in fact certain 'archival methods of arrangement and description' since it is through them that he feels that 'Provenance is [...] undermined' (The Last Dance of the Phoenix 22). The methods he finds fault with would seem to be broadly those of fonds based archival description, which were equated with the principle of provenance by the 1910 conference.

Whilst not disagreeing with Horsman's conclusion, this thesis would argue that fault can also be found with 'archivists' theoretical competencies' (Horsman, The Last Dance of the Phoenix 5). Such competencies, however, do seem to have developed in recent years. For example, if the articulation of the idea of provenance (as a certain method of arranging and describing archives) in the Dutch Manual is contrasted with Horsman's own, as reproduced below, the idea starts to become clearer, e.g.;

> the visualisation through description of functional structures, both internal and external: archival narratives about those multiple relationships of creation and use so that researchers may truly understand records from the past. (The Last Dance of the Phoenix 22-23)

It is, in part, through developing what Horsman calls their 'theoretical competencies' that archivists have started to distinguish this idea from its application.

DISTINGUISHING THE IDEA (OF PROVENANCE) FROM THE APPLICATION

The application of the idea of provenance termed here fonds based archival description (to distinguish it from a different application of the idea, termed here the series system), has always been subject to spatial and temporal variations, nor have such variations been seen as necessarily something to be avoided. Indeed Hilary Jenkinson (later Sir Hilary), whose own archival instruction manual,

A Manual of Archive Administration, was first published in 1922, questions 'whether quite so rigid an application of principle [as that he sees the Dutch Manual as aiming for] is desirable, or at any rate possible, in all cases' (18). Broadly speaking therefore, the application of the idea of provenance, developed at this time (the late nineteenth/early twentieth century) and outlined in manuals such as those of Muller, Feith and Fruin and Jenkinson, involved the arrangement of archives, followed by their description, that is, by 'a summarizing of the result upon paper' or 'the making of the inventory' (Jenkinson 97-98).

Thus, the most telling characteristic of this application (fonds based archival description) is the creation of an arrangement, 'based on the original organization of the archival collection' (Muller, Feith and Fruin 52). Jenkinson, who worked primarily in the context of government organisations, provided guidance on undertaking arrangement, as follows;

> All the Archives in a *Depôt* are divided up into *Fonds* or *Archive Groups*: within an Archive Group we may have *Divisions* or sub-groups: these in turn are to be described under the *Functions of the Administration* which produced them (these Functions being used as *General Headings* for classes of documents): the classes themselves consist of *Series of Archives* representing the original arrangement (94).

More recently, such guidance has tended to include the use of a hierarchical model, such as that in appendix A-1 of *ISAD(G)*, which is reproduced overleaf.[10]

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[10] The idea of a hierarchy can be seen to reflect administrative structures within more traditionally bureaucratic organisations. There has often been discussion about how arrangement should apply to personal papers, where such administrative structures do not apply. In this respect, a question for further research would be to identify the context in which the image of a hierarchy is first used in connection to fonds based archival description. Certainly, Jenkinson's manual does contain a 'Chart of specimen arrangement of archives', which appears to use a sort of hierarchy, although on closer examination, there does not seem to be a link between his level (II) Divisions and level (III) Functions (224).

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APPENDIX A-1

A1   The ISAD(G) hierarchical model shows a typical case and does not include all possible combinations of levels. Any number of intermediate levels are possible between any shown in the model.

Model of the levels of arrangement of a fonds
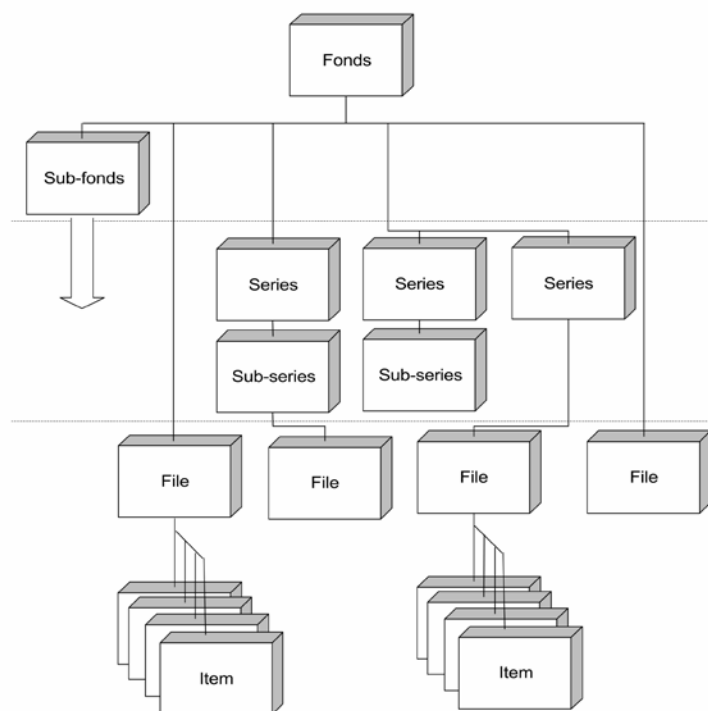
Figure 1.1: Model of the levels of arrangement of a fonds taken from

Appendix A-1 of the *General International Standard Archival Description*

(ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards 36)

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As can be seen from the above, a hierarchical model tends also to invoke the concept of levels. This idea can also be found in Oliver Holmes' paper "Archival

Arrangement Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels", which summarizes the practice of arrangement as undertaken in the United States of America's National Archives in the period following the Second World War. In this paper the levels are; depository level, record group and sub-group level, series level, filing unit level and document level. Record group is seen as the equivalent of fonds or archive group and thus an additional level, depository level, is introduced above it 'chiefly for administrative purposes' (24).

This highlights that one of the reasons why variation in application appears is because the application must be fit for 'administrative purposes', for the context in which it is operating. The context in which the authors of the Dutch Manual were operating was different to that of Sir Hilary Jenkinson, and in turn, the context in which Holmes was operating was different to that of all the others. It was different in as much as Holmes and his contemporaries found themselves dealing with 'a mounting crisis of contemporary records, only a tiny fraction of which could be preserved as archives' (T Cook, What is past is prologue 26). The application devised in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century was no longer fit for purpose, but the strong bond between the idea of provenance and its implementation in the form of fonds based archival description could not quite be broken, although it was stretched to breaking point in the following definition of a record group 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' (Schellenberg, Modern Archives 181).

The snapping of this bond was not long in coming and the individual who finally snapped it was a man called Peter Scott.[11]

PETER SCOTT AND THE SERIES SYSTEM

Peter Scott operated in Australia, although in a broadly similar context to that of Holmes and his contemporaries in the United States of America. The time was the late 1950s/early 1960s and Scott found himself dealing with constantly accruing accumulations of records from the constantly changing organisational structures which formed the modern Australian government; a problem Terry Cook has summarized as 'complexity of administration' (T Cook, What is past is prologue 28).

'Complexity of administration' had always been an issue for those who applied a fonds based descriptive architecture, where records tended to be assigned to a single creator (or fonds). However, as long as the archives that they dealt with were those of long dead organisations (which even when alive had been relatively stable), it was only a minor issue and could be absorbed by the system in a number of ways (T Cook, What is past is prologue 28). Thus, for example, in the Dutch Manual, rule 9 stated that 'If it appears from the contents that the document may have belonged to any one of two or more collections, it should be placed in one of them with a cross reference in the others' (Muller, Feith and Fruin 35). Then again, Jenkinson spoke of the situation 'Where one series of Archives is divided between two Archive Groups', his solution being as follows (85-87);

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[11] Peter Scott has recently reflected at some length on his development of the series system in a volume designed to bring together his many writings on the subject for the first time. Due to a time delay in gaining access to a copy of this work, it has not been consulted for the purposes of this thesis (Cunningham).

It seems quite clear that the Archivist's only plan in such a case if he wishes to avoid confusion is to class the Archives separately under the Administrations which actually created them, even though this means breaking up a single series between two Archive Groups. A proper system of cross reference will leave no doubt as to what has occurred (86).

Once the complexity with which archivists were dealing increased, however, the problem grew worse and it led Scott to propose an alternative solution. He described this solution in the following terms 'to abandon the record group as the primary category of classification' (The Record Group Concept 497). What he did in practice though, was to isolate what appeared to be the objectives of fonds based archival description, namely that it sought to keep archives; 1) 'in their administrative context – the office unit or person producing them and the records system of which they form part' and 2) 'in the order in which they were produced, entered on record, or incorporated into a record system' (The Record Group Concept 493). And then, having ascertained these objectives, he went on to redesign the application to achieve these objectives more effectively given the context in which he was operating.

His redesign resulted in a way of describing known as the series system. The series system did not rely on an arrangement, rather it used an entity-relationship model, which involved the description of two types of entities, context and record, and the recording in those descriptions of the many and varied relationships between entities of the same and different types. With the information these descriptions provided it was possible to construct any number of different arrangements, but the process of arrangement as such did not take place. He chose to present this new way of describing as shown overleaf.
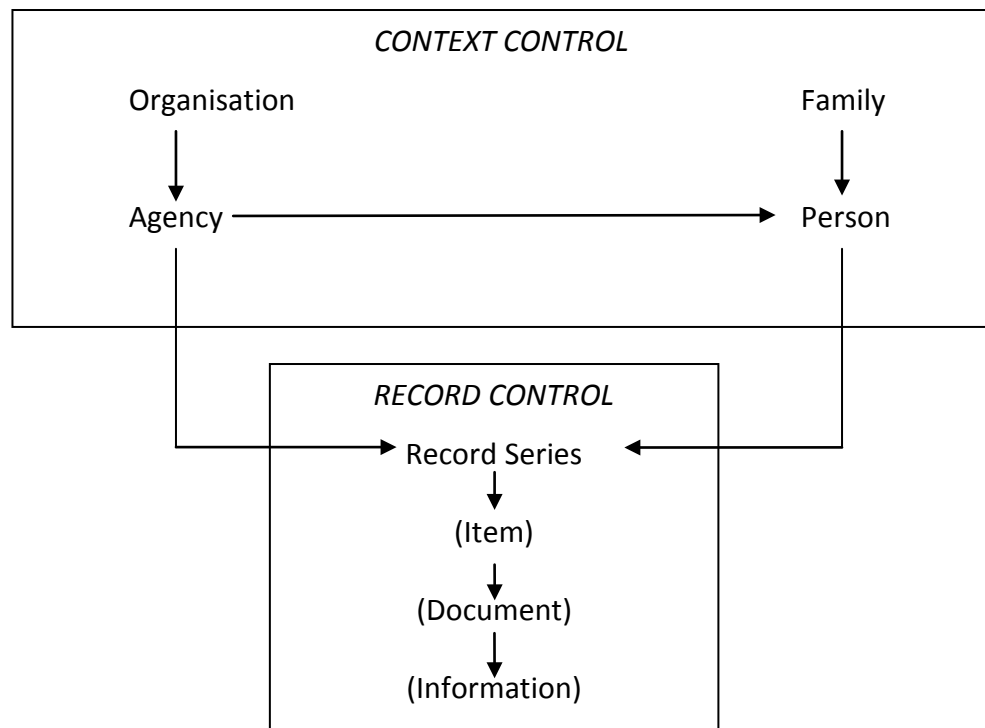
```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                      CONTEXT CONTROL                          │
│   Organisation                              Family            │
│        │                                      │               │
│        ▼                                      ▼               │
│     Agency ──────────────────────────────▶ Person            │
│        │                                      │               │
└────────┼──────────────────────────────────────┼──────────────┘
         │     ┌────────────────────────────┐   │
         │     │       RECORD CONTROL        │   │
         └────▶│     Record Series    ◀──────┼───┘
               │           │                  │
               │         (Item)               │
               │           │                  │
               │       (Document)             │
               │           │                  │
               │      (Information)           │
               └────────────────────────────┘
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Fig 1-2 Peter Scott's representation of the series system (redrawn from Scott, The Record Group Concept 498)

In changing the application though, Peter Scott did not lose sight of the idea, rather he made the point that the fonds based descriptive method 'Instead of enabling one to adhere to basic principles' or operate in a manner 'in complete harmony' with the guiding ideas of the profession, 'may actually distort the application of such principles' (Scott, The Record Group Concept 502). In so doing he served to free the profession from its dogmatic adherence to an application that was no longer the best it could be. In so doing, he also freed the idea of provenance from the application of it known as fonds based archival description, and thus he enabled it to reach more of its potential.

THE REDISCOVERY OF PROVENANCE

In the preceding sections, two ways of describing known as fonds based archival description and the series system have been discussed. It has been shown that

they are both connected to an idea, for which the label provenance has been used. It has been argued that, with regards to the first of these two ways, fonds based archival description, the idea and its implementation were developed more or less in parallel, leading to some difficulty in separating the two. Moreover, it was proposed that the development of a new way of describing, known as the series system, meant that this difficulty could be overcome. For, it was now possible to conceive (as Scott did) that the same idea could have (radically) different implementations. The idea became freed of its constraining implementation and this thesis sees this breakthrough as the same phenomenon as that, termed by Tom Nesmith, 'the rediscovery of provenance' (*Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance*).

A good description of this phenomenon is provided by Terry Cook in his article "What is Past is Prologue" (35-40). He locates it in both Canada and Australia, but notes European influences. He dates it back to the later 1970s in Canada, and to Peter Scott's work in Australia in the 1960s. Cook himself has played a prominent part in this phenomenon and his view of it therefore deserves respect. Nevertheless, that view, though privileged to some degree, need not be taken as the final word on the subject.

Thus, whereas he expresses himself in the following way; 'until the later 1970s, North Americans limited their use of the concept of provenance to a narrow range of arrangement and description activities', the thesis here would be that until the later 1970s the historically engendered embodiment of the idea of provenance as certain arrangement and description activities (the fonds based descriptive method as the articulation of the idea of provenance) limited North Americans' use of that idea (What is Past is Prologue 35). Then again, when Cook writes;

> Scott's essential contribution was to break through (rather than simply modify) not just the descriptive strait-jacket of the Schellenbergian record group, but the whole mindset of the "physicality" of archives upon which

most archival thinking since the Dutch *Manual* had implicitly been based. (What is Past is Prologue 39)

This thesis would see the mindset 'upon which most archival thinking since the Dutch *Manual* had implicitly been based' as, not just, about the '"physicality" of archives', but also, as about the physicality of thinking that meant articulations of ideas were made predominantly in the form of applications, regardless of the fact that articulations in such a form were in danger of becoming 'unduly limiting' and distorted in the face of the inevitable changes in the world in which they had to be implemented (Scott, The Record Group Concept 502).

Writing of the rediscovery of provenance, Terry Cook writes of how 'Canadian archivists began discovering (or 'rediscovering') the intellectual excitement of contextualized information that was their own profession's legacy' (What is Past is Prologue 36). He also asks Europeans 'to forgive North Americans their temporary archival apostasy and to understand the enthusiasm of their recent rediscoveries!' (What is Past is Prologue 38). Scott's fundamental breakthrough was then, to allow archivists to see again that they had an idea, a very exciting idea about 'creator contextuality that can turn information into knowledge' (Cook, What is past is prologue 37).

THINKING ABOUT THE IDEA

The Australians, who rediscovered provenance in the 1960s via a change in their descriptive practice, were the first to start to work with rethinking the idea of provenance. A major outcome arising from their considerations is the records continuum model, which was published by Frank Upward in the mid 1990s. Originally intended to be, 'a teaching tool to communicate evidence-based approaches to archives and records management', it has developed, according to Upward, into 'a worldview' or 'an overview for re-organising our detailed knowledge and applying our skills in contexts framed by the task at hand'

(Upward, Modelling the Continuum 115; 128). It is this worldview that can be seen to underpin the second of the two dominant approaches referred to earlier in the chapter, that which was associated with ISO 23081 and the series system. The model is reproduced below for reference.
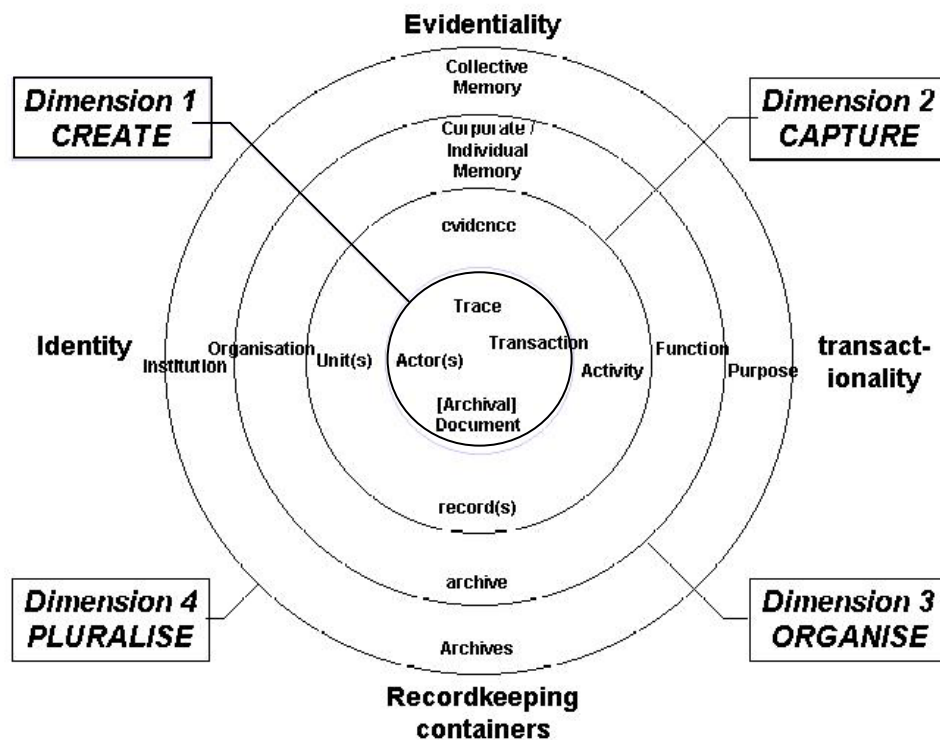
Figure 1.3: The Records Continuum Model

(Upward, Modelling the Continuum 123)

Permission to reproduce this has been granted by Frank Upward.

In the records continuum model, records are seen as contingent and boundless, existing in space-time. The model also reflects, as its developer himself points out, 'the ongoing twentieth century search for continuity between archives and records management' (Upward, Modelling the Continuum 118).

In this regard, it is important to note that, whereas, in North America and Europe, archives and records management have traditionally, and to some extent still are, regarded as distinct professions; the one (archives management)

responsible for those records 'adjudged worthy of permanent preservation for reference or research purposes and which have been deposited or have been selected for deposit in an archival institution', the other (records management) responsible for those records being used or maintained by institutions, organisations, associations, families and so on for their own purposes, in Australia this is not the case and the all encompassing term recordkeeping is preferred (Schellenberg, Modern Archives 16).

Making the records/archives distinction can therefore be seen as a characteristic of the first of the two dominant approaches mentioned earlier in the chapter - that associated with fonds based archival description, whereas not making this distinction is a characteristic of the second, associated with the series system. Labelling these different approaches is difficult however, as there are many different labels in use. For example, the second approach is sometimes associated with the label 'postcustodial'. This is certainly a term used by the developer of the continuum model, but as Terry Cook points out in a footnote, it has also been used in other contexts, some of which pre-date the continuum model (Upward and McKemmish; T Cook, What is past is prologue 62). Whatever the term used, however, there would seem to be a broad consensus within the field of archival science that there is a shift occurring;

> away from viewing records as static physical objects, and towards understanding them as dynamic virtual concepts; a shift away from looking at records as the passive products of human or administrative activity and towards considering records as active agents themselves in the formation of human and organizational memory; a shift equally away from seeing the context of records creation resting within stable hierarchical organizations to situating records within fluid horizontal networks of work-flow functionality. (T Cook, Archival Science and Postmodernism 4)

The first approach can be placed on the side of this shift from which there is movement away, the second on the side towards which the field is moving. This thesis has been constructed within the second of these approaches, which shall be termed here continuum thinking, the first approach being termed, correspondingly, non-continuum thinking.

CONTINUING CONSTRAINT

The strengthening consensus in the direction of travel of continuum thinking can be seen as causing difficulties for those who still undertake the method of describing termed here fonds based archival description, which is associated with the non continuum approach from which the field appears to be moving away. Certainly some continuum thinkers, such as Chris Hurley, would seem to suggest that it is impossible to combine continuum thinking with the practice of fonds based archival description whilst maintaining any intellectual consistency. For example, he feels it necessary to comment as follows;

> I now deride the ICA approach [the multi-level hierarchical approach of fonds based archival description] wherever possible and whenever I am allowed to speak about descriptive standards. When I point out the logical absurdities and implementation nightmares of trying to apply these underlying principles in *ISAD* and *ISAAR*, I frequently get the reaction that although these standards are subscribed to they are not actually implemented as written. "Oh, yes," people say to me "we follow the standards, but we don't do what they say - we actually do it your way!" (Parallel Provenance 9)

It may be that it is impossible to combine (with any intellectual consistency) continuum thinking with the practice of fonds based archival description as outlined above. That is not, however, an argument with which this thesis seeks to engage directly. Rather, it is highlighted here, as another possible causal factor

behind the proposed lack of definition with regards to archival description. Could it be that, if these intellectual inconsistencies do arise, they might result in some practitioners feeling a sense of disconnect with regards to the practice they are undertaking, which will cause it to appear a little out of focus?

Hurley's quote also reintroduces the issue of standards. It may be possible (as Hurley and others do) to argue that, in the context of the emerging continuum thinking, the series system is a 'better' way of describing than fonds based archival description. It may even be that many would agree. Nevertheless, it was always going to be more difficult to replace the fonds based method in those countries (outside Australia) with a longer tradition of its use. As Michael Roper, of the UK Public Record Office put it;

> So radical a solution [the implementation of the series system] was not, however, open to the PRO, where the record group has become a feature of the document reference system which has been used and cited by several generations of scholars. (Modern Departmental Records 403)

Even so, Roper does explain how the PRO were attempting to make small steps in that direction, e.g.;

> It has nevertheless been possible to reduce the emphasis on the record group and to concentrate it on the series (known in the PRO as the class). Successive transfers of records in a continuing series are now placed in the same class irrespective of their source; new classes are placed in the most convenient group, having regard to related classes; new groups are not necessarily created when a new department is established, if there is a convenient existing group. (Modern Departmental Records 403)

Others, or at least those Chris Hurley has spoken to and to whom he refers in the quote above, would seem to be moving in a similar direction, bending the rules as it were without quite abandoning the game. And, as Hurley also points out,

this direction would seem to put them into conflict with the standards, such as *ISAD(G)*, to which they have, at least nominally, signed up.

The point to bear in mind is then, that the negotiation of the possibility of a change from one to another method of describing (itself associated with an emerging shift from non-continuum to continuum thinking) was being made at the same time as a parallel effort to standardize the practice of describing. A complex situation was thereby made more complex, for when looking to standardize the practice, the developers of *ISAD(G)* looked back, to their traditional (fonds based) practice, rather than forward to the idea that there might be a better way of doing it. The decision to do so is completely understandable – it is easier to standardize what is known, rather than what is still in flux, but it does mean that the situation has arisen whereby difference has been standardized.

STANDARDIZING DIFFERENCE

It was stated earlier, that the parallel development of two different suites of standards was one way of managing difference, but in terms of the quest for definition with regards to archival description it may not have been the best way, because once difference is standardized, it becomes a lot more difficult to see past that difference. Comparing the two different suites of standards then, it is not just (or indeed even) the difference between fonds based archival description and the series system, which has been standardized. Rather it is that between continuum and non-continuum thinking, and that between making the link between the idea of provenance and its implementation explicit and allowing it to remain implicit.

For example, with regards to the difference between continuum and non-continuum thinking, it is noticeable that, whereas the ICA standards (*ISAD(G), ISAAR(CPF), ISDF and ISDIAH*) seek to standardize archival description, *ISO 23081*

concerns recordkeeping metadata. In the mid 1990s, as part of a debate within the Canadian journal *Archivaria*, it was recognised that the main point of difference in the opposition of archival description and metadata was when to describe/to create metadata, e.g.

> Heather MacNeil suggests that archival description should be performed by archivists after records have outlived their usefulness to their creator. David Wallace posits that description at the end of the life cycle causes backlogs, and the loss of vital contextual information. To solve these problems he recommends that creators or systems generate descriptions during records creation and use or what has been traditionally called the active stage of the life cycle. (Duff, Will Metadata Replace Archival Description 33)

The 'departure point of application of description taking place after [...] the archives has taken custody of the material' was also one of the points of disagreement with regards to the statement of principles (see p.15), for those in the continuum mindset see archival description as being limited by this departure point (ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, History of ICA/CDS). It is as far as they are concerned only;

> Description applied in the archival environment. Within continuum theory also known as fourth dimensional description. (Australian Society of Archivists Committee on Descriptive Standards 35)

They therefore prefer the term description, described as 'a continual process of accrual of ever broader and richer layers of metadata that capture the contexts within which records are created and used throughout their lifespan as they move within, and beyond, the systems in which they were initially created' (J Evans 91).

The second point of difference that has come to be standardized within the different suites of standards is the degree to which they make explicit their links with their theoretical underpinnings. For example, contrast *ISAD(G)* with its vague statement that 'Archival descriptive standards are based on accepted theoretical principles' with the way in which the bulk of *ISO 23081-2* is taken up with a conceptual model and 'Concepts relating to metadata implementation' (ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards 8; International Standards Organisation 9).[12]

SEEING PAST DIFFERENCE

It would be possible to construct a narrative which shows that, in more recent times, there has been a move towards seeing past these differences, but it would be equally possible to corrupt that narrative. For example, some might see the inclusion in the second edition of *ISAD(G)* of the following sentence 'Description-related processes may begin at or before records creation and continue throughout the life of the records' as indicating a narrowing of the difference between continuum and non-continuum mindsets (ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards 7). Others might see it merely as a sensible acknowledgement of the need to intervene earlier to ensure the preservation of more volatile electronic records.

Then again, it might be possible to argue that the developers of the ICA standards are starting to become more explicit in making the links to their theoretical underpinnings, for Victoria Peters wrote, in 2009, that an ICA working group 'will be investigating not only the harmonisation of the standards but also

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[12] This conceptual model is based on the Conceptual and Relationships Models: Records in Business and Socio-Legal Contexts, which were developed in the late 1990s by the Strategic Partnerships with Industry – Research and Training (SPIRT) Project entitled Recordkeeping Metadata Standards for Managing and Accessing Information Resources in Networked Environment Over Time for Government, Commerce, Social and Cultural Practices.

the possibility of developing a conceptual model for archival description' (26). The details of this process and an idea of what will result from it are, however, not yet publicly available. It will be interesting to see what such a model might look like. It is after all possible that its development might serve to finally bring to light the 'logical absurdities' of which Hurley has spoken (Parallel Provenance 9).

Ultimately though, the point this thesis wishes to make is that it is difficult to see past difference, once difference becomes standardized. In these circumstances, debate tends to become polarized and the middle ground, the core, is neglected. For example, Chris Hurley is one of the foremost current thinkers on archival description, and yet his explorations of the subject are frequently framed in terms of his strong opposition to the ICA standards and the method of describing associated with those standards (as in the articles "Parallel Provenance" and "Documenting Archives and Other Records").

Then again, because difference has become standardized, it is difficult even to use the term archival description without further definition. For example, when someone speaks of archival description, are they thinking of 'fourth dimensional description' or;

> The creation of an accurate representation of a unit of description 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. (ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, *ISAD(G)* 10)

This thesis, therefore, takes the view that it is vital to heed Duff and Harris's call 'to investigate differences with a desire for inclusivity, rather than exclusivity' (274). The lack of definition this thesis sees as its starting point arises in part because what should be the unifying quest of a profession to seek definition for a central aspect of its practice tends to be expressed in terms of an attempt to

resolve a number of other differences, such as those between continuum and non-continuum thinking and between fonds based archival description and the series system. This thesis will then seek to avoid dwelling on these differences; they will remain in the background, but will not be allowed to become the main focus.

This chapter set out the premise that the practice known as archival description is suffering from a lack of definition. It highlighted the fact that there were numerous definitions of archival description and numerous standards for it. Two different approaches, continuum and non continuum thinking, were outlined and it was noted that both approaches shared the same roots and that those roots rested in an idea labelled provenance. This idea, it was shown, was formulated in the nineteenth century and rediscovered in the twentieth, when another difference was drawn, this time between a way of describing labelled fonds based archival description and another developed by Peter Scott and called the series system.

It was further suggested that, negotiating this new difference between two different ways of describing took place against the background of 1) a direction of travel towards so called continuum thinking and 2) a move towards greater standardization for the practice of archival description (as a result of the introduction of automation). It was argued that, as a consequence, difference had become standardized, such that the profession's quest for definition for a central aspect of its practice had been hijacked by the need to resolve a number of other differences. This was seen as one possible reason for the current lack of definition felt with regard to archival description, as was the movement towards the digital age and a wider sense that reality was becoming more chaotic.

Whatever the reason for the current lack of definition with regards to the practice known as archival description, there would nevertheless seem to be sufficient evidence to support the premise that it does lack definition. The question then would seem to be 'what is archival description', but to answer that question now would be to anticipate what follows.