

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

Eric Ketelaar

Eric Ketelaar is Professor Emeritus at the University of Amsterdam. He was visiting professor at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), Gakushuin University (Tokyo) and Monash University (Melbourne), where he continues to be involved as a Senior Research Fellow in Monash's Center for Organisational and Social Informatics. In 2010 he was awarded a Mander Jones Award (for a publication making the greatest contribution to the archives profession in Australia, written or edited by a person in their own right) for his 'Exploration of the archived world: from De Vlamingh's plate to digital realities', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 36, no. 2, November 2008.

The challenge for anyone attending a book launch – or rather the paradox – is that most attendees have not seen or read the book, only the author, the publisher and the poor man or woman who has so kindly been asked to give a speech, in effect launching the book.

Now today is a slightly different matter, because this book, published by the Australian Society of Archivists – or rather a large amount of what is in the book – has already been part of the canon of Australian archival literature for a long time. Who has not at some point in his or her career read – or at least browsed – *Archives and Manuscripts* in the years 1978–1981 which contains a monumental five-part essay of some 100 pages entitled 'Archives and Administrative Change: Some

methods and approaches'. This series of articles is largely a summation of and a reflection on Peter Scott's work in the Commonwealth Archives Office, what is now known as the National Archives of Australia, in Canberra. One of the sections was authored by Gail Finlay, while CD Smith and Hilary Rowell supplied most of the samples and collected information for the tables and charts.

Likewise, who – in Australia, in the Netherlands and elsewhere – has not read Peter Scott's 1966 article in *American Archivist*, entitled 'The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment'. Why, the Netherlands? Why me? As Scott himself declared in 1981: 'In all our approaches to administrative change we have endeavoured to preserve basic archival principles, to the extent feasible. The Dutch Archivists – Muller, Feith and Fruin – have been a source of advice and inspiration throughout' (p. 192). That explains why the superb index of this book – by John Simkin – contains the Dutch term *archieff*, and numerous references to Samuel Muller, one of the Dutch trio who wrote the 1898 *Manual for the arrangement and description of archives*. Even the title of this book echoes the Dutch *Manual*! As Scott explains in the introduction to this new book – something to which I will come back to later – some people,

have speculated whether we favoured British (Jenkinson) or American (Schellenberg) practices in the genesis of the [Commonwealth Record Series] C.R.S. system. In short, we tried to take the best that was on offer from the rest of the world. If there was any bias, it was towards German and Dutch approaches, given the strong 'Registratur' tradition in those countries. (p. 21)

The subtitle of the new book is *Essays and reflections by and about Peter J. Scott*. There are 13 essays in this book authored by Scott that were produced in the years 1966 to 1981. Some texts have never been published. The 'most exciting and significant of all is the text of Scott's near legendary 1979 lecture to University of New South Wales Archives Diploma students on the development and role of the records registry within the Australian government' (p. 2). The fourteenth essay by Peter Scott is his introduction, written over the past few years but finalised in May of this year – finalised not according to Scott, who would have

liked to go on expanding the introduction forever – to the dismay of his editor Adrian Cunningham. In his preface, Cunningham expresses his admiration for Peter Scott with the following words: ‘a man struggling under the yoke of severe ill-health, it is barely believable that he has been able to muster the energy and the intellectual fortitude to write 23,000 words – his all-encompassing valedictory testament that answers outstanding questions about just what he and colleagues were thinking when they devised the series system in the 1960s, and of course much more besides’ (p. 2).

Scott’s introduction ends with his thoughts about what he calls the *mind* shift we are undergoing, in that records are no longer human-readable. He goes on in assessing the current impact of two adages or sayings:

With technological change there is discontinuity in records.

With administrative change there is continuity in records.

This book has been somewhat like an enigma. We all knew that a collection of Scott’s papers was in the making, ever since Ted Ling of the Council of the Australian Society of Archivists, obtained Scott’s agreement in 2004 to work with the Society on a volume of his collected writings. In 2006 the Society asked Adrian Cunningham to take on the role of project manager and editor. One of Cunningham’s many accomplishments is his decision to include not only essays by Peter Scott, but also essays about Peter Scott. The book contains two wonderful new essays by Canadian Laura Millar and Australian Barbara Reed who explore and deconstruct Peter Scott’s contribution to professional discourse, and its continuing resonance and value, a generation later, in the light of new archival discourses, the impact of digital systems and the development and spread of archival descriptive standards.

It was these two essays, more than anything else, Adrian Cunningham writes ‘that stimulated Scott himself to re-engage with his long dormant passion for archives. They impressed upon him that he was not a largely-forgotten historical anachronism, but rather a godfather of modern recordkeeping best practice. They raised various questions that only Scott could answer, so he decided that the only thing he could do was answer them!’ (p. 2).

Essays and reflections by and about Peter J. Scott includes the valedictory notes published in *Archives and Manuscript* when Peter Scott retired from Australian Archives in 1989, fifty years old, because of ill-health. The book also includes a bibliography of writings about the Series System and, as I said, a formidable index. It also includes numerous illustrations, tables, and charts which elucidate Scott's articles.

Peter Scott is 'a godfather of modern recordkeeping best practices' – his thinking influenced the records continuum model, the International Standard Archival Description (ISAD) rules, even the modern ISO 23081 metadata standard. The important concept of multiple-provenance was embedded in the series system as articulated by Scott. To underline its global importance, this book even contains a French translation by Scott of multiple-provenance! Let us not forget that Scott from 1960 to 1963 tutored in French at the University of Sydney: 'Une suite archivistique à fonds multiples diachroniques est produite par plusieurs organismes l'un après l'autre et transmise de l'un à l'autre; elle appartient donc à plusieurs fonds en succession.' And Scott adds – in his ongoing discussion with Michel Duchein and other French colleagues: 'Ne les confusez pas aux fonds mélangés; les suites à fonds multiples diachroniques ne sont pas des suites de documents indépendantes du contexte administratif' (p. 65).

Peter Scott did not *invent* the CRS system, but, as Barbara Reed explains in her essay in the new book, Scott's critical contribution was 'to articulate and formalize methods to separate the documentation of the record from the documentation of its context and to enable multiple linkages between the two to provide both point of time and over time representations of provenance' (p. 346). Now some of you may wonder, is Reed referring to the CRS system as it was presented in the 1994 book *The Records Continuum*? Well, as Frank Upward wrote in his thesis 'Anyone reading that account might legitimately wonder why any continuum archivist ever found the system exciting in the first place'.¹ Indeed, this book is so important because it confronts the reader with the vintage CRS system. Its 'assertion, still valid today, was that this was a far more accurate representation of provenance, that cornerstone of the archival endeavour, than work around efforts to determine a stable fonds . . . or archive or record group where stability was not

present' (p. 346). Understanding Peter Scott and the CRS system, and the extensions derived from the original ideas, provides, according to Barbara Reed, a fine grounding for digital recordkeeping.

As Laura Millar writes in her essay on the international perspectives on the record group, the series and the fonds, 'Scott's goal in proposing the series as the entry point for arrangement and description was to address and overcome the idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies of the record group. Outside of North America, the *fonds* was emphasised instead in order to overcome those same flaws' (p. 330). In abandoning the record group, the series became the basic unit of archival arrangement and description, not unlike the Dutch *Manual* which considers the series as forming the skeleton of the archive. The series, in the Dutch approach, indicate the main lines of the archive, that is to say the organisational components of which they constitute the sediment of activities. The loose documents can then be grouped around the series to which they functionally belong.

§ 20 In the arrangement of an archief one should see to it that the series of protocols, accounts and other documents which from the time of their entry into the archief have been assembled in volumes or files form the skeleton of the archief.²

However, the Dutch *Manual* did concern historically and organically grown archives, not records in formation. Archival materials change and creating agencies change – that is the basis for one of the *Manual's* principles of administrative change (acknowledged by Peter Scott, p. 134). But 'the closer archivists come to managing the current record, the more difficult it is for them to define a totality of materials, link those materials to appropriate creating agencies and thereby use description to "fix" the materials in space and time' (p. 330).

'Scott was able,' as Laura Millar writes, 'to see this reality clearly and quickly, given the circumstances in place in Australia. But in other countries, the reality did not hit home for many years to come. British, American and Canadian archival institutions were focused on – and many are still focused on – the management of the historical record, a static entity, which comes to the institution after its active life is over' (p. 330). And even at the Australian Archives – created in 1994 – the

CRS system was turned into a mockery shadow of the original. Barbara Reed notes in her essay that currently no Australasian recordkeeping system, except for New Zealand's *Archway*, comes close in conception to the original ideas of Peter Scott.

As Millar observes in her article,

Scott and his successors argued that records should be managed well from the beginning. To wait for the elusive '*fonds*' to emerge and the records to become static was to abdicate a critical recordkeeping responsibility, particularly in an organisational environment. 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' (pp. 330–331).

Scott's thinking and writing on the archives and administrative change, on the series system, on archival finding aids, are not only Scott's legacy, but the paramount Australian contribution to the world in the field of archives and recordkeeping. Adrian Cunningham in his preface exaggerates in saying that Scott is Australia's best-known archivist internationally – I could name some others, but modesty befits me, being a Monash man – but he is right in assessing that the Series System, with the thinking behind and flowing out of it, is Australia's greatest, if usually least well-understood, export. But that is for you, Australian archivists, not the primary argument to buy the book and to digest it from cover to cover. The main reason why this volume should be the core of your personal and professional library is the wisdom of an Honorary Member of your Society for exactly 25 years (1985), a wisdom which may be summed-up by Peter Scott's final words: 'The ever-increasing rate of administrative and technological change is resulting in generalized instability (and I have to confess some degree of pessimism in this regard). What is the Archives profession to do? How do we meet these escalating challenges? I fear I have to pass these disturbing prospects and responsibilities to my younger archivist colleagues. I wish them well in all their professional endeavours.'

Editor's note: reviews of *The arrangement and description of archives amid administrative and technological change* will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*.

Endnotes

¹ Frank Upward, *Managing the flicker: continuum concepts and the formation of archives*, PhD thesis, Monash University, 2010, p. 69.

² S Muller, JA Feith and R Fruin, *Manual for the arrangement and description of archives*, translation of the second edition by Arthur H Leavett, with new introductions by Peter Horsman, Eric Ketelaar, Theo Thomassen and Marjorie Rabe Barritt, Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 2003, section 20. Leavitt translated the original section 20, not realising that Muller, Feith and Fruin had rewritten the section in 1905 for the German translation (later followed by the French and the Italian editions). A translation of that new section is in the American edition in footnote 5 on p. 66. Leavitt translated 'archieff' throughout by 'archival collection', see Peter Scott, *The arrangement*, p. 147, note 20 and the introduction of Horsman, Ketelaar, Thomassen, in the edition of the *Manual* cited above, pp. xxix-xxx (reprinted as 'New Respect for the Old Order: The Context of the Dutch Manual', *American Archivist*, vol. 66, 2003, pp. 267-8).