NOTES ON DESCRIPTIVE LISTING OF
HISTORICAL MATERIALS

G.L. Fischer

In an archival and manuscript institution which preserves all kinds of historical materials the problem of description is likely to be of special interest. For example, my own department recently acquired a mixed bag of items from a well-known journalist whose newspaper column often contains historical comment which prompts readers to send him all kinds of records. The gift included what amounted to a small group of papers of an early woman pastoralist, the typescript of an article on troops and their music in the 1939-45 War, an anonymous printed poem of the 1850's denouncing the fouling of the River Torrens by wool scourers, a small scrap of paper bearing a statement about the discovery of gold in a northern locality, a special pass issued during a drivers' strike about 1911, and (pace Mr. Macmillan!) a leather badge of membership of a rifle club in the 1880's. No long and easily identified series here, like LETTERS SENT or INDEXES TO LETTERS SENT; and the same might be said of the many single donations of various kinds which are continually being presented. And yet, for various reasons, it is essential that all these items be carefully, accurately and consistently described.

Theory on descriptive listing for archival inventories has perhaps been too much concerned with the large and easily managed and identified series like LETTERS SENT or REGISTERS OF LETTERS SENT, and far less with the odd items - the tail enders - that are always present, - especially in groups of private papers and often in official archival groups as well. It was something of a disappointment, indeed, that Schellenberg's two articles on the arrangement and description of private papers in this journal paid so little attention to these tail-enders. Perhaps their irritating non-conformism is the reason that so little attention has been paid to them?

When faced with the problem of these odd items in a large archival group after many large series (or at least fairly orthodox ones) have

been described, the tail-enders are often quickly dismissed with something like MISCELLANEOUS RECORDS with some attempt made in the body of the entry to give an idea of just how miscellaneous the records really are. Even if this can be condoned on the ground of expediency it assumes that the individual items in this miscellany are themselves quite unimportant and this may well be most misleading, causing research workers to overlook an item significant to them. And it is, in any case, probably only postponing the evil day of description which will have to be faced sooner or later.

In departments accepting private historical records – many of them single items of historical interest – the work of description cannot be postponed or neatly ducked with a portmanteau-type series entry. Gifts must be recorded and reported to governing boards, annual lists must be prepared (possibly for printed reports), and other lists for publication in Historical Studies, or for research workers. It is even possible that the department publishes its own monthly or quarterly lists of accessions. While it is largely the form of arrangement and description of entries in such lists as these that I shall be dealing with here, yet I believe much of what I have to say will be pertinent to the description of tail-enders as series entries in an archival inventory.

Some consideration must first be given to the physical form of the list itself. Is it to be printed, lithographed typescript, or duplicate typescript? Print remains legible while occupying far less space than the other forms, but it is unquestionably more expensive so that entries must be kept brief. Lithographed typescript can be reduced in size but at the cost of some clarity and sharpness, and (usually) no variation of type face is possible so that special thought should be given to affording facility in picking out items. Duplicated (or carbon) typescript means bulky lists and the same difficulty of making entries stand out holding in a sameness of uninspiring typeface and often fuzzy reproduction.

Printed lists are, of course, most to be desired. Not only for

the reasons I have already given, but also for the elegance that is possible and the general feeling of confidence and encouragement to examine the list that they inspire. Typescript lists, however proliferated, should be prepared so that their metamorphosis into print can be quite easily achieved (e.g. titles should be underlined for italics).

The arrangement of the list itself is most important, but certain types of arrangement may be called for in certain circumstances. In monthly lists for governing boards, for example, it may be desirable that the material received be placed in order of its comparative importance - large and important gifts being placed first. In annual reports it may be desirable to have an alphabetical arrangement by the name of the donor, and since copies of the report may be circulated to donors this form of arrangement may be seen as a courteous diplomatic gesture.

Neither of these arrangements will be of much use to research workers, or even to departmental staff who are not familiar with what donations have been made or the persons who gave them. But given either of these general forms of arrangement, the form of the descript- ive entry for the material itself can, of course, follow a standard pattern so that differently arranged lists can easily be prepared from it. And it might be noted in passing that arrangement by donor is not entirely without some advantage - occasions are certainly known to the writer when this form of arrangement has proved most useful, notably the enquiries of relatives or interested friends of the donor, and also when the name of the collector was notorious. However, most institutions would probably maintain a separate donor's index.

The present arrangement of entries in Historical Studies accessions lists appears to have most to recommend it from the research worker's - or other institution's - point of view. This is an alphabetical arrangement by author, title, or subject. In some of these instances the author entry is also, in effect, the creating agency - particularly where large groups of records or single items like diaries are concerned -

and so is consistent with archival practice. In other cases an author-type entry may not have this relationship. For example, in the interests of facility in the use of the list, an isolated letter (or series of letters) from a well-known person to an obscure one is better entered under the name of the well-known person. In explanation of this apparent disregard for archival principles, it might be observed that one letter (or even one series) does not make an archival group, and yet this may be all that is extant or worth preserving of the obscure person's papers. In descriptive lists attempts to conform rigidly to archival theory as to originating agency will only confuse the searcher and make his task more difficult. He is not interested in the obscure person, but in the well-known one, and even if he approaches his search from the obscure-person point of view he is hardly likely to overlook any entry for the well-known person.

There will obviously be some further degree of arbitrariness about choice of entry headings, especially subject ones. One ship's log may have the name of the ship as its entry heading. But a collection of twenty ships' logs may simply be entered under SHIPS LOGS. Further comment on the choice of entry headings is given in the examples set out below. In all cases of entry headings, library practice will provide much valuable aid as, for example, in regard to compound names, titles, or accepted subject headings. Most entry headings will be for creating agencies or for authors, the latter category not being necessarily creating agencies in an archival sense. Subject entry headings should be avoided wherever possible since to make these properly would be to bog the list down with detail, while general headings would be of little use. In any case the arbitrariness of subject headings might easily be misleading. The searcher must at least be prepared to do some searching.

Two other points about arrangement of the list should be noted. Historical Studies at present - for no very good reason - eschews mention of accessions of official government records, but in lists in which both official and private records appear the two types should be

separated. This will be administratively useful to the institution
compiling the list and to other institutions using it, as well as to
searchers. Where official accessions are heavy, for example, it will
make the task of a person looking for certain private material somewhat
simpler by reducing the number of entries which must be searched.

The second point is that of division of the list by the physical
form of the material contained in it. In older issues of <u>Historical
Studies</u> some lists of accessions have been divided into categories of
'Bound volumes', 'Miscellaneous Manuscripts' and 'Manuscript papers'.
I do not advocate this kind of classification, but some thought should
be given to more generally agreed categories of, say, photographs and
maps which are received in isolation and not as part of groups, and
are yet worthy of publicising. At present - probably for the very
good reason of economic necessity - <u>Historical Studies</u> does not include
these classes of material in its lists and in this article I shall
discuss only one of them briefly.

Given an originating-agency author or title alphabetical sequence
of entries, attention must be paid to the best means of making the
searcher's task a swift one. In printed lists bold-face type (not upper
case) promotes this. The entry heading should be set on its own line
commencing on the far left side. The actual entry itself should commence
one em in on the next line below, and all subsequent lines two ems in.
Typewritten lists should have the entry heading in upper case (cf.
Index to Periodical Literature in N.S.W. Public Library Bulletin),
commencing on the far left side, with the actual entry itself commencing
three spaces in on the next line, and all subsequent lines six spaces
in. At least one line (better two) should be left between each entry
in typewritten lists. Note that printed lists will not require this
space between lines, some characteristic of the appearance of print
rendering it unnecessary.

In coming now to a consideration of the actual entries themselves
I shall try to maintain rapport with the recognised principles of
description followed in archival inventories. For while the kind of

descriptive entries which I will be illustrating are meant for lists
and not inventories, yet it will be useful if the entries conform as
much as possible to archival practice so as to make their transposition
easy from one form to another, and to achieve some degree of consistency
in the general field of description of historical records. It should
be clearly understood, however, that the form of listing I am suggesting
is not meant to be in any way a substitute for the inventory nor to be
proposing any different form of series entry from that now used in
archival inventories. Admittedly some items to be included in
descriptive lists will be actually (or in effect) series, but this
should not be interpreted to mean that the list is based on the idea
of the series. Rather, the list is based on the idea of accessions -
some of which may be groups, some series, some a single letter, document,
photograph or map.

It will be clear that the inventory of an archival group of, say,
something like twenty or more series cannot be reproduced in the kind
of list I envisage. For one thing it is unlikely that an inventory
(even Preliminary) will have been prepared at the early date at which
lists must be issued; and even if it had, its size and detailed information
would be both prohibitive from the point of view of printing costs or
bulk. And to try to provide an emasculated version would be to usurp
unnecessarily the inventory itself. In case of archival groups all the
descriptive list should seek to do is to give a general idea of the
material in it. Examples-

AGRICULTURE, DEPARTMENT OF *
    Correspondence files, registers of correspondence, indexes to
        correspondence, reports on agricultural experiments,
        statistical returns of agricultural production, motion
        picture films. 1901-50. 160 feet. [This department was
        established in 1902 as the Department of Rural Industry.
        The name was changed in 1929.]

ADMEL ELECTRIC SUPPLY COMPANY LIMITED.
    Records of the London Office, comprising minute books of directors'
_____
*
All examples are fictitious

and shareholders' meetings, share and debenture registers,
cash books, journals, ledgers and other printed material.
1898-1954. 12 feet. [In all this group comprises 63 series.
An inventory has been prepared.]

AYR, DONALD REITH
Correspondence, working notes, monographs on aspects of
Australian exploration, printed material and maps.
1933-54. 4 feet. [D.A. Ayr was a leading authority on
Australian land exploration who published many articles.
This group includes much unpublished material of his
findings.]

In the above examples there is little difficulty in chosing an entry
heading - they are all at once both originating-agency/author type
headings. The period covered by the material and its volume are
indicated in over-all terms only.

Some explanation should be given of the notes occurring in square
brackets in the above entries. The desirability of such notes is
obvious - they can be used to say something about the provenance of an
item, something about the information contained in the item, or
parhaps identify the originating-agency, and these would all be of
assistance to research workers, particularly those at a distance. In
an inventory such notes occur below the series title, but this practice
in a descriptive list would use up too much space and possibly make the
list harder to use. It is essential that the lines of print beneath
the entry heading be continuous, yet that the notes be distinct from the
entry itself. Square brackets will achieve this, and such an arrangement
can apply to all entries in descriptive lists. It is within this neutral
zone, also, that reference can be made to the existence of inventories,
the conditions of access shown, or even the donor's name if there is
some reason for this.

My experience has shown that it is the single item or gift that
poses most difficulties in descriptive listing, both as regards choice
of entry heading and composition of entry. Some examples are given
below in an attempt to formulate principles.

Consider a single letter written by a well-known identity to a

comparatively unknown one -

SMITH, LAWSON
    Letter written by Lawson Smith, Hay, N.S.W., to Edward Rees,
       Adelaide. 13 Mar. 1921. 6p. Manuscript. A 5687
       [The letter discusses the basis of his ballad Shearin'.]

This entry sets the general pattern I am trying to develop. It has
the following sequence -

1. Heading - This has been in part discussed above. I do not
    particularly advocate showing birth and death dates, for
    it is often difficult to supply this information in every
    case without considerable research.
2. Statement of the item - This simply describes the item for
    what it is. There is no attempt at a 'made-up' title.
3. Date - The form shown is recommended archival practice.
4. Pages (or number of volumes, notebooks, etc. - this
    corresponds to a linear detail in an inventory series
    entry.)
5. Form of text - I suggest 'Manuscript', or 'Typescript' be
    written in full : there is no abbreviation for 'Printed'.
6. Accession number or other identification symbol. (This
    corresponds to the series number in an inventory.)
7. Notes in square brackets.

In the example given the repetition of the writer's name might be
queried, but it makes the entry unequivocal and seems to me to permit
a more comfortable form of entry when the places of writing and receipt
are shown. The number of pages is the number of pages of actual text,
and even if the date has been in fact supplied by research there need
be no attempt to indicate this unless within the explanatory notes.
What the list is seeking to do is to give information, not bibliographic
description. For this reason no use is recommended of terms like 4to.,
8vo., holograph, or autograph. Not infrequently letter writers use any
piece of paper so that conventional printing sizes become meaningless,
while the statement of the item adequately takes the place of the
mystique of booksellers' terms.

One letter has its special problems and so have series or
collections of letters - and I am not using the latter terms inter-
changeably. Consider a series of letters received by a person - perhaps
the only extant items of his personal papers. Here the entry heading

can be consistent with archival practice of entry under originating agency -

WILSON, GEORGE
    Letters received from literary acquaintances and relatives.
        1900-1919. 53 items. Manuscript. [Includes notable letters
        from ...]

To make separate entries for each letter writer in this series is clearly undesirable, both from an archival point of view and in the interest of brevity of the list. Some of the writers can, if necessary, be shown in the explanatory notes. The use of the term 'item' in this entry might be remarked. It is a usefully neutral term which avoids the plight of repeating the first word of the statement, and yet can stand for all types of material. It is, in fact, of equal applicability in an inventory series entry where an expression in linear terms is meaningless because of its smallness. In such a series it is not necessary to state the overall number of pages.

Suppose, now, that a collector presents a collection of letters by a particular person (we will not ask what archival groups may have been plundered to achieve this!). The entry may be illustrated as -

ASHBY, MURIEL
    Letters written by Muriel Ashby to various persons and learned
        societies. 1931-36. 23 items. Manuscript. [Includes letters
        to ... Muriel Ashby identified the botanical family of ...
        and several of the letters deal with this work. The letters
        were collected by ... whose son ... presented them.]

In this case information as to the collector and donor may have special significance and should be included in the explanatory notes.

Enough examples have now been given to establish the general form of entry I am attempting to formulate. The following examples are offered for consideration of special kinds of material.

STANDISH, ERIC
    Diary kept by Eric Standish during a voyage from London to Port
        Adelaide by the Tricolor. 17 Sept. 1848 - 3 Jan. 1849. 1 vol.
        Manuscript. [This diary gives a detailed account of immigrant ship
        conditions. It appears to be a 'fair copy' of the original,
        probably written by Eric Standish after his arrival.]

Except where only a very few pages of a volume are used, it is not necessary to show the number of pages in such items as diaries.

ELSON, FREDERICK JOHN
    Drafts of poems. c.1900-c.1923. 187 items. Manuscript.
       Photo-print copies. [Originals in possession of the British
       Museum. Date of the drafts assessed from internal evidence
       and from publication dates.]

Photographic copies, whether prints, negatives, photo-stats, reflex copies, micro-film positives or negatives, should all be regarded as the original item, but the detail of photographic form should be included.

THOMPSON, ESDAIL
    Indenture of apprenticeship between Esdail Thompson and Samuel
       Welkin. 12 Mar. 1823. 20"x24". Manuscript on vellum.
       [Esdail Thompson was apprenticed as a surgeon by this
       indenture. He later became a notable South Australian surgeon.]

It is this kind of document especially which has been most responsible for attempts to produce made-up titles, and, incidentally, for more mystique - D.S. (Document signed). Such items can however, be described quite simply for what they are, using explanatory notes to bring out any necessary detail.

VARLEY, JABEZ
    Statement by Jabez Varley that he discovered gold on section 310,
       Hundred of Mirrapara. 3 May 1878. Fragment. Manuscript.

Manuscript repositories receive the (apparently) oddest things! The use of the term 'fragment' might be noted - it can be particularly apposite on occasion. Further, in the context of a single item being described it is unnecessary to state '1 item'.

BROWN, ALBERT
    Biographical notes on Albert Brown. Compiled by Edwin Excell.
       1958. 23p. Typescript. [Albert Brown was a prominent
       pastoralist in the 1880's and 1890's.]

A subject entry heading rather than author may seem rather a nice distinction in this example, but it may well be that in material of this kind the interest is more in the subject than in the literary content. Where the literary content is unequivocal, however, descriptive

listing draws closer to book catalogue entries as in the following
examples.

COLTON, FERDINAND
Troops and their art. By Ferdinand Colton. 1945. 8p.
Typescript. [This article surveys art activity among
Australian troops during the 1939-45 War. It has not been
published.]

WELLS, RICHARD
Days to forget. By Richard Wells. 1960. 378p. Typescript
carbon. [This typescript-carbon has a number of comments by
the author. The novel was published by World Publications,
Melbourne, 1961.]

I am not particularly happy about the form of entry for literary
manuscripts such as these. While it seems quite absurd to commence
the statement with a term like 'Novel' or 'Essay' and then give the
title, such an approach would be more consistent with the general
form of listing I am proposing. To describe the items as though they
were books is just the situation I have been trying to avoid. But
perhaps this may be regarded as a special case. Note that although
a literary manuscript may be received in a bound (or quasi bound)
form, the number of pages should be stated rather than giving '1 vol.'.

The description of certain kinds of printed matter presents
special problems, but such items are received in manuscript repositories
which have a general responsibility for historical materials. Consider
a rare poster announcing a reading from Pickwick Papers to be held in
a country inn in 1853. Choice of title entry may be somewhat arbitrary
but I would suggest the following -

PICKWICK PAPERS
Poster announcing a reading from Charles Dickens' Pickwick Papers
to be given in the Crown Inn, Maryvale, on 23 March 1857.
15"x10". Printed.

Two points are worth noting in this type of descriptive entry. It
eschews the bibliographic description of reproducing the actual words
and line breaks of the poster - this would occupy far too much space.
Instead the statement simply describes the item for what it is, and

such an entry would be equally applicable as a series entry in an inventory (without the entry heading, of course). Note also that in this case the date of the event is not placed separately, but is included in the statement. This is because the date given is not the date of the item, but the date of the event to be held. If for some reason it is necessary to show the date of publication (and that this is assumed from the date of the event) it might better be done in the explanatory notes. Recognition of the principle that in a descriptive list we are only making a statement about items will spare us from searching for and giving a publication date in a bibliographic sense.

Programmes and menus (printed or manuscript) also carry the date of the event and they might be described in the same manner as the poster example above -

DUKE OF EDINBURGH'S VISIT, 1867
Programme of the civic reception held at the Town Hall, Adelaide, on 23 March 1867. Printed.

It is not important to give the size of such items, either in conventional paper sizes of 8vo., or in linear measurement, since they vary greatly.

A rather different problem comes up in describing copies or extracts from birth, marriage and death registers. Such items refer to specific persons so the entry heading is not difficult to decide upon. But the date of extract or copy could be a century or any time after the event registered and some recognition of this must be made in the entry. Example -

EPSOM, JOSEPH
Certified copy of registration of death of Joseph Epsom. Dated 3 Sep. 1867. [Joseph Epsom died at Kapunda on 12 Aug. 1849 and the death was registered in Adelaide on 26 Aug. 1849.]

In the above example the use of the word 'dated' is perhaps one way of avoiding confusion, but the date of death should be given in the explanatory notes.

There are particular problems in describing printed works which by reason of their association with an archival group or person, have

manuscript annotations or sketches, or some other significance. The existence of a printed book in an archival group, for example, might point to a special interest or awareness of the originating agency. Where a book does come up in this way it is only a matter for the inventory and can be treated as a series entry using the title of the work with the author and imprint following in normal cataloguing sequence, and the particular significance of the item can be noted in the descriptive paragraph. Here I am concerned only with such items as they occur as isolated gifts and must be described singly. The following will serve as examples -

UPLAND, PHILIP
    Copy of Rambles in Adelaide by Eustace Whytly (Melb., Capital Press, 1911) with marginal sketches in colour and black and white made by Philip Upland in c.1924.

MATTERS, JOHN
    Copy of Looking at Federal Politics by W.W. Stanley (Syd., Bridge Press, 1935) annotated with marginal comments by John Matters. [The annotations relate to the references made to John Matters.]

However notable a printed work may be from a literary or bibliographic point of view, its place in an archival or manuscript repository is not so important from these viewpoints. Rather its importance lies in its associative significance or in the additional manuscript matter it may contain.

Perhaps one of the most intractable and difficult types of material to describe is newspaper cuttings in isolation. Volumes of cuttings on a particular subject are relatively simple to deal with -

ELGIN, THOMAS ALLEN
    Press cuttings of reviews of books by Thomas Allen Elgin. 1944-56. 1 vol. [The cuttings were assembled by his mother.]

HOCKEY
    Press cuttings of the results of Adelaide hockey matches over the years 1900-1912. 5 vols.

Items of this kind sometimes have a title in manuscript supplied by the compiler of the book. Consistent with the principle that the

statement in descriptive lists should describe items for what they are, such titles should be ignored in the statement. If, for some reason, it is necessary to mention the title this could be done in the explanatory notes.

Single press cuttings must be considered for descriptive listing on their merits - and some may deserve it if they bring out new information on a subject. Probably a subject entry heading will most often be found useful -

LITERARY CRITICISM
    Australian Poetry in transition. By H.A.Bell. Printed.
    [Cutting from the Sydney Litterateur, 20 Jan. 1918.]

In many instances it may be difficult to give the page numbers and even the source of cuttings. Some useful guidance for this kind of entry may be found in the N.S.W. Public Library Index to Periodical Literature.

Illustrated material is so diverse that, although it has great historical research value, it should be the subject of a separate paper. I do not intend to touch upon single items, but some photographs may accumulate in an archival way. A commercial photographer, for example, may build up a file of his own pictures; or an album of photographs may form a series. The following examples are offered -

BITTER, DOUGLAS JOHN
    Photographs made by Douglas John Bitter. 1872-90. 656 items.
      [Bitter was a well known landscape photographer in Adelaide.
      This group includes views of Adelaide streets, country towns,
      country residences, prize-winning cattle and sheep.]

HIGH VALLEY RESEVOIR
    Photographs showing construction progress of the High Valley
      Reservoir, near Adelaide. 1893-95. 1 album. [The album
      was presented to the engineer in charge of the project,
      Mr.S.M.Small, and contains 43 whole-plate prints.]

The suggestions I have made in this article have been offered with the idea of practical application, but I am only too well aware that many of the lines of description have not been sufficiently developed to avoid some misunderstandings, inconsistencies - and perhaps confusion! -

so that the whole thing simply invites criticism. I will not be disinterested in such criticism, and I would like to see some further examination of the many types of material which I have not dealt with.

What I have tried to do is to point to difficulties that arise in compiling descriptive lists and suggest some ways to meet these problems. The need to grapple with these problems is only too painfully apparent to anyone who has had dealings with the tail-enders of a group, or the bewildering variety of items received in isolation. And also I have used this article to try to clear my own thoughts on the matter.

If any principles have emerged from these considerations I think they would be these —

1. Descriptive listing, for whatever purpose, should be as closely related to archival series inventory listing as possible.

2. Items should always be described for what they are, their description being in the form of statements about them. They should not be described as though they were quasi books.

3. Descriptive statements and their complementary details should thus not be regarded as, in effect, transcriptions of (hypothetical) title pages, nor as standing in larger or smaller degree as a kind of substitute for the original (as bibliographic description does).