

THE SERIES — A SPECIALIZED 'RECORD GROUP'?

by

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[This article is based on a paper delivered by Mr Green at the Archives Section Sessions held at the beginning of the 14th Biennial Conference of the Library Association of Australia in Brisbane, 21st August, 1967].

In the arrangement and description of archival material, three physical elements are usually recognized, viz.—(1) Record Groups; (2) Series; and (3) Items. The distinction between these elements is based on the assumption that the archives of an organization (government, business, church or club) can be first divided into significant groups (record or archive groups); that these groups can be divided into series; and that series can be divided into items. This assumption is, I believe, completely false. Instead we must base any theory of the arrangement and description of archival material upon the assumption that archives consist of items which may be grouped in various ways. The grouping of items into series is the essential process which the archivist must analyze and describe. It is also the only valid basis for the physical arrangement of archives.

However, the archivist may make any number of other groupings of records as guides to the collection in order to facilitate the use of archives.

First of all I will examine the concept of the record group and of the series and consider the relationship, if any, between the two. Various definitions have been advanced for the term 'record group', all of them closely aligned with the administrative divisions of the government or other organization. The *Lexicon of Archive Terminology*, compiled by the International Council on Archives, puts forward this definition of the archive group (= Un fonds d'archives)

Un fonds d'archives est un ensemble de documents dont l'accroissement s'est effectuée dans l'exercice des activités d'une personne physique ou morale.

Australian archivists meeting in Canberra in 1954 adopted the following definition:

All the archives of a department, office, or private institution which was an organic whole, complete in itself, capable of dealing independently, without any added or external authority, with every side of any business which could normally be presented to it.¹

An improvement upon this definition is that suggested by R. C. Sharman in an article entitled "An Experiment in Archive Classification".²

A record group . . . consists of all the extant public records of an authority which had the right to conduct correspondence in its own name, and maintain a registry for the preservation of its official records.

These definitions are somewhat arbitrary,³ and capable of varying interpretation.⁴

Turning to the definition of the term "series" we would logically expect (if the assumption that "record groups" can be divided into series was correct) that the term would be defined in relation to the record group. Significantly this is not the case. "Series" is defined as a grouping of items.⁵ Thus the definition adopted in 1954 reads (in part):

Any group of documents, files or dossiers which has been collected together for any specific purpose.⁶

By the definitions at present accepted for "record group" and "series" clearly record groups cannot be divided into series. We have the situation where on the one hand the archives are thought to be divided into record groups and on the other that items combined together (under certain conditions) make up series. The lack of any specific relationship between the two must cause us seriously to question the assumption upon which the record group concept is based.

As it is not possible to define "series" in relation to the accepted definitions of "record groups" perhaps we should approach it from the opposite direction. The usual practice in sorting out records is to make the record series the initial unit of description (and in some cases it is even necessary to describe the records at the item level in order to determine the series). This suggests that we should assume the archives consist of items which are combined into series. Perhaps we could extend this and suggest a definition of the "record group" as follows:

The record group consists of all the record series of an authority which had the right to conduct correspondence in its own name, and maintain a registry for the preservation of its official records.

But this does not help overcome the complication that not all record series are created by one authority only. To place series into 'convenient' record groups is not satisfactory, since it is entirely subjective. Even the use of objective criteria (e.g. the grouping of series according to the authority having the most recent executive use of the series) has a tendency to 'hide' some series in unlikely groupings because of the idiosyncracies of administrative changes.⁷

The series, in fact, stands completely by itself. What then is the purpose of providing further groupings? The essential reason is to provide guides to and information about the records within an archival institution. In the case of the archives of a small organization, such as a club or small business, it may not be at all necessary to provide any grouping other than the series. But obviously it would be meaningless to list all the series in a government archives without some division. But should we limit ourselves to only one method of grouping based on administrative organization? And is the series the unit upon which we should form such groups? I would suggest that there are several groupings which can be made, and these groupings should consist of series, parts of series and even items.

For any kind of accessioning procedure and for referring questions of access it is necessary to group records according to the authority controlling the records. Then the records must be grouped according to authority creating them as a preliminary to any meaningful appraisal for disposal activity. While these two groupings are vital to the archivist's work they might be meaningless to researchers, who tend to be concerned mainly (and sometimes exclusively) with the information contained in the records. It is an essential part of the archivist's craft to unravel the mysteries of record making procedures and to guide researchers to the information that they require. But it is also necessary to publish guides to the holdings of an archives, if only for the purpose of making potential users aware of what is available. The basic guide should be, I think, a listing of records (series and parts of series) which were created by an authority. This could be supplemented by other specialized guides. Subject guides may be the most successful way of publicizing the archives. A special kind of subject grouping is that by geographical area, which may be particularly relevant in the Australian situation. Guides could also

be prepared on a chronological basis, and if applicable, on a language basis.⁸ Groupings could also be made according to the type of record. This is particularly appropriate for institutional units producing the same or similar records, such as District Courts, municipalities or even some businesses.

The record group has been a rather unhappy concept. Jenkinson's "command" the "... whatever else we do we must not break up the Archive Group"⁹ is impossible to keep in the light of recent ideas of the importance of the "series". I have attempted to show that the assumption upon which the record group concept is based is unfounded. If, however, we abandon completely the traditional view of the record group and see the "series" as one grouping of records, we are then in a position to make other groupings of records to make known the contents of archival institutions.

REFERENCES

1. AUSTRALIA. Commonwealth National Library. Archives Division.— *Proceedings of the Archives Management Seminar*, Canberra 1954. Canberra, 1955, 105.
2. *Archives and Manuscripts* II (Apr 1964), 19. See also Sharman's discussion on the definition adopted in 1954. *ibid.*
3. Indeed "arbitrariness" is considered an essential virtue of the record group concept by the National Archives (U.S.A.). See Schellenberg *Modern Archives*, 181 and Fishbein's defence of the record group in the *American Archivist* XXX (Jan 1967), 239-40.
4. See P. J. Scott's article "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment" (*American Archivist* XXIX (Oct 1966), 493-504). I wish to acknowledge the assistance given to me in the preparation of this paper by Scott. I, of course accept the responsibility for the opinions expressed in the paper.
5. The French equivalent of the English term "series" is "une subdivision d'un fonds d'archives", (*Lexicon of Archive Terminology*) however, the definition does not provide any indication that it is a subdivision of the archive group.
Une subdivision d'un fonds d'archives est un groupe d'articles qui par leur structure ou leur contenu presentent les memes caracteristiques.
6. AUSTRALIA. Commonwealth National Library. Archives Division.— *Proceedings of the Archives Management Seminar*, Canberra 1954. Canberra, 1955, 107.
7. Using this criteria some of the records described by P. R. Eldershaw in the *Guide to the Public Records of Tasmania* Section 3 Convict Department would have to be described in a "record group" of the Administrator of Charitable Relief. See Introduction to the *Guide*, 15.
8. It would be appropriate, for example, to group the records of German New Guinea (those that have survived) according to language.
9. Sir Hilary Jenkinson. *A Manual of Archive Administration*, rev. re-issue. Lond. Lund, Humphries, 1965, 102.

THE ARCHIVES OF ST. MARY'S, SYDNEY

by

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However much one school of historians has tended to ignore the fact, Churchmen have played a most important role in the development of Australia; and religious bodies have had a major influence in shaping national policy in much wider spheres than the exclusively spiritual. Modern writers such as Professor Manning Clark are well aware of this fact, and, consequently, of the value of church records.

As Archivist of the R.C. Archdiocese of Sydney, I now propose to take off the shutters and let some light into the hitherto rather unknown strong rooms in which (appropriately enough) are housed St. Mary's Archives, within the crypt of the Cathedral. That Sydney must contain