

# THE RECORD GROUP — A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE

BY KENNETH A. POLDEN

Archivist, Reserve Bank of Australia

It is perhaps surprising that current journals devoted to archives administration do not very often publish articles that discuss the fundamental principles upon which our professional practices are based. When, therefore, one reads contributions such as K. A. Green's "The Series — A Specialised 'Record Group'" <sup>(1)</sup> which, following P. J. Scott's article "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment" <sup>(2)</sup>, questions widely accepted principles of archives arrangement, one is compelled to give it closest consideration.

In essence the proposal put forward by Scott and supported by Green is to abandon the concept of the "record group" in the arrangement of archives and to limit the physical and numerical control of archives to the "series" level. Under the proposed system, the record group is, however, to be represented in the series inventory by "a simple listing on paper of series attributed to a given agency." <sup>(3)</sup>

These proposals only have relevance, indeed are only necessary, if currently accepted, long-established principles can be shown to be illogical and lacking empirical foundations, or, even if valid, are substantially incapable of performance. Although it is not possible to debate the matters at issue on the home grounds of Messrs Scott and Green, the experience of some other archives establishments does confirm the practicability of arranging the complete archives of a creating body, physically and descriptively, to reflect the primary records-keeping divisions of the body — records groups.

\* \* \* \*

Archives administration is not an exact science. It stands on a very small number of general principles, the application of which must be tempered by commonsense and a measure of flexibility to fit the framework and contours of the organisation concerned but also consistent with a genuine acknowledgement of the purpose behind the principles even if it cannot be followed out to the letter. And the essential purpose behind the principles of archives administration is simply to preserve the archives of an organisation arranged in their natural order as created or assembled, provided the original operations were in fact carried out in an orderly manner. Ideally, all the archives of one organisation will be arranged and housed together, distinctly from those of other organisations and, for purposes of control, will be described in an inventory. This is the target to be kept in sight even though anomalies may be discovered in the archives themselves and difficulties of administration encountered. The archivist must make the best he can of difficult situations, keeping one eye on the past in order to preserve the total integrity of the archives and the other eye on the future to ensure that researchers in generations to come will find an arrangement that reflects the overall structure and operations of the organisation without having to attempt some rearrangement, the accuracy of which would always be subject to doubt.

Clearly, in this context, the term "organisation" is imprecise (but not so vague as to destroy the value of the notion), for if this article

is to have general application, freedom of interpretation to match the individual reader's relative circumstances must be permitted. "Organisations" which create archives are so diverse in composition, size, nature, structure, constitution and administration that rigid definitions of the terms commonly used to describe the various levels of control of archives (such as "group" and "series") cannot validly and unrestrictively be applied in abstract discussion but may serve to build a total theory pattern which may be applied in whole or in part as appropriate to any particular body, singular or corporate. Thus, every archivist must analyse the total structure of his organisation to determine the extent to which it naturally separates into autonomous divisions and subdivisions that independently maintain records and then to identify the different classes of records they each create or assemble. An archivist responsible for the operations of a government repository will necessarily have a large number of "organisations" (departments) to study. (4)

Now if the records of the whole organisation have not been maintained all together under undivided control but have been created and maintained in several distinct sets corresponding to certain divisions of administrative authority within the organisation, then the indications are that the total archives comprise a number of what are theoretically defined as "record groups". Similarly, if these various administrative authorities each created and maintained different kinds of records distinguished by physical characteristics and purpose, and assembled in separate runs, such as general correspondence, board memoranda, serially numbered circular material, press cuttings, registers, etc., then their record groups comprise a number of what are theoretically defined as "series" of records accordingly. If the total archives is known to have been created and maintained on a pattern similar to this hypothetical but practical case, then why not allow the pattern to survive and be reflected in the final arrangement of the organisation's permanently valuable archives? The principles of provenance and sanctity of the original order are simple, practical and valid. (5) Further, if the principles can be observed in the administration of the archives of one single, large organisation, the application of the same principles uniformly to each of a number of organisations who transfer their archives to an independent archives authority would seem to be only a matter of degree.

There are, of course, and always will be, anomalies and difficulties but unless something was drastically wrong with the records management system into which these unusual records have been absorbed, they will, surely, only be exceptions within the great bulk of the relative record group. Even though there are simple guiding principles of archives administration, it does not take long for an archivist to realise the sheer impossibility of having inflexible "systems" built into any part of his work. If exceptions from the norm do reach large proportions and require special administrative treatment in archives arrangement, the special treatment must not be permitted to override or displace the standard practice in terms of the accepted principles.

If records received from an agency are known to include estrays (maybe records inherited from a predecessor and used for administrative reference but not added to), arrangements can be made to restore them to proper provenance. If the records have been significant in the development or administration of the transferring agency, a suitable notation can

be embodied in its descriptive inventory or in the administrative history that accompanies it and a cross-reference noted in the inventory of the predecessor. The same treatment may be applied to records that have been created and successively transferred between two or more record groups. Since sanctity of the "original order" suggests non-interference by the archivist and since records can be placed in one location only, it is necessary to decide administratively the most appropriate group into which they should be accessioned. There need be no rigid rule: even if the archivist can be shown to have erred in his decision it does not matter greatly provided the inventories of all relevant record groups are noted of the existence of the composite records and their location. Split records provide a more serious and difficult problem which can be considered only in the light of all the circumstances, the most significant of which might well prove to be the age of the records and their current administrative usefulness to the transferring agencies. If the shuffling of papers has become too intricate, the final position can only be described on paper — in the inventories of all relevant record groups.

As has been pointed out in the articles under discussion, archiving has its trials and tribulations in matters of numbering and shelving. Both of these matters can certainly be vexatious but they have administrative solutions which archivists must discover independently to suit their local circumstances. They cannot be accepted as valid arguments for modifying principles of arrangement. It is important that numbering should avoid rigidity and embody a measure of flexibility, possibly assisted by combinations of letters, figures and chronological indicators. There is no need for a numbering "system" to be slavishly applied throughout the total holdings of a repository: indeed there are advantages in adopting different patterns of numbering for the archives of different organisations in the one repository.

Since the various series within any one record group usually are physically distinct from each other (though there is almost certainly an informational or evidential relationship), there is no "original order" in their inter-relationships other than a rough, chronological correlation. In the circumstances, there seems no reason to attempt any particular ordering of series within a group except that, over the very long term, anachronism should be avoided in locating and inventorying series that have closed. Similar considerations apply in the cases of the various groups composing the total archives of the organisation. There is, however, a difficulty which one can envisage in a situation where several series composing a group, or several groups within the total archives remain "live" for an infinite period. The passage of time itself will eventually separate more and more the records that were contemporary with one another but created in different series or groups. To take an extreme example for illustration, it would be unrealistic to allow three or four distinct series to grow without a break along a continuous run of shelving for some hundreds of years. (Even Australian archives will grow ancient in time). The situation calls for convenient pauses. We must accept that archives administration and repository procedures will always be subject to improved methods and technologies even though the principles remain constant. If we would recognise the inevitability of such future changes we may also plan to facilitate them. <sup>(6)</sup> As long as there is unused space it is possible to allocate it in rough proportion to the rate of increase of accessions of

the various "live" groups whose records are received. When one group becomes tight, it or other groups can be relocated unless retrieval depends upon a "location number" system, a most unsatisfactory arrangement for permanent archives that will certainly be subject to occasional movement in the course of their future administration. These are all routine but sometimes perplexing problems that an archivist simply must accept and solve.

There is a strong case for not attempting to complete the final accessioning of permanently valuable archives too soon. Records whose archival value is in doubt — and there is often a very broad band of such records — can be seen in better perspective many years after the event. Furthermore, unless the records concerned are a numbered or registered series, there is always the possibility that supplementary accessions and estrays will turn up to spoil a neat piece of arrangement or an inexpandable numbering. Preferably, records should pass through an intermediate stage before attaining the higher status of permanency. <sup>(7)</sup> Given the objective of "original order", it is too much to expect that heterogeneous records of comparatively recent vintage can be accessioned and arranged just once and that this arrangement will remain undisturbed throughout the life of the archives extending perhaps 200 years plus. If the attempt at final arrangement is deferred until at least 30 years after the records were created, the archivist is better placed to arrange records more clearly and uniformly than is possible if done piecemeal over an extended period. The lag permits him to deal with complete runs — say a sub-series of files covering a 20-year period — as near as possible to original order (if in fact all the files in the run had contemporaneous order) instead of facing the prospect of rearranging the same files after accessioning them in several batches whose order of receipt differed from their order of creation.

In summary, then, the thesis propounded here is that the two main principles of archives administration — provenance and sanctity of the original order — are the ideals towards which archives arrangement should strive. To the extent that these ideals are purely theoretical concepts in given situations, archives practice should be patterned on the theory as far as commonsense will permit.

Perhaps one moral that can be drawn from this exercise, especially in this paper-creating age that is becoming so records-management conscious, is the need for archivists to forestall some of the future problems of archives arrangement by maintaining close liaison with records managers, enlisting their co-operation in records-keeping practices that will contribute towards the creation and retirement of records in orderly, logical series. For example, the problems discussed above arising from composite files may not arise if records managers insist on cutting off files when changes in administrative control occur, allowing the new administrator to use the predecessor's files in parallel while they remain currently useful. Eventually, if of permanent value, they may be accessioned into the predecessor's record group, the inventory being noted with a reference to their relationship to the later series created by the subsequent administrator. Nevertheless, in the daily round of business operations, it is important to maintain a balanced view of priorities: while seeking practical co-ordination of archives and records management functions, we must not allow the archives tail to wag the current records dog.

## REFERENCES

1. *In Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 3, No. 5, November, 1967, p. 13.
2. *In The American Archivist*, Vol. 29, No. 4, October, 1966, p. 493.
3. *ibid*, p. 500. There is an implied assumption here that the "group" is coextensive with the "agency" but this is not necessarily so if "agency" is taken to be coextensive with the whole organisation or department.
4. For a clear, undogmatic exposition of "levels" of archives arrangement, see Holmes, Oliver W., "Archival Arrangement — Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels" in *The American Archivist*, Vol. 27, No. 1, January, 1964, p. 21.
5. In the case of my own organisation, the Reserve Bank of Australia, formerly Commonwealth Bank of Australia, whose archives comprise the records of a score of decentralised filing sections (our "groups") serving autonomous, administrative departments with histories of up to 55 years, the image we now have of the past structure of the Bank would become very blurred indeed if we abandoned the group basis of arrangement and allowed the very large number of series to become intermingled. We think of the past in terms of the departmental structure and, consequently, arrangement along these lines is the natural course to take.
6. In the Reserve Bank we are adopting a concept of "century blocks" of archives, so permitting a grand "cut-off", with necessary tolerances, at the year 2000 to permit the succeeding archivist at that time to make whatever administrative modifications seem to him most suitable for applying to the 21st century block.
7. Excepting particular series of records which have, as series, been accepted as having permanent value (e.g. board meeting records), Reserve Bank records are not accessioned to the permanent archives until 40 years old. By then, almost all material of temporary usefulness has been destroyed and the remainder is of no further interest to creating departments in their daily administration. The timing also approximates the period for which access to archives is closed to outside researchers.

---

## ADDITIONAL MANUSCRIPT MATERIAL IN THE ARCHIVES OF THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY, LONDON

BY J. ALLEN

Department of Anthropology, Australian National University,  
Canberra.

During a recent visit to England, I was able, with the co-operation of the staff of the Royal Geographical Society, to sort through a vast quantity of manuscript material in their basement. The manuscripts were in no apparent order, alphabetically, chronologically, or geographically, and it seems likely that they have not been seen since 1940 at least. The Society's Archivist, Mrs M. Hughes, and I spent four days extracting the manuscripts relating to Australia, and the following list compiled by Mrs Hughes gives the names of the authors, and the approximate dates of the manuscripts.

Most of the manuscripts are the originals of articles which have been published in either the *Proceedings* or the *Journal* of the Society. Unfortunately no time was available to prepare a detailed list of these documents, however the following situations were found to exist in relation to those documents relevant to my own research.

1. One manuscript had been rejected for publication but had not been returned to the author.
2. Of one ten page manuscript less than two pages had been published. In addition, significant editorial alterations had been occasionally made to the text.