ARCHIVAL PRINCIPLES AND THE TREATMENT OF PERSONAL PAPERS

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Nearly twenty years ago T. R. Schellenberg wrote two articles for this journal on the arrangement and description of personal papers.[1] In these articles and in his book *The Management of Archives*[2] he argued that private records, including personal papers, had the same 'organic quality' as public records and that the archivists and librarians who looked after them should use archival rather than library techniques. It is doubtful if Schellenberg's writings have led to many changes in the treatment of personal papers and unfortunately they have not stimulated much discussion of the subject by Australian manuscript librarians. In this article I would like to emphasize a few of the distinctive features of personal papers, which Schellenberg played down, and to offer some explanations for the failure of manuscript librarians to observe certain archival principles. In doing so I may strengthen the conviction of some Australian archivists that librarians indulge in 'pernicious practices',[3] but at least they will now be able to cite contemporary rather than nineteenth-century examples to support their criticisms.

The arrangement of all kinds of archives, including personal papers, can be divided into two processes: the arrangement of holdings within a repository and the arrangement of items within each record group or collection. European archivists in the last century formulated two principles to apply to these processes and they were gradually adopted by government archives in most countries. The principle of *respect des fonds* (*provenienzprinzip*) covered the arrangement of groups of records within an archives, while the principle of original order (*registraturprinzip*) related to the arrangement of items within each record group. The term 'provenance' is often used to cover both principles, which is confusing, especially as manuscript librarians use the term in a third sense, meaning the source from which a collection was acquired.

Little needs to be said about the principle of *respect des fonds*. The sanctity of the archival record group has at times been questioned but few would dispute the importance of maintaining the integrity of collections of personal papers. If collections are either split up or amalgamated, on the basis of their subject content or some other criterion, the research of historians will be hampered in two ways. In most collections there are many items of no intrinsic value, but they may be of interest if it is known that they were once in a man's possession. This will sometimes be clear from the papers themselves, but often it will only be apparent if the collection is kept together as an entity. In addition, the relationship between two or more items in a collection, the added meaning they give to each other, can be of great value to the historian, but this relationship would be destroyed and the meaning lost if collections were not kept intact. In the nineteenth century librarians, historians and others who arranged collections of papers frequently treated each item as a discrete entity

and items from many collections were brought together on the basis of their common subject, period or locality. Archivists rightly condemned such practices. Even today historical societies and other amateur bodies which have small manuscript collections are often unaware of the concept of the collection, or the principle of *respect des fonds,* and they fail to keep their collections intact. Nevertheless, as Schellenberg admitted,[4] it is a long time since large manuscript repositories committed this offence and nearly all manuscript librarians accept without qualification the principle of *respect des fonds.* It is a principle that is not usually difficult to follow, although problems sometimes arise when a man's papers are found to include papers of other members of his family.

While the principle is observed, the influence of library theories of classification are still evident in the way some librarians arrange the collections within their repositories. They admit that it is not possible to classify each collection in a precise way, as they usually relate to numerous subjects, but nevertheless they divide their collections into broad groups on the basis of geography, subject, period or form. The Bodleian Library at Oxford University shelves its collections in groups with labels such as historical, literary, and music, each subdivided by language. Similarly, the Houghton Library at Harvard University adopted a scheme in which the collections were grouped by language, geography or subject.[5] These classification schemes do not hinder the research of historians in any way. At the same time, it is hard to see how they can assist research, for both historians and reference librarians will only find relevant collections by using catalogues and other finding aids, and not by wandering along the shelves. Such schemes mean wasted space, for after each group space must be left for expansion, and this problem is compounded if the collections in each group are shelved in alphabetical order. It seems much simpler and more economical if collections are arranged in the order that they are acquired, with separate sequences for very large items and perhaps for single items. Arrangement by accession numbers is the practice of most Australian manuscript repositories.

There is therefore no essential difference between the arrangement of collections of personal papers within a manuscript repository and the arrangement of record groups within an archives. But at the next level of arrangement the relevance of archival theory is open to question. The principle of original order has often been criticized by archivists and even Schellenberg admitted that it was part of the profession's theoretical superstructure which, unlike *respect des fonds,* often had to be modified in practice.[6] Collections of personal papers vary greatly and it is hard to make generalizations. Nevertheless, manuscript librarians would generally argue that the principle of original order either cannot be applied or should not be applied to most collections of personal papers.

Manuscript librarians who have written about arrangement have mainly dealt with the practical difficulties of identifying the original order. Most collections reach the library in a state of disorder and are often no more than an agglomeration of loose papers. Letters may be in files but the files frequently have no titles and there is no evidence

to show when or why the letters were grouped together. In fact, they may have been filed for the first time a few days before they were transferred to the library. A large proportion of collections are received after the person who assembled them has died, and they may have passed through several hands. Even if they are acquired directly from the person himself, they have often been stored for years in trunks, cupboards, and garages, or they may have been weeded and rearranged every time the owner changed house. If libraries left large disordered collections in the state that they received them extraordinarily detailed finding aids would be needed before they could be used.

Archival purists might argue that such collections should not be left as they are, but should be restored to their original order. After all, the records of government departments often reach an archives in a mess and it is the task of the archivists to identify the filing system that was used when the records were 'active'. But personal papers differ from archives in that there are often no files or bundles at all, neither files nor documents have any notations which might show how they were once arranged, and it is extremely rare for a person to compile lists or indexes of his papers. With most collections there is simply no evidence which would assist the librarian to restore the original order and, if the collection is to be usable, he must create his own system.

There are even problems when collections are received in fairly good order. Collections of personal papers are relatively small and it is not difficult and is quite common for someone to rearrange them completely and thereby destroy the original order. A favourite pastime of retired politicians is to sort through their papers, often with their memoirs in mind, and while the new arrangement may be of interest to historians it is necessarily an artificial one. After a person has died a member of his family or a biographer may sort the papers and years may then pass before they are transferred to a library. Handwritten annotations will probably show who did the rearranging, but when it was done will be much more difficult to determine. If a collection has been rearranged it may be easiest to leave it as it is, but the decision to do so will be based on practical rather than theoretical considerations.

While manuscript librarians generally agree about the difficulty of restoring the original order, opinions differ concerning the significance of the original order. Ellen Jackson considered it so important that, where no order was discernible, the librarian should use his imagination to restore the original arrangement.[7] In contrast, L. J. Gorton of the British Library wrote that it was unwise to place great reliance on existing schemes of arrangement.[8] The assumption that the original order is necessarily significant, and that wherever possible it should be retained or restored, needs to be examined.

At this point an obvious but important distinction should be made between public and private archives. It has often been asserted that the government archivist should not interfere with the existing arrangement of his records because his primary obligation is to the government and the courts, and not to historians.[9] Government officials would have no confidence in archivists who drastically rearranged their old files, and at the same time the courts would no longer

recognize public documents as possessing special evidential value. In government archives the needs of the government must have precedence over the needs of the historians: if there were no historians it would still be necessary to have archives. On the other hand, the manuscript librarian serves only one master: if there were no historians (using the word in a very wide sense) there would be no manuscript repositories. There have probably been instances when the donor of a collection has stipulated that the existing arrangement be preserved but otherwise the librarian is only obliged to consider the needs of the historian. Thus the only valid question is whether or not the original order is of value to the historian.

Writers have sometimes claimed that, just as the arrangement of a department's records sheds light on how the department was organized, the existing arrangement of a man's papers reveals something of his character. It may be of slight interest to a biographer to know that his subject was very orderly or very untidy, but this fact could be simply recorded by the librarian in an inventory; it does not follow that he should perpetuate the existing arrangement. As R. C. Berner has written,[10] this argument assumes that collections are mostly used by biographers and, in any case, the arrangement would only be really interesting if a man had a deep interest in classification. There may be a strong case for leaving the papers of Melvil Dewey in their original order, but such collections are rare.

A more common argument brings together two large assumptions: the original arrangement must have been usable when the records were 'active' and if it was the best arrangement for the people who used them it should be the best arrangement for the historian.[11] This argument may be valid for 'office collections', that is, the papers of men who had efficient secretaries and a logical filing system, with every paper filed as it was received. But most people only file their personal papers after they have finished with them, if at all, and therefore there is no necessity for the filing system to work well. Of course some personal filing systems do work, although they tend to break down as collections grow large. However, while the person himself may have had little trouble in retrieving particular papers, the system evolved for his use alone, and anyone else will be faced with numerous inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies. In the rare cases where the system was fairly logical it may still not be of much assistance to the historian.[12] For instance, a person may have consistently used an alphabetical filing system, whereas every historian who comes to use the collection may wish that he had used a chronological arrangement.

The strongest argument in favour of the retention of the original order is based on the so-called organic relationships between the papers in a collection. Propinquity may be significant. Some notes placed with a document may be of great interest. But if they were separated they would be rendered quite meaningless, and their connection may never be realized or, if suspected, may never be proved. This is an argument for caution and it is generally recognized that the existing arrangement should not be disturbed until the librarian has a complete picture of the whole collection and can perceive the connections between different pieces of paper. But it is not an argument

for leaving the whole collection as it is. Schellenberg pointed out that alphabetical, chronological and activity arrangements will each reveal different kinds of relationships between papers.[13] Perhaps unwittingly, he was showing that any logical arrangement will necessarily reveal some kinds of relationships and will necessarily obscure other kinds of relationships. The relationship that is revealed may not be as significant for the historian as the relationship that is obscured. The librarian must therefore decide whether the existing arrangement is significant, or useful, or useless. For example, if Lord Bruce had filed his letters alphabetically it might be a useful arrangement in showing at a glance the extent of his correspondence with J. G. Latham and J. A. Lyons. But there would be no significance in the fact that letters from both Latham and Lyons were filed together under 'L' and the librarian would be justified in rearranging them if he thought a chronological or an activity arrangement would be more useful. On the other hand, if Bruce had filed his letters by subject it could be very significant that letters from both Latham and Lyons, dated January 1931, were filed together under the heading 'New Party'. In this case the file title would show that there was a significant relationship between the letters, and the librarian would not be justified in rearranging them.

Summing up, the archival principle of original order usually cannot be applied to collections of personal papers, owing to the disordered state in which they are received. In the few cases where the original order has been preserved the principle should be observed if the order is significant, that is, if it reveals or suggests the thoughts and ideas of the person who assembled the papers. When papers have been filed by activity, subject, event, organization or idea the arrangement will normally be significant and should be retained, even though there will be many inconsistencies. An alphabetical or chronological arrangement is not normally significant and, provided care is taken with individual papers, can be discarded if an alternative arrangement is considered more useful for the historian.

For these or other reasons manuscript librarians generally devise new arrangements for most of their collections, rather than retain or restore the original order. Similar arguments have sometimes been advanced by archivists. For instance, the Swedish archivist G. F. Weibull asserted that the work of the archivist should be 'creative', not 'restorative', and that in the interests of historical research records should be grouped by subject matter within each *fonds*.[14] Few archivists have accepted this view. But it is unfortunate that some archivists have gone to the other extreme and rigidly applied the principle of original order to personal papers. Faithfully following Jenkinson,[15] they have even refrained from moving items which were clearly misfiled. Consequently, these items are either lost or finding aids are burdened with such statements as 'The 1860 folder of correspondence contains several letters of 1861, apparently misfiled'. The uncritical acceptance of archival theory led Berner to conclude that 'archival techniques have had unfortunate consequences for manuscript work'.[16]

In arranging a collection of personal papers the librarian is trying to help future users of the collection find material as quickly as

possible. It would undoubtedly help historians if all items were placed in chronological order or some other logical arrangement. But unless a historian is a biographer he is unlikely to have time to work right through several large collections in the hope that there will be some papers relevant to his research. If he is writing a full social history of a particular period a chronological arrangement would be satisfactory. But most historians are primarily concerned with a subject and the arrangement should enable them, in Schellenberg's words,[17] to localize their searches, instead of spreading them over the entire collections.

Manuscript librarians can be criticized for concentrating too much in their writings on the ideal arrangement of items rather than the ideal division of collections into subgroups or series. They seldom use the archival term 'series'[18] and although large collections are usually divided into several groups the criteria used in establishing the groups are often vague or conflicting. Most writers state that collections can be divided on the basis of form[19] and it cannot be denied that such an arrangement places little strain on the intellect of the librarian. Yet historians are hardly ever concerned with the form of the material but rather with its content, and it is hard to see how arrangement by form alone will help them to localize their searches. If they are interested in a subject, activity, event or policy they will have to look in half a dozen large series if they are to find all the relevant papers. Moreover, apart from indicating the quantity and date range of the letters it is very difficult for the librarian to describe in any detail the range of subject matter in a huge correspondence series. Some items, notably diaries, can really only be arranged by form but for most types of papers a different basis should be used in establishing series.

Although historians are primarily interested in subjects it is seldom possible to establish series on a subject basis. A person may have had an interest in a particular subject and collected and created papers relating to it. For instance, in his old age Sir John Latham took a deep interest in the White Australia policy and collected publications and statistics on immigration and corresponded with people who shared his interest. In such cases it would seem useful to group the papers together in a series, provided that they relate exclusively to the subject. However, in most large collections there is material on thousands of subjects and individual items will often be concerned with many different subjects, while the precise subject-matter of other items will be quite obscure. The division of whole collections into subject groups is completely impracticable.

If arrangement by form is not very useful and if arrangement by subject is usually impracticable, one is left with arrangement by activity. Unlike archives, personal papers are not necessarily the product of activities, unless one defines that word in an extremely broad sense to take in thoughts and feelings (in which case books are equally the product of activities). Moreover, it is not correct to say that every item was written or received by a person in a particular capacity. A man may often write letters in the combined role of friend, businessman and politician and such letters do not fall easily into series called personal papers, business papers, political papers and so on. Nevertheless in a large collection a great many papers will

relate exclusively to particular activities and, without necessarily understanding fully the subject matter of the papers, the librarian will be able to group them into series based on the activities. Such series are subjective, unlike most archival series. Series based on form are objective, and merely need to be identified by the librarian. But series based on activity are created, not identified, and with a large collection the series created by any two librarians would probably not be identical. One might establish a single series called 'political papers', whereas another might have divided those papers into 'backbencher's papers', 'Attorney-General's papers', 'papers relating to 1957 trade delegation', and 'papers relating to Liberal Party conferences'. As long as each series only contains papers exclusively on one activity it is not possible to say that one kind of arrangement is necessarily superior to the other. In either case the historian concerned with a particular subject, activity or event will be able to localize his search in one or a few series.

As some papers do not relate to any activity, and as others may relate to two or more activities, it will normally be necessary with large collections to establish some general series based on form. Sometimes a person may have only kept his personal correspondence and destroyed his business, legal, organizational and other activity-related papers, and in such cases the entire collection will have to be divided into form series. But whereas Schellenberg made the surprising statement that if series cannot be established on the basis of type they should be formed on the basis of activity,[20] it would seem more useful for searchers if the reverse was the rule: where possible series should relate to activities, with the remaining papers divided by form.

Manuscript librarians, unlike archivists, have written a great deal about the arrangement of items within series or subseries and, in particular, about the ideal arrangement of correspondence. Some have categorically stated that letters should always be filed by date,[21] while others have claimed that most historians, especially literary historians, are primarily concerned with particular people and that letters should therefore be arranged alphabetically.[22] Several American libraries, including the Newberry Library and the Bancroft Library, try to give the historian two approaches by filing incoming letters alphabetically and outgoing letters chronologically.[23] This method may help the historian to locate a particular letter, but he is bound to want to see the reply and he will have to move continually from one series of letters to the other. The real solution is to arrange all the letters by date, with replies attached to the incoming letters, and then to index them, but obviously this method is far more time-consuming.

The relevance of archival theory for the description of personal papers can be dealt with more briefly. In the past archivists have been very critical of manuscript librarians on the grounds that they were preoccupied with detailed cataloguing of individual items. Huge backlogs of unprocessed material resulted from this preoccupation and, in addition, the descriptions of collections, series and subseries, which should bring out the relationships between items, were neglected. Archivists also criticized the tendency of librarians to use the card

catalogue for all levels of description. Cards were ideal for expanding finding-aids, such as catalogues of holdings and indexes of items, but for descriptions of individual collections, series or other groups they were not as suitable as inventories and guides. Such criticisms have been accepted by most manuscript librarians and have led to a greater diversity of finding-aids for personal papers.

Schellenberg was surely right in arguing that descriptions should proceed from the general to the particular and that the first task of a manuscript repository was to describe in very general terms its total holdings. At the same time, there is a danger that librarians will complacently conclude that such general descriptions of personal papers are sufficient and that attempts to provide more detailed descriptions show an ignorance of archival theory. Yet personal papers are rather different from other kinds of archives, not so much in form but in the kind of information that they contain, and if historians are to make full use of them different kinds of finding-aids are needed.

Archives are used mostly by historians who wish to discover how policies were formulated or implemented, transactions were carried out, or organizations were administered. This kind of information can only be obtained from groups of papers, not from single items, and historians are usually satisfied if the archivist can produce indexes or registers of files which will enable them to retrieve groups of papers on particular policies or activities. Personal papers may include material, such as legal and business papers, which must be used as a group and which need not be treated individually. But partly because they are personal, and partly because they are usually far from complete, personal papers seldom provide more than a few clues about policies or transactions. Instead, their value lies mainly in the information they contain about people's motives, ideas, feelings and prejudices, information which may never be recorded in the files of a department or organization. Important evidence about motives or ideas can be contained in a single letter, and that letter will often be an isolated item within a collection. For instance, among the 12,000 letters in the papers of Sir Josiah Symon there is one letter from the novelist Rolf Boldrewood which gives a detailed exposition of his literary ideas.

There are other notable differences between archives and personal papers. Collections of papers are not usually very large:[24] the holdings of the largest Australian archives are a hundred times more extensive than those of the largest manuscript repository. It would be impossible for a large archives to index every letter in every file, even if it was desirable, but it is possible for many manuscript repositories to index all their letters. Personal papers tend to cover a wider subject range than archives. The records of a government department or organization mostly relate to their functions, which are relatively specific, but a man's papers relate to his interests, which over a lifetime may be extremely diverse.[25] It is quite common for a large collection of personal papers to contain material on such varied subjects as religion and foreign policy, music and trade unions, law and cricket, pensions and broadcasting. Even if a historian knows something about a person's career and interests, he will find it hard to predict the subject-matter

of the papers or the range of correspondents. It would be unreasonable to expect the biographer of Boldrewood to work through the papers of Symon, a politician and lawyer, in the hope that they corresponded and, even if he did, it would probably be a long time before he found the single letter. Therefore it is possible and desirable that finding-aids be compiled which not only describe the papers collectively but enable the historian to locate single items[26] relevant to his research.

Calendars describe single items but few attempts have been made to produce calendars of collections of modern manuscripts. They require exceptional historical knowledge and abstracting skill on the part of the compiler, entries tend to be overloaded with a great deal of repetition and trivia, and they are extremely time-consuming to produce. Subject indexes are more useful, but as a single letter may deal with a dozen subjects they are also very time-consuming. It is generally sufficient if inventories contain descriptions of the principal or recurring subjects covered in the papers, especially if series have been established on an activity or subject basis. Librarians have often reported that the most common request of historians is for letters written by particular people; for example, Berner has asserted that perhaps 90 per cent of user requests for access to papers is by the users' linkage of proper names to the subjects of their interest.[27] The name index to correspondence is the finding-aid which historians regard as essential for personal papers.

The British Library, the Bodleian Library, the National Library of Scotland and other British libraries are still attempting to index correspondence in all collections, even if this means large cataloguing backlogs. The practice of most American libraries is to give different levels of description to different collections, according to their size and research value.[28] Thus if a collection is very small or consists entirely of congratulatory letters it is doubtful if the time spent indexing it would be justified by subsequent use. Similarly, within large collections there may be groups of papers for which collective descriptions will be sufficient. These qualifications notwithstanding, unless most of the large collections of personal papers in a repository can be indexed by name they will be neglected or overlooked by historians, and reference librarians will waste hours on vain searches. In fact, it could be argued that libraries that have no hope of obtaining the staff needed to index at least some of their collections should vacate the field of manuscript-collecting.

Personal papers undoubtedly share many of the characteristics of the archives of governments and organizations, and the writings of archivists have generally had a good influence on the practices of manuscript librarians. However, there are some significant differences between archives and personal papers in the way they originated and were used in their 'active' state and in the information that they contain, and these differences should be taken into account when they are arranged and described by librarians and archivists. Schellenberg, when writing about government archives, stated that 'no archival principles should be ridden to death',[29] and this warning is even more applicable to personal papers.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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14. See Schellenberg (1939) *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.
15. H. Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, London, 1937, p. 114.
16. Berner, *op. cit.*, p. 396.
17. Schellenberg (1965) *op. cit.*, p. 183.
18. For instance, there is almost no discussion of the function of series, or of the problem of establishing them, in R. B. Bordin and R. M. Warner, *The Modern Manuscript Library*, New York, 1966.
19. *e.g.* R. C. Berner and M. G. Bettis, 'Description of manuscript collections: a single network system', *College and Research Libraries*, vol. 30, 1969, pp. 405-16.
20. Schellenberg (1965) *op. cit.*, p. 185.
21. *e.g.* M. Russell and E. G. Roberts. 'The processing procedures of the Manuscript Department of Duke University Library', *American Archivist*, vol. 12, 1949, pp. 369-80.
22. *e.g.* A. W. Nyholm, 'Modern manuscripts: a functional approach', *Library Resources and Technical Services*, vol. 14, 1970, pp. 325-40.
23. *Ibid.;* Finch, *op. cit.;* Berner (1960) *op. cit.*
24. This statement would need to be qualified when discussing manuscript collections in countries such as the United States, where politicians often retain enormous collections of official papers. (See K. E. Brand, 'Developments in the handling of recent manuscripts in the Library of Congress', *American Archivist*, vol. 16, 1953, pp. 99-104). The largest collections in Australia are only a fraction of the size of the Woodrow Wilson or Mackenzie King papers.
25. See R. L. Brubaker, 'Archival principles and the curtator of manuscripts', *American Archivist*, vol. 29, 1966, pp. 505-14.
26. By 'items' is meant single letters and other documents and not files.
27. R. C. Berner, 'Arrangement and description of manuscripts', *Drexel Library Quarterly*, vol. 11, 1975, pp. 34-54.
28. *e.g.* Nyholm, *op. cit.*
29. Schellenberg (1939) *op. cit.*, p. 18.