

A Case For Abandonment of ‘Respect’ Part II

Colin Smith

Part I of this paper covered the first three sections:

1. *History of the issue*
2. *Facing the reality of administrative change — Scott’s new approach*
3. *Physical maintenance of lower-level order rather than physical record-grouping at high level*
 - 3.1 *The record-group level*
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 - 3.2 *Lower-level order — lip service and reality*
 - 3.2.1 *Series level*
 - 3.2.2 *Item level*
 - 3.2.3 *Boles’ heretical disrespect for item-level order*
 - 3.2.4 *The orthodox disrespect of Duchein and Schellenberg*
4. **Physical maintenance of final active order rather than physical reconstruction of earlier orders**

I turn now to the case where administrative arrangements and record-keeping systems have changed significantly over time. I shall argue that this reduces *respect des fonds* to a pointless and futile attempt, not to preserve, but rather to reconstruct, past high-level orders, and that in this it is fundamentally inimical to respect for low-level order. I shall argue, too, that ‘respect for *original* order’ involves a commitment to reconstruction, which must result in violence to the authentic low-level structure of records if they have been reorganised by their creators.

I shall deal first with the latter point.

4.1 *Respecting original order — or reconstructing it?*

Respect for *original* order implies that one ought to seek to reconstruct

items and series as they originally were, even at the expense of destroying no-less-authentic configurations in which they have ended up. According to Jenkinson, ‘our aim must be to get back to the original order designed for our Archives by their compilers, the *ordre primitif*’ — ‘to establish or re-establish the original arrangement’.¹ He was following Muller, Feith and Fruin, who considered that ‘the original order should first of all be re-established as far as possible.’² Again, Boles quotes Gracy to the effect that ‘for the most part modern archivists “lean toward ‘restoration’ work, toward maintaining, or reestablishing, the files as closely as possible to the order in which they were kept by the creator.”’³

I agree here with Duchein. He criticises ‘push[ing] the principle of respect for the [internal] structure of *fonds* to the rebuilding [of] the structure when it no longer exists’, likening it ‘to the practices of architects ... who also “would rebuild as much as possible” (and even beyond the possible) “the original state” of buildings which were entrusted to them for restoration.’ He insists that ‘Neither historian nor archaeologist nor archivist has to “rebuild” what time has destroyed ... We ought, therefore, to reject this method of “restoration” ... which constitutes an unjustified extension of the *respect des fonds*.’⁴

Duchein would appear, however, to be thinking rather of the case where original order has been succeeded by disorder — or some misguided archivist’s order — rather than where it has been obliterated in favour of a later active order. Indeed, he does not distinguish between the two circumstances. When one makes the distinction, however, the case against reconstruction is stronger still. One is no less obliged to preserve the later order than what may be left of earlier ones. And this ‘bird in the hand’ is worth two in the past, being a cannibal with the remains of past birds — evidence regarding past arrangements and the identity of related records — in its belly. It is also less work to secure a bird in the hand than to chase early birds.

Duchein’s difference with Muller, Feith and Fruin over this point — when all qualifications on both sides are noted — is largely semantic. It appears to be another of those irrelevant diversionary arguments — bearing on the case of disorder, and the case of order imposed on inactive records — which characterise those who devalue low-level physical order. Its main interest is that Duchein’s views here contradict those he espouses regarding *respect des fonds*.

4.2 *Respecting fonds — or reconstructing them?*

I shall consider, in turn, the proposals of Muller, Feith and Fruin, of Duchein, and of the Jenkinsonians. The three approaches have much in common, but Muller, Feith and Fruin rather ignore administrative change, while Duchein is quite as concerned about it as Scott — but prepared to go through with a physical reconstructionist *reductio ad absurdum*. Jenkinson, meanwhile, resorts to semantic evasion.

4.2.1 *The palaeontological metaphor of Muller, Feith and Fruin*

Muller, Feith and Fruin suggest that ‘The archivist deals with the archival collection just as the paleontologist does with the bones of a prehistoric animal: he tries from these bones to put the skeleton of the animal together again.’⁵ Implicit in this metaphor is the notion of preserving final active order.

But the skeleton represents a *fonds*, and thus suggests that *fonds*, like skeletons, must be physically distinct. Departures from that ideal are thus likened to a jumbled heap of bones awaiting reconstruction to give them meaning. It is implied that a jumble of records necessarily represents a destruction of patterns of organic activity. The possibility is excluded, that the jumble might rather reflect the true complexity of organic activity.

Perhaps we should abandon the image of a skeleton, and put in its place that most tangled and ramifying form of organic life — skeleton weed.

4.2.2 *Duchein’s attempt to disentangle fonds*

Duchein espouses Jenkinson’s ‘fundamental rule of arrangement ... [that] whatever else we do we must not break up the Archive Group.’⁶ He shares with Scott, however, an awareness of ‘the repercussions of administrative change on the composition of *fonds*’.⁷ He thus ends up proposing a great deal ‘else’ as necessary to the following of Jenkinson’s rule.

Duchein seeks to correct the final active order, rather than to preserve and explicate it. He complains of arrangements by creating agencies ‘sometimes even contrary to the principles of *respect des fonds*, especially when there is a mixture of documents from different *provenances*.’⁸ He makes it a condition of what little respect he has left for ‘the arrangement given by the creating agency ... that it is not incompatible with the principle of *respect des fonds*; and that it encompasses all the documents making up the *fonds* or section of *fonds* that is being handled.’⁹

Duchein does not explain how agencies which *are* the provenance and *make* the *fonds*, can violate them. Nor does he acknowledge that each *fonds* is by definition as authentic as the last, even if its creation involves the destruction of its predecessor.

Nor is Duchein satisfied — as Muller, Feith and Fruin appear to be — to let the final provenance determine the *fonds*. Rather, he wants to ‘proceed [where there is multiple provenance] as if the *fonds* had not been arranged before coming into the care of the archivist’¹⁰ — even to the extent of insisting that a multi-provenant series, despite its ‘technical unity’, ‘belong[s] to two distinct collections.’¹¹

Suppose that Duchein had to restore a cathedral and applied the same principle. Would he consider, despite the ‘technical unity’ of the seventeenth-century bell-tower with the late-mediaeval nave and the Norman facade, that these elements should be physically separated? Would

he consider it ‘deceptive and dangerous’¹² to leave things as he found them — despite his observations noted earlier? Would he tolerate the cathedral’s ‘catastrophic’¹³ structure, only because he found its elements ‘completely, inextricably, and irremediably mixed...’¹⁴

Thanks to administrative change, Duchein’s determination ‘not to destroy the unit of *fonds*’¹⁵ has led him into an advocacy of forcing the archival collection into that ‘alien framework’¹⁶ which Scott rejects — one hardly less threatening than the ‘alien mold’¹⁷ of which Muller, Feith and Fruin warned the subject-groupers. He has attempted to follow Jenkinson’s simplistic and deceptive injunction in favour of *respect des fonds*, and ended up flouting Jenkinson’s other ‘absolute Rule’ — ‘that no original filing or binding may be interfered with in any way.’¹⁸

How, then, does Jenkinson himself resolve this conflict?

4.2.3 *Jenkinson’s semantic evasion*

Jenkinson recognised a problem ‘Where one series of Archives is divided between two Archive Groups.’¹⁹ His solution is ‘to class the Archives separately under the Administrations which actually created them, even though this means breaking up a single series between two Archive Groups.’²⁰ He hastens to add, however, that this is to be done only ‘where the Archives of one Department have been taken over by another simply from the point of view of custody ... Where Archives compiled originally in one Administrative connection become later involved in a fresh administrative action they naturally become Archives of this second Administration.’²¹ He would thus, like Muller, Feith and Fruin, preserve final active order at the top level. ‘An Archive belongs’, he concludes, ‘to the last Administration in which it played an active part.’²²

The point of this is made clearer by Fischer, who asks ‘what happens to files that are caught in mid-stream, as it were, at the time their series is subject to an administrative change of control? Should these be split also?’²³ Jenkinson has covered himself by authorising only vertical splitting of a series between the part created by the first agency and the part added on to the end of it by a successor which has inherited the first part purely for custody. Where the successor has used the inherited files to record its own further action, however, he sees them as thereby rendered the successor’s records. The whole series is thus deemed to belong to one record group, despite its mid-life transfer between agencies. The call for horizontal splitting of files, in order to consign successive strata to the *fonds* of the appropriate administrative era, is thus evaded. Applying ‘common-sense’, and eschewing ‘archival vandalism’,²⁴ the Jenkinsonians gratefully discover that there is no mixture of *fonds* after all.

Duchein, however, knows a mixture of *fonds* when he sees one, and uses its existence to justify dismemberment of the given order. The only case where he will do otherwise is when he is forced to — ‘when the documents from agency C are completely, inextricably and irremediably mixed with

those from agency D'.²⁵ And only in such a case will he resort to Jenkinsonian sophistry — ordering us to 'stop considering the *fonds* from agency C as separate *fonds*'.²⁶

Such 'irremediable' mixture of documents of different original provenance, however, is also embarrassing to Jenkinsonians. Jenkinson approves a clean vertical break. But what is he going to do when scattered items in the pre-existing part of a series are added to and restructured, while others are untouched? Go through the series fishing out some files and leaving others? And what are to become of the finding aids — the intersorted subject cards and the pages of file and correspondence registers in which the successor agency's entries are mixed with those of the predecessor?

'There seems no special reason why the appropriate parts of such controls cannot be placed with the group to whose records they particularly relate',²⁷ suggests Fischer — none, that is, except his characterisation of the equivalent procedure, applied to similar records in the form of bound volumes, as 'archival vandalism'.²⁸

Fischer also — despite his advocacy of 'Letting the archival dust settle'²⁹ — rather surpasses Duchein in calling for series to be 'cut off at an appropriate point'³⁰ by managers of current records, in order to suit the archivist's alleged requirements. In the last analysis, record-groupers think alike.

There is also some agreement among them that records needlessly torn apart should then be notionally reconstituted — an absurd reversal of the third element of Scott's method.

5. Notional rather than actual reconstitution of fonds

5.1 *Doing it backwards*

Both Jenkinson and Duchein propose notional reconstitution as a means of undoing the damage done to lower-level order in the attempt to establish distinct physical *fonds*. Jenkinson suggests, where a series has had to be broken between two agencies, that a 'proper system of cross-reference will leave no doubt as to what has occurred'.³¹ Duchein proposes 'reconstituting, thanks to finding aids, the continuity of *suites* of documentation which were disturbed in the arrangement of *fonds* because of changes of structure and jurisdiction relating to the agencies'.³²

It is illuminating to imagine equivalent procedures in other disciplines. Librarians, for instance, might dismember periodicals and multi-authored monographs in order to concentrate all the writings of each author on a particular shelf, but notionally reconstitute the various works in their catalogue. Or the cathedral-restorers — having destroyed the building in order to segregate its architectural elements — might show how it was by means of plans and photographs. Or the excavators of Bath, having laid bare a succession of ruins from bottom to top, — from Roman to Georgian

— might remove each layer to a separate museum, after recording the way each was connected with the others.

Scott's proposals, as Duchein partly recognises,³³ are for the opposite of this approach — for notional analysis of a given order of things rather than its dismantling and notional reconstitution. This may not be apparent, in view of Scott's breaking up of repository holdings into smaller, lower-level units, but it is really so.

Duchein, as it were, has got beyond the approach of the first archaeologists, who took away artefacts 'as collector's items, without preserving them in the context of their discovery'³⁴ — but not far beyond it. He is trying, instead, to physically assemble materials in '*fonds*' — as it were, in separate museums devoted to 'Roman Britain', 'Mediaeval England' and the 'Georgian Period'. Scott, however, sees that we must physically preserve intact sites, and welcome rather than deplore their multi-provenant stratigraphy. He sees that ages/periods/cultures/*fonds* survive physically only as fragments/layers/levels within sites. He sees that, physically speaking, *fonds* — or rather, fragments of *fonds* — are low in the record hierarchy rather than at the top — lower than series — lower even than items in many cases. It is series, not *fonds*, which equate to sites. *Fonds* are a composite of the strata within many series/sites. Thus, the notional analysis of series, and the notional reconstitution of *fonds*, are really two sides of the same coin.

5.2 *Some unwitting endorsements*

In fact, most of the traditional theorists have accepted notional reconstitution of *fonds* — but as a way to get around difficulties, rather than as a basis on which to build a new theory and method. Muller, Feith and Fruin approve the physical removal of documents requiring special storage conditions to an appropriate section of the repository, observing that 'Whereas the old organization should be followed in the arrangement of the inventory, one is entirely free in the filing of the documents.'³⁵ They also propose that an irretrievably scattered archival collection 'should nevertheless be described by a single official in a single inventory, with mention of where the documents are located.'³⁶ Again, Duchein, reconciling himself to *fonds* which are 'completely, inextricably, and irremediably mixed', proposes to 'note at the head of the finding aid for agency D that the *fonds* of agency C is included.'³⁷ Polden too, noting that multi-provenant records 'can be placed in one location only', and that the archivist might err in deciding which, suggests that '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 ... 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.'³⁸ Fischer agrees that 'Tolerance of [such a] situation can readily be facilitated through appropriate notation in both record groups.'³⁹ Thus, Scott's critics have all unwittingly conceded his point.

Scott, meanwhile, has quite wittingly conceded much to them. He has debated the issues in their terms, claiming that his solution is ‘in complete harmony with traditional principles⁴⁰ — ‘firmly based on the cardinal principles of archives as enumerated by French, Prussian, Dutch and British archivists...’.⁴¹

This is not so. In fact, Scott has arrived at a method which embodies new principles — principles which distinguish the baby from the bathwater, and save it from drowning.

6. Summary and conclusion

A statement of principles needs to imply means as well as ends. A mere statement of ends tends to be no more than an endorsement of ‘motherhood’, begging vital questions.

The principles of ‘*respect des fonds*’ and ‘respect for original order’ can both be read as ends/motherhood statements. However, they can also be read as ends and means statements, and the means often subvert the ends. Their ‘motherhood’ connotations cloak deeper, contrary implications. Indeed, these are slogans rather than principles.

One of their difficulties is that vague word, ‘respect’. Does it demand ‘physical observance’? Apparently most archivists think so, and that interpretation, combined with other elements in the two formulae, leads to problems.

6.1 Problems with ‘*respect des fonds*’

We can avoid the problems here by talking about the ‘principle of provenance’ instead of ‘*respect des fonds*’ — but at the cost of retreating to pure ‘motherhood’. ‘Respect for provenance’, on the other hand — if we take the above view of ‘respect’ — commits its proponent to physical reconstruction. This commitment becomes even stronger when one espouses ‘*respect des fonds*’, it being the common understanding that a *fonds* is a physical record group, kept or brought together on the basis of provenance. ‘*Respect des fonds*’ thus amounts to physical record-grouping. To advocate abandoning record groups, as Scott does, is to advocate abandoning ‘*respect des fonds*’, as I do.

Respect des fonds — a destructively reconstructionist doctrine — ought not to be tolerated on the false plea that it means ‘not break[ing] up the Archive Group.’⁴²

6.2 Problems with ‘respect for original order’

The problem in attempting to ‘respect original order’ are not so obvious in practice. The principle is hardly less muddled, however, than ‘*respect des fonds*’.

To propose respecting *original* order, where there has been change in record structure, is to dismiss all subsequent orders as of no account, and to

again fall into reconstructionism. We ought to be equally respectful of all authentic, or active, orders — whether original or not.

If, however, ‘respect’ means physical maintenance, we must say so clearly, and also say that we are proposing to preserve the *final* active order, while doing our best to clarify the relation of that order to earlier ones.

Again, ‘respect for original order’, taken literally, is hard to distinguish from ‘*respect des fonds*’, because the formula includes no reference to the level of order in question. If we mean lower-level order, we must say so.

6.3 Proposed new principles

We must say what we mean and mean what we say. My attempt to do so leads to the following principles of archival arrangement and description:⁴³

- Physical maintenance of final active order at item and series levels
- Recording of all the relations, over time, of agencies, series and items.

FOOTNOTES

1. H. Jenkinson. *A manual of archive administration*. London, 1966, p 104.
2. S. Muller, J.A. Feith and R. Fruin. *Manual for the arrangement and description of archives*. New York, 1968, pp 59, 60.
3. F. Boles ‘Disrespecting original order’ *American Archivist*. Vol. 45 No. 1, Winter 1982, pp 26, 27.
4. M. Duchein ‘Theoretical principles and practical problems of respect des fonds in archival science.’ *Archivaria* No 16, Summer 1983, p 76.
5. Muller, Feith and Fruin, op cit. pp 70, 71. Actually, they attribute the image to a speaker at a meeting.
6. Jenkinson, op cit. p 102. Quoted by Duchein on p 72.
7. Duchein, op cit, p 68.
8. Ibid p 79.
9. Ibid
10. Ibid
11. Ibid, p 72, footnote.
12. Ibid, p 79.
13. Ibid
14. Ibid, p 73.
15. Ibid, p 72.
16. P.J. Scott, C.D. Smith and G. Finlay ‘Archives and administrative change: some methods and approaches, Part 4.’ *Archives and Manuscripts*. Vol 8 No 2, December 1980, p 57.
17. Muller, Feith and Fruin, op cit, p 54.
18. Jenkinson, op cit, p 88. (Emphasis removed.)
19. Ibid, p 102.
20. Ibid, p 103.
21. Ibid
22. Ibid, p 104.
23. G.L. Fischer ‘Letting the archival dust settle: some remarks on the record group concept.’ *Journal of the Society of Archivists*. Vol 4, No 8, October 1973, p 643.
24. Ibid
25. Duchein, op cit, p 73.
26. Ibid
27. Fischer, op cit. p 643
28. Ibid
29. Ibid, p 640.

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30. Ibid, p 643.
31. Jenkinson, op cit. p 103.
32. Duchein, op cit, p 81.
33. Ibid
34. Ibid, p 66.
35. Muller, Feith and Fruin, op cit, p 156. cf Scott, Smith and Finlay, op cit, December 1980, p 57.
36. Ibid, p 41.
37. Duchein, op cit, p 73.
38. K.A. Polden 'The record group — a matter of principle.' *Archives and Manuscripts*. Vol 3, No 6, May 1968, p 5.
39. Fischer, op cit, p 643.
40. P.J. Scott 'The record group concept: a case for abandonment' *American Archivist*. Vol 29 No 4, October 1966, p 502.
41. Scott, Smith and Finlay, op cit, December 1980. p 62.
42. Jenkinson, op cit, p 102. Quoted by Duchein on p 72.
43. Compare Scott's commitment to 'respect[ing] the physical integrity of the record series and fully record[ing] its administrative context' (op cit, 1966, p 502).