Book Reviews

Edited by Paul Brunton

Nancy Sahli *MARC for Archives and Manuscripts: the AMC Format.* Chicago, Society of American Archivists, 1985.

Max J. Evans and Lisa B. Weber *MARC for Archives and Manuscripts: a Compendium of Practice.* Madison, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1985, distributed by the Society of American Archivists.

MARC (Machine Readable Cataloguing) is a family of formats developed by the Library of Congress for the automated bibliographic control of information about library and related material. The AMC (Archival and Manuscript Control) format was developed with the Library by the Society of American Archivists' National Information Systems Task Force.

These two works are, respectively, a manual for users of the AMC format and a summary of the ways in which eleven American archival institutions and bibliographic services have used the AMC format.

It is worth noting first of all that the AMC format is just that: a format, for organising descriptive information about archives and manuscripts into fields and sub-fields for use in an automated database. The user must find database management software which can handle data records created in the AMC format.

This leads to one of my few criticisms of the manual. With my relatively little knowledge of database software, I would guess that some commercially available database programs might be able to be used to process data records in this format. The manual indicates that suitable software will soon (as at the 1985 publication date) be available from a number of sources and advises the reader to contact the S.A.A. for further information. Further guidance on this subject would have been helpful.

In this review, I do not propose to assess the AMC format itself. Rather, I want to assess the effectiveness of these two companion works in presenting and explaining the format so that it can be used. Then I want to discuss very briefly some of the issues which the development of this format raises for archival automation in Australia.

The physical presentation of the volumes is most attractive. The

organisation of each volume is clear and logical, and I was able to find my way through them and recognise the relationships of the various sections quite quickly. This is just as well, because the AMC format is complicated, involving seventy-seven fields, with up to twenty sub-fields in each (although a large proportion of these would not be used in a given application). Further, for the sake of compatibility with other MARC formats, the AMC format makes extensive use of library-oriented concepts and terms for its field names and descriptions. Without the assistance of the data elements dictionary, the use of a great many examples, and indeed of the compendium volume itself, it could be very difficult for archival users to relate the elements that make up their own descriptive information to the structure of the AMC format.

The manual volume comprises an introduction in question and answer form, covering the history of the AMC format, information on the structure of the format and the manual, and some discussion of how the format can be implemented. Wisely, the reader is referred to a bibliography for information on broader aspects of archival automation.

One matter that I felt could have received more attention in the introduction is the level of archival description. The format is very flexible, and data records can be created to describe everything from whole collections and record groups down to individual record items. The manual notes correctly that the ability to provide automated linkages between data records at different archival levels must be provided in the software chosen. Some explanation of the way in which linkage between levels can be noted in the relevant fields would have helped here.

Following the introduction are a sample blank data input form for the AMC format, two example data records, a selected bibliography and a glossary.

The bulk of the manual comprises a field-by-field description of the AMC format. The descriptions are arranged by field number, and a given field description can be found by scanning the preceding field summary or using the data elements dictionary at the back of the volume. Each field description commonly comprises a statement of the purpose of the field, a listing and description of the sub-fields, and a number of examples. The information is presented according to a standard structure, which greatly assists the reader. Of particular value is the assessment, in many field descriptions, of how useful a given field is likely to be for archival and manuscripts control.

The final part of the manual is the data elements dictionary, which provides the link between the terms used by archival institutions to describe records and archival activities on the one hand, and the fields and sub-fields used in the AMC format on the other.

The compendium of practice volume, as noted above, describes the ways in which the AMC format has been used and interpreted by a number of

archival institutions and bibliographic services. Again, the information is presented according to a standard structure. For each field, which is arranged numerically, the sub-fields and indicators are listed, followed by a summary of the AMC standards. The practice of each of the bibliographic services and archival institutions in relation to that field is then noted, frequently with examples. Further examples from these institutions, this time of whole data records, are provided in the appendices to the volume.

I found the compendium invaluable in assisting me to understand details of the AMC format and for interpreting the fields in terms of the practices of archival institutions with which I am familiar.

The development of the AMC format is already having an obvious impact in the United States. For this reason alone, its implications for Australia's increasingly computer-conscious archival community must be considered. I cannot look seriously at the issues in this review, but a couple of points can be noted.

In this review I have referred entirely to the descriptive role of the AMC format. A small number of fields, however, relate not to the description of records but to recording the archival processes through which the records go. The format's capacity here appears to be inadequate to record the complex processes of modern archives management, especially in larger archival institutions. This has already been recognised by N.A.R.A. (National Archives and Records Association) in its assessment of the AMC format[1].

This leads to one of the first questions which an institution considering the adoption of the AMC format would need to ask: should it be used in addition to other control systems (both descriptive and process-oriented), primarily to allow the exchange of information about holdings with other repositories; or should it be used as the main control mechanism? If it is to be used only for the former purpose, is it worth the cost of creating and maintaining the required AMC data records?

Ironically, archival institutions with existing automated control systems may be in the most favourable position to adopt the AMC format, by writing a program to create at least minimum AMC data records from their current automated information. For an institution using manual systems, the use of the format could be a great deal more costly.

Perhaps the answer is to recognise the value of the AMC format as a means of exchanging information about records between archival and related institutions, and to recognise its limitations as an institution's main control mechanism. That is, perhaps institutions should choose or develop automated control systems and descriptive formats which best suit their own needs, and then find the means to convert their automated information into AMC data records to meet the further objective of information exchange.

FOOTNOTE

1. William M. Holmes, Jr., Edie Hedlin, and Thomas E. Weir, Jr., 'MARC and Life Cycle Tracking at the National Archives: Project Final Report'. *American Archivist*, Vol. 49. Summer 1986, pp. 305-309.

David Roberts
Australian Archives
New South Wales.