

THE RECORD GROUP IS DEAD — LONG LIVE THE RECORD GROUP!

Cheryl Simes

'It became a dirty word at National Archives, its remains shrouded in cosmetic binders. It was invented by the Americans (at least, according to the Americans), who now think they are the first to have doubts. It was disowned by the Australians, who remain misunderstood by the rest of the world. And the British have yet to realise that they have joined a revolution. It was the Record Group. And yes, although pockets of resistance remain, the past tense is appropriate.' Thus Cheryl Simes opened the leading article in the March 1991 (vol II no 1) issue of the New Zealand Archivist. It is reproduced here with permission.

The Record Group, as enshrined in British and American government archives, insisted on by Jenkinson, Schellenberg and lesser prophets, and generally adopted in the English-speaking world, is dead. A burial may now be permissible, for the death certificate — long prepared by the interns in the Antipodes — has at last been initiated by the senior specialists.

The patient was ill for some time. It was born with a critical genetic weakness: an allergy to climatic change. It functioned perfectly in a stable environment, and for most of a century the archivists failed to recognise environmental change as more than a mere aberration. Their attention was focused on the backlog of material accumulated through the previous centuries — material as neatly arranged into a predictable (from hindsight) and stable administrative context as it was fitted into acid-free containers with controlled temperature and humidity. But gradually, the archivists saw that the administrative climate had always been changeable, and that the rate of change would only increase. Some tried to adapt the archives to fit the record group; others extended, or squeezed, the record group to fit the archives. But the changes were ever more complex, and with every exposure to the real world the life of the record group was drained a little more. Now the struggle is over.

The most open challenge came from Peter Scott, an Australian. Back in 1966 he questioned the record group's ability to cope with administrative change. He co-authored a sequence of later articles, further developing the theme, with damning evidence of the record group's inadequacies. More importantly, he detailed an alternative: the Commonwealth Records Series (CRS) system developed by the Australian Archives.¹ The CRS system focused on the series as the key unit of arrangement. Item reference codes no longer had an agency (or group) component. There was a single register of series with unique series numbers allocated serially from this register. Each series was linked to its creating agency (or agencies) on paper only. Agencies were also given unique references from a central register, and were linked in turn to organisations (corporate entities, governments etc). In this system, series could also be linked to other series, agencies to other agencies, organisations to other organisations. These linkages could show relationships of administrative authority, predecessors and successors, functional change, and intellectual access. Most significantly, the links for any single series (or agency, organisation) could be plural at any time, and certainly plural over time.

The major problem with the CRS system was that, outside Australasia, only the initial article was read, and the positive suggestions were misunderstood and misrepresented. Scott was accused of abandoning provenance, of rejecting the principle of *respect des fonds*, of describing larger administrative units 'only as groupings of related series'.² Somehow the critics failed to notice the careful provision for documenting organisations and agencies and linking these to the series. It was only in 1986 that Max Evans introduced the concept of 'authority control', again in the *American Archivist*, and presented a clear summary of the major basic arguments presented by Scott.³

In New Zealand however, Scott's ideas were debated by archivists struggling to redeem National Archives' collapsing record group system. The initial challenge was simply to cope with successive accessions from active series, but the discussion developed into a quiet but total revolution. In 1984 the trial Government Archives Integrated Management System (GAIMS) was launched; the first draft of the GAIMS Manual was produced in 1985. Based on modified CRS principles, GAIMS aimed to provide flexible descriptive formats but consistent and clear lines of intellectual access, while maintaining the provenance of each item and series.

Interesting as such developments may be, they do not in themselves constitute a valid death certificate for the record group.⁴ A closer look at recent authoritative publications from the United States and United Kingdom is in order. Of particular relevance are Frederic Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* and Michael Cook

and Judith Proctor, *Manual of Archival Description* (second edition). These volumes may reasonably be expected to represent the 'state of the art' in archival theory and practice.⁵

At first sight, Miller has written a readable, comprehensive and well illustrated guide to orthodox arrangement and description. Indeed, were it simply that, this new addition to the SAA handbooks ought still to be compulsory reading for novice and experienced archivists alike. The overviews of principles, the historical survey of theory and practice, and the practical and logical procedures for accessioning, arrangement and description, are worth detailed consideration. Miller states explicitly many supplementary principles and guidelines that were not mentioned by earlier writers and therefore had to be developed as part of an archivist's 'instinct'. One favourite line: 'Original order is innocent until proven guilty' (page 27).

Reading Miller carefully however, one quickly suspects revolutionary sentiment. There is matter-of-fact recognition that arrangement by provenance 'can be entirely on paper'. The reality is that, 'Records in complex institutions may have no single creator or may have different creators over time', and archival arrangements must be adapted accordingly.⁶ More bluntly, there is the recognition of a difference between arrangement by provenance and arrangement by filing structure:

Archival arrangement should thus not be thought of as one unified system in which physical files and file series are at some lower level than record groups, collections, and subgroups. These are instead two different kinds of arrangement — arrangement by provenance/records creator and arrangement by filing structure. *Each works best when separated from the other.*⁷

Miller hovers between the Old World and the New. He explains in detail how to prepare an old-style inventory, before describing the alternative 'series-records creator linking system', which he considers better able to cope with the complexities of modern records.⁸ A little experience of the nineteenth century suggests a more flexible system is needed for these records too, but Miller probably had to exercise some diplomacy here. His examples of the new approach even include unique series numbers, just as in CRS and GAIMS. In short, he's gone about as far as he can go, especially in an official SAA publication.

Back in the United Kingdom, however, *MAD2* appears dedicated to the traditional concept of levels: repository (0), management group (1), group (2), class/series (3), item (4), and document (5). Within each level there may be as many sub-levels as necessary, so that subgroups may be placed between 2.001 and 2.999, and series between 3.001 and 3.999: this at least allows some of the linkages of more obviously flexible schemes. *MAD2* is laden with irritating dogma, yet even so there are hints of change. For instance, the authors sensibly reject the use of

mnemonics for group references, while recommending the use of alphabetical characters for same, and numerical characters for series. Just like GAIMS, but what really is so wrong with using numerals for groups/agencies?

More disturbing is the insistence that

*Reference codes for class [series] descriptions and below should be numbered serially from 1 in each unit of description. The practice of using a continuous series of numbers throughout a group is not recommended.*⁹

This means that the 'classes' (series) within each sub-group should be numbered from 1, and is designed to minimise the need for subnumbering caused by later accruals — much more complicated than the rest of the world has found necessary. The interesting thing is that no mention (critical or otherwise) is made of unique series systems as in CRS and GAIMS, yet the authors are known to be aware of *Keeping Archives* and Scott's 1966 article.

But what of the critical question of administrative change? The problem is indeed recognised:

When an archive-generating function is transferred from one administrative department to another, the archive service must inevitably make a decision about how to deal with new accruals of archives relating to that function. *Such accruals must either be added to the original class [series] or they must be treated as a new class.*¹⁰

The ensuing anomalies are mentioned, but the issue is sidestepped with the claim that the problem is one of 'archival management' rather than archival description.

There is then a glimmer of hope. It's as though the authors cannot endorse the revolution but will not condemn it either. A single paragraph early in the book suggests they may have reconsidered their apparent intransigence and revised their introduction to suit, without spelling out the implications for other sections of *MAD2* such as the form of series numbers used:

Group descriptions . . . may be regarded as forming a separate file from descriptions at lower levels. This is because frequent changes in the administrative structure of creating organisations have loosened the connexion between groups and classes [series]. The file of group/subgroup descriptions may then be regarded as a form of authority file governing elements in the description of classes and below. If this separation between group and class level is effected, the repository must make sure that adequate cross-reference exists.¹¹

So even here, the basic point has been recognised: series must be linked to their creators, but the links may be on paper only.

The issue is not one of terminology, i.e. 'management group' or 'record group' or 'organisation', 'group', or 'agency', 'series' or 'class'. If archivists and users are happy with the word 'group', then by all

means let them use it, without insisting that each series belongs in only one 'group'. It is easier to correct mistakes, and make multiple linkages, when the series have unique numbers and the connections are on paper only, but whether the description (or inventory) is headed 'Agency' or 'Record Group' is immaterial, as long as it is clear how the system works. Long live the new, improved record group!

It would be unjust to both Miller and *MAD2* to leave the discussion here, for there is much more to each volume than this. Both pay considerable attention to indexing, and urge the need for more than has happened in the past, although they differ on the applicability of external thesauri or word lists, while urging in-house consistency. There is much emphasis on format, and on uniform descriptive standards, particularly as each country is developing networks to exchange information between repositories, and between libraries and archives. In addition, *MAD2* provides detailed guidelines for describing special-format archives and integrating such descriptions in a general archives system. Between the two volumes, there is also much superficial variation in terminology, premises, and conclusions, but this ought only to prompt further investigation and debate.

As Schellengerg noted just a year before Scott's initial article:

The development of methodology is, obviously, a never-ending job . . . New methods of control are being developed, using new devices that are the product of modern technology, for the methodology of a profession must be constantly revised and refined to meet its current problems.¹²

There is much to challenge New Zealand and Australian archivists, with opportunities to sift and build on the ideas and experiences presented, and so continue to develop some of the best considered archives services in the world.

ENDNOTES

1. P. J. Scott, 'The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment', *American Archivist* 29(4), October 1966, pp. 493-504. A more detailed exposition is found in Scott, G. Finlay, and C. D. Smith 'Archives and Administrative Change: Some Methods and Approaches', Parts 1-5, *Archives and Manuscripts*, 7(3), 7(4), 8(1), 8(2), 9(1) respectively (1978-81).
2. F. M. Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, p. 62 (see note 5 below). See also M. Duchein 'Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des fonds* in Archival Science', *Archivaria* 16 (1983), pp. 71n-72.
3. Max Evans, 'Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept', *American Archivist*, 49(3), Summer 1986: pp. 249-261. Evans too apparently read only the 1966 article.
4. Although *Keeping Archives* (Australian Society of Archivists, 1987) has been received enthusiastically outside Australasia, the implications of its Series Register and single sequence of series numbering (p. 155) might not have been accepted.
5. Miller: Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 1990. Cook/Proctor: Gower, Aldershot, 1989. The latter (*MAD2* for short) was produced by the Archival Description Project, University of Liverpool. This article was originally intended to be a review of these publications, but the writer became distracted.
6. Miller, p. 60.
7. Miller, p. 62. Emphasis added.

8. Miller, pp. 98-99.
9. *MAD2*, p. 53. Emphasis in original.
10. *MAD2*, p. 37. Emphasis in original.
11. *MAD2*, pp. 15-16. This is a recognition of recent developments at the Public Record Office.
12. T. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (Columbia University Press, New York and London, 1965), pp. 18-19.

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