Review Article

Record-keeping and Records Continuum Thinkers: Examining a Seminal Australian Text (*Archives: Recordkeeping in Society*)*

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Some contexts

In seeking reviewers for books, editors understandably privilege those who possess that elusive quality 'impartiality'. Measured by this yardstick, those involved in commissioning this piece from me have failed miserably. It is, I think, widely known that I am not an impartial reader of texts which embrace record-keeping and continuum frameworks. Moreover, in recent years I have engaged in vigorous debate, both public and private, with several contributors to *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* – Sue McKemmish, Frank Upward, Ann Pederson, and Chris Hurley. And a final preliminary layer of partiality – in the book's planning stages I was invited by McKemmish and Michael Piggott to contribute a chapter. Although my decision to decline the invitation was motivated solely by work pressure at the time, I would

be a fool to think that my early encounter with the project hasn't influenced my reading of its end product.

More contexts

For some years now I have thought of dominant Australian archival discourses as a juggernaut – an overwhelming force to which individuals and institutions have aligned themselves more or less willingly. To an extraordinary degree Australian archivists speak the language of what I have called a 'record-keeping paradigm' – a conceptual frame for understanding archives which is informed by the dissolving of thresholds between 'archives' and 'records', a defining of 'the record' in terms of functional (or work process) requirements, a privileging of the evidential attributes of records, and an emphasis on accountability.[1] This language, of course, is not unique to Australia. Indeed, it is, arguably, dominant in international English-language archival discourses. In *Recordkeeping in Society* the paradigm is variously labelled 'recordkeeping perspective', 'recordkeeping framework', 'recordkeeping-based approach' and 'recordkeeping approach'. Always, it should be noted, with the unhyphenated 'recordkeeping', with its implicit naturalisation of a construct. In this piece I stick with the name 'record-keeping paradigm'.

The most powerful stream within Australian record-keeping discourses is that informed by application of Frank Upward's Records Continuum Model. Non-Australian progenitors notwithstanding, the continuum is, again arguably, Australia's most influential contribution to international archival discourses. It has found footholds in many countries and been engaged by thinkers as prominent on global stages as Terry Cook and Eric Ketelaar. The editors of *Recordkeeping in Society* declare in their introduction that all of them are 'records continuum thinkers and operators', and that the other contributors 'vary in the degree to which they adopt a continuum framework' (p. v). Semantic profusion in the book also offers us 'a continuum view of the record' and 'a records continuum perspective'. In this piece I use 'continuum thinking' to describe approaches more or less influenced by the continuum model, and 'continuum framework' to describe the frame of reference informing these approaches.

Recordkeeping in Society is a big book - big in its ambition, its scope, length and significance. It is, in the words of its editors, a 'broad scope effort', a 'single volume "textbook" treatment' (p. 329). It builds on a big book tradition in Australia reaching back to *Keeping Archives* (1987 and 1993) and including *Archival Documents* (1993) and *The Records Continuum* (1994). Its fulcrum is chapter 8, Frank Upward's 'The records continuum'. The chapters before Upward's cover elements of an extensive terrain: documentary traces of social and organisational activity, archival institutions, record-keepers, document analysis, records and records systems, the records aggregation (or *fonds*), and archival frameworks (or systems). Chapters after the fulcrum provide four critical conceptual windows into record-keeping: accountability, law and juridical systems, power, and memory. Even more impressive than its scope is the reach of its aim: 'to provide a conceptual base for archival science which coherently incorporates both established and emerging concepts within the discipline' (p. iii). What this 'conceptual base' means in practice is a synthesis of continuum thinking and what some of the book's contributors call 'postmodern' thinking.

Significances

Over the last decade, slowly but steadily, thinkers working within record-keeping and continuum frameworks have engaged the work of thinkers influenced by or articulating what Sue McKemmish calls 'the postmodern archival discourse' (p. 19). In my reading, the most sustained endeavour is happening in Australia, and *Recordkeeping in Society* marks the first book-length collective expression of such endeavour. For this reason alone *Recordkeeping in Society* is an important book.

I do not wish to repeat here my objections to the label 'postmodern'.[2] Suffice it to note that in using the label the contributors to *Recordkeeping in Society* are referring to a stream of discourse which flows widely in spaces defined by respect for narrative, comfort with multiple shifting meanings, acknowledgement of contingencies in knowledge construction, and an intense awareness of the dimensions of power. In these spaces 'the record' is something always in the process of being made, and so-called record-keepers are narrators of the record. This stream draws on a range of energies variously labelled 'postmodern', 'poststructural', 'postcolonial' and 'deconstructive'. Of all the streams

in international archival discourse, it is the one most open to 'the other' - the voices and the knowledges marginalised by a Western-dominated global mainstream. This stream I refer to (in an explicit move to naturalise a construct) as 'the recordmaking paradigm'.

In looking for synthesis, or at least for a 'conceptual base' hospitable to synthesis, the editors of *Recordkeeping in Society* are disarmingly transparent about their endeavour. Both in the introduction and in the postscript, they reflect on the project in a way which demonstrates compellingly the extent to which they have engaged recordmaking perspectives. I am tempted to call these two texts the heart of the book. But by this measure its heart covers at least two other locations. Firstly, the magisterial final chapter by Michael Piggott, 'Archives and memory'. In my reading this is a brilliant piece, the most accomplished on 'memory' to have come out of archival discourses in the last decade, and the clearest demonstration in *Recordkeeping in Society* of the possibilities for synthesis. And secondly, Frank Upward's fulcrum chapter on the continuum model. On the one hand, Upward offers a re-reading of the model through the lenses of what could be called recordmaking thinkers and their intellectual mentors - Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and others. Upward's striving for synthesis is deliberate, explicit and sophisticated. On the other hand, Upward overtly looks to integrate the book's component parts - something resisted by the book's editors. So, for example, in the introduction the editors indicate that they 'want each chapter to stand alone ... and to restrict cross-referencing between chapters to a minimum' (p. iv). Nonetheless, Upward relentlessly references the other chapters, constellating them around his re-reading of the model. He also, in what could be called over-enthusiasm, offers sections which traverse precisely the ground covered by chapters 2 (Adrian Cunningham on archival institutions) and 7 (McKemmish, Barbara Reed and Piggott on archival frameworks). With reference to the former, Upward explains: 'My aim is not to compete with Adrian Cunningham's chapter ... but I give a perspective that can be read back into that chapter' (p. 212). I, for one, do not find this explanation convincing - the upshot is a form of competition, in which Cunningham fares best.

Clearly, a reading of Upward's imperial piece is essential to any evaluation of the book's significance. Before turning to this task, and taking my lead from the editors' stated aim for the book, I assess the

degree to which the other authors have integrated record-keeping thinking with that of recordmaking.

Integrations

Four of the authors make little or no attempt to engage recordmaking perspectives - Ann Pederson, Barbara Reed, Chris Hurley and Livia Iacovino. As always, Hurley is a special case. Unlike the other three, all of whom move comfortably within a continuum frame and whose work is almost hermetically sealed from influences outside that frame,[3] Hurley resists easy categorisation. Clearly open to continuum thinking, and positioned, broadly, within a record-keeping frame, his work is nonetheless permeable (never deliberately, predictably; never with signposting) to what is outside it. This piece is vintage Hurley. He mounts a masterful, searing, positivist critique of record-keeping assumptions about accountability.

Four of the chapters demonstrate engagement with recordmaking ideas, but in a mode which I wouldn't call integrative. In each case the authors are open - explicitly open - to a recordmaking paradigm, but their openness posits a universe adjacent to rather than permeating the universe within which they operate. In her chapter on 'traces', McKemmish explores, elegantly, her continuum universe through the first sixteen pages, then in the closing four pages opens a window on the 'other' - a recordmaking universe. In chapter 4 the order of engagement is reversed. Here McKemmish, together with Robert Hartland and Upward, begins with an account of document analysis which is comfortably within a recordmaking universe (pp. 75-89), then shifts decisively into what feels like a parallel record-keeping universe (pp. 89-99). Hans Hofman's chapter on 'the archive' offers pedestrian record-keeping analysis, apart from a little foray (pp. 150-52) into what is outside. And McKemmish again, this time with Reed and Piggott, on 'archival frameworks' in chapter 7 - here the openness to recordmaking is offered in the opening and closing sections (pp. 159-65 and 189-93), with the middle section delivering conventional continuum analysis.

For moves which are truly integrative, readers must turn to the chapters by a third quartet - Upward (whose chapter on the continuum model I deal with in the following section), Cunningham, Ketelaar and Piggott. The pieces by Cunningham ('archival institutions') and Ketelaar

('recordkeeping and societal power') read like two companion tapestries – Cunningham deploys a strong record-keeping woof crossed by a light recordmaking weft; with Ketelaar the pattern is reversed, as one of the world's foremost articulators of recordmaking discourse engages, more or less comfortably, the language of record-keeping. But it is with Piggott's concluding chapter, as I have already indicated, that integration is taken to the level of synthesis. Here, to stay with the weaving metaphor, warp and weft are equally weighted in a design which is richly textured and full of beautiful patterns. Rather than placing concepts from different paradigms alongside one another, Piggott looks for the spaces in which they talk to one another. I would have liked him to open up more to the energies of deconstruction – energies which allow, for instance, an understanding of 'remembering' which is not the binary opposite of 'forgetting' – and to have explored more fulsomely the dynamics of narrative, but these are relatively minor quibbles which do not detract from what is an extraordinary achievement.

Readings of the continuum model

Like a growing number of thinkers and operators (to use *Recordkeeping in Society's* unfortunate phrase) (p. v) outside Australia, I believe that readings of Frank Upward's Records Continuum Model have enriched archival discourses. That said, recordmaking thinking – especially in its deconstructive form – finds it difficult to accommodate the authority accorded the model in Australia. The root of the difficulty, I believe, lies in continuum model adherents' belief that a distinction must be made between readings of the model and 'the model itself'. Upward, for example, once upbraided me for confusing readings of the model with the model itself. And in *Recordkeeping in Society* he states upfront: 'In this chapter I give an updated account of a model for the records continuum ... The model itself has helped many of the authors of this book ...' (p. 198). So, for Upward there is a 'model itself' which he merely provides an updated account of. The model carries an inherent authority. And the closer an account is to representing the model itself, the more authoritative it is. For me, on the other hand, there is no 'model itself', only readings. And in *Recordkeeping in Society* Upward is offering a new reading.

Here I wish, very briefly, to offer a deconstructive reading of Upward's reading. In my reading Upward looks to integrate diverse discourses with the discourse he and others have generated around the concept of a records continuum. The result is a form of integration which involves inordinate violence and barely contains energies which are disintegrative. To return to the weaving metaphor of the previous section, Upward lays down a powerful continuum woof crossed by a flimsy weft containing both recordmaking and record-keeping elements. Many of the threads are loose, threatening to unravel the tapestry. The most serious loose thread is that constituted by the notion of a 'model itself'. But there are others almost as serious:

- Any model in any discipline confronts the enormous challenge of representing in simple terms a complex reality. One of the critical mechanisms for avoiding over-simplification, and for accepting an unavoidable contingency, is the defining of terms. Upward spurns this mechanism as he reaches for transcendence: 'Defining the terms used in the model would be counter-productive to its purpose ... Those wishing to understand the terms further can use dictionaries – and their own experiences – to assist' (p. 204). Upward, of course, is being disingenuous. Ultimately definitions cannot be avoided. Careful reading of Upward's many texts about the model would reveal a full set of implicit working definitions. And few dictionaries are helpful when looking up terms like 'evidentiality', 'transactionality', 'pluralise' and 'recordkeeping containers'.

- Getting one's head around the model's four dimensions and four axial elements is made tortuous by the semantic fuzziness preferred by Upward. Questions abound. While not necessarily excluding pre-creation dimensions, the model's positing of 'creation' as dimension one certainly renders them less visible. Deconstruction, as Ketelaar and others have explained, places a question mark behind any notion of 'origin' and would assume – in, for example, the concept of 'archi-text' – elements of Upward's dimension four to constitute a necessary 'before' in relation to dimension one. The axial elements, according to Upward, 'do no more than represent the most basic general categories

by which accountability can be discussed' (p. 202). Here two layers of privileging are discernable - in the elevation of 'accountability', and the subordination (not necessarily the exclusion) of categories like 'narrativity', 'memory' and 'authority'. I could go on, but let me rather quote at some length Upward's own anticipation of doubts and questions likely to be raised by what he calls 'a postmodern reading': 'What is the trace? Does it exist as evidence? How does recordkeeping evidence relate to legal evidence? How does evidence relate to memory? Who really is the creating agent? The individual or the organisation that employs them? What is the difference between the individual as a 'corpus' ... and as an actor? How well do created documents reflect actions?' (p. 207). I would quibble with the phrasing of some of these questions - for example, I would reject in principle the possibility of documents reflecting actions - but they - and a myriad others of the same order - threaten a fundamental unravelling of the continuum model.

- Upward's reading of other thinkers along the grain of his model is extremely uneven. He finds a snug integration for Luciana Duranti. No surprise, as she can be positioned comfortably within the record-keeping paradigm. His reading of Michel Foucault is assured and insightful, although, again not surprisingly, it is with the structuralist dimensions of Foucault's work that Upward finds resonance. I found his reading of Terry Cook unconvincing, even disrespectful. So many of Cook's recordmaking explorations - especially those he has drawn from Hugh Taylor and extended in multiple directions - are ignored by the analysis. As is the body of Cook's finely nuanced critique of the continuum model - Upward is quick to cite Cook's praise, but is silent on the myriad tough questions Cook poses.[4] And, finally, Jacques Derrida. One of what Upward calls a 'gang of French muggers of the intellect' (p. 209), Derrida is typified by Upward as 'the questioner of interiorities of text' (p. 209). And, he concludes, 'Derridan views about the interiority of the act have their locus in the first dimension of the model' (p. 209). I find it difficult to engage this type of analysis

> seriously. Derrida located in the first dimension of the model? Over ten years of studying Derrida I have discovered that as much as he is a questioner of interiorities he is a questioner of exteriorities.[5] His work, if anything, spans – effortlessly – all four dimensions of the model; questions their order; challenges their containment within a finite sequence of numbers; and, of course, places an indelible question mark behind any and all oppositions, boundaries, containers and, dare I say it, models.

In this reading of his model, Upward – in my reading – is straining. And an unravelling is discernable in all directions. I smiled when I read Upward quoting Cook approvingly that the continuum model should be viewed as a plastic sheet (p. 203). What further conceptual gymnastics might be required to square the model with recordmaking thinking? One is tempted to suggest imagining the model as a mirror located in a room filled with smoke ...

Conclusions

As I have already indicated, in my view *Recordkeeping in Society* is an important book. It assembles the finest voices in Australian archival discourses, together with two of Europe's most prominent voices, in a common purpose – to cover as wide an archival terrain as possible while searching for the interconnections between record-keeping and recordmaking ideas. Ultimately, to repeat, it aims 'to provide a conceptual base for archival science which coherently incorporates both established and emerging concepts within the discipline' (p. iii). To their credit, the book's editors name the project as a work in progress and signal some of its shortcomings – the terrain not covered and the concepts not yet coherently incorporated. Does it deliver a new, coherent, integrative conceptual base for 'archival science'? Does it find a synthesis of record-keeping and recordmaking paradigms? No, it doesn't. But it goes a long way towards demarcating the space in which these objectives might be met.

As I have suggested, the book's key texts – its heart – are the introduction, the postscript, and the chapters by Cunningham, Upward, Ketelaar and Piggott. The former two articulate both the need and the desire for synthesis. And they go further, demonstrating both the openness and

the willingness to muddle forward which I believe are essential if such endeavour is to be successful. The essays by Cunningham, Ketelaar and Piggott – in different ways – demonstrate the possibilities for integration and suggest that synthesis is not a chimera. All three of these writers deploy conceptual frames lightly. They have listened carefully to ideas outside their frame of reference. And they have allowed 'the stuff' of their enquiries to shift the frames where necessary. In contrast, Upward exemplifies an approach which deploys a conceptual frame heavily, which does not listen carefully to ideas outside the frame, and which stuffs 'the stuff' into the frame whether it fits or not. Upward, in short, offers us a model for integration and synthesis which is about qualities and processes for which I would use labels like 'violence', 'co-option', 'totalisation' and 'disrespect' (in the literal sense of a failure to look again).

All of this begs the question 'is synthesis desirable?' What is the imperative to seek integrations between paradigms which move in different conceptual spaces? Why, for example – and to push the point of reference to a crude extreme – would a social democrat seek a common language with a reactionary white supremacist? For me, the imperative comes from what I think of as the call of justice – a call which, in the terms of Derrida, sounds in one's relation to 'the other'. For deconstruction, listening to 'the other', inviting 'the other' in, is the beginning of ethics and the dream of a justice which is coming. This is a call, even a calling. And, in my reading, the *Recordkeeping in Society* project has heard the call, and it has worked with calling. Which is why I placed the book on my shelf marked 'books with considerable heart'. Synthesis is a noble aim, one worth working hard for. But if the price to be paid is the violence of an Upward in totalising mode, then it is not worth paying. And that marks a troubling question at the heart of *Recordkeeping in Society*.

Endnotes

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1 I first made this argument in 'Law, Evidence and Electronic Records: A Strategic Perspective from the Global Periphery', presented at the International

Council on Archives' quadrennial Congress, Seville, Spain, September 2000. It was subsequently published in the *South Afrcan Archives Journal* 41 (1999/2000) and *Comma* 2001, 1-2.

2 See, for example, my 'Concerned with the Writings of Others: Archival Canons, Discourses and Voices', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 25, 2 (2004) and "Something is Happening Here and You Don't Know What it Is': Jacques Derrida Unplugged', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 26, 1 (2005) (a Norwegian translation was published in the Norwegian publication *Bok Og Bibliotek* 1-2005).

3 Pederson, at least, cites texts by Terry Cook (p. 73), but I wonder what Cook would make of her description of his work in record-keeping terms.

4 See in particular Cook's keynote address to the Australian Society of Archivists' 2000 conference - 'Beyond the Screen: The Records Continuum and Archival Cultural Heritage'.

5 See, for example, my *Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa* (Second Edition) (National Archives, Pretoria, 2000), 'A Shaft of Darkness: Derrida in the Archive', published in Carolyn Hamilton et al (eds), *Refiguring the Archive* (David Philip, Cape Town, 2002), and 'Something is Happening Here and You Don't Know What it is' (2005).