

The Australian ('Series') System : An Exposition

by

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Precis

In the 1950s and 1960s, the then Commonwealth Archives Office (now Australian Archives) systematised its approach to archival documentation through separation of data about record-keeping and context. This method, in one form or another, has now been adopted in numerous other archives. The pioneering accounts of the system's chief expositor, Peter Scott, necessarily based a theoretical exposition on examples from Australian Archives itself, since no other applications were available.

How the system is applied varies, however, from archives to archives. Some underlying aspects, not always well recognised or articulated in reports of its use, remain constant. This chapter attempts to isolate and describe these characteristic features and to build them into a conceptual model of the system applicable to all its variations.

About the Author

Chris Hurley has a B.A. (Hons) in History (U. of Sydney) and post-graduate diplomas in Education (U. of Sydney), Librarianship (U. of N.S.W.), and Archives (U. of London). He began working in archives in 1971 at the Australian Archives where he was involved at various times in arrangement and description, transfer and disposal, and in the development of the 1983 *Archives Act*. From 1981 to 1990, he was Keeper of Public Records for the State of Victoria where he is currently Chief Archivist. He has served four terms on the Council of the Australian Society of Archivists and has convened both the A.C.T. and Victorian Branches of the Society. He is currently Convener of the ASA's Education Committee.

About the Text

This is the final draft presented by the author for publication in *The Records Continuum : Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years* edited by Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott (Melbourne, Ancora Press in association with Australian Archives, 1994). It varies slightly from the edited text which appeared in that volume when published. Naturally, there are many things that would be different if it were written today but they are mainly matters of emphasis, terminology, and expression. This version remains as written with the single exception of Figure Five where the opportunity has been taken to revise the terminology to bring it more in line with later thinking. Since it has been cited a number of times from the original publication, the pagination used in published form is shown here by use of square brackets to indicate where, in the original text, a new page begins – e.g. [351] indicates that what follows is on p.351 – but readers of the on-line version need to be aware that there may be minor differences with the printed text.

This was the first time I had been asked to explain the System in writing to an

audience that I couldn't see. I was, by now, aware that, despite what we had taken to be the perfect clarity of Peter Scott's explanations, many readers simply didn't "get it". This was not a case of their understanding what Peter was saying and disagreeing with it – though it often came out that way – but of critics who (we thought) misapprehended what they had read or heard. We couldn't understand why, but it was clear that such misapprehensions existed. Terry Cook, for one, assured us it was so. I worried that there was nothing more I could think of to say to dispel those misapprehensions. Fifteen years later, I now know that for some people they may never be dispelled and I have ceased to trouble myself about it. I now believe that it is not about explaining a solution to an uncomprehending audience, but about agreeing on the problem. Until archivists have a problem with description, the solution offered by the System is not only unappealing it is incomprehensible and unnecessary – rather like the concept of standard time to a villager who never had to catch a train. No amount of exposition, however skilful, can deliver understanding until the problems of **not** doing it this way have been understood.

I was also troubled by the fact that, by now, I had moved out of Australian Archives (as it then was) and applied the System in another environment altogether – one in which the implementations I had learned from Peter needed to be modified or expanded. In other words, I could not simply recount the System as applied by Scott himself – and as I had learnt it from him. I had to take my first steps in applying his ideas (or, rather the ideas expounded by him for I had to explain in this article that he is not solely responsible) while at the same time demonstrating how they can be given different application and developed to cover new ground. This required talking a step back and identifying the underlying principles, while abandoning and even rejecting some of Scott's own applications and developing new ones he had not sanctioned. I did this by adopting the collective (rather than the royal) plural and ascribing new ideas to a community which had inherited the guardianship of the System.

The System has been the vehicle for much collaborative and fruitful thinking. We never checked back with Peter (at least I didn't) to see if he approved the use we were making of the ideas. For me, that never mattered. I was sure we were being true to the conception – regardless of whether Peter himself approved or not. I like to think, though, that he would not condemn the use we have made of the System in his absence.

The Australian ('Series') System : An Exposition

In the broadest sense [Peter Scott] achieved two things. First he provided the final building block in progress towards 'integrated current and ... intermediate' records management Secondly the solution to our long-standing problem of arranging and describing the archives produced under the increasingly fluid administrative arrangements of the Government Peter would agree that his 'flash of genius' occurred in the climate of a long-standing pursuit of 'ideal' classificatory techniques for records which Keith Penny and I had been pursuing ever since the Schellenberg seminars in 1954 I do not know how long Peter savoured his insight before explaining it to Keith Penny, or how long then elapsed before Keith burst through my office door; but on hearing the proposition, not a minute elapsed before I stated 'that's it' or words to that effect, and from then on, whatever the problems that still lay ahead that was it. As Keith and I both recognized, this approach preserved the *essence* of the two basic principles of provenance and respect for original order, but varied the priorities of use for 'classificatory' purposes¹

[150] The story of the search for a satisfactory way of documenting records which culminated in Maclean's triumphant cry is still buried in the files of Australian Archives. I will not attempt to tell that story - still less to rehearse or update the arguments, already expounded by Scott and others, for preferring the technique.

Recent (increasingly complimentary) attention from overseas has been mingled with what appear to be misapprehensions about the way the technique is applied. It has been represented to us that this is because too little has been published by Australians about the Australian system -

It is clear that those in North America working on descriptive standards, and especially on defining the archival fonds as a replacement for the cumbersome record group, have certain misconceptions about Scott's legacy and the Australian system. The series system may be its name, but the notion that Australian descriptive practice is unduly minimalist in ignoring the wider context of creation 'above' the series level, or inter-series, is simply wrong.²

Scott described the Australian system as it was developed and applied within the Australian Archives. I shall here present a conceptual model³ independent of (but, I hope, comprehending) varying applications of the system currently in use.

Background : The Search for an 'Ideal' Classificatory Technique

[151] The Australian system (the system) cannot simply be understood, however, as just another way of describing records. For its practitioners, it is part and parcel of, and in important ways an emanation from, an approach to (philosophy of) archives. Since the time when the profession here was being, in effect, invented following World War II, there has been widespread (though not universal) adherence to the proposition that

.... archival science provides the pivot for efficient and effective management of the continuum of the records of an institution To preserve the continuum, the archivist needs to be involved in the ongoing management of recorded information⁴

A sense of the need for that involvement beginning with 'progress towards 'integrated current and ... intermediate' records management has permeated successive generations of Australian archivists who, like Maclean, have seen the system as the building block for integrated information management.

Consistent with this view is a rejection of a purely custodial approach to archival description. Although it would be incorrect to say that Australian archivists have long

anticipated all the current trends in post-custodial documentation theory, we have eagerly embraced them because they fit so well our own long-standing commitment to integrated records management.

Central to this commitment is the idea that records description must be capable of dealing with all records, at any stage in the records continuum, not just an archival remnant which has passed out of current use. Classificatory techniques focussing on 'holdings' which cannot practically be employed until, to paraphrase one of the system's native critics, the 'archival dust has settled'⁵ are not suitable because they effectively place a barrier between the archivist and the 'ongoing management of recorded information'.

Archival arrangements were formalised within the Commonwealth of Australia less than 50 years after its formation. Apart from a few 'ancient' records inherited from the pre-federation colonies, the Archives dealt only with recent records. Their holdings had all the characteristics of intermediate records : frequent transfers and recalls, fluctuations in ownership, changes in provenance. The organisation could be unkindly characterised as 'a collection of record centres in search of an archives'⁶.

For obvious practical reasons, therefore, it was necessary to classify and describe records in a manner which allowed for continuing and sometimes frequent changes in status (whether of location, arrangement and record-keeping system, or provenance and control). There simply were no archives in the old-fashioned sense (a stable, finite, physical body of records held outside the continuum) to be described. What developed was a system which could be applied to any records, regardless of custody or location, from the moment of creation and throughout the continuum, which would also reflect both past and future changes in status (provenance and control) and record-keeping system.

[152] Similar needs are now being recognised in the treatment of electronic records, but there was an older model to look to for inspiration. In nineteenth century top-numbering and succeeding paper filing systems there was also a loss of physicality which is 'documented' in associated registers and indexes⁷ (control records). Each record gets a number which has no purpose other than identification. Associated records are not brought together physically by author or subject. These links are found by consulting the control records. The control records also show changes in physical arrangement (top-numbering) made during subsequent transactions and shifts in provenance or control.

These top-numbering techniques, which evolved into annual-single number filing systems, provide the pattern for the Australian system⁸. By applying sound records management practices, the system was able to document ideas about records independently of the physical survival of the manifestations of those ideas⁹.

The meaning of archival information comes from knowledge of (ideas about) -

- where the information came from, when, and how it has been kept and maintained (**knowledge of record-keeping system**)
- who acquired it, who kept it, who used it and their records-related activities (**knowledge of context**).

We now see (in the light of our experience of electronic records) that information outlasts its associations with context and record-keeping system. The system was developed to address earlier manifestations of this same problem. Persons die and bequeath their records. Corporations change, evolve, merge and are abolished. Functions and activities are born, develop, and die out. Record-keeping systems adapt and evolve, often in response to contextual change. To paraphrase Scott on the problems of relating Series to Record Groups -

.... the central problem arises from the fact that the lifespan of the [record-keeping system] and that of its [context] are not necessarily coextensive.¹⁰

The system solved that problem by identifying and separately documenting -

- (1) the processes for making, storing and accessing records and for maintaining the record-keeping system (**records control**), and
- (2) provenance and ownership as well as the larger organisational, familial, or social `ambience' in which records-creators, records-keepers, and records-users function (**context control**).

It is the completeness¹¹ with which the system demands a separation of data into different descriptive entities for record-keeping and context (and the concomitant process of establishing complex inter-relationships in the space between them) - see **Figure One** - which distinguishes it from other systems.

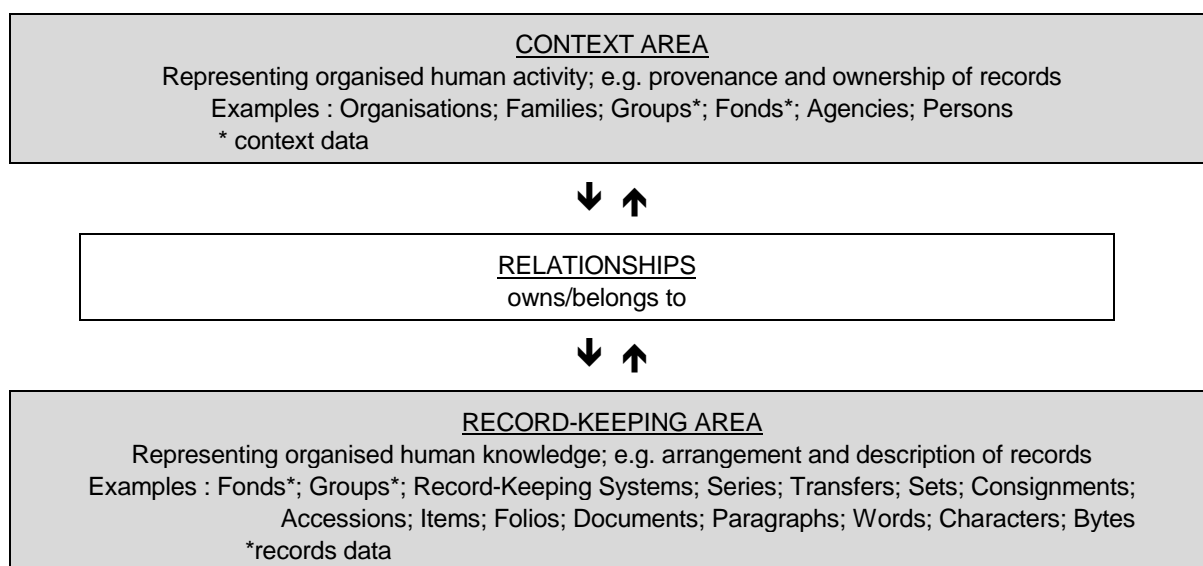


Figure One

In the past, transmutations of record-keeping and context have occurred by slow, if inexorable, progression which often left intact part at least of the physical evidence of the lost or mutated record-keeping systems and the contextual associations of records the `preservation' of which (through the unbroken chain of custody) has been described as a primary archival duty. With electronic records, we now have a loss of physical evidence which is practically simultaneous with records-creation. For records to have meaning, knowledge of record-keeping and context must be able to survive when the physical characteristics which embody and evidence that knowledge do not. The system provides a methodology for `preserving' record-keeping and contextual associations by linking archival information to documentary representations of record-keeping and context which no longer physically exist (or will not survive) or which

never had physical existence¹². David Bearman, if I understand him correctly, has called this process 'documenting documentation'¹³.

The world provides us with dozens (even hundreds) of possible descriptive entities to choose from¹⁴. The choice is ours. A **document**, for example, is part of a **file** (containing numerous documents). Each document comprises text made up of paragraphs, sentences, words, characters and may be of several formats (outgoing letter, memorandum, incoming letter). Each file belongs to a **series** (or, successively, to several series) which is part of a **record-keeping system** (or, successively, several record-keeping systems). Records are made by **persons** or **corporations**, used by them, added to by them, owned by them, possessed by them, and controlled by them (or their successors).

As we shall see, the system uses the accurate depiction of changing relationships between descriptive entities as the preferred method for documenting record-keeping and context. This being so, the entities we choose to document must be well conceived and consistently drawn¹⁵. Scott has given us the cogent and spirited arguments which led Australian Archives (AA) to prefer the series. In the end, however, neither the series (nor any other conceptually satisfactory descriptive entity) should be seen as the **only** possibility.

It is indeed 'simply wrong' if anyone supposes that the system has focussed on the series to the exclusion of others. It is also bemusing because, within Australia, the most frequently voiced criticism of the system is that **too much** effort is put into documenting context. Researchers complain that the volume and complexity of contextual documentation raises barriers to *getting at* the records; archivists complain that it is *wasteful* to spend so much time on administrative history and context at the expense of *working on the records themselves*.

Another misapprehension which may have arisen is that the descriptive entities in the literature (organisations, groups, agencies, and series) - which are the primary points of data capture - are the only products of the system. Once these entities and (critically) the relationships between them have been documented, compounds of the data thus captured can be generated to produce 'descriptions' which look much like traditional finding aids -

The description of the twin separate but interconnected streams of agency description or biographical note on the one hand and the series description on the other, permits a richer reconstruction of provenance than many practices followed or proposed in North America.¹⁶

Described by Scott as *Inventories*, in a pre-computerised environment these were manually compiled listings aggregating data about one kind of relationship between descriptive entities : all the series created by the same agency, for example, or all the series currently owned (or controlled) by the same agency.

In some respects, the system was born twenty years too early. Its practical applications still suffer from its pre-computer genesis. Too often the outputs still look too much like the inputs. When it was devised, output was generated by photocopying vast quantities of input documentation many times and then inter-filing the resulting duplicates into various assortments. Only now are we truly beginning to conceptualise and generate outputs which are products of the data captured and not just mis-shapen

variants of it.

In the Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV), for example, registration documentation (input on descriptive entities) has been for many years banished from the search rooms. It has been replaced by enhanced inventories which draw together *both* context and records data into an integrated statement which bears no direct correlation with any single input document. See **Figure Six**.

Entities and Their Attributes

Even where a relationship between record-keeping and context is stable (e.g. where records have only one creator) the two are logically separate - otherwise the equally common case (records produced successively by more than one creator) would be conceptually impossible. These differences must be observed when documenting attributes. Thus, two date ranges which appear to be identical (creator : 1914-1953 and records : 1914-1953) in fact mean quite different things because the one represents the start and end of existence of a records-creator whereas the other (covering the same span of years) dates the process of records-keeping. Each attribute relates not just to a different descriptive entity, but to a different idea about each entity : beginning and end of a records-creator, beginning and end of a process of records-creation. The fact that they are an identical number of years is coincidence; they could easily be (and often are) different.

In Scott's classic exposition of the system¹⁷, the two areas identified above were further subdivided. The context area was divided into 'four basic elements' (entities) : organisation, agency, family, person¹⁸. Although the divide between different kinds of context is not as clear cut as that between context and record-keeping, lower level context entities had one characteristic that set them apart from the higher level entities to which they belonged - viz. lower level entities create, maintain, use, control, or dispose of records, higher level ones do not.

In the 1966 outline, this was absolutely true. 'Organisations' and 'Families' are not records-creating entities. They are descriptions of the administrative or familial structures or groupings to which records-creating entities (agencies and persons) belong. Neither an organisation nor a family was ever shown in AA's application of the system as the creator of records. After nearly thirty years, it is now much clearer that records-creation is only one aspect of provenance. The system's early concentration on documenting successive phases in creation introduced the idea of 'multiple-provenance'. To this was added a second kind of relationship : 'control' (to describe ownership and disposition of a defunct agency's records by its successor). It is now clear that contextual entities may be of very many different kinds and that the relationship each has with various records entities is manifold. We are still thinking through (and in many ways only just beginning to realise) how much further ideas about context and provenance must go beyond mere records-creation.

For the purposes of this discussion I have identified two different kinds of context entities : provenance (for persons and corporations who create, maintain, use, control, or dispose of records) and ambience¹⁹ (for entities, such as organisations and families, which associate provenance entities with administrative structures, families, functional or juridical responsibilities). See **Figure Two**.

Separation, within the context area, of provenance and ambience is now a standard feature of the system. Australian Archives groups provenance entities, within its largest ambient entity (the Commonwealth of Australia), by a device. Each provenance entity is related to the central department(s) which was/were subject to the same responsible minister (when showing a superior/subordinate relationship between two corporations, the superior corporations acts as an ambient entity, not as a provenance entity). The Public Record Office of Victoria has gone further and established portfolio-based ambient entities (waggishly called record groups)²⁰ as a feature of their application of the system, augmented by other 'groupings' of agencies such as municipalities, courts, hospitals.

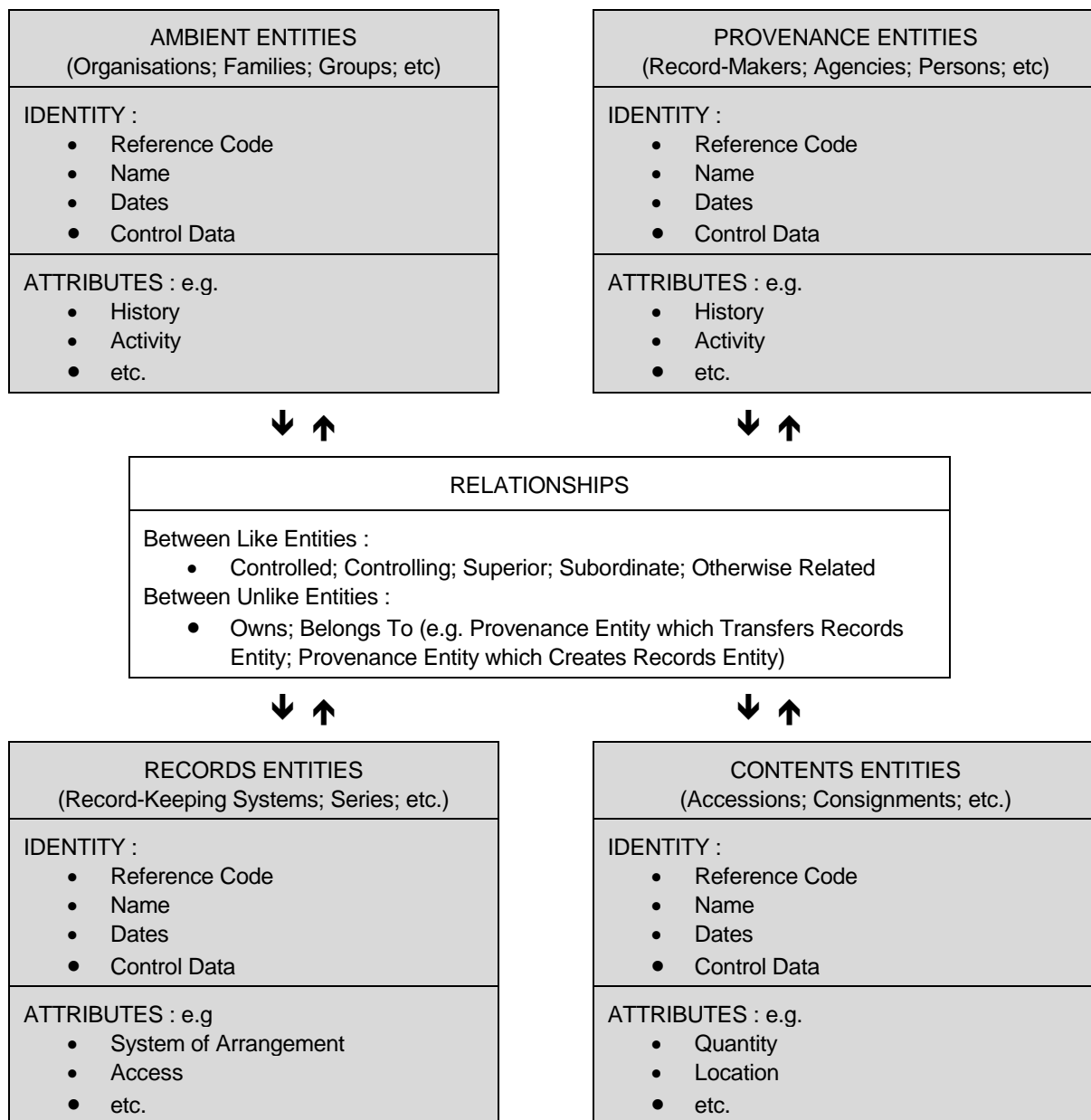


Figure Two

AA's organisations and PROV's record groups are both essentially structural. They are based on and reflect the identification and description of arrangements for the administration of the agencies which belong to them. Scott's justification for ambient

entities in his 1966 article²¹ was the existence within AA of records inherited from other jurisdictions - hence the need to distinguish, within the archives of the Commonwealth of Australia, records of non-Commonwealth origin.

A manageable number of ambient entities is a simple convenience for any archival documentation programme which has to deal with numerous provenance entities. At PROV, it was concluded that with up to 10,000 provenance entities (agencies), it would be convenient to have about 100-200 ambient entities (record groups) to present a comprehensible picture of the whole structure being documented.

It is clear that for reasons of internal control and retrieval, small archival programmes may have no need for ambience. An in-house archives in a small organisation may need only one ambient entity (or none). Indeed, it appears that a majority of the system's users currently employ no ambient entity and use provenance entities only²². When dealing with high level context, however, it is necessary to consider issues wider than the self-perceived needs of each archival programme.

'Department of Trade and Customs' means something as a provenance title within AA's documentation programme. On a broader scale, however, it is meaningless. Victoria, in the 19th century, also had its Department of Trade and Customs. As well as serving the internal needs of each archival documentation programme, it is ambient entities, above all, which are crucial to the development of any national documentation programme. Reference codes (CA 1234 for the Commonwealth Department and VA 9876 for the Victorian) are meaningless. Such codes indicate who documented the provenance entity, not where it belongs administratively and (critically) not whether it is the same as another documented entity with the same name. That can only be known by associating each provenance entity with related provenance entities within its correct ambient entity(ies).

As part of any national plan for archival documentation, therefore, a desirable step will be the development of a process for establishing and controlling ambient entities. I have argued elsewhere that it is the single most important step in moving towards standardisation²³. Nationally agreed ambient entities (and there is no reason why they should not ultimately be global) could serve the purposes of standardisation and information exchange by providing a universal context statement which no one programme can ever provide. Such a proposal, intelligently conceived and resolutely executed, might put a characteristically antipodean spin on the notion of a 'total archives'.

Even a small in-house programme, therefore, may need to provide for ambience - not to meet its internal needs but as part of a national (or international) endeavour. In the meantime, each archives - at the upper reaches of the context spectrum - has to make do with ambient entities of its own devising to meet its own perceived needs. Where there is no structural unity to the provenance entities being documented, ambient entities based on jurisdiction are possible. A collecting archives may divide provenance entities by type (e.g. unions, businesses). Some of PROV's record groups are of this type.

I have recently suggested that functions may be the basis of another type of ambient

entity²⁴. Functions which are treated, not simply as attributes of an entity or as the basis for a vocabulary of retrieval, but as ambient entities in their own right must be related to other ambient, provenance, and record-keeping entities. They properly define and differentiate jurisdictional responsibility and activity. The names of such entities when worked into a thesaurus can, conceivably, provide access at any level and thus afford the nearest that archivists may ever get to something like a subject approach - one which is based on provenance. At least two archives using the system (the Public Record Office of Victoria and the City of Sydney) has begun experimenting with this.

Just as the context control area can be sub-divided, so can the record-keeping area. In his 1966 article, Scott barely touched on this. He then divided record-keeping into series (which I shall call records entities for the purposes of this model) and into items (e.g. files, volumes, cards), documents (e.g. folios in a file), and 'information'. These latter, which are extensively used to physically control records, I have called contents entities²⁵. See **Figure Two**.

Contents entities are typically used for physical transfer, accessioning, and repository control purposes. Possibilities include :

- a transfer (that portion of records which is uplifted as one);
- an accession (that portion of records which is receipted as one);
- a consignment (that portion of records which is treated as one²⁶);
- an item (that portion of records the record-keeping system creates as one);

and, more narrowly :

- a document (each complete transactional record);
- a folio (each physical membrane making up a document);
- a paragraph (each block of text making up a document);
- a word (each meaningful set of characters within a document);
- a character (component parts of a word).

Non-physical categorisations (e.g. disposal class or access category²⁷) are also possible and, when dealing with electronic records, they will proliferate. In an electronic system, for example, each 'view' (i.e. that portion of the data available for display in response to query) might be treated as a contents entity.

Precisely how an entity is defined and described will vary from application to application. The logic of the system does not dictate which descriptive entities to use nor does it prescribe how entities should be defined. The model developed here merely identifies broad categories of descriptive entities which any application of the system will be likely to require. In any given application, archivists will need to build in their own rule base to 'bound' the entities and determine their attributes for the purpose of data capture and subsequent use.

It will be seen, then, that the conceptual model itself imposes no hard and fast 'rules' about how descriptive entities are defined and related. This must be worked into the rule base devised for each application. The model provides a framework within which differing (and even conflicting) applications can be compared and evaluated. Such a process of comparison and evaluation is the path, I believe, towards standardisation - along which we may be able gradually to develop a rule base for common application of the system in several archives.

Choosing Which Entities to Document

Following current practice in the then Commonwealth Archives Office, Scott chose the *record series* as the preferred descriptive entity for records and called the records-creating entity an *agency*. Scott's own writings deal extensively with both *series* and *agencies*, arguing the case for a separation of records and context, the manner in which they behave, and the style in which they should be documented.

In particular, Scott argued the respective merits of the *series* over broader or narrower alternatives. There is no particular reason, however, why the conceptual model here described cannot be applied using different descriptive entities so long as the basic methodology is observed. Use of the series as the preferred records entity is not, in other words, essential when applying the system - hence my use here of 'Australian system' in preference to 'series' system.

In a recent article²⁸, David Bearman has argued the advantages of the record-keeping system as a preferred focus for records control. Though Scott referred several times to the record-keeping system, he consistently argued the strengths of the series as the preferred records entity. Without departing from the conceptual model, archivists applying the system can thus build in their own rule base to 'bound' the entities and determine their attributes for data capture. Either system or series (and possibly both) can be used in alternatives applications of the method - see **Figure Three**.

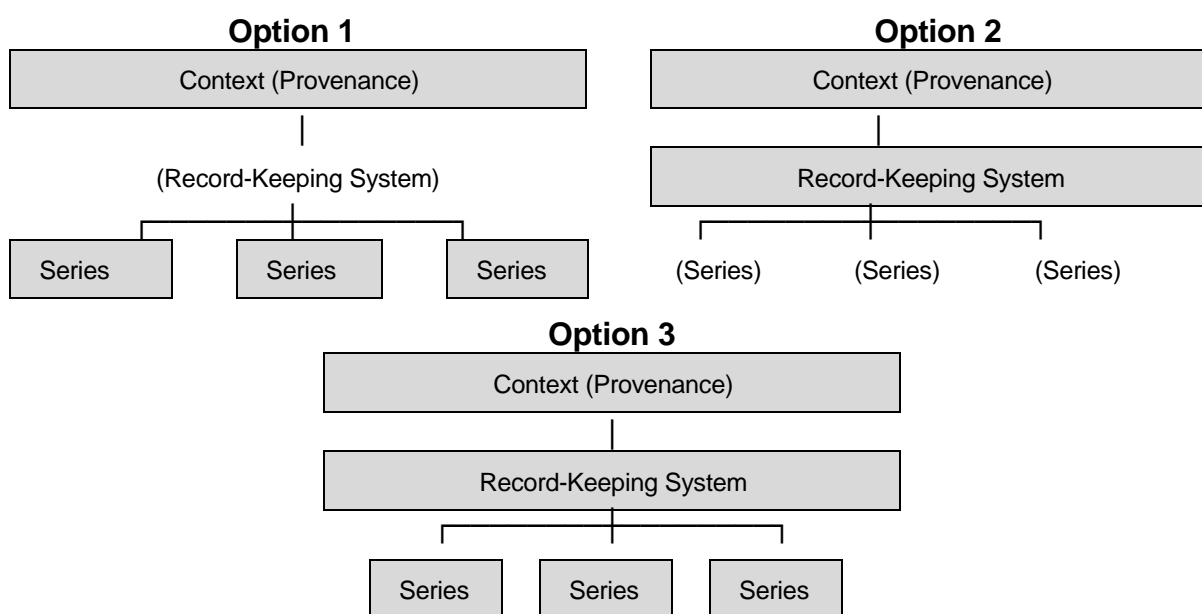


Figure Three

In Option 1, the record-keeping system must be depicted by showing relationships between series belonging to the same record-keeping system because the record-keeping system is not identified as a descriptive entity. Alternatively, the record-keeping system is shown in Option 2 as an entity in which case series must be depicted as attributes of (or as lower level entities below) the record-keeping system. Perhaps it is possible (though it might not be worthwhile) to show both record-keeping system and series as entities (Option 3). Initial reaction amongst some Australian practitioners has been to continue to prefer the series (Option 1) when dealing with

paper records, while keeping an open mind on Option 2 when dealing with electronic records.

Locating the records entity at the series level is not essential. This is not to say that it is a matter of indifference. Debate over which to prefer and why lies at the heart of our professional life. The model is not designed to focus on one right answer. In conceptual terms, both series and record-keeping system works because they both consist entirely of record-keeping attributes, unlike Record Groups or *Fonds* which, by their nature, have attributes drawn from context.

The more that another system follows the path of separating data about context from data about record-keeping (even if it fails to use the series as its preferred descriptive entity) the closer it will be to the Australian system. Logically, though there would be great practical difficulty in doing so, there is no reason why even high level record-keeping entities such as the *Fonds* could not be employed provided data about context were separated into a different entity : i.e. there would be two co-extensive entities - the record-keeping *Fonds* and the context *Fonds* - neither of which could, of course, be expected to be physically complete when dealing with records of any complexity.

As users of the system have become more familiar with its ways, they have become less concerned about whether the entity being described is a 'true' series in the technical sense. Nowadays, several series may be grouped together for convenience and documented as a single descriptive entity - provided they behave collectively in the same manner as a single entity (series). We are now less concerned with whether the records being described are in all cases a true series than with describing as a series any body of records which our experience tells us will behave as a series would behave and would have the same kind of attributes²⁹.

In the same way, there is room for debate over what constitutes a records-creating entity (agency). Are the separate branches of a government department to be treated as records-creating agencies in their own right or as component divisions of the parent agency? Long experience of applying the system has taught us that there is no satisfactory answer to that question posed in that way. It will depend on a number of variables which alter cases - chiefly whether the 'sub-agencies' had their own history, what administrative structures join each with its parent(s), and what kinds of records each kept³⁰.

The system does not provide answers to questions like : what is a series and what is an agency? Archivists applying the system may develop different rules on these and like questions and still be operating within the conceptual framework which the system provides.

Rules for establishing what is a series and what is an agency are necessarily still evolving. Australian practice is based on the fairly narrow experience of a relatively small number of archives in this country, limited to administration (chiefly government) and record-keeping inherited from the British and operating during the 19th and 20th centuries. Common sense tells us there is much we don't know about how the system must be adapted if it is to be applied to different experiences of human activity. Even

our limited experience suggests that application of the system in different environments will require substantial modifications to the precise rules which have so far been developed here and currently govern our identification and description of entities. Growing overseas interest in the system promises an exciting future in which its application to other records-making environments will throw up problems with which we have not had to deal.

Application of the system to early nineteenth century administration reveals (not surprisingly) that the kind of administrative structures used in the eighteenth century and the early 1800's follow a very different behaviour pattern from late 19th century and 20th century administration. This requires changes to the rules developed for dealing with context entities from the later period. No doubt, the opportunity (so far denied us) to deal with mediaeval and non-European structures would necessitate even more radical revision of the rule base. Similar issues arise from the challenge of documenting electronic records.

Maclean, Penny, and Scott did not discover the series. It was then, and remains, an element used in other documentation systems. Using the series as a descriptive entity is not a defining (or even necessary) characteristic of the system. This is why 'series system' is not a good name for it. A better hallmark is the use of at least two descriptive entities : one on either side of the intersection between context and record-keeping. The system, thus defined, meets the traditional requirements of archival description by making relationships across that intersection (pre-eminently, between records and records-maker). As we adapt the system to new and less familiar tasks to which, it seems likely, it will have to be applied, other kinds of entities and other kinds of relationships are possible, even desirable.

These are important questions which pose significant challenges and will lead progressively to changes to the way the system is applied. But the challenge (so far at any rate) has been to the application of the system - not to the conceptual model itself. We may dispute the boundaries of the descriptive entities and their attributes. We may quarrel over which entities to prefer. Those disputes occur within the framework of applying a methodology which confirms every day the advantages of continuing to use different descriptive entities (whatever their makeup may be) for context and record-keeping data.

Relationships

Some critics of the system suppose (wrongly) that the attributes of the larger 'lost' entities, ones which aggregate characteristics of both records and provenance, are dispensed with. The answer to such critics is that those attributes are not lost; they are preserved most lovingly at the very heart of the system. We call them relationships.

What, it may reasonably be asked, apart from an inordinate desire to break down structures into their component parts, is the purpose of our analysis? As readers of Scott will understand, the analysis set out in Figure Two represents a possible segmentation of data about record-keeping and context into descriptive entities which can be used to document both records and context as they exist in a single moment of time. Figure Two represents a 'spatial' analysis of descriptive entities and their

possible relationship to one another.

The other dynamic aspect of such relationships is that they exist also in time. Relationships between entities must be shown in both space and time. In order to show changing relationships **through** time, it is necessary first to document each phase in the changing relationship **synchronically**³¹ - to use the term borrowed from linguistics which Peter Scott (himself a trained linguist) preferred. As Scott pointed out in his 1966 article, it is the temporal more than the spatial dimension which requires a break-down of data used to control context and record-keeping into successive entities. For a diagrammatic representation of how temporal changes in relationships are documented see **Figure Four**³².

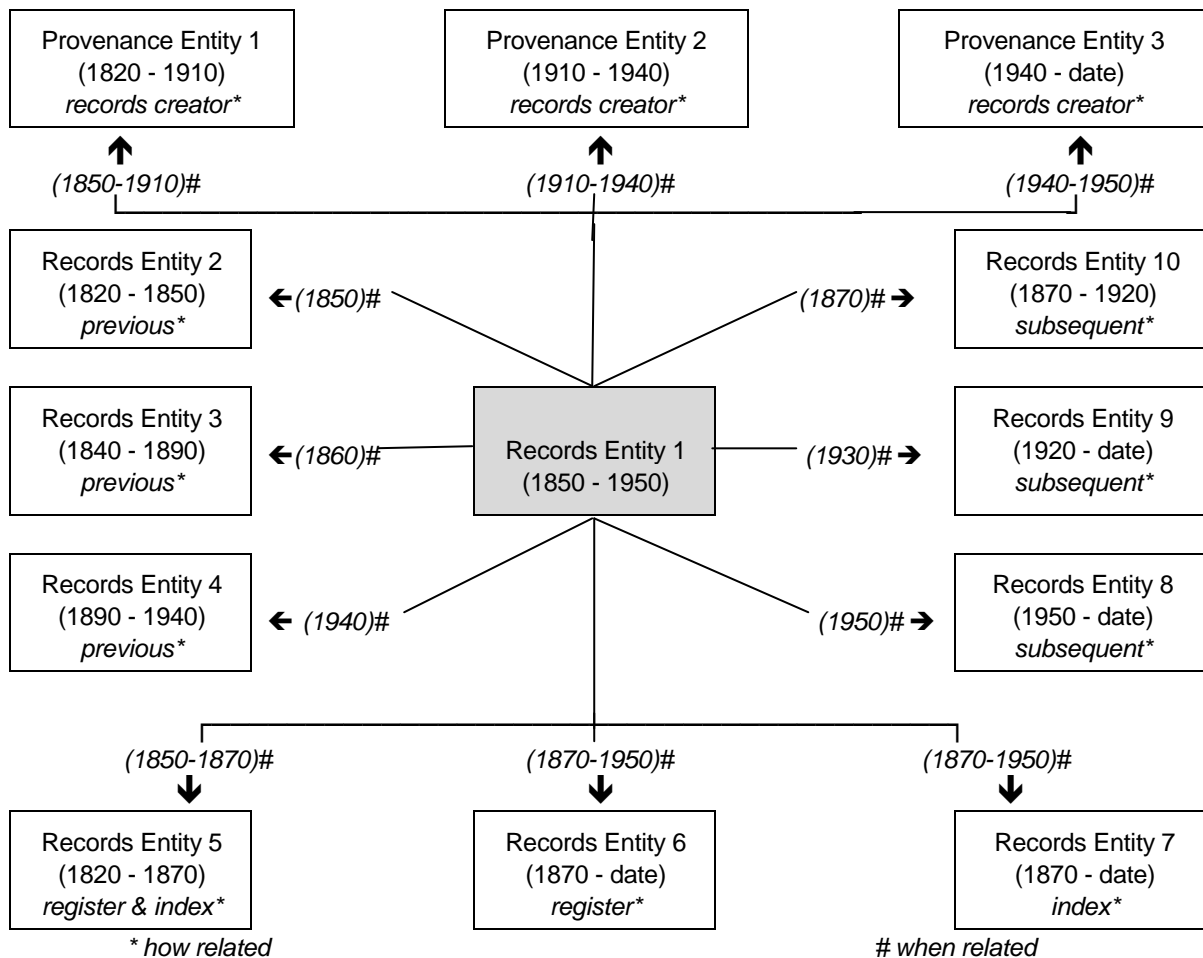


Figure Four

The power of the synchronic approach (and herein lies its chief advantage over the alternatives) is that it allows a complex knot of relationships to be untangled by the simple device of documenting each set of relationships from the point of view (successively) of a single descriptive entity. An accurate reconstruction of the original whole from any point of view is then possible. The same result cannot be achieved by attempting to document relational change within an entity.

Of each relationship, it is necessary to ask : how related and when related? It is data about the how and the when of relationships that enables complex and detailed statements about record-keeping and context to be (re)constructed. Other attributes

(date, content, purpose) tell us little about contextual and record-keeping qualities. By documenting relationships carefully, we are able to say more than it is possible to describe by merely associating like entities in a common category or ascribing a common characteristic.

To put the matter at its simplest, it is the difference between being able to say that `Jack and Jill are uncle and niece'³³ instead of `Jack and Jill belong to the same family'³⁴. Critics will reply that both are simple statements and that the first can be made from the point of view of the family just as easily as from the point of view of Jack and Jill independently. Suppose, however, that Jack and Jill became involved in the kind of murky matrimonial tangles the Habsburgs undertook in the 17th century. Then, Jack and Jill might be successively -

- uncle and niece : from 1660 to 1680
- brother- and sister-in-law : from 1680 to 1683
- husband and wife : from 1683 to 1689
- deceased and widow : from 1689 to 1702.

This is to say nothing of the relationships each would have, by both blood and marriage, with other individuals, nor with offices held. If Jack was King of Spain, then Jack and Jill were Rulers of Spain from 1683 to 1689, but the Rulers of Spain from 1680 to 1689 were Jack, Jill, and Jill's sister. Complexity of this order is best depicted synchronically.

Some archivists find refuge in the belief that while hapless colleagues must grapple with these complexities, `my archives' (a characteristically custodial phrase) are happily free of them. It is a delusion. Robinson Crusoe's records might be that simple (though I think the proposition is debateable) but not many others. Unless you squint and take a narrow, limited, parochial view, all archives belong to a complex, rich, and dense contextual background - personal, social, organisational, national, and (ultimately) global - which most archival programmes (including those in Australia) have not yet begun to document more than superficially.

Relationships Have Outcomes

In order to divert the pirates' unwelcome nuptial attentions away from his daughters, Major-General Stanley appeals to their tender natures by claiming (falsely) to be an orphan. In the second Act, he is overtaken by remorse -

Scene. A Ruined Chapel by Moonlight ... General Stanley discovered seated pensively ...
GEN. ... I come here to humble myself before the tombs of my ancestors, and to implore their pardon for having brought dishonour on the family escutcheon.
FRED. But you forget, sir, you only bought the property a year ago, and the stucco in your baronial hall is scarcely dry.
GEN. Frederic, in this chapel are ancestors; you cannot deny that. With the estate, I bought the chapel and its contents. I don't know whose ancestors they *were*, but I know whose ancestors they *are*, and I shudder to think that their descendant by purchase (if I may so describe myself) should have brought disgrace upon what, I have no doubt, was an unstained escutcheon.³⁵

As the General thus so aptly reminds us, it is impossible to be too nice when depicting relationships between entities. **Figure Five** illustrates how relationships are documented at all levels of the system. No single application is likely to utilise all of the logical possibilities which this model reveals because it will not be necessary in

terms of what it is trying to achieve (its `functional requirements'³⁶) and because it would not be practical in terms of the resources available to most of us.

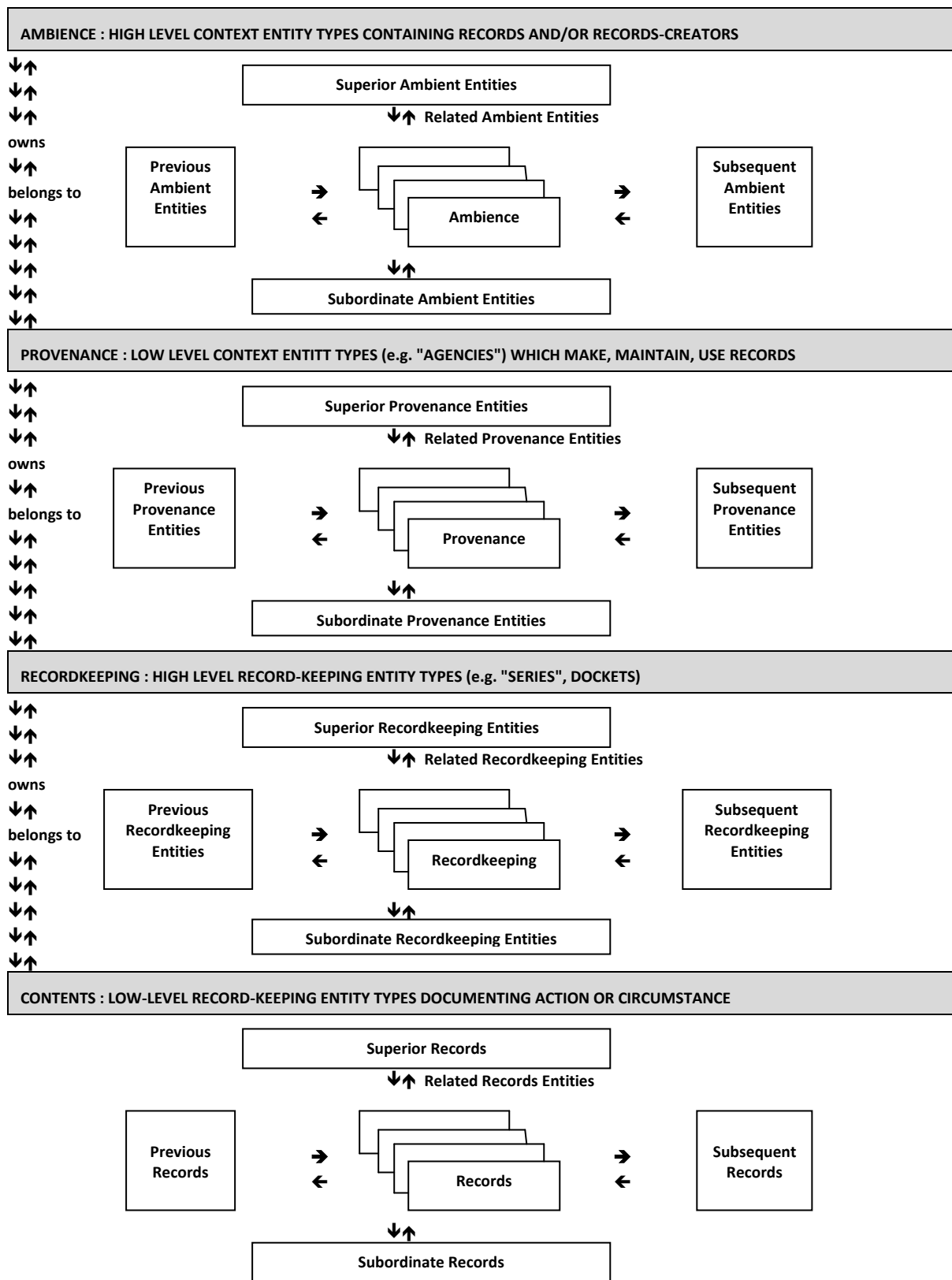


Figure Five

What the model provides is a conceptual framework within which particular

applications will document those attributes and relationships necessary to meet the information demands upon it³⁷.

I suspect that Peter Scott came to regret the use of the word 'abandonment' in his seminal 1966 article. He sometimes spoke wistfully of how we had not lost the *Fonds* as critics supposed but recreated it 'on paper' using our Inventories and other products of the system. Certainly the opening words of his series of articles (in collaboration with others) from 1978 to 1981 indicate that by then he felt the need for a corrective statement -

As archivists we regard *respect des fonds* as one of our cardinal principles of arrangement. By this we accept that records and archives derive much of their meaning and value from the administrative (or other) context in which they were originally created; furthermore we maintain that preservation of the association between archives and their original historic context is vital to a full and proper understanding of the evidence and information which they contain.³⁸

It is the products of the system - combining data about related entities into a single statement - which provide 'the full and proper understanding of the evidence and information which [records] contain'. The attributes of an entity (and its relationships with other entities) are contingent upon both its definition and the descriptive methods we apply; so it is important to choose useful entities to document and to apply sound methodology. It is by accurately and faithfully depicting relationships 'from the administrative (or other) context in which [records] were originally created' that we fulfil our great twin mandate to maintain order and provenance. Good definition and sound methodology derive ultimately from understanding the needs of users of archives (archivists, researchers, records-creators and owners, 'society' and, ultimately, posterity). We hold that the 'cardinal principles of arrangement' represent our best endeavour to satisfy those needs, through -

a process the objective of which is to construct a value-added representation of archives, by means of strategic information capture and recording into carefully structured data and information access systems, as a mechanism to satisfy the information needs of users³⁹

The system allows us to '(re)construct' almost any conceivable combination of data. Certainly, as Scott predicted, it seems likely that any of the notions of *Fonds* currently being posited in the North American debate could have its 'Australian' counterpart - provided always that its component entities have been properly conceived and accurately documented in accordance with correct archival principles. Any 'identified information need' can be satisfied (if it is anticipated) by carefully structuring useful descriptive entities for capturing needed data and utilising well conceived information access systems.

To return to the family relationships of Major-General Stanley, it will be seen that the system can be used to produce not merely an *Inventories of Descendants (Persons)* for each family, but also additional and separate Inventories of descendants by blood, by adoption, and (if need be) by purchase - to say nothing of Inventories of sisters, cousins, aunts, etc. Data about a person may appear on as many Inventories as suit the circumstances of the case without losing knowledge of the precise relationship between any two (or more) individuals. On this principle, any entity which can be imagined or discerned (whichever you prefer) can be documented, using the system, at least as completely - and we would say more accurately and unambiguously - than with any other methodology.

Products of the system, it should be noted, do not have to follow the principle of data separation between context and record-keeping. A *Fonds*, or any other product combining characteristics of both, can be generated from the process of data collection thus far described.

Inventory of Series

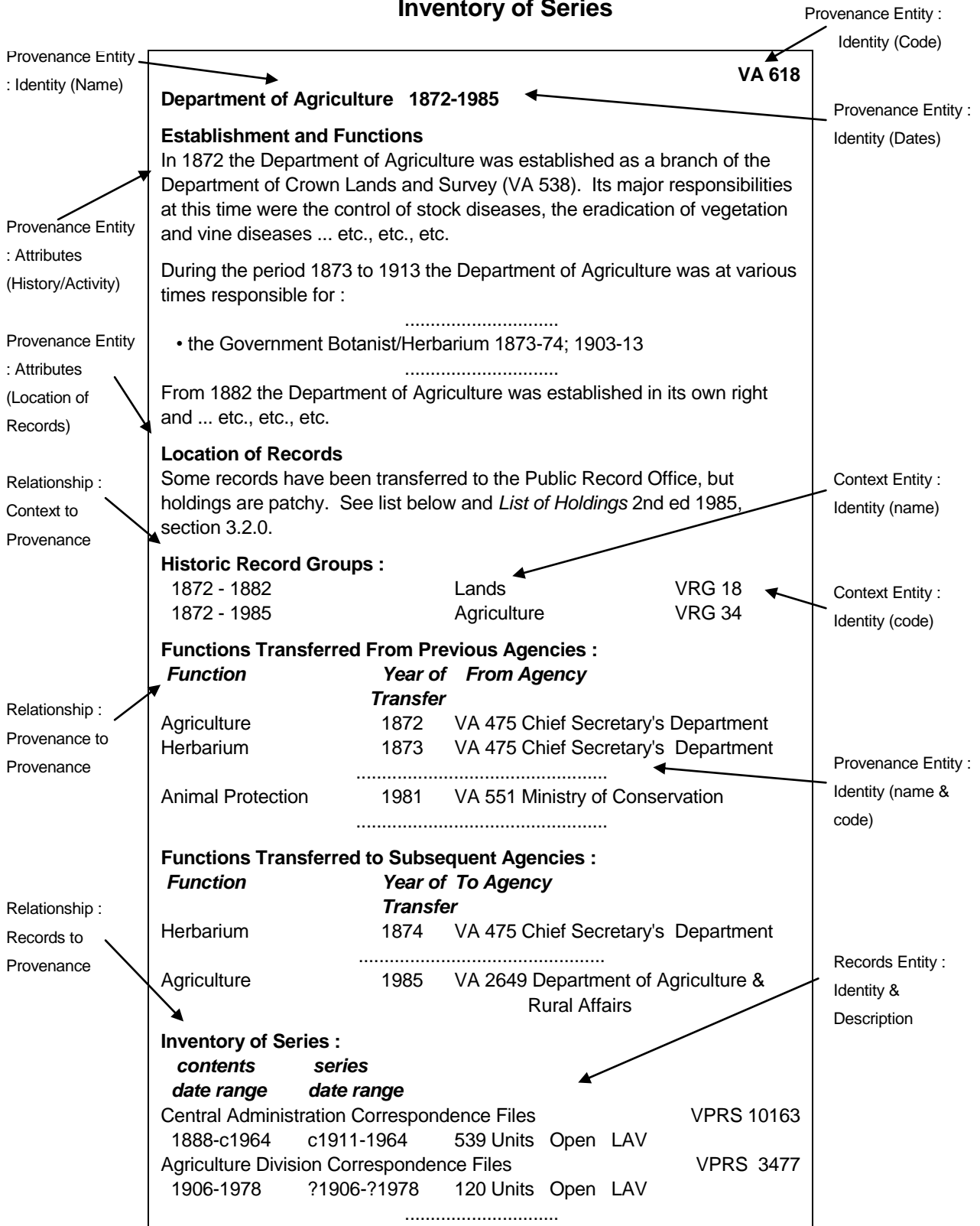


Figure Six

Strictly, since the system can be regarded as a kind of relational data base, it has no 'products' - on the principle that a particular view of the data is created not upon capture but in response to user query.

My colleague, Sue McKemmish⁴⁰, will describe, in her contribution to this volume, products of the system which have been developed at the intersection of ambience and provenance. The best example of products which cross the boundary between provenance and records is still the *Inventory of Series* (for an Agency) which remains the staple of finding aids produced by archives using the system. An example is shown in **Figure Six**.

The archivist's skill lies in documenting the attributes and relationships necessary in order to permit views of the data which satisfy user demand. One such view, of course, is the *Fonds*. The real test of the system's archival integrity, in my opinion, insofar as that can be judged by its success in 'preserving' the *Fonds*, is not whether such an entity is used for the purposes of data capture, still less whether such a thing is kept physically intact (even if that were possible). The question is whether or not proper 'respect' is shown by designing a system which is capable of generating a *Fonds* (i.e. a documentary representation of a *Fonds*) when called upon to do so⁴¹.

Perhaps this is why Australians are reluctant to be drawn into that great archival grail quest - The Search for the Holy Fonds. Even if those who are questing find what they think they are looking for, it will be (in our terms) not an end, but a beginning. As students of the grail legends will recall, it is a journey towards insight - not one of physical discovery. The object of the search is not something to be unearthed and taken hold of. Seekers must develop in themselves the power to see. When they do, they discover that the object of their quest was there all the time. Even when a *Fonds* is defined (assuming one definition will do), the real quest remains - finding which attributes and relationships to document (and how) so that it will materialise for us.

ENDNOTES

1. Ian Maclean, "Peter Scott" *Archives and Manuscripts* (Vol. 18, No. 1, May 1990), pp. 12-13.
2. Terry Cook "'Down Under' comes out on top [review of Keeping Archives II]" *Archives and Manuscripts* (Vol. 21, No. 2) November, 1993 p.272
3. The model, fully developed in **Figures Two and Five** is adapted from the analysis used by Michael Cook and others in their *Manual of Archival Description (MAD)* - 1986 (with K Grant) and 1989 (with M Procter). The model can, of course, be used for other systems. I use it here only to demonstrate features of the Australian system. See also end-note 36 below.
4. Glenda Acland, "Archivist : Keeper, Undertaker or Auditor : The challenge for traditional archival theory and practice" in *Keeping Data; papers from a workshop on appraising computer-based records* Australian Society of Archivists and the Australian Council of Archives, Sydney, 1991.
5. Gerald 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.
6. Quoted (anonymously) in W Kaye Lamb, *Development of the National Archives ... Sept 1973* Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Paper No. 16 (1974), p. 17.

7. Typically, incoming documents are registered and "docketed" - i.e. folded from top to bottom, tied up in red tape, and filed in a pigeon hole with the registration number showing on the outside edge. When new papers arrive, they too are registered and docketed. The "previous papers" are then folded **inside** the new docket which is filed under the new number. In one sense, the first (top-numbered) docket no longer exists physically because it is now filed with later papers under the new number. It continues to exist logically, however, within the system because the original index and registration entries (showing the new number and usually summarising the contents) still exist.
8. P J Scott, G Finlay, C Smith, "Archives and administrative change : some methods and approaches (part 4) *Archives and Manuscripts* (Vol. 8, No. 2) December 1980, p. 61.
9. P J Scott, "Archives and administrative change : some methods and approaches (part 5) *Archives and Manuscripts* (Vol. 9, No. 1) September 1981, pp. 3-6.
10. Peter J Scott, "The record group concept : a case for abandonment" *American Archivist* (Vol. 29, No. 4) October 1966, pp. 495-496.
11. "From applying such measures to existing multiple-provenance series, it was then but a short step to extend the approach to *all* series, both to those that were single provenance, to those that were already multiple-provenance and to these [sic] that were *potentially* multiple-provenance ..."
Peter Scott, Gail Finlay, Clive Smith, "Archives and administrative change : (part 4)", p. 58.
12. Descriptive entities are most easily understood as documentary representations of physical entities (the description of a file or volume). It is arguable, however, that some entities (and those the most important), such as organisational structure (provenance), function (jurisdiction or competence) and activity, indeed most contextual entities and record-keeping systems (as distinct from their physical components and products), do not (and never have) existed physically. See also end-note 14.
13. David Bearman "Documenting Documentation" *Archivaria* 34 (Summer, 1992), pp. 33-49.
14. As to whether the world really does provide us with our descriptive entities - whether they can, or should, exactly correspond to ('describe') things which actually exist in the real-world - is, of course, a matter of debate. For my purpose here, which is to model how the system handles descriptive entities, it is not necessary to have a view on this. See also end-note 12.
15. "Those things are called relative, which, being either said to be *of* something else or *related to* something else, are explained by reference to that other thing. For instance, the word 'superior' is explained by reference to something else, for it is superiority *over something else* that is meant So it is with everything else of this kind The significance of all these is explained by a reference to something else and in no other way Those terms, then, are called relative, the nature of which is explained by reference to something else, the preposition 'of' or some other preposition being used to indicate the relation Sometimes, however, reciprocity of correlation does not appear to exist. This comes about when a blunder is made, and that to which the relative is related is not accurately stated If the statement is made accurate, the connexion will be reciprocal All relatives, then, if properly defined, have a correlative. I add this condition because, if that to which they are related is stated as haphazard and not accurately, the two are not found to be interdependent if, of two correlatives, one is not correctly termed, then, when all other attributes are removed and that alone is left in virtue of which it was stated to be correlative, the stated correlation will be found to have disappeared Thus it is essential that the correlated terms should be exactly designated When the terminology is thus correct, it is evident that all correlatives are interdependent.
Aristotle, *Organon (Categoriae)* tr. E.M.Edghill ch. 7 (Relation) **6a 36 - 7b 14**.
16. Terry Cook, "'Down under' comes out on top ...", p. 272.
17. Peter J Scott, "The Record Group Concept", pp. 493-504

18. *ibid.*, p. 501
19. I can think of no more satisfactory term to describe that area of context which does not deal with provenance.
20. Helen Smith and Chris Hurley, "Developments in computerised documentation systems at the Public Record Office, Victoria" *Archives and Manuscripts* (Vol. 17, No. 2) November 1989, especially pp. 167-169. Victoria's "Record Groups" are so-named jokingly. Although they come in at somewhere like the same level of documentation activity as Groups or *Fonds*, they are characteristically Australian entities because they contain **only** data about context, no data about records. Unfortunately (and surprisingly), quite a number of people don't see the joke - a salutary reminder that humour and professional dignity do not mix.
21. P J Scott, "The Record Group Concept", pp. 500-501.
22. Australian Archives, *CRS Review Report* (November, 1993) part 13.4 and Table 16.
23. C Hurley, "Standardisation 1987 : a recapitulation" *Archives and Manuscripts* (vol. 18, No. 1) May 1990, especially p. 72.
24. C Hurley, "What, if anything, is a function?" *Archives and Manuscripts* (Vol. 21, No. 2) November 1993, pp. 208-220. Careful readers will also have noted that in this article the wheel has come full circle and that I am positing the creation of an entity which combines **both** context and records data. It should be noted, however, that such an entity, if it is ever used, will be a product of data captured using traditional Australian entities which would begin, at the data capture stage, by rigorously separating the data.
25. It should be noted, however, that 'items' as described by Scott are not truly contents entities. They are described on an Inventory of Items for each series but they do not exist as descriptive entities in their own right. The Inventory of Items is merely an extension of the description of a series, the whole of the data on all of the items being no more than a long-winded description of attributes of the series. To be a true contents entity, an item needs to be documented and then **related** to a series. Most applications do not yet deal with data on items in this way - except for AA's ANGAM II whose coverage at this level is partial.
26. A consignment may be housed intellectually rather than physically - i.e. each item may be controlled by a common consignment code regardless of physical location.
27. A disposal class or access category may, of course, also operate as a supra-records entity. See also P J Scott, C D Smith and G Finlay, "Archives and administrative change : (part 3)", pp. 41-43.
28. David Bearman, "Record keeping systems" *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn, 1993), pp. 16-36.
29. It should be pointed out, however, that so far as I am aware most practitioners of the system of would still use true series most of the time.
30. See Peter Scott, Gail Finlay, Clive Smith. "Archives and administrative change : some methods and approaches (part 3) *Archives and Manuscripts* (Vol. 18, No. 1) June 1980, pp. 46-51 for the traditional AA view.
31. **synchronic** *a.* Describing a subject (esp. a language) as it exists at one point in time (opp. *diachronic*); hence **-ICALLY** *adv.* [f. LL *synchronus* (see SYNCHRONOUS) + **-IC**] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (6th ed.)
32. For an indication of the types and variety of relational changes see -

- P J Scott, C D Smith and G Finlay, "Archives and administrative change : some methods and approaches (part 2) *Archives and Manuscripts* (Vol. 7, No. 4) April 1979, pp. 152-159.
33. Three relationships : Jack \longleftrightarrow Jill; Jack \longleftrightarrow Family; Jill \longleftrightarrow Family.
 34. Two relationships : Jack \longleftrightarrow Family; Jill \longleftrightarrow Family.
 35. W S Gilbert, *The Pirates of Penzance* (1880) Act II.
 36. David Bearman, "Record-Keeping Systems", pp. 27-32.
 37. See also end-note 3, above. It is a measure of how little conceptual thinking has gone on in Australia post-Scott that, even now, it is not clear how those ideas currently in the news (e.g. functions, activities, transactions) should fit into the system. Australian archivists, like their colleagues overseas, have fairly mature ideas about records and provenance. Outside of those areas, in what I have called ambience and contents, there is much more conceptual thinking to be done. The system was considerably in advance of its time, but it needs to be kept up-to-date.
 38. P J Scott and G Finlay, "Archives and Administrative Change : Some Methods and Approaches (Part I) *Archives and Manuscripts* (Vol. 7, No. 3) August 1978, p.115.
 39. David Bearman, "Documenting Documentation", p. 34
 40. This article has benefited (as do most things) from Sue's input, and I take this opportunity of thanking her for it.
 41. "In fact, this approach enhances the concept of the fonds and the sanctity of provenance : through it, the fonds (or "whole") will emerge organically through the descriptive activity of archivists ... The fonds, therefore, should be viewed primarily as "an intellectual construct". Terry Cook, "The concept of the archival fonds in the post-custodial era : theory, problems and solutions" *Archivaria* 35 (Spring, 1993), p. 33. Terry comments, after reading this piece, that his argument - following Max Evans and David Bearman - indeed supports the view that "the fonds is not a physical thing, but a conceptual entity, that must emerge from the relationships ... amongst separated creators and records descriptions, rather than one fixed grand total of information locked in time".