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Are Records Ever Actual?

SUE McKEMMISH

Writing is one of the representatives of the trace in general; it is not the trace itself. *The trace itself does not exist.*

Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*¹

In an exploratory essay on the concept of the archival *fonds* and the post-custodial era, Terry Cook has urged archivists to:

liberate themselves from the constraints of the 'custodial era' with its focus on physical groupings of records, and to embrace instead the implications of the 'post-custodial' era with its conceptual paradigm of logical or virtual or multiple realities. ²

He goes on to argue that in future the archival profession will no longer be defined in terms of the 'curatorship of physical objects', but in relation to its knowledge of the 'conceptual relationships between creating structures, their animating functions, and the resulting records'. ³

Australian archivists have been quietly grappling with these conceptual relationships since Peter Scott rejected the *record group* as an inappropriately physical way of preserving and representing records in their contexts of creation. In abandoning the *record group*, Scott was driven by his understanding of the dynamic nature of the relationships amongst records and between records and their contexts of creation and use. This understanding was in part forced upon him by the type of jurisdictional and functional arrangements, organisational structures and recordkeeping processes common in mid-twentieth century bureaucracies, and the ways in which they were subject to change at an ever increasing rate. He therefore conceived a system capable of capturing and re-presenting archival data about the nature of the 'logical or virtual or multiple' relationships that exist at any moment of time (and hence through time) amongst records, and between records and their contexts of creation and use. At the time when Scott advocated the abandonment of the *record group* as the basis for the physical arrangement and description of archives, he was seen by many to be abandoning the basic archival principle of *respect des fonds*, and what Chris Hurley has described as 'that great [but ultimately elusive] archival grail quest – The Search for the Holy Fonds'. The object of Scott's own quest was a system that could reconstruct recordkeeping systems in their legal, functional and organisational contexts at any given point in time, a system that was capable of generating for users multiple views 'on paper' or 'on the screen' of a complex reality that has always been conceptual rather than physical.

Cast in the role of defenders of the evidential qualities of the non-current record of social and organisational activity, archivists developed principles or sets of rules to govern the arrangement and description of records in their physical custody. The primary aim of these rules as articulated by writers such as Muller, Feith and Fruin, and Jenkinson was to provide for what Jenkinson termed the moral defence of the record – to ensure that records were preserved in the context of their creation and would thereby retain their qualities as evidence of the functions and activities of the organisations or persons that created them.

The rules they devised were more or less appropriate to the type of jurisdictional and functional arrangements, organisational structures and recordkeeping processes of their places and times, and as well as being shaped and conditioned by the available technology. They were however rooted in an understanding of the *fonds* as a physical object, an organic growth, capable of reconstruction on the shelves in the repository and able to 'inherently reflect the functions, programmes, and activities of the person or institution that created them'. ⁴ Thus the French *respect des fonds* prescribed ways of physically arranging records in archival repositories to represent the *fonds*:

the whole of the documents of any nature that every administrative body, every physical or corporate entity, automatically and organically accumulated by reason of its function or of its activity. ⁵

The *fonds* was defined in terms of jurisdiction and competence. It was seen as having both an external and internal dimension, the external dimension relating to the external structures in which the records were accumulated or created and the internal dimension to the internal recordkeeping structures.

Archival systems that were based on these rules had as their object the physical grouping of records in the

repository to *represent* the higher level external structures in which they had accumulated, thus also reflecting the functions and activities of the records creator, as well as to recreate internal filing structures. The systems also aimed to describe the resulting *record groups* in archival finding aids.

The variant German *provenienzprinzip* (principle of provenance) was cast at a different level of the organisational hierarchy, that of the administrative unit that created the records. It was linked to the *registraturprinzip* (principle of registration order), which was derived from observing the way pre-action registry systems order official documents. The Germans believed that the functions and activities of records creators were best reflected in registration or filing order rather than in the administrative structures in which records were created. This belief stemmed from an understanding of how the recordkeeping processes which govern filing order themselves are based on the activities of the records creator, an understanding which is close to David Bearman's view that the recordkeeping system is the locus of functional provenance:

Record-keeping systems are established to serve institutional or personal purposes and therefore reflect the functions and activities of the creating organization or individual. . . Suffice it to say here that what systems analysts would call the business function being conducted, not the 'office of origin', determines the form and content of records and dictates the procedures for their creation and dissemination. [6](#)

Respect des fonds and the German variants were blurred in their translation by Dutch and English archivists into the associated principles of *provenance* and *original order*, and subsequently various permutations of these principles developed in North America. The external dimension of the *fonds* came to be equated with the principle of *provenance* and to be defined as the grouping together in the physical custody of the archives of the records of a single creator. The internal dimension of the *fonds* came to be equated with the principle of *original order*, and was defined as maintaining records in their filing or sequence of action order. Over time *respect des fonds* and the related principles of *provenance* and *original order* as thus elaborated came to be considered as the fundamentals of archival science. [7](#)

Thinking in many northern hemisphere archival institutions about how best to preserve records in context got bogged down in attempts to develop, refine and implement sets of rules that would result in a physical manifestation of the *fonds* on the repository shelves and a surrogate of this physical manifestation in the archival finding aids. Given the impracticalities involved in the endeavour, in many systems, *record groups* brought together the records of organisational or administrative units which operated at a lower level than the *fonds*. And in practice records tended to be preserved in the order in which they were *found* or *transferred*. Archivists became trapped in systems that attempted to represent records and their context by freezing them in time. And they became wedded to the cataloguing notion that archival data consists of the description of the physical objects thus 'created', the formed *fonds* or *record group*. They were like the early photographers who captured on film incomplete streetscapes, ones from which all moving objects had 'vanished', or else immobilised their subjects for long enough for them to be 'frozen' on film.

Meanwhile in Australia, the Commonwealth Archives Office (CAO), unencumbered by the baggage of archival systems past and concerned almost exclusively with modern records, began to re-examine the purposes of archival systems. The subsequent development of Scott's system, the Commonwealth Records Series (CRS) system was informed by new thinking about the nature of records of social and organisational activity and of recordkeeping systems, the recordkeeping continuum, and the relationship between archival work and current recordkeeping. [8](#) The CAO defined its role as a defender of the archival record in terms that went beyond the physical custody of old records to address the broader notions encompassed by the Oxford Dictionary's definition of custody as 'safekeeping; protection; defence; charge; care; [and] guardianship'. [9](#) It looked to exercise these responsibilities across the recordkeeping continuum, i.e. in relation to recordkeeping processes from the time of records creation. At the same time, it was carving out a place for itself in the management of Commonwealth records generally. It therefore needed an archival information system that would support its programs of intervention in relation to current recordkeeping processes in Commonwealth agencies, as well as its programs for managing records already in its repositories.

Thus, the development of the CRS system reflected a view of the purposes of an archival system which went beyond the arrangement and description of records in the physical custody of the archival authority and incorporated the type of information needed to manage the disposal of unwanted records from current recordkeeping systems, to assure the transmission of records of continuing value from agency systems of control to archival control, and to manage subsequent archival program action, eg conservation action or administration of access. The CRS system thus attempted to address two of the purposes of archival documentation systems defined by Bearman in 'Documenting Documentation', the preservation of the evidential qualities of archival

records and the requirements of their internal management. It is noteworthy that scant attention was paid to the other main purpose identified by Bearman, serving the needs of end users to locate and access relevant information. [10](#)

The development of the CRS system was also based on new thinking about the concepts of *respect des fonds*, provenance and original order. Scott did not reject the need to preserve records in their contexts of creation, but rethought the objectives behind the associated principles in a modern context:

If the long-established principles of *respect des fonds* (*provenienzprinzip*) and respect for original order (*registraturprinzip*) have any general validity beyond the immediate historical situations in which they were developed, it would seem that they entail the following objectives:

1. Archives should be kept in their administrative context, in the sense of both (a) the office unit and person producing them and (b) the record system of which they form a part.
2. Archives should be kept in the order in which they were produced, entered on record, or incorporated into a record system. To these one might add other objectives, such as flexibility in archives management (especially in numeration and location) and efficient use of storage accommodation. [11](#)

This quotation also reflects how Scott, following Dutch and English traditions, blurred the French and German principles. However, in the way he defined records creating entities in his system, and in his decision to locate the physical level of control in the record series as the most logical building block for reconstructing recordkeeping systems, he was much closer to the German approach.

Scott concluded that the physical arrangement of records in the repository and the documentation of records in their context could and should be separate processes. The object of description ceased to be the creation of a surrogate ('word photograph') of the physical grouping of records in the repository. It became instead the creation of knowledge representations in the archival system of contextual and recordkeeping relationships. The highest physical level of control or grouping of records in the repository would be determined by the physical process of accumulation of the records, not by the organisational or system structures in which they accumulate. The identification of records creating entities was linked initially to recordkeeping processes, rather than to higher level jurisdictional or organisational structures, thus revisiting the German view of the functional nature of the relationship between *provenance* and *filing order* (as expressed in their *provenienzprinzip* and *registraturprinzip* principles). [12](#) This way of defining records creating entities was later abandoned in favour of one which relied on legislative and administrative arrangements, ie the instruments by which the Commonwealth government structured itself to carry out its functions, but still pitched at office unit level. Archival description would analyse and document separately contexts and records, then recombine information about contexts and records in finding aids that reconstruct provenance and recordkeeping system relationships 'on paper' or intellectually. The higher level organisational structures in which records accumulated were not represented as context or records creating entities in Scott's system. However they were represented in outputs from the system, such as *Inventories of Agencies*, which brought together archival data about the hierarchical relationships between lower level records creating entities.

A set of rules (rule-base) was developed to apply this new thinking to the type of organisational structures and recordkeeping processes dominant in Australian bureaucracies in the mid twentieth century. Hence agencies became the focus for descriptions of context, and the series for records. Although as originally conceived, Scott had envisaged the inclusion of descriptions of functions and legislative arrangements as separate context entities, this was not implemented. Information about functions and legislation came to be incorporated in the descriptive texts of agency registrations, an issue which will be discussed below. It was determined that the series was the appropriate level of physical arrangement, ie that it represented best the physical process of records accumulation. It was defined in Scott's seminal 1966 article as:

a group of record items, which, being controlled by numbers or other symbols, are in the same sequence of numbers or symbols, or which, being uncontrolled by numbers or symbols, result from the same accumulation or filing process and are of similar physical shape and informational content.
(p.498)

In deciding to use the series as the focus for documenting records, and the building block for reconstructing recordkeeping systems, Scott was following much the same logic in relation to manual registry systems as Bearman does when he states that for electronic records, the recordkeeping system has the advantage of being a real thing 'with concrete boundaries in time and space'. [13](#)

A set of procedures and archival practices was developed to translate this rule-base into arrangement and description action in relation to records in and out of custody, e.g. the separate registration of organisations, agencies and series, which ideally occurred prior to transfer, and the physical processes of accessioning consignments of records series.

Heather MacNeil has stated that:

In asserting the principle of *respect des fonds* as the only sound basis for archival arrangement, early archival theorists were asserting the primary nature of archives as evidence and, by extension, the archivist's primary obligation to protect the integrity of evidence in the methods used to treat archival *fonds*. That obligation is asserted more directly in Jenkinson's moral defence of archives, which refers to the fact that we protect archives not only from physical deterioration but also from loss of meaning, due to their accidental or deliberate eradication from their context. [14](#)

However they were also asserting that the only way to assure the moral defence of the record was through a combination of physical arrangement and physical custody.

Peter Scott broke the nexus between moral defence, physical arrangement and custody, at least in relation to representing the provenancial and recordkeeping contexts of records. He was one of the first to challenge the 19th century view, still embedded in some archival systems to this day, that the *fonds*, in terms of either its external or internal structures, can be represented through the physical arrangement of records in an archival repository. He also rejected the corollary notion that the description of records and their contexts should mirror the arrangement of the records in the physical custody of the archives authority. Scott believed that it was possible to respect the *fonds* by 'context control', by documenting records and their contexts in terms of the relationships between them. Thus it was not necessary to reconstruct the *fonds* physically. (Indeed it is not logical to attempt to do so because *fonds* have what we recognise today as a virtual not a physical reality. Because of this the physical reconstruction of the *fonds* in a *record group*, while providing one view of what is a multiple reality, obscures or obliterates other views.)

It was Scott's great insight that the contexts in which records are created, both the provenance and recordkeeping system contexts, can only be represented 'on paper' or intellectually. As a consequence, the Commonwealth Archives Office abandoned attempts to reflect provenance and recordkeeping systems either in the physical arrangement of records on the repository shelves, or by describing them in the state in which they were found or transferred. Instead Scott set out to build a system that could represent the logical, virtual and multiple relationships between records and their contexts of creation (provenance relationships), and amongst the records themselves (recordkeeping system relationships). How well the CRS system achieves this will be further explored below. In terms of the way he designed his system, his genius lay in the separation in the system's structure of knowledge about context from knowledge about the records themselves, and the system's capacity to establish relationships between contexts and records, thus anticipating the use of relational databases in archives systems by twenty years!

Almost thirty years after Scott attempted to explain his series system to the archival world in the pages of *The American Archivist*, the Australian response to the *General International Standard Archival Description*, *ISAD(G)*, has paralleled Scott's response to the record group. Although now regarded as an 'historical document', the 'Madrid Principles' adopted by the International Council on Archives (ICA) in 1992 provided the basis for the development of *ISAD(G)*, which essentially follows a cataloguing model, combining records and context data in one logical record in the archival descriptive system, a surrogate for the physical record in custody. Australians were critical of the confusion of the theoretical basis for description with a statement of a particular application of the principle in the 'Madrid Principles', which in part stated:

- (3) The basic unit of archival management is the 'fonds' (*group, collection*)
- (4) An archival accumulation can be analyzed into levels of *arrangement*; these in turn are *represented* in levels of description. [15](#) [My emphasis.]

The Australian Society of Archivists' (ASA) comments also raised three critical issues in relation to the 1992 version of *ISAD(G)*:

- (1) Descriptions of Records must not be limited by custodial considerations
- (2) Allowance must be made for Description of Context and Provenance to be developed independently of the description of records
- (3) Allowance must be made for more than one records-creator when attributing a 'unit of description', i.e. for multiple-provenance attribution at the series level. [16](#)

Many Australian archivists also find the other English language 'standards' – the Canadian *Rules for Archival Description*, *RAD*, the British *Manual for Archival Description*, *MAD* and the US *APPM* inadequate for similar reasons. In particular, for the reasons rehearsed above in discussing Scott's abandonment of the *record group*, Australians are critical of placing the *fonds* at the centre of archival arrangement and description, as many of our international colleagues advocate, whether by prescribing its use as an entity for data capture *about the record*, by formulating it upon ideas which stress one phase in the evolution of context and structure to the exclusion or detriment of others, or by persisting with the notion that it can be kept physically intact, or by prescribing that each series can only belong to one *fonds*. It is interesting to note that in spite of the significant contribution of Canadians such as Terry Cook, Richard Brown and Brian Brothman to the elucidation of the virtual nature of the *fonds* in its external dimension, and the development of 'new provenance theory' (which focuses on functions and activities, rather than organisational structures), the official Canadian descriptive tactic in *RAD*, takes an opposite approach and has stuck to a structural and physical definition of *respect des fonds* as:

the principle that the records of a person, family or corporate body must be kept together in their original order, if it exists or has been maintained, and not be mixed or combined with the records of another individual or corporate body. [17](#)

In response to these international developments, the ASA Council commissioned Chris Hurley to collect and 'systematise' information about how Australian archival institutions structure and use descriptive data. The outcome of this project is an evolving document, the *Australian Common Practices Manual: ACPM*. Although intended to be descriptive of Australian practice rather than prescriptive, the *ACPM* has adopted a conceptual framework for presenting and comparing information about the structure and use of descriptive data in Australian archival information systems which is based on the identification of four kinds of descriptive entity – ambience, provenance, records and contents. Developed by Chris Hurley, this conceptual model was refined for presentation in full in his chapter in this publication. In the *ACPM*, it is used as an 'analytical matrix' to compare and correlate his findings in relation to Australian archival information systems. [18](#) It also provides us with a powerful tool for exploring the layers of contextuality (jurisdictional, functional, organisational and recordkeeping system-related) that surround the point at which the transaction is captured as a record, as well as the nature of the relationships that occur within and across the layers. A particularly exciting aspect of the model is the inclusion of two different kinds of context entities – ambience (for entities such as organisations, families or groupings of agencies by jurisdiction or competence) and provenance (for persons and corporations who create, maintain, use, control or dispose of records). Ambient entities are described as properly defining and differentiating jurisdictional responsibility and activity. Ambience provides for what has been a 'missing link' in the Australian system until now – a way of representing in the system higher level entities that do not directly create records. Most archival systems in Australia do not provide for ambient entities. Standardised ways of capturing and representing such entities will be a critical part of any national or international plan for 'documenting documentation'.

The *ACPM* approach enables us to draw key distinctions between systems that take a cataloguing approach and associate data about records and their context in one descriptive entity, and series system approaches which construct relationships between separate records and context entities, either within the layers of contextuality or across their interfaces. It also suggests a very different way of conceptualising the *fonds* than that favoured by international colleagues who still see it as having an external and internal dimension. Pursuing the logic of his model of the Australian system, Chris Hurley proposes that if one wished to document the *fonds* within this model, it could be treated as two coextensive entities in the archival system, one residing in the ambient layer, and one in the records layer.

The *Manual* in itself is not a standard, but it is an exciting step in that direction. It is not only concerned as is the *ISAD(G)* with defining data content and structure for archival systems. More significantly it is moving towards an archival system specification for common application. Although it does not prescribe a series system approach (yet!), it forces its users to take a series system perspective, but a series system perspective re-invigorated and enriched by the multiple layers of contextuality introduced into the conceptual model. It is currently providing a springboard for the presentation of Australian views on standardisation to the international community via Chris Hurley's role as Australia's representative on the ICA's Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards.

In part as a response to the Australian critique, but mainly as a result of Canadian initiatives, *ISAD(G)* is being revised to incorporate access points and authority records. An associated document, the draft *International Standard Archival Description for Authority Records*, *ISAD(AR)*, sets out standards for the description of 'fonds' which will be held as records in an authority file, containing administrative histories and biographies. Each 'series' description could then be linked to these descriptions of the 'fonds' by access points.

Indications are that our international colleagues believe (mistakenly) that provisions for multi-level description of

the *fonds*, and the introduction of authority files to enable indexing of the 'series' description by 'fonds' will address Australian concerns, in particular the need to allow for the separate documentation of context and records. Heather MacNeil has stated:

In *RAD*, the techniques of multilevel description and authority control are the means by which internal and external structure are brought together in order to identify and explain these systems of interrelationship and to facilitate intellectual access to them; in the Australian series system, external and internal structure are rigorously separated through the techniques of context control and records control in order to accomplish the same end. The different approaches are complementary, not contradictory. [19](#)

But the Australian requirement that multiple relationships can be established between context and records entities to represent complex and dynamic realities (the corollary of the requirement for the separate documentation of context and records) cannot be fully met by multi-level description techniques or the introduction of authority files and access points. The problem with the international argument arises most particularly from the insistence simultaneously on the *fonds* as both the 'highest level' of description and the focus for the capture of archival data *about the records*. This results in an approach which

- binds up archival data about context and records,
- can only present a view of the *fonds* at a particular point in time, and therefore
- makes poor allowance for documenting changing contextual and documentary relationships.

Nor do the revisions go any way to address the Australian view that international descriptive standards should not be limited by custodial considerations.

On the other hand, as discussed below, it is true to say that, the Australian series system has not generally dealt well with documenting the layer of contextuality that is to do with jurisdictions and functions. The exploration by some Canadians of the virtual nature of the *fonds* has much to offer here, though not the *RAD* technique of multi-level description. Ironically, Scott may have thrown out the baby with the bath water. In abandoning the physical *record group*, he also failed to make adequate provision in his system of intellectual 'context control' for the jurisdictional and functional layer of contextuality that the abstract *fonds* represents.

As quoted above, Cook has referred to the role of the archivist in building a knowledge-base of the 'conceptual relationships between creating structures, their animating functions, and the resulting records.' One of the purposes of the CRS system has always been the construction of such a knowledge base. However Scott's original choice of context and records entities did not allow for the full elaboration of all the layers of contextuality identified in Chris Hurley's model. Moreover, the CRS system as 'prototyped' by Scott was quickly codified before many of the features he envisaged had been developed. Perhaps for this reason, its further conceptual development has been somewhat limited. Essentially the CRS system operates at a single layer of contextuality. In this provenance layer, it captures detailed data about administrative structures as well as data about their mandates, functions and activities, much of which is 'lost' in descriptive text, rather than presented in structured data elements. Missing in large measure from the series system in Australian Archives is the ambient layer which has to do with jurisdictional, organisational and functional context. Apart from the maximalist 'organisation' (pitched in the CRS system at the level of the whole of government), ambient context in the sense of higher level organisational structures is represented only through the controlled and controlling relationships established between agencies. Also largely absent until recently have been the 'animating functions', assigned to organisations via legislative and administrative mandates. Functions are both broader and narrower than the boundaries of the structural entities to which they relate – they both embrace and penetrate them. They are translated into action by processes that take place within organisational structures, processes which in turn are made up of sequences of transactions that are captured as records in recordkeeping system structures.

As Scott originally conceived the series system, contextual entities included not only organisations and agencies, but also functions and legislation (mandates and controls). Officially, however, legislative mandates and functions remained 'on the drawing board', until analysis of functions was undertaken in the 1980s to enable the construction of a functional thesaurus to index the automated system of agency and series registrations and inventories, RINSE. Until then, information about functions, activities and legislation remained buried in the descriptive text of agency and series registrations. Scott himself pursued his concept relating to functions by working away at his own functional classification of records held in the New South Wales Office of Australian Archives when he was in charge of the region during the 1970s and early 1980s. [20](#) Functional analysis is now regarded by Australian Archives as an indexing tool. It has not been considered as either a way of classifying context or records entities, or as a way of defining and capturing archival data about them. Nor has it been considered as a context entity in its own right.

Finally, although much work is undertaken in Australian Archives to analyse recordkeeping systems and they are represented in the system through the establishment of controlling, controlled and related series relationships, much rich data about recordkeeping systems and processes is also buried in series description text. This is particularly ironic given Scott's view that:

an archivist may be defined essentially as a preserver and interpreter of records in their original recordkeeping systems. [21](#)

Scott himself undertook extensive analysis of Australian 19th and 20th century recordkeeping systems, and lectured for many years on this subject in the University of NSW archival program, but no publications resulted from his endeavours.

Exploration of how to best represent the ambient layer of context has begun in other institutions which have adopted and modified the series system. The Public Record Office Victoria uses the term 'record groups' to refer to portfolio-based entities or entities made up of other 'groupings' of agencies by common jurisdiction or function. Its archival system establishes relationships between provenance entities and these ambient entities, thereby enabling links to be made between lower level records creating units and higher level organisational structures, functional or jurisdictional groupings. It also maps the transfer of functions between record groups and agencies. A further development of this aspect of the system has been the separate registration of functions and the establishment of relationships between functions and other entities in the system – record groups (ambient entities), agencies (provenance entities) and series (records entities). [22](#)

Pursuant to these developments, Chris Hurley proposes that functions may be another type of ambient entity – treated not 'as attributes of another entity, or as the basis for a vocabulary of retrieval, but as ambient entities in their own right'. In making this suggestion, he is hinting at a way to push the logic of the series system even further. This begs a host of questions. Should data relating to functional context be associated with entities which are essentially defined by their organisational structure? Is it appropriate to treat functions, activities, processes and transactions as attributes of other types of entities, e.g. organisations or agencies? Could functional as opposed to structural context be documented separately, then relationships established to link these entities to other context entities and records entities? Could activities, processes and transactions be treated as other types of context entity? And finally, what might be achieved by exploring this approach – would it enable archival systems to better achieve their purposes? Tentative answers are provided in the PROV's experience, which suggests that functional approaches are much preferred by end users and that records 'align much more easily and simply under functions'. [23](#) Whereas relationships between administrative structures and records are constantly changing with increasingly frequent reshuffles, amalgamations and divisions, the relationships between functions and records are relatively stable. There is still much experimentation and exploration to be done in these areas.

Some recent treatments of the concept of the archival *fonds* follow Scott in recognising that in its so-called external dimension it has what we readily identify today as a virtual rather than a physical reality:

It is at the heart of this process or **relationship** linking the creator and the records that the essence of provenance or *respect des fonds* is found. But a **relationship** by definition is abstract; it is not a concrete thing that one can touch or arrange or push into archival boxes. The fonds is thus a concept expressing a dynamic interconnection between the abstract description of the records creator(s) and the concrete description of the actual records (series, files, items). [24](#)

However, especially when dealing with paper records, few writers question the physicality of the internal dimension of the fonds. Nor did Scott extend his thinking about 'context control' to 'records control':

Essentially the point at issue is the *level of physical classification* of records; i.e. while one may readily classify items into series, my view is that it is impossible physically to classify series into record groups. [25](#)

Whereas series were to have 'their administrative context and associations recorded on paper', record items were to be 'kept in their administrative context and original order by physical allocation to their appropriate series'. [26](#) Thus according to the rule-base of the CRS system, original order must be preserved by the physical arrangement of the records into series. But, in what physical sense are records ever 'actual'? Are series conceptual or physical entities? Can original order be represented by physical arrangement? Clearly it cannot in electronic recordkeeping systems, but this may be equally true of paper systems in which the physical ordering or placement of records is not immutable and records can be and are re-ordered – whether at document or file level.

Documentary forms that result from social or organisational transactions or communication become records when they are captured by recordkeeping processes in the broader context of the related social or organisational

activity. They thereby acquire their special quality as evidence. Recordkeeping, whether achieved by rudimentary accumulation processes, or highly formalised and systematic ones, incorporates individual documents into the record by 'placing' them in relation to other documents that form part of the record, and establishing their relationships to their contexts of creation and use. Recordkeeping systems capture the content of documents, represent their structure, and link related documents together. Among other things, quality recordkeeping systems retain the information content and structure of records in reconstructable relations, and link to the original records information about subsequent access and use. They also enable records to be retrieved at a later date in a form that represents their original structure and in a way that reflects their context of creation and use. ²⁷ Both the relationships amongst documents in a recordkeeping system or accumulation of records, and between records and their contexts of creation and use, are multiple and dynamic. Although electronic recordkeeping systems are readily identified as being able to define multiple contextual and documentary relationships, it is often assumed that manual paper systems are limited to capturing the 'original' filing order and representing it physically. But is this really so?

Chris Hurley has touched on, but not explored further, the virtual nature of 19th century recordkeeping systems and the way they capture 'metadata' about the documents they contain – he refers to the loss of 'physicality' in 19th century systems through top-numbering (physical re-location into other series/systems), and subsequent shifts in provenance and control, which were 'documented' in the systems' registers and indexes. He could also have added through the frequent temporary attachment of papers together to facilitate business transactions, at a time when copying technology was not available to enable multiple permanent associations of documents on files.

In the paper filing systems of the 20th century, records move between series through top-numbering, and sub-sets are shuffled around with administrative change, physically retired to secondary or archival storage, or destroyed. In decentralised organisational structures, the 'logical' paper record of a particular transaction can be physically captured at and dispersed across various office locations. Even at item level, the record is not always completely captured in a document's content, structure and physical placement. For example, the various stages in the process of becoming for the record that is the title deed, a single document which is continually updated and amended to capture within it the records of a series of property transactions, may be captured physically in the document's content and structure, but equally may only be evident in the 'metadata' present in related records. Consider also the document used on the cover of this publication, which apparently captured the records of at least three transactions, and has been placed in a different recordkeeping system context by a top-numbering process that removed it from its 'original' filing order. The changes in status which the series system was developed to accommodate related to structural provenance or control, but continuing and frequent changes in status also occur in relation to location, arrangement and recordkeeping system ordering. The record is always in a process of becoming.

The rule-base of the CRS system enshrines the record series as the foundation for both the intellectual and physical control of Commonwealth records. It perpetuates the notion that, although provenancial relationships and recordkeeping system relationships can be and are best represented intellectually, a record series is a physical entity, not an abstraction based on the dynamic relationships in both time and space between the records accumulated by the recordkeeping process that creates the series. It should be noted, however, that in relation to this part of the rule-base, the physical level of arrangement in the repository has most often been at the consignment (or accession) level rather than the series.

For the same reasons that the *fonds* can be only partly manifest by what is in the boxes on the shelves, logical, virtual and multiple documentary relationships cannot be adequately represented physically. In so far as he insisted that records (at least those of continuing value) be arranged physically in record series to reflect their process of accumulation, Scott did not carry through the logic of his insights about 'context control'. He developed a system that could, by separating context and records-related knowledge, then establishing relationships between them, reconstruct provenance and recordkeeping systems 'on paper' or as knowledge representations in an archival information system. By extension it could do the same for the record series themselves. The logic of his thinking, especially when combined with the liberating effect of new technology, can lead to the conclusion that the system of physical arrangement on the repository shelves is irrelevant to both 'context' and 'records control', and can as well be determined according to the demands of stores management.

The loss of physicality that occurs when records are captured electronically is forcing archivists to reassess basic understandings about the nature of the records of social and organisational activity, and their qualities as evidence. Even when they are captured in a medium that can be felt and touched, records as conceptual constructs do not coincide with records as physical objects. Physical ordering and placement of such records captures a view of their contextual and documentary relationships, but cannot present multiple views of what is a complex reality. The traditional custodial role takes on another dimension when it is accepted that the record is only partly manifest in what is in the boxes on the repository shelves. The purpose of archival systems is to ensure

that records are preserved in the context of their creation and use, and retain their qualities as evidence so that when retrieved for future use their meaning and significance can be understood. Even when documenting records in traditional forms, archival systems cannot fulfil this purpose if they do not go beyond concerns with the physical grouping and description of records in the repository, to capture data about contextual and documentary relationships.

As a defender of the pre-twentieth century (paper) record, Jenkinson stressed the importance of continuous custody to preserve physical integrity and attempted to defend its moral integrity through its physical preservation as part of the *fonds* (his Archive Group). As a defender of the record of modern 20th century bureaucracies, Scott broke the nexus between moral defence and physical arrangement and custody, at least in relation to the preservation of the record's provenancial and recordkeeping system context. Defenders of the post-modern record are turning away from a custodial role and are exploring how to preserve and provide access to electronic records of continuing value in their contexts of creation and use through the capture and management of archival metadata.

In an eloquent defence of the role of a government archival authority in the management of the recordkeeping continuum, Glenda Acland characterises the record as an evidentiary, post-custodial conceptual reality, in contrast with the relic, which is a curatorial, custodial, physical thing. ²⁸ She thus articulates an understanding of the nature of records of social and organisational activity which informs post-custodial thinking about an archival mission, one which is supported by the 'twin pillars' of appraisal and documentation programs having as their object the capture of representative *traces* of the functions and activities of records creators, rather than records as 'physical things'.

Australian disciples of Scott can potentially contribute much to the development of strategies for documenting records in context in ways that support a post-custodial role for the archival profession, whether in relation to paper or electronic records. But just as Scott liberated the Commonwealth Archives Office from the monster of physical order at the *record group* level, they may need to liberate themselves from the notion that the series is a physical grouping of records. Australian experience in analysing the contexts of records creation and use in order to document provenancial relationships, and in analysing recordkeeping systems in order to document record series and the relationships between them, is of continuing relevance, and can contribute to understandings of the 'conceptual relationships between creating structures, their animating functions, and the resulting records'. However Australian archivists generally need to broaden their conceptualisation of the layers of contextuality that surround the point where the transaction is captured as a record. And their knowledge of recordkeeping systems needs to be sharpened and better communicated. Australian experience of archival intervention across the continuum of recordkeeping processes is also highly relevant to the development of successful strategies for managing the electronic record. Moreover the insights that are being gained from revisiting basic concepts and developing systems to capture and manage archival metadata have the capacity to inform the redesign and redevelopment of archival documentation strategies for records in more traditional documentary forms.

There is much to celebrate and build upon in the work of Ian Maclean, Peter Scott and the Australian archivists who have been inspired by their vision of a 'fully integrated government records system'. ²⁹ The Australian experience of managing the records continuum and the Australian series system's potential as a conceptual model for the documentation of records in context through time and space have much to offer as archivists move beyond custody in their moral defence of the virtual electronic record.

NOTES

1. Quoted in chapter 4, 'Deconstruction and the Question of Literature/Derrida', David Carroll, *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida*, Methuen, NY & London, 1987, p.81.
2. Terry Cook, 'The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era', in *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Terry Eastwood, Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1992, p.38.
3. *ibid.*, p.63.
4. *ibid.*, p.35.
5. *ibid.*, p.40. The *fonds* has been variously defined in the archival literature. I use here the definition favoured by Cook. It was developed by the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards.
6. David Bearman, 'Record-Keeping Systems', *Archivaria* 36, Autumn 1993, p.18 & 22.
7. For a more extensive coverage of these principles and their evolution, see Cook. For an exploration of the way in which they influenced the evolution of archival systems within the Commonwealth Archives Office, see Frank Upward's chapter in this publication.
8. As also explored in relation to Maclean's writings by Frank Upward elsewhere in this publication.
9. Heather MacNeil, quoting this definition, recently wrote: What I object to is the blithe assumption, latent in the phrase 'post-custodial', that our custodial role is something that we must transcend if we are to survive as a profession. . . . Archival custodianship has always been linked inextricably to the protection and safeguarding of evidence. Physical ownership of the records is merely the means by which, historically, archivists have assured that protection. The advent of information technologies does not change the substance of our custodial responsibility; it simply changes the means by which we exercise it. These are sentiments that many Australian archivists, especially those reared on the series system would echo. Heather MacNeil, 'Archival Theory and Practice:

Between Two Paradigms', *Archivaria* 37, Spring 1994, p.16.

10. David Bearman, 'Documenting Documentation', *Archivaria* 34, Summer 1992, p.33-49.

11. Peter Scott, 'The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment', *The American Archivist*, vol.29, no.4, October 1966, p.493-4.

12. Apart from the largely redundant organisation entity, which operates at the level of a whole government, Scott's system's context or records creating entities operate at the level of the administrative unit, the *sub-fonds* in international terms, whereas the French notion of *fonds* as translated into *record groups* by the English and Americans in their systems generally operate at the higher level of Chris Hurley's ambient entities and reflect their functions in so far as they are defined in terms of their jurisdiction or competence. In a national or international system, it would be critical to represent the whole of government level and the CRS system's organisation entity would become a vital part of the system.

13. David Bearman, 'Record-keeping Systems', p.24.

14. Heather MacNeil, 'Archival Theory and Practice . . .', p.9.

15. The 'Madrid Principles' or *Statement of Principles regarding Archival Description* and the draft *ISAD(G)* were published in *Archivaria* 34, Summer 1992, p.8-16.

16. Australian Society of Archivists, *Comment on: ICA Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description First Version Revised* (12 October 1992). For a more detailed discussion of the Australian response, see: Chris Hurley, 'Data, Systems, Management, and Standardisation', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol.22, no.2, Nov. 1994 (forthcoming).

17. *Rules for Archival Description*, Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Ottawa, 1990, p.D-5. For Terry Cook's views on RAD's approach, see 'The Concept of the Archival Fonds in the Post-Custodial Era: Theory, Problems and Solutions', in *Archivaria* 35, Spring 1993, p.36, fn 28 and passim.

18. For more information on the *Australian Common Practices Manual*, see Chris Hurley, 'Data, Systems, Management, and Standardisation'.

19. Heather MacNeil, p.11. Terry Cook and other Canadians would dispute the claim by supporters of RAD that the authority files as defined in *ISAD(AR)* describe 'fonds'.

20. Peter Scott, 'Listing of Government Records by Function – An Experiment in the Australian Archives NSW', *Australian Historical Bibliography*, no.3, Feb. 1981, p.28-37. One suspects this activity was frowned upon by his masters in Canberra, and it remained a purely local undertaking.

21. Peter Scott, 'The Record Group . . .', p.500.

22. See Chris Hurley, 'What, if Anything, is a Function?', *Archives & Manuscripts*, vol.21, no.2, Nov. 1993, p.208-20. Another Australian archival system that has 'registered' functions as separate entities is the City of Sydney's.

23. *ibid.*, p.218. Sigrid McCausland makes similar points about the City of Sydney's experimentation with the registration of functions in her chapter in this publication.

24. Cook, p.74.

25. Peter Scott, Letter to the Editor, *American Archivist*, vol.30,no.3, July 1967, p.541.

26. Peter Scott, 'The Record Group . . .', p.497.

27. These characteristics and others of recordkeeping systems are being explored at the University of Pittsburgh in a 3-year research project which aims to specify functional requirements and specifications for quality recordkeeping. David Bearman reported on the current state of play with this project at a seminar on 'Metadata Specifications for Recordkeeping Systems' held at Monash University on 14 May 1994.

28. Glenda Acland, 'Managing the Record Rather than the Relic', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol.20, no.1, May 1991, p.9-15. For these evocative phrases describing the way Glenda contrasts the conceptual record with the physical relic, see Terry Cook, 'Electronic Records, Paper Minds: The Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Post-Modernist Era', in *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol.22, no.2, Nov. 1994 (forthcoming), fn 16.

29. Peter Scott, Letter to the Editor, p.542.

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