RULES FOR ARCHIVAL
DESCRIPTION

CANADIAN ARCHIVAL STANDARD

RULES FOR ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION

Prepared under the direction of the

PLANNING COMMITTEE ON DESCRIPTIVE STANDARDS

a committee of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists, representing:

L'Association des archivistes du Québec

The Association of Canadian Archivists

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FOREWORD

The Bureau of Canadian Archivisits is pleased to endorse *Rules for Archival Description* for use by Canadian archivists. *RAD* establishes for the first time a national set of rules for the description of archives, a goal the profession has sought for so many years.

Standards are not new to the work of archivists. Technical standards have existed for some time in the field of archival conservation. Records management guidelines have resulted in a more coherent and consistent approach to information management. Now the profession has a set of rules that will enable archival institutions to produce more uniform descriptions of their holdings.

Descriptive standards are important for several reasons, not the least of which is improved service to our users, who stand to benefit the most from their implementation. Applying agreed upon standards to our descriptive practices will facilitate the exchange of information between archives at the local, national, and international level.

The Bureau of Canadian Archivists is committed to the ongoing development, use, and maintenance of *RAD*, in cooperation with the Canadian Council of Archives.

André Martineau,
Secretary General
Bureau of Canadian Archivists

PREFACE TO THE 2008 REVISION

Nearly twenty years have passed since Kent Haworth's extensive preface to the first edition of *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)* in 1990. Over this period Canadian institutions and the archival profession have made a significant investment in *RAD*, resulting in increased standardization of archival descriptions and improved access by users to archival holdings.

The initial publication and subsequent implementation of *RAD* reflects the substantial effort of the members of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists' (BCA) Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards. Today Archives Canada, the national archival database network, aggregates more than 55,000 *RAD*-compliant fonds and collection-level descriptions, promoting the discovery of, and access to, archival material held in Canadian repositories. Following the development of *RAD*, the Canadian Council of Archives (CCA) charged a committee of experts with monitoring and promoting issues related to archival descriptive standards within the context of the Canadian archival system. Established in 1996, the Canadian Committee on Archival Description (CCAD) is responsible for the continuing maintenance, review, interpretation, and revision of *RAD*.

Maintaining and updating *RAD* represents a significant effort. Since 1990, and in collaboration with the Canadian archival community, the standard has been enriched by regular rule revisions as well as the addition of an index and several chapters that provide guidance on the description of specific media.

In 2001, the Canada-U.S. Task Force on Archival Description (CUSTARD) was initiated to explore the potential for harmonizing archival descriptive standards within North America. At the time, the initiative revealed what were felt to be significant divergences in approach between Canadian and U.S. practice. At the conclusion of CUSTARD in 2003 a collaborative draft document formed the basis for the U.S. standard, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (*DACS*), and a comprehensive revision of the Canadian standard referred to as draft RAD2.

Over the course of 2004 there was comprehensive consultation on the draft RAD2 document. Not unlike the CUSTARD project, this consultative process revealed widely divergent opinions from within the Canadian archival community. Following a careful review of feedback received, CCAD put forward to the CCA a number of options for proceeding with the development of *RAD*. The approved option saw the Committee move forward to draft a series of revisions to *RAD* based on those aspects of draft RAD2 that received the most consensus from the Canadian archival community.

The 2008 revision to *RAD* is the result of this effort, and reflects the responsibility of CCAD to directly respond to needs expressed by the Canadian archival community. The revision sees the addition of a number of rules as well as a new chapter. The revision means to make the standard more flexible and reflective of the range of descriptive practice in Canadian archives. For example, *RAD* now includes rules that provide guidance for those approaches where the series constitutes the highest level of description. These rules make the standard more permissive, and will ultimately allow more Canadian institutions to participate in the national archival database.

The revision also includes rules that guide the description of collections and discrete items. Archival material varies with respect to provenance. Rules have been added to provide guidance for the description of collections of material assembled on the basis of a common characteristic. A new chapter includes rules for the description of discrete items that do not form part of a larger body of materials. The addition of these rules will support archivists to consistently describe the range of material that make up the holdings of Canadian archival repositories.

Finally, CCAD is very pleased that the 2008 revision incorporates a Statement of Principles. The principles serve as a conceptual framework for the standard that represents a contemporary approach to archival description. They mean to guide descriptive practice and inform the evolution of standardization in Canada. The sum of the changes implemented in the 2008 revision allow archivists and institutions greater flexibility, latitude and the exercise of judgement in describing archival materials, while at the same time firmly grounding practice within a framework of explicit principles.

The 1990 publication of *RAD* represented a substantial and cooperative effort by the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards. The 2008 revision to *RAD* reflects ongoing dialogue by the Canadian profession on the nature and evolution of contemporary descriptive practice. As a national archival descriptive standard, *RAD* continues to require the input of, and feedback from, the archival professional community. In addition to identifying areas of consensus, recent community consultations also revealed a number of areas with greater divergence of opinion. These points of divergence will form the basis for future discussion, consultation and revision of the national descriptive standard.

Sharry Watson
Canadian Committee on Archival Description

PREFACE TO THE 1990 EDITION

> And if the Archivist is here provided with a general guide rather than a detailed set of rules at least we should be sure that no theories are enunciated which are not applicable to archive work in any country, nor on the other hand any first principles omitted. In most sciences and arts it will be found that special cases can be satisfactorily met by any one who combines a sound theory with ordinary common sense and both with practical experience. It is that combination that we wish to commend to the Archivist.[1]

HISTORY AND METHODOLOGY

The presentation of *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)* to the Canadian archival community represents three years of concentrated effort on the part of the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards to realize several recommendations made by the Bureau of Canadian Archivist's Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards.[2] The Canadian Working Group recognized that the development of detailed standards and rules for the description of archives is one of the most complex matters for archivists to undertake. At the same time, the Canadian Working Group believed that the standardization of archival description was both possible and desirable for both users and keepers of archives.[3] Efforts in this direction were already well advanced by Michael Cook and Margaret Procter[4] in Great Britain and Steven Hensen[5] in the United States of America. Although the process of descriptive standards development has taken a different course in Canada and some of our rules differ their efforts have made our own enterprise that much less problematic because we had the advantage of examining their work, and the work of others who have struggled before us with the development of rules for the description of archival materials.[6] In Québec, the

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[1] Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), p. 19.

[2] Hereafter referred to as the Canadian Working Group. For a history of the profession's long held resolve to develop national standards for the description of archival material for all media see *Toward Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1985), pp. 1-3.

[3] *Ibid.* p. 8. For an account of the benefits of standardization for archivists, users and sponsors of archives, see *Developing Descriptive Standards: A Call To Action,* Occasional Paper No. 1 (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1987).

[4] Michael Cook and Margaret Procter, *Manual of Archival Description,* 2d ed. (Great Britain: Gower Publishing Co., 1989).

[5] *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: a Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*, 2d ed., comp. Steven Hensen (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1989).

[6] Acknowledgments here also must include Elizabeth Betz and Wendy White-Hensen for their pioneering work in non-textual media. See *Graphic Materials: Rules for Describing Original Items and Historical Collections,* comp. Elizabeth Betz (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress,

Association des archivistes du Québec recognized the importance of standardizing the format of finding aids in 1982 when it established an ad hoc working group and in 1984, *Les instruments de recherche pour les archives* was published as a means of accomplishing this objective.[7]

While it was prudent enough not to attempt to produce standards and rules in the limited period of a year (the length of its mandate), the Canadian Working Group did recommend the appointment of six committees to develop standards of description for textual archives, architectural drawings, photographic and other graphic material, moving image material, sound recordings, and machine readable archives. In addition, the Canadian Working Group also made several other significant recommendations affecting the descriptive practices of archivists, including the development of authority files, the use of *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* (second edition) rules for the formation of personal, geographic and corporate names, and the investigation of issues and problems related to the subject indexing of archives. At its last meeting, the Canadian Working Group recommended that a standards committee be established to ensure that their specific recommendations would be carried out and to direct generally the work of descriptive standards development on behalf of the profession.

The membership of the Committee on Descriptive Standards comprised two representatives from the Association des archivistes du Québec (AAQ) and two representatives from the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA). At its first meeting on 16 January 1987 the members of the Committee agreed to expand its membership to include the Secretary General of the Bureau and a representative of the National Archives of Canada as an observer. At the same time the Committee also changed its name to the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards to more properly reflect its mandate as a planning and coordinating body. These functions were formalized in its mandate statement as follows:

> continue the development of archival descriptive standards as required
> by the Canadian archival community; publish and disseminate archival
> descriptive standards as well as encourage their use through training
> programmes and publications; and assist in the establishment of
> mechanisms to maintain and revise the archival descriptive standards
> as required.

The Planning Committee then established several working groups, the first of which was the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level (hereafter referred to as the Fonds Level Working Group), appointed in March 1987 to produce a report that would include rules for description at the fonds level. At the same time working groups were established to develop rules for description of particular classes of material found in a fonds, e.g., textual records, moving image materials, graphic materials, and sound recordings.

1982), *Archival Moving Image Materials: a Cataloging Manual,* comp. Wendy White-Hensen (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, [1984]).

[7] Louis Cardinal et al., *Les instruments de recherche pour les archives* (La Pocatière, Qué.: Documentor, 1984). For a note on the history of these efforts see Jacques Ducharme's comments in his essay on finding aids in Carol Couture and Jean-Yves Rousseau, *The Life of a Document* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1987), pp. 199-209, especially fn. 1, p. 207.

When the Planning Committee reviewed the "Report of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level"[8] and the responses of the archival community to it, it realized that general rules, *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules,* Second Edition, 1988 Revision[9], rules governing all levels of description for all media, analogous to chapter one of *AACR2R,* had to be drafted. With a chapter on general rules in place, the Fonds Level Working Group report could become a chapter on rules for the description of multiple media fonds. In addition, the other working groups responsible for the construction of rules for the description of particular media, could then work within the framework of description established by the general rules for description. Accordingly, the Planning Committee itself drafted General Rules for Description (chapter 1), and in consultation with the Fonds Level Working Group, revised their draft rules to produce Rules for Multiple Media Fonds (chapter 2). As can be seen from the table of contents subsequent chapters will contain rules for description of various media at the fonds, series, file and item levels. These chapters will be published and distributed once they have been reviewed and recommended for use by the archival profession in Canada.

RULES FOR ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION

In order to develop rules for the description of archival materials a thorough analysis of the process of description and of the way archivists arrange archival materials is necessary. Inevitably attention must be focussed on the fundamental principles guiding archivists in their descriptive work. With the exception of appraisal, perhaps no other aspect of archival work so demands our analysis of archival theory and principles as does archival description.

The archival community, nationally and internationally, has yet to arrive at a consensus on the principles governing its descriptive practices. Nevertheless, RAD is formulated in a way that takes into account the nature of archives and the common assumptions presently guiding archivists in their descriptive practices.[10]

The principles governing descriptive practice may be defined as the theoretical and practical underpinnings of any descriptive process, while descriptive standards can be characterized as general, officially agreed upon, and widely accepted frameworks that define the way the descriptive process should be carried out and which must be based on overriding and agreed upon principles. Rules governing description can be viewed as a set of instructions, as specific as possible, that embody standards in a particular context with the object of producing consistency in the descriptive process. The practical

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[8] "Report of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level to the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists," March 1988. This report was circulated to the profession for comment in the fall of 1988.

[9] *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules,* Second Edition, 1988 Revision, Michael Gorman and Paul W. Winkler, editors (Ottawa: Canadian Library Association, 1988). Hereafter referred to as *AACR2R.*

[10] *Toward Descriptive Standards* refers to "commonly accepted assumptions" which must be considered when discussing descriptive standards.

context in which the rules are applied depends on an understanding of the relationship between principles and standards.[11]

Archivists adhere to certain axioms which govern the way they arrange and describe a fonds, and these axioms will perforce determine the rules for the description of archives.[12] These axioms have guided the Planning Committee and its working groups in the formulation of rules for the description of a fonds and its parts. One axiom holds that records created or accumulated by one records creator must be kept together and not intermixed with the records of other creators, often referred to as *respect des fonds.*

A second axiom follows from the observance of *respect des fonds:* the way archives are described depends on their arrangement. Implicit in the archivist's observance of *respect des fonds* is the assumption that the way a creator "automatically and organically created and/or accumulates records" will affect the way archivists arrange a fonds. A fonds cannot be described until it has been arranged. The authors of *Toward Descriptive Standards* underscored this vital link between arrangement and description when they stressed that "archival description must proceed from a thorough understanding of the concepts and practices of archival arrangement, which give all processes of administrative and intellectual control of archives their distinctive character."[13] Similarly, levels of arrangement will determine the level of description and the authors of *Toward Descriptive Standards* recommended that archivists recognize five levels of arrangement (repository, fonds, series, filing unit, and item) and seven levels of description (inter-institutional, repository, thematic group, fonds, series, filing unit, and item).

Another axiom governing descriptive practice, also recommended by the authors of *Toward Descriptive Standards,* requires that all descriptive work must proceed from the general to the specific.[14] In order to place the description of a series that is part of a fonds in context, one must have a description of the fonds of which the series is a part. Users must know the context in which the records they are consulting have been created. It is incumbent upon archivists, therefore, to have intellectual control of their holdings first at the fonds level, before proceeding to lower levels of description.

These axioms have guided the Planning Committee and its working groups in writing *RAD.* To ensure its successful implementation, it is vital that archivists understand the foundations and structures on which it is built and the philosophy and principles underlying it. *RAD* is based on the framework of *AACR2R* with appropriate modifications

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[11] I am indebted to Michael Gorman for delineating this framework in an essay entitled "Principles, Standards, Rules and Applications" in Ralph W. Manning, ed., *AACR2 Seminar Papers* (Ottawa: Canadian Library Association, 1981), pp. 89-97.

[12] Some would argue that the "principles" referred to here are really only assumptions because there is, as yet, no unanimity amongst archivists about their universal nature. This points out the need for an international congress of archivists to produce such a Statement of Principles such as those enunciated by librarians in Paris in 1961.

[13] *Toward Descriptive Standards,* p. 57.

[14] Jacques Ducharme refers to this principle as the "principle of universality; that is, that archives must be described as a whole before one can undertake a detailed description of the parts." Cited in Carol Couture and Jean-Yves Rousseau, *The Life of a Document* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1987), p. 199.

to reflect those archival principles governing the arrangement and description of a fonds and its parts. After examining alternatives for the description of archival materials in a standardized format, the Fonds Level Working Group recommended in its report to the Planning Committee the adoption of *AACR2R* as a framework for archival description.[15] The Planning Committee endorsed this recommendation and accepted the approach taken by the Working Group to analyze each area in *AACR2R,* to evaluate its applicability to archival description and to modify the rules, explaining the reasons for any modifications. In its response to their report, the Planning Committee emphasized to the Fonds Level Working Group that any *AACR2R* rules could be modified to respect archival principles and in subsequent meetings with them a consensus was arrived at on the presentation of the rules as they appear in *RAD.*

In order to understand *RAD* it will be useful for archivists unfamiliar with the evolution of bibliographic standards and rules to understand the larger framework in which *RAD* and *AACR2R* reside. *AACR2R* represents an integrated approach to the description of materials normally found in libraries (as its table of contents for part I illustrates) and it is a generalist code of practice, "not specifically intended for specialist and archival libraries," but one which can be used as the basis for the description of materials like those found in archives, with appropriate modifications.[16] *RAD* provides archivists with a set of rules which "aim to provide a consistent and common foundation for the description of archival material within a fonds, based on traditional archival principles."[17]

It is essential, therefore, that archivists using these rules in their descriptive work remember that they are an extension of *AACR2R* to cover materials in archives that are part of a fonds. In some cases *RAD* modifies or augments an *AACR2R* rule; in other cases the rules are equivalent to *AACR2R.* Because *RAD* is based on *respect des fonds* it does not provide specific rules for the description of collections or items that do not form part of a recognizable fonds. Collections are, unlike fonds, artificial accumulations of materials and often lack a natural, organic unity. However, the rules can be applied to the description of collections and discrete items and *RAD* provides archivists with guidance in this matter in the introductory rules (see Rule 0.1). If archivists wish to describe published materials they should consult the relevant chapters in *AACR2R* for guidance.

The levels of detail of description reflected in rules 0.29 and 1.0D are intended to provide institutions with some flexibility when choosing a particular level of detail for a finding aid. The contents and format for a particular type of finding aid (union list, repository/thematic guide, inventory, or list) are thus determined by the depth (or level of detail) of description required by an institution. Implicit in the provision of levels of detail of description is the necessity for institutions to define the purpose of their finding aids (both existing and projected) and establish the minimum level of detail required for descriptions appearing in each type of finding aid. It must be emphasized that *RAD* does not prescribe products, that is, it does not provide guidance on the types of finding aids archives should develop, or the form in which they are presented or distributed to users.

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[15] "Report of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level," p. 9.

[16] *AACR2R,* Rule 0.1.

[17] *Rules for Archival Description,* Rule 0.1.

That is a matter of institutional policy.[18] Similarly, many rules provide for options in the application of a particular rule. Institutions are expected to develop their own policies and procedures for the application of an option as instructed in Rule 0.5.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The development of *RAD* has been, and continues to be, a challenging task. The Planning Committee appreciates, from its own experience, that *RAD's* implementation by institutions and use by archivists will require as much patience, careful study and reflection as that exercised by the Planning Committee and all its Working Groups in

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[18] This distinguishes *RAD* from both Michael Cook's *Manual of Archival Description* and Steven Hensen's *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts,* which both propose formats for the standardization and presentation of finding aids. Both Cook and Hensen give considerable attention to the provision of examples in a particular format. Cook gives two models for listing at different levels (list and paragraph modes) and Hensen displays archival descriptions tagged in accordance with the USMARC-AMC format.

[19] The Canadian Archival System: A Report on the National Needs and Priorities of Archives, Summary Report - August 1989 (Ottawa: Canadian Council of Archives, 1989), p. 19.

their development. The degree of success archivists will have in applying these rules to their descriptive work will depend upon the collective efforts of the Planning Committee, its Working Groups, and those in the profession who have taken the time to respond to the challenge of this endeavour. We can only hope that as archivists assess the rules they will apply, as Sir Hilary Jenkinson once commended, their "practical experience" combined with "sound theory" and "ordinary common sense."

Kent M. Haworth,
Chairperson
Planning Committee
on Descriptive Standards