

to the mansion under construction by the Canadian Planning Committee on Archival Description. RAD is designed to accommodate archivists engaged in the preparation of finding aids of all types for all media. MAD2 is designed to be as accommodating as RAD, but MAD2 is built on its own unique foundation — one presented as an alternative to AACR2. Both APPM and RAD present rules for the preparation of a catalogue record, a specific form of archival finding aid that can be combined with bibliographic catalogue records in a single information system to facilitate cross-research in primary and secondary resources. The authors of MAD2 reject the library-like catalogue record as an appropriate form of archival description, emphasizing instead other uniquely archival descriptive products.

Comparison of these three works could be nothing more than an interesting exercise, were it not for the growing support for development of international standards for archival description. The International Council on Archives has sponsored recent discussions of this issue for which an analysis of the three standards works was commissioned. This analysis revealed — in spite of cautious words to the contrary — that the books' similar covers are indicative of other similarities (all three are decorated in combinations of blue and white). The authors of the three works generally agree on the data elements that comprise a viable archival description and they all clearly believe that rules should govern the use of these data elements. The rules presented in the three manuals — with a few notable exceptions — are compatible. Continuing work by the ICA group has affirmed this compatibility.²

Supporters of international descriptive standards take heart from the core similarities between MAD2, RAD, and APPM2. They are not discouraged by obvious differences between the organization and structure of MAD2 and the organization and structure of its North American counterparts. They see a future in which archival description can be as widely shared and universally understood as descriptions of published works.

Notes

- 1 Some partial "comparisons" by the authors of these respective works are now in print. The preface to RAD acknowledges a debt to APPM and MAD, and Heather MacNeil of the Canadian Council of Archives has reviewed APPM in this journal. The author of APPM has evaluated RAD and MAD in *Archives and Informatics*. The Author of MAD considers its relationship to APPM in section 9.IIB of MAD2.
- 2 The ICA effort is being carried out by an Ad Hoc Commission on Archival Descriptive Standards that includes representatives from Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Malaysia, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, and the United States. The Commission already has circulated a set of basic principles on which rules for archival description can be based. A subgroup has begun drafting rules for the formulation of at least fifteen elements of description. It is expected that the principles and rules will be presented for international consideration at the ICA Congress to be held in Montreal in 1992.

Sharon Thibodeau

National Archives and Records
Administration, Washington, D.C.

Rules for Archival Description. PLANNING COMMITTEE ON DESCRIPTIVE STANDARDS. Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990. xvii, chapters paginated separately. ISBN 0-9690797-3-7.

What follows is not so much a review of *Rules for Archival Description* (RAD) as a synopsis of discussions which I have been having about it recently. RAD is not the sort of work which can be subjected to a conventional review. It is, after all, the culmination of a deliberate programme of action by the profession in Canada as a whole, tracing its history back, at least, to the Wilson Report of a decade ago. Throughout its planning and preparation, it has been subjected to detailed peer review, in the form of drafts submitted for comment, so that the final product should satisfy the needs of the community which has created it.

RAD is also not a work which one reviews simply by reading it. It can only be "judged" by using it to create descriptive products in archives. Until significant numbers of institutions adopt RAD as a tool of descriptive practice and have prepared a representative sample of archival descriptions one will not be able to determine whether the rules provide more or less help in solving the myriad problems which descriptive work presents. Until then, a "reviewer" of it can only examine the work using personal knowledge of the theoretical and practical requirements of description in order to estimate if it has covered all the bases.

Nevertheless, some kind of review is in order for a document which has been seen as a fundamental goal of the profession and is now offered for use. "Descriptive standards" are no longer a motherhood issue but a set of rules which we are reasonably expected to apply in our daily work. And, despite the very open participatory environment in which the rules have been written and revised, it is only now, when RAD is presented for use, that many of us have begun to look seriously at it. An imminent need to understand and apply the rules focuses the mind wonderfully.

It is on that very practical basis that I began my "conversation" with the Planning Committee at its first Workshop on RAD in Calgary last October. My observations, as a supporter-in-principle who must now "put his money where his mouth is," have been very practical, working-archivist questions about applications which, nevertheless, often involve esoteric discussions about some of the basic principles of archival arrangement and description. Using the rules does not mean a rote application of detailed instructions. On the contrary, my initial contact with the rules indicates that archivists will be forced to think hard about how and why they write their descriptions if they are to understand and use the rules.

First, they must be prepared to make a critical examination of their institution's descriptive practices in light of RAD's requirements. RAD is a set of rules about what descriptive information should be collected and about the style and order in which the information should be presented. Although application of the rules will undoubtedly force changes in the appearance of an archives' descriptive tools, it will not necessarily change the "data elements" which an archives is currently collecting. In comparing RAD's requirements against my institution's practice, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that we are already collecting most of what RAD says we should; we just aren't presenting it in RAD's approved style.

Unlike some descriptive manuals, RAD does not attempt to prescribe a physical model for the description of archives, although it certainly implies limits and directions to the appearance of future descriptive tools. Clearly, a RAD description is much more conceivable in a computer environment than on 3x5 cards. Similarly, RAD makes what may be a radical leap (sorry) by allowing all descriptive elements, from fonds level to

item, to be written into essentially one record (through multilevel description), though it does not require it. It has, I hope, been understood for a long time that archives are not going to be able to adopt universal descriptive standards without changing the way they collect and present descriptive information. A break with the old ways of doing things is a fundamental assumption of descriptive standards.

Understanding and applying the rules are not easy. The Planning Committee took a middle ground between Michael Cook's *Manual of Archival Description* (MAD) (which is a begin-at-first-principles effort) and Stephen Henson's *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* (which is a straightforward adaptation of *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*) by creating a set of rules, based on AACR2's structure and standards but written deliberately for the description of archival material. Nevertheless, many of the rules jar; formal title rules, for example, still carry the aura of their bookish origins. In my ongoing conversation with Planning Committee members, I have become confident that the rules do not demand absurdities; rather they support very well the rational practice of archivists in establishing names for archival units. Nevertheless, this set of rules alone demonstrates the need for much more interpretive assistance than RAD currently provides. It also demands a thoughtful approach by archivists when complying with RAD's rules about what constitutes title information, because RAD demands that such decisions be documented in the record. Similar demands for introspective decision-making by archivists are evident throughout the rules.

The structure of RAD, based on AACR2, will present challenges for many new users. One discovers quickly that one must never attempt to read or use RAD chapter by chapter. The whole is an integrated, interdependent work, which can only be used by reference to its mnemonic structure (with lots of bookmarks handy). Although only two chapters of Part I are currently available (chapter three, "Text," is out for review), they are sufficient to begin writing descriptions, unless the material being described is heavily freighted with special media. It is, in fact, the existence of chapter two, on multiple media fonds, which has justified, for me, the entire exercise. I confess to having been discontented with the project when chapter one, "General Rules for Description," was released for review; I can now understand its role as a compendium of common rules applicable to all subsequent chapters. It was chapter two which demonstrated that one could write an acceptable archival description using the rules.

Chapter two does, however, present problems which must be resolved before RAD can be consistently applied in institutions. RAD has developed rules for the description of fonds when it is not yet clear in archival theory what constitutes a fonds. Here again, the release of RAD forces archivists to think hard about what they are doing when they identify the hierarchical relationships of the records they propose to describe. Although this problem has occupied the core of my conversation with Committee members (which is still in progress) and it is beyond the scope of this review, it can nevertheless be briefly presented.

Although RAD does not, and should not, provide rules for identifying the fonds, its use of the term requires an examination of the concept which the term represents. It is not equivalent to Schellenberg's record group and does not necessarily permit the Jenkinson/Schellenberg structure of hierarchical groups and sub-groups to "place" a record unit in an arrangement system (the Committee's use of the term, *sous-fonds*, is an invention because there is, in fact, no equivalent expression for the English sub-group).

Until the profession is clear about what it means when it declares a unit of records to be a fonds, the application of RAD's rules will be subject to institutional whim and administrative convenience, rather than to the records themselves from whence, supposedly, comes our wisdom (see "Chief Source of Information"). The Committee has obviously recognized that the definition and application of the concept of fonds is vital to the use of RAD: they have commissioned a study on the issue.

In 1987 the Planning Committee issued "a call to action" on descriptive standards. That call needs to be reissued today. RAD is not another book on archives to be read and put on the shelf. There must be a professional and institutional commitment to adopt and use it as a tool of description. Although it is still incomplete, it is usable now. Only with use will the profession be able to review the work properly.

Keith Stotyn
Provincial Archives of Alberta

Records of Federal Royal Commissions (RG 33); Volume 1: Series 33/1 to 33/75. JAMES MURRAY WHALEN, ed. Ottawa: Government Archives Division, National Archives of Canada, 1990. General Inventory Series. Text in English and French. xxi, 180 p. ISBN 0-662-57217-3. Free.

The acquisition of federal government records considered worthy of long-term preservation is part of the mandate of the National Archives of Canada (NA). The Government Archives Division of the NA publishes a series of general inventories to inform government officials, researchers, and the general public of the rapidly growing extent and variety of such records. Each inventory covers one record group which is usually defined as any body of records of the Government of Canada or its predecessors that are "organizationally or functionally related by administrative continuity" (Introduction, p. xiv). This normally means that a separate record group is created for each department, branch, or agency of the Government of Canada that at any point during its existence maintained a separate and self-contained registry system. Record Group 33 (RG 33), however, does not conform to the usual definition of record group as applied to federal government records held by the NA. In RG 33, small bodies of similar records that have no administrative continuity (other than their identity as federal royal commissions) form one record group.

The purpose of *Records of Federal Royal Commissions* is to describe the records of federal commissions of inquiry since Confederation held by the Government Archives Division. Generally, it does not describe the records of the more recently appointed public inquiries available in the Government Archives Division scheduled to be published in volume II of the inventory which will contain an index to both volumes. The records in the record group are arranged by series; each series (i.e., RG 33/1, RG 33/2, etc.) contains the records on one commission. Although RG 33 is reserved for the records of federal royal commissions, it also includes some records other than those of royal commissions such as departmental investigations appointed under Part II of the Inquiries Act. Conversely, there are also records of certain royal commissions held by NA that have been placed in record groups other than RG 33. The lack of precision is partly because the federal government has so many ways to appoint commissions of inquiry.