

Words on the Page, Mud on the Paper: Materiality and Metadata in an Archival Context

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Used First World War trench maps are vanishingly rare. They were essentially ephemeral; folded and refolded, torn, thrust into grubby pockets, drawn on and discarded. New editions rendered old ones not just redundant, but dangerously misleading.

A map of this sort was part of an accession that I was working on. It was with other items of the type that often drift in with collections deposited in Archives (in this instance, two military wrist-watches). Objects of this sort often seem peripheral in an archival context; they can't be read in the way a document can. But the map was arguably in a permeable category between object and record as well.

The paper was well used: it was dirty, with the folds tending toward rips. An ominous blue pencil line marked out the course of the shells to be launched upon a German trench. Apart from the text of the printed map, and the significant additions, another text was visible. A few spots of Flanders mud still adhered to the paper. I remarked on this to the experienced Archivist at the bench next to me. My colleague considered it for a few moments and said: 'Should we wipe it off?'

Like Alistair Kwan¹, my other professional experience before coming to Archives has given me an alternative perspective. Museums

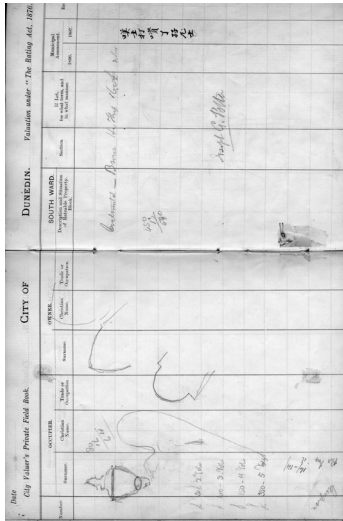


Figure 1: Field Valuation Book, Valuation Department, Dunedin City Corporation. Ref. V 2/7ff. Dunedin City Council Archives.

tend to regard the object like a text to be read, regardless of any print (or lack of it). Hence, the mud on the map is as much a thing to be interpreted as a written word, vividly showing the item in use, amenable to analysis and interpretation. The Museum worker in me said to leave the mud alone.

Peripheral additions like this, and the other use-wear and added details, are a form of metadata. They become useful – and hence worth saving in some form – when a different type of reading is undertaken. The practices of Museums and Galleries can enhance and inform archival practice in this way. Many practical ways of looking at documents, and reading their physical qualities and meta-meanings, can be imported into Archival practice. This applies to the written record in many ways already; metadata in the form of hand-writing (as opposed to the text), and data re-use are examples most of us will know well enough.

Alternative use and meanings can be found for otherwise redundant official records. As a Civic archivist, I am constantly

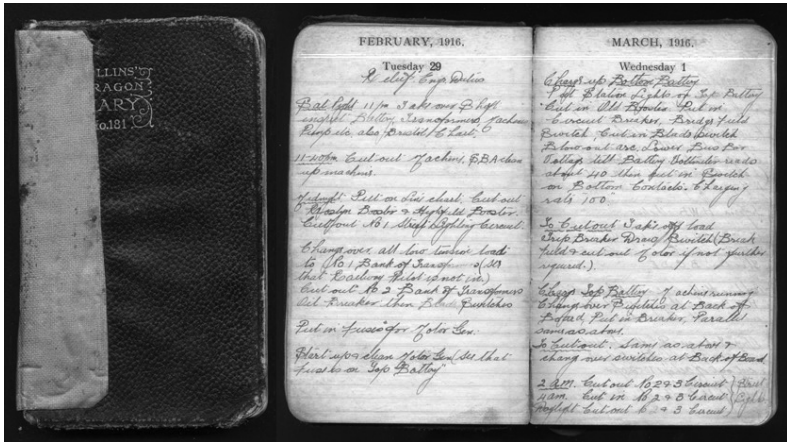


Figure 2: Diary of J S Doig a personal record of official events. Dunedin City Council Archives.

discovering how obsolete documents can be used to bridge the gaps in our record, through the reinterpretation of texts. In some instances, the physical aspects, be they writing, materials or fixtures are good clues to hidden truths. There are also instances of the unofficial and personal ‘in the margins’ of the official story – some of these narratives may be useful to other researchers. They can help to clarify the face-value reading of the record as well.

Hand-writing – particularly in the era before typewriters – is a form of meta-data, and at times a valuable one. Researchers of our cemetery records grapple with less than reliable texts – the sextons who produced them were often less than reliable themselves.² The records are in a variety of hands and states of disarray; comparing the writing with dates in the margins allowed a researcher to pinpoint the date when one particularly erratic individual commenced his career. This has been of some value in interpreting a confusing array of inconsistent duplicate records. Ironically, this researcher has contributed a lot of valuable word-searchable transcription work to our records: easy to use, but with the individual, and the chaotic reality edited into invisibility. The content remains the primary official source, but the style itself is another.

What was the daily experience of an employee of the Dunedin City Corporation in the 1880s and 1890s? Unless a reprimand or unusual instruction was issued, obscurity was nearly complete. Marginalia that apparently contribute nothing to the record of property valuation can leave a tantalising glimpse. The Field Valuation Books³ produced by City Valuer, John Morris, are such an example. Notes in the back of these books record the weather and the workload, accompanied by drawings of grave-stones and maritime flags, all things to be seen on his rounds of Dunedin's South Ward. Most intriguing is the rendering of his name in Chinese letters, copied like a talisman from one volume to the next. The course of his career, from the 1870s to his retirement in the new century can be traced in the margins. Most of this may be of no official note, but his caution that he was finishing work at 1.30 a.m., and that the results might be questionable has proven to be well founded! Interpretation of these official records is intertwined with the unofficial marginalia, in a reciprocal relationship that enhances the value of the public record.



Figure 3: Scrapbook of the St.Kilda Rate Payers Association. The paper used to construct the book consists entirely of election posters for the Communist Party. Ref. ACC 1993/7. Dunedin City Council Archives.

Material is routinely appraised and selected for ‘cultural and aesthetic value’. ‘Cultural value’ surely includes the work of employees in Local Government, which has, after all, a long and significant history. This type of selection can be a subjective process, but the latitude inherent in the process is a virtue, in that it avoids the narrowest strictures of legislation. The criteria applied to the process need not be without system, and many archives will have encountered these challenges before.

Very occasionally, records from former employees will be offered to the Archives by descendants. As a general policy, personal papers are not within the collection remit, but again, many of these items reveal the permeable relationship between the official and the personal. The 1916 personal Diary of John Doig contains notes from the professional study relating to his work on the Waipori Power Scheme, general procedural instructions for the plant, and records of daily duties.⁴ The personal is elided once more with the professional and official – the value as a public record may lie in the record of daily business, but a different Public may find other value.

The book ‘Australasian Roads’, by Coane and Coane⁵ is not a Council publication, and its ostensible connection with the collection is thus more tenuous again. The value inhering in it lies in the glimpse of hidden thinking that informed Council decisions. This volume had a long tenure as a Council resource: published in 1915, it was in the hands of an employee by at least 1928 (the name and date are inside



Figure 4: Alexander Leck Papers. Dunedin City Council Archives.



Figure 5: Port Chalmers Dog Register, binding. Dunedin City Council Archives.

the cover). It subsequently went through numerous shifts of offices, changing hands until a retiring employee offered it to Archives.

Some pencil marks indicate that one user made note of the advice relating to the topic of waste-disposal. The surviving deliberations over the building of a Destructor shows that the options outlined in the book were each meticulously explored (and in this case, ultimately rejected). Further notes indicate that other topics may have been influenced by the book; in the end, the decisions that were made are the official record, and speak for themselves: but the researching public might find this volume of background interest, and it is retained for this reason.

Sometimes, the ostensible text is of very little interest. Scrapbooks of the St.Kilda Ratepayers Association⁶ contain newspaper clippings that, apart from the choices of material involved, could be reproduced from several sources. The scrap paper used for the pages themselves, however, reveals a surprise: an election poster for a Communist Party candidate, remaindered and re-purposed. In the context of other signs of sympathy for the Soviet Union hidden among the scraps, an entirely different subtext emerges.



Figure 6: Port Chalmers Dog Register, inside boards. Dunedin City Council Archives.

‘Fixtures and Fittings’

Even if we cannot retain some non-conforming items (or constituent parts of them) in a collection, there are ways in which the meta-record can be preserved. Once again, museum practice can provide a template for archival procedure.

Paper records mostly reflect a time before the advent of word searchability in the modern, electronic, sense. Card indexes, and rigorous filing, controlled search practices as far as the technology of the day allowed. The practices of the era were reflected in, and in turn limited by, the physical apparatus of record keeping. A vast market for patent fixtures, filing boxes, card indexes and literal ‘red tape’ existed well into this century, and to an extent still does.

All too often, information management practices include re-organising records. Archivists also remove packaging (not to mention rusty pins and staples). This can alter the artefactual reality of the record. Like the mud on the map, they may be as much a nuisance, as a valuable piece of information. If these need to be removed, aspects of Museum practice can help preserve the information lost

In the case of the records of the Port Chalmers Borough, the influence of old record-keeping practices is remarkably intact. This is also a reflection of the ubiquitous influence of the very energetic Town Clerk, Alexander Leck (served 1879-1913). Most records of the Borough from this time are in his distinctive hand, reflecting an organisational record unified both intellectually and physically. This is represented by the distinctive – and mostly still unopened – bundles of letters he produced to organise and archive his work.⁷ With their distinctive bindings and wrappings, they manifest both the meticulous man and the organisation that became his creation. A large consistent set of such material can be a rare thing due to methodological reorganisation, a variety of contributors, and the attrition of time. As physical evidence they are ripe for interpretation and preservation – but fitting this into an already busy Archivist’s schedule can be just one more challenge. The letters are still valuable as records of Council activity and need to be viewed for that purpose, even now. An ad-hoc but consistent method for recording their original

state is available if such records are to be dismantled. Photography can record the contents and binding as they are revealed; almost any cell-phone camera produces an adequate image today. If this process is treated like the production of a loan form (or for that matter a Museum Condition Report), a short record can preserve the non-verbal information that would otherwise be disorganised. Loan documents, while less frequently issued, are also an opportunity to produce a condition report of the type familiar from Museum practice. Should the removal of older fixtures and fittings be called for later, a record will already be available. The example of the untidy, but fascinatingly complete, Port Chalmers Dog Register⁸ is a case in point. The volume was recently loaned for display, and this afforded an opportunity to record the physical reality of the document. This is of value both for the loan period, and for the permanent record.

‘How to read an electricity connection card’

Records of individual Dunedin City Council Electric Power and Light Department connections were clearly ephemeral; when the relevant building was demolished, the cards were destroyed (as far as I can tell; the details of this record keeping procedure are lost, a fact that is itself a problem for later users). Numerous modifications to the wiring in any given building necessitated a record system that could handle easy modification. The Visiblex ring-binder allowed this sort of change; the binders are gone, but the perforated cards tell the story of the record management process. The cards survived in an old air-raid shelter when the system ceased to be used, until they found their way to Archives. Obscurity alone may have saved them from destruction; disposal procedures of the earlier period are not clear and don't seem consistent either.

What would we have if modern retention and disposal standards had been applied to these, and other, older records? Would we have more of use, or less? These records were designed to be discarded and replaced during normal use. Dangerous goods permits were also not intended for long term retention, and most have consequently been destroyed. With the later advent of the Hazardous

a guarantor

3. The consumers: not always reflected in Valuation records, Street Directories, or any other readily discoverable source. Whoever paid the bill ended up with their name in the official record, up to the date when their use of power ceased.
4. Use of the premises – not always well defined, but discernible from:
5. Equipment installed – seldom mentioned in official sources, but including petrol pumps, welders, lighting, heating, radios, and a whole raft of other industrial machinery. This is often a major, or even sole, source of information for HAIL analysis.

This leaves us with a minimum of four classes of information not readily found elsewhere. This may also be raised again when it is considered that in some cases:

6. The information may relate to Council-held areas where relevant records of any sort may be few and poorly detailed.
7. The set appears to be complete and consistent, and is amenable to a wide interpretation of the various data

The connection card for 95 Filleul Street⁹ is a typical example of what was, at first glance, only a dwelling connection. A closer examination showed that the occupier had in fact pursued his profession there. The G. Williamson who occupied the house was a homeopath, who had installed a ‘therapeutic’ device designed by the infamous quack-doctor, Albert Abrams. Dates and other information are all concisely presented. Details of this sort are no longer practical ones for the original purpose; the wiring in the building is long since changed, no doubt. But archaeologists, hazard researchers, family historians, and a raft of others are beginning to appreciate their value. The data in these records is of doubtful face-value, but the meta-data is more valuable than ever, in the context of other information loss.

This type of assessment is a result of the practical use of records during Archival research – the practical informs the theoretical. Retention and Disposal decisions may be better ones as a result.

Metadata in an archival context is often concerned with contextualising the text. Reinterpretation of the text itself, and a focus on the other written details, are techniques which will no doubt be familiar to many of us. The marginal and inadvertent data are metadata too; they simply await the right kind of reader. Physical qualities of the material are often overlooked in an Archives context, and attention to this may help to enrich the stories that records can tell. This will also allow archives to broaden their usefulness to a variety of publics.

Endnotes

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turn to media and materiality', in *Archifacts* 1-2, 2017, pp. 86-94.

2 Dunedin City Council Archives, Parks and Reserves 8/1/1/b

4 -- Diary of J S Doig

edition), George Robertson Proprietary and Company Limited, Melbourne.

6 -- Scrapbook of the St. Kilda Rate-Payers Association, ACC 1993/7.

7 -- Papers, Alexander Leak.

8 -- Port Chalmers Dog Register.

9 -- Electric Power and Light Department, Series 15, Connection 3873.