

Book Reviews

Archival Arrangement and Description:

Modules 1-3 in Trends in Archives Practice

CHRISTOPHER J. PROM and THOMAS J. FRUSCIANO (eds.)

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Digital transfers are now a reality being faced by many archivists and online access to archival finding aids is commonly expected, so a clear and relevant how-to manual on both topics from an authoritative source will be widely welcomed. Although written specifically for North Americans, many parts of this (relatively slim) volume do provide a useful guide for New Zealand archivists needing a greater knowledge of descriptive standards, digital archives management, and providing online access.

The editors are authoritative figures in the US archival world. Thomas Frusciano, University Archivist at Rutgers University, is the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Archival Organization*, while Christopher Prom, Assistant University Archivist and Associate Professor of Library Administration at the University of Illinois, was recently appointed Publications Editor of the Society of American Archivists. Prom was involved in developing ArchiveSpace, a software suite for archivists and manuscript curators, and has conducted a 'Practical E-Records Project' as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Dundee in 2010–2011. The editors bring both practical and theoretical knowledge to the volume. Though its stated aim is to cover arrangement and description, they have not forgotten that the purpose of arrangement and description is to preserve context and to enable access, so these aspects are also covered.

Archival Arrangement and Description comprises three modules in a new series, 'Trends in Archives Practice', described in the Preface as a strategy to deal with the rapid changes in the world of record-keeping. The intention is that they be read in conjunction with basic manuals on archival theory and practice, and with other modules in the series as required. Each module is brief and specific, so it can be easily updated; and, in a further effort to improve accessibility and ease of updating, the modules are also available online as eBooks and PDFs.

As the modules have been written with a North American audience in mind, the standards used are not always appropriate for New Zealand

needs. However, if read in conjunction with relevant local manuals, such as *Keeping Archives and Describing Archives in Context: A Guide to Australasian Practice* (bearing in mind New Zealand standards, which can be found on the Archives New Zealand and ARANZ websites), much of the advice relating to general principles, terminology and specific resources could be very useful. Some suggested practices reflect the strong library tradition in North American archives, and the emphasis on the use of DACS (Describing Archives: A Content Standard), the American implementation of ISAD(G) means that this advice needs to be filtered out for local use. All authors are careful to emphasise that, although standards are necessary for information sharing, decisions on description can be tailored to specific needs. The basic concepts are carefully explained and described, but there is so much technical terminology and the volume is so dense with information, that some degree of background knowledge would be very helpful. For example (p.83 – a definition of RDF: Resource Description Framework): ‘RDF is a W3C standard for data exchange on the Web. RDF employs URIs to convey ...’

The modules have been separately written by experts in their fields to a consistent format, so that despite different authors their structure is easy to follow. Each begins with an overview of the topic, followed by detailed explanations and guides, a section on applying the information to your own repository, a conclusion which summarises the module, and then some very practical appendices. These contain case studies, citations for further reading, glossaries, web addresses for suggested tools and resources, and workflows to help in implementing solutions suggested in the modules.

The first module, by Sibyl Schaefer and Janet Bunde, introduces the different types of descriptive standard, giving a brief history of their development (from a North American point of view) and an overview of most types, including international descriptive standards. Data structure, content and value standards are covered, as are metadata standards, though the influence of library standards on US archives can be strongly seen in this module. There is a suggestion that the use of MARC standards (library-based) may no longer be suitable for archives, but the authors do emphasise that standards should be chosen to suit individual circumstances. There is also a brief discussion of the semantic web and linked data. An appendix with further reading also provides web addresses for standards, tag libraries and schema such as EAD, EAC-CPF, MODS, METS, XML, Dublin Core and ICA standards such as ISAAR(CPF), ISAD(G), ISDF and ISDIAH.

The second module, by J Gordon Daines III, describes the challenges of processing digital records and manuscripts. He uses business process mapping of arrangement and description to show how traditional A & D methods can be re-engineered to suit digital records, and then offers a possible procedural model for digital processing, based on a US example. From a Continuum/context relationship perspective it is interesting that the author notes the need to become involved with the creators of digital records before transfer, if possible, and that these tend to have many-to-many relationships compared to traditional paper records. In support, he cites (Australian) Adrian Cunningham's argument for the involvement of digital archivists in the creation and management of digital information. However, lifecycle model terminology is still used, and the author goes no further than to say (p.93) that archivists can ask donors how their digital materials were generated, for what purpose, and how they were managed.

Finally, module 2 contains eight recommendations: practical advice, such as engaging with the literature, creating a list of questions to ask donors, becoming comfortable with the available tools, developing policies and a preservation plan, participating in workshops, not letting 'the perfect be the enemy of the possible', and finding short-term solutions to bridge gaps until a better one is available. An appendix describes recent projects, examining methods of managing digital and hybrid records, and provides reference for more information. The module also lists links to a range of relevant software, and suggests downloading them to become more familiar with their possibilities. These links to software will no doubt in time become outdated, but these manuals are produced as modules to allow regular updating—another reason to look at an online rather than a printed version.

In module 3 Daniel Santamaria describes access tools for pre-accession, accessioning, description, managing legacy data and backlogs, delivery of descriptive records, and for the (automated) evaluation of access to and use of archival records. It provides implementation recommendations for each, at three levels from basic to advanced. Again, this module is influenced by library-based methods, recommending archivists bear in mind four user tasks defined by the library community – Find, Identify, Select and Obtain material described – when creating descriptive records. However, it does note that library-designed descriptive tools are not usually appropriate for archives. It does mention context briefly, stating the end result should be a record that communicates the information content and functional purpose, including the context of their creation

and use. However, the emphasis is very much on access rather than the preservation of context. The main finding tool is described as a 'catalog', with finding aids described as usually a single document which 'facilitates the discovery of information within a group of records ... that are related by a unifying characteristic, such as their circumstance of creation or the format of material.'

The module contains description, discussion and examples of implementations for several different tools and standards, such as Encoded Archival Description and Encoded Archival Context, locally developed databases and tools, Microsoft Access, Archivists' Toolkit, Archon and ICA-AtoM. (The proofreading in the volume is mostly good, but the web address for ICA-AtoM has been replaced with one for FileMaker Pro). Again, the case studies provide detailed real-world examples of implementations of different access tools in different kinds of institution, and these assist understanding how the manual's suggestions could be put into practice, as well as enlivening its drier informational parts.

The one feature missing, however, which I would have found very useful, is an index. Although there are detailed tables of contents at the beginning of each module, an index would allow searching for terms – for example, EAD – that are in every section. Some subjects are covered in a range of contexts, so there is repetition, though as the modules are available separately, this may be unavoidable. It does mean, however, that when read together there can be a sense of *déjà vu*. I found myself skipping back several times to work out whether I had already read a section. This is another reason for an index, to be able to put together all the information on a single topic. Of course, if accessing the modules online, this would be possible without an index, so perhaps this is why it was not done.

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