

The Problem of Modern Archives¹

By LÉOPOLD GENICOT

*Professor, University of Louvain
Honorary Archivist-paleographer at
the General Archives of the Kingdom
at Brussels*

A profound change is at present taking place in the composition of Belgian archives and in the work of the technical personnel assigned to them. Until recent years, documents antedating the French Revolution formed their principal and sometimes, almost exclusive content, and archivists were only required to have a thorough knowledge of history and the auxiliary sciences, as well as a sound knowledge of Belgium's past and eventually of the part of the province to the chief town of which they were assigned. But most of the so-called "early" archives are now filed and indexed and we cannot expect that much more will be added to them, except for family or commune records. On the other hand, so-called "modern" archives (subsequent to 1796) are beginning to overflow our depositories. They will necessarily occupy an increasingly larger space and the day is not far off when they will monopolize all the archivists' time. Archivists will then cease to be mere historians; they will have to know in detail all the intricacies of contemporary Belgian administration, and the course on archival economy that they take today during their training period will without doubt be augmented by an intensive course on Belgian institutions since 1830.

This development of modern archives gives rise to serious technical problems. There are a number of points in which modern archives may be distinguished from early archives, principally these two essential ones: they are very voluminous and they are "living," in the sense that the administrative agencies which created them

¹ A translation by Mrs. Magurn, member of the staff of the World Bank, Washington, D. C., from the original French as published in the journal of the Association of Belgian Archivists, Librarians, and Museum Curators, *Archives, Bibliothèques et Musées de Belgique*, 18: 65-74 (1947). Published with permission of the Association and Professor Genicot.

are still in operation. Modern records should therefore be filed according to certain rules, some of which apply to them alone.

Heretofore these special rules have never been strictly formulated. But the time has come to define them as precisely as possible and in full detail and to issue the necessary supplement to the *Manual* of Feith, Fruin and Muller, because, although this manual is excellent in connection with early archives, it leaves a large number of the questions posed by modern archives unanswered. This task, of primary and immediate urgency, is obviously beyond the scope of one person; it can only be carried out by means of a series of exchanges of viewpoints in which all Belgian archivists will participate, or by a committee officially charged with carrying it out.

The present article is a contribution to this collective work. We shall reveal some of the principles which we have followed in filing modern records—some with respect to the selection of documents, and others with respect to the preparation of indexes.

The basic consideration in the selection of modern records is the absolute need for destroying part of them, at least when they are subsequent to 1830 or 1840. For instance, the tax returns prepared annually by the taxpayers of the province of Namur, together with their vouchers, constitute around 10,000 files of average thickness, and it is materially impossible to preserve such quantities of paper.

Moreover, it is not necessary to do so. A good number of current administrative documents can be destroyed without detriment to history, for example those which contain only facts barren of all interest, which can be found in other documents, or which are re-stated in official or private publications. The destruction of a more or less sizable fraction of modern records is thus perfectly legitimate.

It should be done very prudently, however, and by applying tested principles. The first of these might be expressed as follows: all documents which duplicate other documents or printed matter should be destroyed.

Since 1796 and even more since 1830, the central, provincial and even commune administrations have been publishing regularly certain types of documents and certain statistics. The preservation of first drafts, originals and complete or partial copies of documents of this type which do not have any important annotation or correction is naturally contraindicated. In the archives of the provinces and towns we find, for example, a large number of budget statements intended for different administrative agencies; these more or less lengthy statements (many contain only one article) have for

every marginal note only a brief note mentioning the settlement of expenditures; they can therefore be eliminated whenever the corresponding budgets and accounts are printed. You can — and we shall presently come back to this point — frequently destroy documents which have served for drawing up statistics or which have been condensed in the form of statistics.

The application of this principle is justified, however, only to the extent to which official publications are easily available to searchers. Hence it is necessary to have in each archival depository, especially in the provinces, the most extensive administrative library possible, and, since this library will never be complete, to prepare a "catalogue of official publications" since 1830, which would contain some brief indication as to the exact content of each of the publications and indicate the library or libraries where they might be obtained for reading or consultation. This catalogue would be useful not only to visitors to our depositories; it would also render the greatest service to the archivist in charge of the selection of a modern record group by giving him a list of all the publications where certain documents of this group might be published.

All documents which serve the same purpose as others should also be eliminated, with the removal, first of all, of material duplicated within one file or folder. With the present development of bureaucracy, many matters are submitted to several authorities before being settled. Thus a sometimes impressive number of copies is added to the original report, together with acknowledgments and routing slips and other papers of this kind which do not add anything new and which it would be absurd to keep; their systematic elimination easily transforms thick files into manageable ones.

Material duplicated within the same record group should be eliminated next. Many modern collections of records, especially legal records, contain parallel series in which some documents closely reproduce or summarize others and should therefore be eliminated. It is useless to retain lists, dockets, conclusions, proceedings, summary notes on hearings and judgments in the archives of a civil court; it suffices to keep the dockets, conclusions and sentences and, in exceptional cases, any proceedings which contain correspondence or other papers with more complete information on certain points than the dockets. It is the task of the archivist to examine these parallel series and decide which should be destroyed. This is naturally a very delicate matter and requires a close study of the documents to be selected. To facilitate it, it would be desirable for every

archivist who has classified a modern records collection to prepare a well-documented report on the principles which he has followed. This report should especially give details on the series which he has kept and those which he thought could be legitimately destroyed. It would then be discussed at a meeting of archivists. After a certain time we would in this way have a body of rules applicable to the selection of each type of modern archives. If such a procedure is not followed, the result will inevitably be that the archivists in charge of selecting records in one place will waste a great deal of time on a preliminary study of the documents, a perfectly useless study because it has already been made by his colleagues at another place, since similar collections may be kept in each depository. And, with far more serious results, several archivists working separately might reach different conclusions; some might eliminate series kept by others and identical records might be handled differently from one depository to another.

Within the same record group there may still be overlapping among "primary" documents and statistical statements derived from them. The former may be kept or destroyed according to whether or not they give details of real interest not found in the latter. Thus we find in the files of the provincial government of Namur both the lists of provincial automobile, bicycle, and dog taxes and the annual census of the number of autos, bicycles, and dog taxes, as well as the fines which have been imposed. We can not go so far as to destroy the lists of automobile taxes prior to 1914, because the corresponding census statements do not permit the development of this new method of locomotion to be closely followed, or a study to be made of the region and social class in which it was first used. On the other hand, there is no reason to keep the list of dog taxes, especially since they do not indicate pedigrees.

Duplication may exist not only within the same depository, but also from one group to another. The same district budgets and accounts are found at the same time in the district files, the files of the "arrondissement" and the provincial government. Cognizance of infractions of weights and measures regulations is taken in the reports of inspectors sent to the provincial government and in the decisions of the lower court which have passed sentence on them. And it is obvious to specialists that the majority of the files of the local and regional sections of the Relief and Food Committee could be destroyed because they have been recopied or summarized sufficiently in the files of the provincial divisions.

Finally, there may be duplication among documents kept in dif-

ferent depositories. This is especially true in the case of documents kept at the same time in the files of a ministry, which are deposited in the General Archives of the Kingdom, and in the documents of a provincial government office or a regional bureau under this ministry, which are sent to the archives of the interested province. The desire to facilitate the research of local historians justifies the preservation of the copies of the papers held in provincial depositories, insofar as they have enough space. But some day space will undoubtedly be insufficient and it will then be necessary to apply in all its severity the first principle of destroying documents containing duplicate material.

The second principle which we propose to follow in the selection of modern archives is that of eliminating documents which lack historical interest. In all record groups there are papers, even complete series, which are of no importance or which are of such slight importance that it is unnecessary to keep them. We cite for instance the case of the provincial government files which contain the appointments of private guards and, in the case of the lower courts, all the papers relating to the settlement of the expenses of criminal suits. As in the case of parallel series within the same record group, the archivist must make a choice. If left to himself, he runs the risk of permitting himself to be guided by subjective considerations and of taking arbitrary decisions. That is why it would be desirable to achieve common accord among archivists as to the list of series which, in each type of record group, can be destroyed as being of insufficient interest.

But there are some series of documents which are of real importance but which nevertheless cannot possibly be kept in their entirety. The most striking case is that of tax returns, mentioned at the beginning of this article. Space is lacking to keep them all, but they should not be destroyed completely. It is therefore necessary to keep some of them. First of all, we should preserve those which are of special interest because of the years from which they date, particularly those from 1914 to 1918. Then, among the others, which are all of the same interest, we shall keep certain specimens selected at random and which will serve as samples. Thus, in Namur, it was decided on the one hand to keep all the returns for one year out of ten, 1900, 1910, etc., and on the other hand to keep those for every year for certain typical towns and certain city streets, a large agricultural village of the North, an industrial town of the Basse-Sambre, a semi-agricultural, semi-industrial borough of Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse, certain villages of Condroz, Ar-

denne and Fagnes, a middle class street, a large commercial thoroughfare, a street thickly settled with small shops, a wealthy boulevard and a new suburban avenue. Here is another example of the application of what could be called the sampling principle: In criminal courts, the reports of cases which were not prosecuted constitute a bulky mass of documents which, if taken separately, are of no interest but which together are very revealing of the conditions existing in a town, for example. Therefore we can neither keep nor eliminate all of them. The best solution would appear to be to keep primarily those of the "crisis years," 1870, 1871, 1884, 1894, 1902, 1914 to 1919, and, for normal periods, those for one year out of ten.

Of course, there are in modern as well as in early archives certain series of documents which must be kept in their entirety, as, for example, the correspondence of the presiding judge in a court of inferior jurisdiction or the records of the general police and of the general events in the records of a provincial administration. There may even be records, land records, for instance, which must be kept absolutely intact. Thus, if space is lacking in the depository, they should not be destroyed but a new place should be made for them.

Briefly, those are three of the rules which might permit a solution of the first technical problem raised by modern archives, that of crowding and insufficient space. The second, the preparation of indexes, is much easier.

All modern archives are necessarily incomplete: they contain only a part, the oldest, of the documents received or issued by the agency which created them. At variable intervals new documents are acquired, documents which differ only as to date from those hitherto filed and which are simply a chronological extension of the latter. How should these files be classified?

The adoption of decimal numbering appears necessary, to begin with. This permits the incorporation of new documents into old files at any time and in their logical place in the series to which they belong, without disturbing the existing classification. For this it is necessary only to divide the group into sections numbered from 1 to 9, the sections into subsections serially numbered from 10 to 19, from 20 to 29, etc., the subsections into groups designated by three figures, 100 to 109, 110 to 119, etc., until there is a strictly chronological series which may be numbered continuously.

To understand this system better, here is an example of the ap-

plication of decimal numbering to a record group, that of a court of inferior jurisdiction.

First, the general classification plan:

1. General

- 10 Organization of the court
- 11 Correspondence of the court
- 12 Correspondence on the laws of "7 vendemiare, year IV and 19 fructidor, year V" (French Republican calendar dates) on religious buildings and clergyman's oaths
- 13 Activity of the court. Statistics
- 14 Building and other property
- 15 Accounts. Petty expenses
- 16 Legal summaries
- 17 Collection of local police regulations

2. Public Prosecutor's Office

- 20 Correspondence
- 21 Births, marriages and deaths
- 22 Supervision of police courts
- 23 Documents concerning notaries and solicitors
- 24 Documents concerning officials (civil servants) and sworn officials
- 25 Healing arts
- 26 Committee of wards for parolees and children

3. Civil and Commercial Court

- 30 Rulings of court in session
- 31 Summary inquiries and counter-inquiries
- 32 Record of proceedings
- 33 Findings (decisions)
- 34 Civil procedures
- 35 Cause list
- 36 Civil trials (judgments)
- 37 Unclosed proceedings
- 38 Bankruptcies
- etc. . .

Here are two samples of the detailed plan of one section:

2. Public Prosecutor's Office

- 20 Correspondence
- 201 Registers 1849-1854
 - 2010 1849
 - 2011 1850
 - 2012 (Reserved, register missing)
 - 2013 1852

- 2014 1853
- 2015 1854
- 202 Circulars received and issued 1808-1898
- 203 Correspondence with the Attorney General 1828-1909
 - 2030 1828 to 1886
 - 2031 1887 to 1909
- 204 Records of Attorney General's reports, 1896-1904
 - 2040 1896 to 1899
 - 2041 1899 to 1904
- 205 Miscellaneous correspondence 1825-1920
- 3. Civil and Commercial Court
 - 30 Rulings of court in session on petitions, injunctions, trials, inquiries, etc., year VIII-1830
 - 300 Year VIII-XII
 - 301 Year XIII
 - 302 Year XIV-1806
 - 303 1807
 - 304 1808
 - 305 1809
 - 306 1810
 - 307 1811
 - 308 1812
 - 309 1813
 - 3010 1814
 - 3011 1815
 - 3012 1816
 - etc. . . .
 - 3026 1830
 - etc. . . .

Although this system theoretically has an incontestable superiority over others, it presents serious difficulties in practice. For example, it makes it necessary to leave a large amount of shelf space at the end of each chronological series to avoid extensive manipulations at the time of subsequent acquisitions and thus causes a great deal of space to be unutilized. It would probably also cause much confusion and error. Would not our file clerks become confused by numbers with 4, 5 and even 6 figures placed in close succession on the shelves in a way so disturbing to the uninitiate? Would they be able quickly to find the requested document for the visitor and always put it back into its proper place?

It would be better to apply a simpler system: place the documents on the shelves and number them as a single continuous series in the order in which they are received. This method will obviously

end by breaking the unity of the files on the shelves; future acquisitions will be separated, series will be divided, part will be located in one place, another part farther away and still another perhaps elsewhere. But that will not be important provided the unity of the files is reestablished, the series reconstituted, in the index.

The index should therefore be prepared according to the following principles:

Documents cannot be listed therein, as in the case of the indexes of early archives, in strict serial order, as this would make consultation simply impossible. They will have to be listed in chronological order, without regard to the serial numbers. This will require that the index be established on loose-leaf sheets (we will not discuss the card indexing system, the objectionable features of which are too obvious), that each page be devoted to a single chronological series and that the page be turned at the end of the series; otherwise it would be necessary to rewrite the list completely at each inventory taking. Thus it will be possible, at the time of later acquisitions, to complete the index, series by series, by using the blank left at the foot of each page and, if necessary, by inserting a new sheet.

The use of loose-leaf pages instead of a record book will not result in the loss of pages. There are today systems of loose-leaf binding, especially the spiral type, which guard against this danger.

In order to clarify the essential features of this method of classifying and indexing, we shall use again the example given above. At the first entry, the documents are numbered in the usual order, as a single series, without reserving any numbers (except to fill in a small gap later). Assume that we reach the figure 2,825.

The Rulings of Court in Session are numbered serially:

560	Year VIII-XII
561	Year XIII
562	Year XIV-1806
	etc. . . .
570	1814
571	1815
572	1816
	etc. . . . up to
622	1864

The next series, Summary Inquiries and Counter-Inquiries, is

623	Year VIII-IX
624	Year X-XI
	etc. . . .

At the time of second acquisitions, the documents are numbered from 2,826 and the Rulings of Court in Session for the year 1865 and thereafter are numbered from 3550, for example

3550	1865
3551	1866
3552	1867
etc. . . .	

In the index prepared at the time of the first acquisitions, one or several pages are devoted to Rulings of Court in Session, and we turn to the next page for Inquiries and Counter-Inquiries as follows:

	p. 80	
620	Rulings of Court in Session	1862
621	"	1863
622	"	1864
The rest of the page is left blank		
	p. 81	
623	Summary Inquiries and Counter-Inquiries	Year VIII-IX
624	"	" X-XI
etc.		

At the time of the second acquisition, the index is completed series by series and page 80 then looks as follows:

	p. 80	
620	Rulings of Court in Session	1862
621	"	1863
622	"	1864
3550	"	1865
3551	"	1866
3552	"	1867
etc.		

If necessary, a page may be inserted and numbered 80a, or all the pages may be renumbered and the table of contents remade, which requires only slight effort.

The problems of selection and numbering are not the only ones raised by modern archives. There are others, for example, that of format and delivery. Administrative agencies should standardize the format of their records or at least avoid as far as possible the use of those enormous sheets which do not fit into our shelves and are difficult to handle, and, in particular, they should send in the documents which are no longer essential to them, at periodic intervals and as early as possible. But here the solutions do not depend on the archivists alone and we shall not attempt to prescribe them.

In concluding the brief study which we have just made, we advocate the following measures: (1) the creation of a course on the administrative organization of Belgium since 1796, which would be given to trainees; (2) the establishment of a "Catalogue of official publications" since 1830; (3) the establishment of a committee of archivists, or the organization of meetings of archivists, for the purpose of defining the general principles applicable to the classification of modern archives; (4) the presentation by each archivist who has classified a modern record group of a well-documented report on this work, and the organization of meetings at which these reports would be discussed, in order to draw conclusions as to particular rules applicable to the selection of each type of modern archives; (5) the adoption of serial numbering for the classification of modern records, provided that the indexes are adjusted.