

The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment

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IN THE classification system that is generally accepted and adopted by Australian archivists, the primary category for purposes of arrangement of archives is, as in the United States, the "record (or archive) group," the second category is the "record series," and the third is the "item" (consisting of one document or a number of documents fastened or bound together). The concept of the "group" provides the required administrative context for archives and is used as a basis for (a) the descriptive inventory, (b) the physical arrangement of archives (*i.e.*, the so-called shelf group), and (c) the numerical control of archives.

Most archivists would undoubtedly agree, however, that, in attempting to apply the concept of the record group, they encounter in the organisation of archives problems of varying complexity, both administrative and physical. The present observations have as their object analysing some typical Australian problems in order to reveal the conflict between the concept of the record group and basic archival principles and proposing a solution in harmony with these principles.

BASIC OBJECTIVES

If the long-established principles of *respect des fonds* (*Provenienzprinzip*) and respect for original order (*Registraturprinzip*) have any general validity beyond the immediate historical situations in which they were developed, it would seem that they entail the following objectives:

1. Archives should be kept in their administrative context, in the sense of both (a) the office unit and person producing them and (b) the record system of which they form a part.
2. Archives should be kept in the order in which they were produced, entered on record, or incorporated into a record system.

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To these one might add other objectives, such as flexibility in archives management (especially in numeration and location) and efficient use of storage accommodation.

SOME PROBLEMS

If one accepts the above propositions, then the following difficulties present themselves in the application of the record group concept to archives:

1. *The Record Group as the Records of a Transferring or Controlling Agency*

The record group, if conceived as the records transferred to archival custody by one agency, is in basic conflict with the first objective. There are cases in which a record transferred by an agency was actually produced by another. For example, an experimental record group established by the Commonwealth Archives Office for the Commonwealth Department of the Interior included a Register of Correspondence, 1901, no doubt transferred to archival custody by the Department of the Interior but actually produced by the Prime Minister's Office in the first Department of External Affairs and transmitted to the Department of the Interior through three successor agencies. The administrative context provided by the Department of the Interior is hardly relevant to the volume in question, and surely, in order to explain the record system and the initial notations on the documents, the series must be placed in the context of the Prime Minister's Office.

There are other cases also in which a record series created by one agency has been split and consequently has been transferred to archival custody by a number of other agencies. As an instance of this problem, the Commonwealth Archives Office has received parts of the correspondence of the Department of Post-war Reconstruction from the Department of National Development, the Department of Repatriation, and the Prime Minister's Department, all of which latter agencies assumed responsibility for some of the functions of the former department on its abolition in 1950. If the parts of the correspondence were left with the record groups of the transferring departments, the series would be separated from its primary administrative association and would be permanently split, with a consequent destruction of its original order.

Thus the record group considered as being records transferred by an agency is deficient in that it does not in all cases provide a meaningful administrative context for an archive (contrary to ob-

jective 1) and in that it may interfere with the original order of items within a series (contrary to objective 2).

2. *The Record Group as the Records of a Creating or Recording Agency*

The conception of the record group as the records created by one agency is an attempt to meet somewhat more closely the basic objective. Even this conception will be in conflict with one of the objectives, however, in cases where archives are found to have been created not by one agency but by a succession of agencies. What can one do in such circumstances? There appear to be three possibilities:

(a) Place the series with one of the record groups, normally that of the last creating agency. For example, in the Commonwealth Government, a correspondence files series, 1903-38, was produced in turn by the central offices of the first Department of External Affairs, to 1916, the Department of Home and Territories, 1916-28, the second Department of Home Affairs, 1928-32, and the first Department of the Interior, from 1932. If one places the series with the Interior record group, however, one both deprives the other creating agencies of an important part of their records and makes the Interior group rather grotesque, since a department established in 1932 can hardly have participated in the production of archives created in 1903. This solution thus provides a partly false administrative context in one group and destroys the original sequence of series in other groups.

(b) Create a composite group to include both the first creating agency and its successors. One might attempt functional groups, but such groups are nebulous and fictitious and provide no real administrative context for the interpretation of the documents.

(c) Split the series, allocating the appropriate part to each creating group, as recommended by Jenkinson. Such a procedure, while providing an administrative context, however, would destroy the original order of items within the series and the organic unity of the series. Indeed, splitting is not always feasible, as for example in the case of a single volume, Register Under the Contract Immigration Act, 1902-40, created in turn by the Commonwealth Departments of External Affairs (1), Home and Territories, Home Affairs (2), Interior (1), and Interior (2).

In essence, the central problem of the creating agency record group for the physical arrangement of archive series arises from

the fact that the lifespan of the series and that of its creating agency are not necessarily coextensive. Series are begun and ended, agencies are established and abolished, but such events do not necessarily coincide. To attempt to fit the series into the record group is to deny the real nature of the series and to attempt the impossible, whatever ingenious compromises one may resort to.

A further disadvantage of the creating agency record group is that it is not always easily defined or identified. Considerable research into administrative history may be necessary before a group can be established; in the meantime, records cannot be assigned to a group, with resultant delay in processing and numeration.

3. *Record Group Series Numeration*

It is the practice to use the record group as the basis for numbering series, thus determining the order of series in the descriptive inventory and in physical arrangement on storage shelves. On the assumption that there is a logical order of series within the group (whether functional, organisational, type, class, or chronological—the last being the only unarbitrary order), once the series numbers are allotted an additional series that is accessioned cannot be inserted readily in its logical position. One must therefore become reconciled to either disorder or a general renumbering. In other cases final processing and numbering may be postponed indefinitely to await the likelihood of an additional series being discovered. Such rigidity arises from the implicit assumption that the group is a stable entity, whereas in reality the group is hardly ever static but is subject to change. If one's objective is flexibility in numbering, the record group will not suffice.

4. *The Record Group as a Shelf Group*

It is also the practice to use the record group as the factor determining the shelf location of archives, all series in a group being shelved together in order. Once the series are so shelved, however, what does one do when a further accession is received of (say) series no. 2 of a group of 50 series, some of which require varying shelf heights? Does one move series 3–50, to allow the insertion of the additional part of series 2, or does one become reconciled to disorder? If one's objective is efficient storage, the record group will not suffice and indeed inhibits a realistic approach to repository management.

5. *Record Group Definition*

Underlying the preceding difficulties, there is also a fundamental problem in the lack of satisfactory and consistent interpretation of the concept of the record group. The definition adopted by Australian archivists in 1954 was, after Jenkinson,

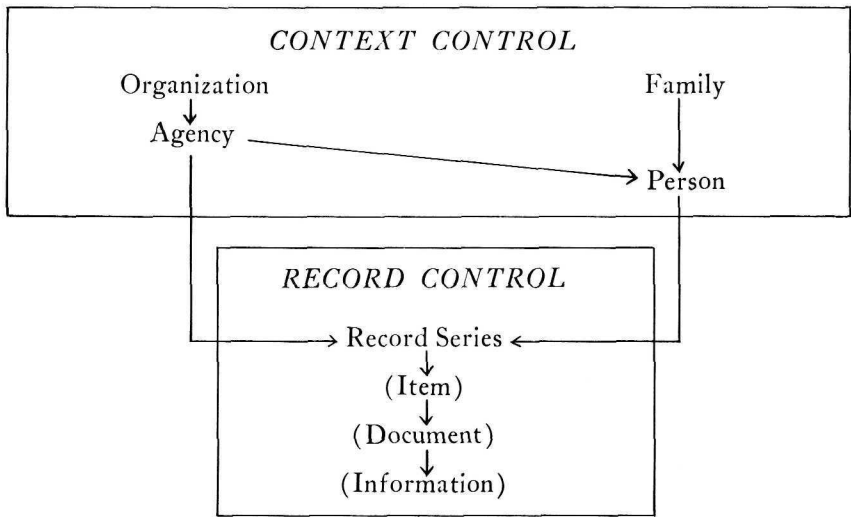
all the archives of a department or office which is or was an organic whole, complete in itself, capable of dealing independently without added or external authority with every side of any business which is related to its normal functions.

The first part of the phrase "all the archives of a department or office" was imprecise enough to permit the interpretations "archives transferred by . . ." and "archives created by . . ." Although the terms "department or office" were preferable to Jenkinson's "administration," the question of subdepartments and suboffices (branches, divisions, and others) was not given sufficient consideration. In short, the very arbitrariness of the concept is sufficient to make one question its usefulness.

A SOLUTION: THE RECORD SERIES

An obvious solution to all the above problems is to abandon the record group as the primary category of classification and to base the physical arrangement of archives on the record series as an independent element not bound to the administrative context. If the series becomes the primary level of classification, and the item the secondary level, (a) items are kept in their administrative context and original order by physical allocation to their appropriate series, and (b) series are no longer kept in any original physical order in a record or shelf group (if there is any such order) but simply have their administrative context and associations recorded on paper. Such a system is in harmony with basic objectives.

As an experiment, this system was introduced in 1964 in the Commonwealth Archives Office, Canberra, and as a result of its completely satisfactory performance it has been officially adopted as the basic method of classification and arrangement. It has provided a nonrigid, flexible approach for the physical control and processing of archives and has allowed considerable development in the control of administrative context. A simplified version of the system may be illustrated by a diagram, showing the basic inter-element structural links:



Besides links to other elements, each element may have internal links, both diachronic and structural. A full statement of links is given at the end of this paper.

1. *Record Control*

Four archival elements may be distinguished: the "record series," the "item," the "document," and "information," the last three being dependent elements, only the record series being free or independent. The definition of the series currently in use is a group of record items, which, being controlled by numbers or other symbols, are in the same sequence of numbers or symbols, or which, being uncontrolled by numbers or symbols, result from the same accumulation or filing process and are of similar physical shape and informational content.

The interelement links for the series are those to the administrative context, *i.e.*, to the agencies or persons creating (recording) or controlling the series; intraelement links would include those to previous and subsequent series that perform a similar function or contain similar information and those to controlling series (indexes, registers) or controlled series (files etc.). Links from the series may be included in a Register of Record Series, which allocates a series control number and records a description of the series. The feasibility of the system is illustrated by the sample series registration sheet shown on the opposite page.

Links to the record series from the administrative context are provided by indexes to record series, under each agency or person;

Form CAO 39

COMMONWEALTH ARCHIVES OFFICE

Registration of Record Series No. CRS A1.

The record series described below has been entered in the Commonwealth Register of Record Series:

DESCRIPTION

1. Series Title: Correspondence Files, Annual Single Number Series
2. Date Range (Series): 1903-1938 (Contents): 1885-1940
3. Registration System: Annual Single Number
4. Range of Registration Numbers: 1903/79 — 1938/33973
5. Order of Items: Numerical
6. Size of Item: 13½ × 8½ × file thickness
7. Quantity: 1040 boxes (type No. 1)

INTER-ELEMENT LINKS

8. Agency Recording:
 - 1903-1916: CA 7, Department of External Affairs (I)
 - 1916-1928: CA 15, Department of Home and Territories
 - 1928-1932: CA 24, Department of Home Affairs (II)
 - 1932-1938: CA 27, Department of the Interior (I)
9. Agency Controlling:

CA 12, Prime Minister's Department	(portion only)
CA 18, Department of External Affairs (II)	" "
CA 31, Department of the Interior (II)	" "
CA 51, Department of Immigration	" "
CA 60, Department of Territories	" "
10. Related Legislation:
 - None

INTRA-ELEMENT LINKS

11. Previous Series:
 - 1902: CRS A8, Folio series files
 - CRS A9, A series files
 - 1910: CRS A63, A series files
 - 1924: CRS A5, NG series files
 - 1925: A3, NT series files
12. Subsequent Series:
 - 1910: CRS A63, A series files
 - 1911: CRS A3, NT series files
 - 1923: CRS A5, NG series files
 - 1939: CRS A659, Class 1 files
13. Related Control or Controlled Series:
 - 1903-1910: CRS A30 Number Registers
 - CRS A31 Index Books
 - 1911-1938: CRS A69 Number Registers
 - CRS A70 Index Cards, Miscellaneous Cabinet
 - CSR A71 " " Immigration Cabinet
 - CRS A72 " " Papua/New Guinea Cabinet
 - CRS A74 " " Northern Territory Cabinet
 - CRS A82 " " Norfolk Island Cabinet

there are separate indexes for (a) series created and (b) series controlled or transferred to archival custody. In place of the record group inventory is an inventory of series for each agency or person, based on the indexes, which provides flexibility in the order of series

and insertion of new entries. A series that was created by more than one agency or person is listed in its logical place in the inventory for records of each of the agencies or persons concerned, with details of its transmission from the previous agency or to the subsequent one. Under this system, the record group is represented by a simple listing on paper of series attributed to a given agency or person; it no longer provides the basis for physical arrangement or numerical control.

Simple consecutive numerical control of series allows flexibility in processing because series may be registered and numbered before their administrative context (*i.e.*, links to creating agency or person) is fully determined. Series need not be stored in numerical order, but, with a location index, they may be stored as seems most economical, according to categories of size (standard, nonstandard), continuity (live or dead), or frequency of use (active, inactive). Simple consecutive numerical symbolization may be elaborated, if required by the number of series involved, to a combination of letters and numbers, as has been done in the Commonwealth Archives Office, where allowance has been made for symbols up to three letters and four numbers, *i.e.*, from A1 to ZZZ9999, giving over 180 million symbols.

For each series a general history is prepared, which includes, *inter alia*, an analysis of the recordkeeping system of which the series forms a part. Indeed, an archivist may be defined essentially as a preserver and interpreter of records in their original recordkeeping systems. The role of the archivist, as an analyst of recordkeeping systems of the past, may also be developed to include current systems; for, with the simple numerical series control, series registration may be extended to cover series that are not yet in archival custody. For example, the Commonwealth Archives Office is using series registration as a basis for identification and disposal of records in Commonwealth Government agencies.

2. *Context Control*

The Commonwealth Archives, although composed essentially of records created by Commonwealth Government agencies, includes records of other governments (some records of the Australian colonies and states were transferred to the Commonwealth on its establishment in 1901), of private organisations (*e.g.*, those firms owned by enemy nationals, expropriated during the two World Wars), and of private persons and families (*e.g.*, papers of former Commonwealth ministers and officers, many of which include nonofficial

and family material). As a result, the context control system, needed to replace the record group, has been designed to cope with all known possibilities.

There are four basic elements (organisation, agency, family, person), each of which is numbered independently but linked to the others by indexes:

(a) *Organisation, Agency*

The organisation is, by definition, a whole government or private organisation (company, society, church, etc.). The interelement link to its dependent agencies is provided by a structural index to agencies. Organisations may be linked to one another diachronically (previous, subsequent) and structurally (*e.g.*, the Commonwealth Government may be regarded as being "controlled" by the United Kingdom Government until the Statute of Westminster, 1931; the Commonwealth Government in turn controls the administrations of the various Commonwealth territories).

An agency is a part of an organisation that has its own independent recordkeeping system. Within the context of a government it may be the office of the head of state, the central office of a major department, or the regional office of a bureau; that is, it may be at any level in the administrative hierarchy. Linked to the organisation of which they form a part, to the persons that they employ, and to the record series that they produce, agencies are also linked to one another diachronically (previous, subsequent) and structurally (*e.g.*, the Commonwealth Prime Minister's Department is controlled by the Prime Minister and in turn controls, *inter alia*, the Commonwealth Archives Office).

A Register of Organisations and a Register of Agencies, together with a supporting index to agencies by organisation, is maintained. A general history may be compiled for each organisation and agency, giving, *inter alia*, analyses of the development or organisational structure and recordkeeping systems. An inventory of agencies for each organisation may be prepared, the agencies being arranged in any convenient order (chronological, organisational, or functional).

Agencies are free elements; they can, and do, move from organisation to organisation with little or no change (*e.g.*, in Australia, the Mercantile Marine Offices at the various ports, transferred in 1922 from the states to the Commonwealth; or the offices of the Qantas Empire Airways, Ltd., a part of an independent private organisation until 1947, when they were acquired by the Com-

monwealth Government). In such cases agencies may be simply indexed to the two or more organisations concerned.

(b) *Family, Person*

These elements provide the necessary context for personal or family archives and for archives of an agency that may have been produced by a given person. Families are linked to the persons of which they are comprised; persons are linked to their respective families, to agencies with which they are associated, and to record series they produced.

Registers of families and of persons are required with indexes to persons by family and agency. A short biographical statement may be prepared for each person and a history and genealogy for each family. An inventory of persons for each family or agency may also be prepared.

Persons are "free" elements, as they may pass from one family to another, females by marriage or adoption, males by adoption. In such cases, additional indexing is all that is required.

CONCLUSIONS

The record group is, from many points of view, an unduly limiting concept in archives management and, as has been shown, an unnecessary complication. Instead of enabling one to adhere to basic principles, it may actually distort the application of such principles. If the record series is adopted as the primary record unit, one avoids all former difficulties in physical arrangement, and one is able to link archives with far greater accuracy to their appropriate context. Provided that one respects the physical integrity of the record series and fully records its administrative context, one is in complete harmony with traditional principles.

This brief survey has attempted to present the elements basic to any archives system replacing record group control, at the levels of content control and record control. There are naturally other elements that may be introduced, such as legislation (statutes, ordinances, regulations, and others) and information control terms (*i.e.*, subject headings used in indexes or filing systems, well worthy of separate study from an historical viewpoint, to show the ever-changing concepts used for information retrieval and to illustrate the thought patterns of a given agency or person—in the study of which science will merge with linguistics and semantics). Undoubtedly other developments will ensue.

STRUCTURAL AND DIACHRONIC LINKS OF SERIES

<i>Element</i>	<i>Links</i>	<i>Record</i>
A. CONTEXT CONTROL:		
1. (a) Organisation	<i>To Same Element:</i>	
	(1) Previous Organisation	(1) Register of Organisations
	(2) Subsequent Organisation	(2) Register of Organisations
	(3) Organisation (s) controlling	(3) Register of Organisations
	(4) Organisation (s) controlled	(4) Register of Organisations
	<i>To Other Elements:</i>	
	(5) Agencies controlled	(5) Index to (and inventory of) Agencies by Organisation
(b) Agency	<i>To Same Element:</i>	
	(1) Previous Agency	(1) Register of Agencies
	(2) Subsequent Agency	(2) Register of Agencies
	(3) Agencies controlling	(3) Register of Agencies
	(4) Agencies controlled	(4) Register of Agencies
	<i>To Other Elements:</i>	
	(5) Organisations controlling	(5) Register of Agencies
	(6) Persons employed	(6) Index to (and inventory of) Persons, by Agency
	(7) Record Series (created or recorded; controlled)	(7) Index to (and inventory of) Record Series, by Agency
2. (a) Family	<i>To Same Element:</i>	
	(1) Previous Family	(1) Register of Families
	(2) Subsequent Family	(2) Register of Families
	(3) Related Families	(3) Register of Families
	<i>To Other Elements:</i>	
	(4) Persons included	(4) Index to (and inventory of) Persons, by Family

<i>Element</i>	<i>Links</i>	<i>Record</i>
2. (b) Person	<i>To Same Element:</i>	
	(1) Parents	(1) Register of Persons
	(2) Spouse(s)	(2) Register of Persons
	(3) Issue	(3) Register of Persons
	<i>To Other Elements:</i>	
	(4) Families including	(4) Register of Persons
	(5) Agencies employing	(5) Register of Persons
	(6) Record Series	(6) Index to (and
	(created or	inventory of)
	recorded ;	Record Series, by
	controlled)	Person
B. RECORD CONTROL :		
(a) Record Series:	<i>To Same Element:</i>	
	(1) Previous Record Series	(1) Register of Record Series
	(2) Subsequent Record Series	(2) Register of Record Series
	(3) Record Series controlling	(3) Register of Record Series
	(4) Record Series controlled	(4) Register of Record Series
	<i>To Other Elements:</i>	
	(5) Agencies (creating, controlling)	(5) Register of Record Series
	(6) Persons (creating, controlling)	(6) Register of Record Series
(b) Item:	Element bound to record series	(1) Inventory of Items, by Record Series

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Offered large sums for his memoirs—in one case a million dollars—General Marshall invariably replied that he was admitted to the councils of the President, the Prime Minister, other chiefs of state, and the great military staffs as a representative of the United States Army, not as a reporter for LIFE or THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.

—FRANK MCCARTHY, "Fomer Aide Says General Marshall Derived 'Great Satisfaction' From Prospect of Library," in *George C. Marshall Research Library Newsletter*, vol. 4, no. 3, p. [2] (Mar. 1966).