

# Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archivist as Editor

Heather MacNeil

## Abstract

A number of recent archival initiatives have asserted a relationship between archival description and authenticity. This article establishes a preliminary foundation for understanding the nature of that relationship by reviewing the literature relating to archival description and authenticity, comparing the authenticating function of archival description with that of textual criticism, and identifying three lines of research inquiry that present themselves in light of that comparison.

In 1996, a group of archivists came together in Ann Arbor, Michigan, under the auspices of the Bentley Library Fellowship Program for the Study of Modern Archives, to develop a model of an archival descriptive system that could accommodate both existing and emerging electronic information environments. As part of their deliberations, the Bentley research group identified three main purposes of archival description and the methods by which they are achieved.<sup>1</sup> These purposes and methods, which were subsequently adopted by the Canada-U.S. Task Force on Archival Description (CUSTARD), are

1. to provide access to archival materials by means of a description that is retrievable, at a minimum, by provenance;
2. to promote the understanding of such materials by documenting their context, structure, and content; and
3. to establish grounds for presuming records to be authentic by documenting their chain of custody, their arrangement, and the circumstances of their creation and use.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wendy M. Duff and Kent M. Haworth, "Advancing Archival Description: A Model for Rationalizing North American Descriptive Standards," *Archives and Manuscripts* 25, no. 2 (1997): 204.

<sup>2</sup> Canada-U.S. Task Force on Archival Description, "Statement of Principles for the CUSTARD Project," <http://www.archivists.org/news/custardproject.asp> (accessed 26 April 2005).

PICKING OUR TEXT: ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION,  
AUTHENTICITY, AND THE ARCHIVIST AS EDITOR

While the first two purposes are familiar, the third represents a new way of thinking about archival description because it makes an explicit connection between archival description and authenticity. This article aims to lay a preliminary foundation for understanding the implications of this connection by reviewing the literature relating to archival description and authenticity, comparing the authenticating function of archival description with that of textual criticism, and identifying lines of research inquiry that present themselves in light of that comparison.

**The Literature Relating to Authenticity and Archival Description**

An authentic record is one that can be proven to be what it claims to be and that has not been altered or corrupted in essential respects. The authenticity of a record is assessed in relation to its identity (i.e., was it written by the person who claims to have written it?) and its integrity (i.e., has it been altered in any way since it was first created and, if so, has such alteration changed its essential character?). Protecting the authenticity of a record thus implies the need to preserve its identity and integrity over time.<sup>3</sup> The connection drawn between authenticity and archival description is based on extending this protection from the individual record to a body of records, typically, the fonds.<sup>4</sup>

Authenticity is a concern for any area of scholarship that analyzes and interprets documentary sources. For records that are held in archival repositories, scholars traditionally have relied on the integrity of the archival procedures associated with their acquisition and management to provide assurances of the records' authenticity. The role played by archivists and archival institutions in providing assurances of the authenticity of the records in their care has been specifically recognized in the archival literature.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, a

<sup>3</sup> This characterization of authenticity is based on the work of the Authenticity Task Force of the InterPARES 1 Project. See Heather MacNeil, "Providing Grounds for Trust: Developing Conceptual Requirements for the Long-Term Preservation of Authentic Electronic Records," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 52.

<sup>4</sup> The fonds is defined as "The whole of the records, regardless of form or medium, organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular person, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities and functions." This definition is taken from International Council on Archives, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa, 2000), 10. The term "fonds" is roughly analogous to the terms "collection," "record group," and "manuscript group," which are more commonly used in the United States.

<sup>5</sup> David Bearman and Jennifer Trant, "Authenticity of Digital Resources: Towards a Statement of Requirements in the Research Process," *D-Lib Magazine* (June 1998), <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/june98/06bearman.html>; Charles T. Cullen, "Authentication of Digital Objects: Lessons from a Historian's Research," in *Authenticity in a Digital Environment* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2000); Luciana Duranti, "Archives as a Place," *Archives and Manuscripts* 24 (November 1996): 242–55; Terry Eastwood, "Should Creating Agencies Keep Electronic Records Indefinitely?" *Archives and Manuscripts* 24 (November 1996): 256–68; Clifford Lynch, "Authenticity and Integrity in the Digital Environment: An Exploratory Analysis of the Central Role of Trust," in *Authenticity in a Digital Environment*.

number of archival research projects have explored issues of authenticity, mainly in the context of electronic records generated in organizational settings. The exploration has been both indirect<sup>6</sup> and direct.<sup>7</sup> Issues related to the assessment and maintenance of the authenticity of electronic records over the long term have been explored most extensively in the InterPARES 1 Project and, within that project, in the work undertaken by the Authenticity Task Force.<sup>8</sup>

The specific role played by archival description in providing a “collective attestation<sup>9</sup> of authenticity” for a body of records has been asserted and advocated in two of these research projects.<sup>10</sup> Such assertion and advocacy draws on both classical and contemporary archival literature.<sup>11</sup> However, the origins and evolution of this relationship, its embodiment in practice, and its implications for archivists and archival institutions have yet to be explored and analyzed in a critical and substantive way.

A limited contemporary archival literature in English on the historical origins of arrangement principles and the historical development of finding

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Duff, “Ensuring the Preservation of Reliable Evidence: A Research Project Funded by the NHPRC,” *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996): 28–45.

<sup>7</sup> Luciana Duranti and Heather MacNeil, “The Protection of the Integrity of Electronic Records: An Overview of the UBC-MAS Research Project,” *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996): 46–67; Eun G. Park, “Understanding ‘Authenticity’ in Records and Information Management: Analyzing Practitioner Constructs,” *American Archivist* 64 (Fall/Winter 2001): 270–91.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Gilliland-Swetland, “Testing Our Truths: Delineating the Parameters of the Authentic Electronic Record,” *American Archivist* 65 (Fall/Winter 2002): 196–215; Heather MacNeil, “Providing Grounds for Trust II: The Findings of the Authenticity Task Force of InterPARES,” *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002): 24–58; MacNeil, “Providing Grounds for Trust,” 50, 52–78.

<sup>9</sup> The term “collective attestation of authenticity” comes from the baseline requirements developed by the Authenticity Task Force of InterPARES 1. Typically, an attestation of authenticity refers to a single record; a collective attestation of authenticity is an attestation that refers to a body of records. In other words, the attestation of authenticity covers a collectivity of records rather than a single record. See MacNeil, “Grounds for Trust II,” 57–58.

<sup>10</sup> Gilliland-Swetland, “Testing Our Truths;” MacNeil, “Providing Grounds for Trust II;” Duranti and MacNeil, “Protection of Integrity,” 46–67.

<sup>11</sup> Eugenio Casanova, *Archivistica* (Siena: Lazzari, 1928); Giorgio Cencetti, *Scritti Archivistici*, in *Fonti e Studi di Storia Legislazione e tecnica degli archivi moderni*, vol. 3, ed. Antonino Lombardo (Rome: Centro de Ricerca Editore, 1970); Michael Cook, “Archival Arrangement,” *The Management of Information from Archives*, 2nd ed. (Brookfield, Vt: Gower, 1999); Duranti, “Archives as a Place,” 242–55; Luciana Duranti, “The Origin and Development of the Concept of Description,” *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 47–54; Hilary Jenkinson, “The Evolution of Archives,” in *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co. Ltd., [1937] 1965), 23–38; Elio Lodolini, *Archivistica: Principi e problemi*, 8th ed. (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1998); S. Muller Fz., J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin Th.Az., *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, trans. Arthur H. Leavitt, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003).

aids exists.<sup>12</sup> With few exceptions, however, such discussions are brief, and they tend to focus on specific jurisdictions and institutions. In recent years, the archival literature on arrangement and description has been dominated instead by discussion of the relative merits of fonds versus record group and fonds versus series-based arrangement and description,<sup>13</sup> on issues associated with the development and implementation of national and international descriptive standards as a means of enhancing intellectual retrieval,<sup>14</sup> and on the needs of researchers in both traditional and Web-based finding aid environments.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Bartlett, "Respect des Fonds: The Origins of the Modern Archival Principle of Provenance," *Primary Sources & Original Works*, 1, nos.1-2, (1991): 107-15; Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983); Kathleen E. Brand, "The Place of the Register in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress," in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings in Archival Theory and Practice*, ed. Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1984), 236-44; Arnaldo D'Addario, "The Development of Archival Science and its Present Trends," in *Archival Science on the Threshold of the Year 2000. Proceedings of the International Conference, Macerata, 3-8 September 1990*, ed. Oddo Bucci (Ancona: University of Macerata, 1992), 167-94; Michel Duchein, "The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe," *American Archivist* 55 (Winter 1992): 14-24; Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Traditions in American Archival History," in *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice*, ed. Randall C. Jimerson (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2000), 123-42; Edward E. Hill, "The Preparation of Inventories at the National Archives," in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings in Archival Theory and Practice*; Judith M. Panitch, "Liberty, Equality, Posterity? Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution," in *American Archival Studies*, 101-22; Raimo Pohjola, "The Principle of Provenance and the Arrangement of Records/Archives," in *The Principle of Provenance: Report from the First Stockholm Conference on the Archival Principle of Provenance, 2-3 September 1993* (Stockholm: Swedish National Archives, 1994), 87-101; Ernst Posner, "Max Lehmann and the Genesis of the Principle of Provenance," in *Modern Archives Administration and Records Management: A RAMP Reader*, comp. Peter Walne (Paris: Unesco, 1985), 115-23; Robert F. Reynolds, "The Incunabula of Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: J. C. Fitzpatrick's Notes on the Care, Cataloguing, Calendaring and Arranging of Manuscripts and the Public Archives' Commission's Uncompleted 'Primer of Archival Economy,'" *American Archivist* 54 (Fall 1991): 466-82; T. R. Schellenberg, "Principles of Arrangement," in *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 168-93; Donato Tamblé, "Archival Theory in Italy Today," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 83-100.

<sup>13</sup> Terry Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era," in *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Terry Eastwood (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 31-86; Michel Duchein, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of Respect des Fonds in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 64-82; Chris Hurley, "The Australian ('Series') System: An Exposition," in *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and the Australian Archives First Fifty Years*, ed. Sue McKemish and Michael Piggott (Clayton, Australia: Ancora Press, 1994), 150-72; Bob Krawczyk, "Cross Reference Heaven: The Abandonment of the Fonds as the Primary Level of Arrangement for Ontario Government Records," *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999): 131-53; Terry Eastwood, "Putting the Parts of the Whole Together: Systematic Arrangement of Archives," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 93-116; Mark Wagland and Russell Kelly, "The Series System: A Revolution in Archival Control," in *The Records Continuum*, 131-49.

<sup>14</sup> Duff and Haworth, "Advancing Archival Description," 94-217; Steven Hensen, "The First Shall Be First: APPM and its Impact on American Archival Description," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 64-70; Daniel V. Pitti, "Encoded Archival Description: The Development of an Encoded Standard for Archival Finding Aids," *American Archival Studies*, 395-416; James M. Roth, "Serving Up EAD: An Exploratory Study on the Deployment and Utilization of Encoded Archival Description Finding Aids," *American Archivist* 64 (Fall/Winter 2001): 214-37.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth H. Dow, et al., "The Burlington Agenda: Research Issues in Intellectual Access to Electronically Published Historical Documents," *American Archivist* 64 (Fall/Winter 2001): 292-307; Wendy Duff, "The Acceptance and Implementation of the Rules for Archival Description by Canadian Archives: A Survey," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999): 27-45; Wendy Duff and Penka Stoyanova, "Transforming the Crazy Quilt: Archival Displays from a User's Point of View," *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998): 44-79.

Recent archival literature addressing the implications of postmodern thinking on archival theory and practice implicitly recognizes the need for an in-depth examination of the relationship between authenticity and archival description. Such literature—which emphasizes the historically contingent and constructed nature of archival theory—calls for archivists to revisit the terms of archival theory and practice in light of postmodern thinking,<sup>16</sup> to reexamine the principles and assumptions underpinning archival arrangement and description,<sup>17</sup> and to reimagine the nature and purpose of finding aids.<sup>18</sup> But to date there has not been any in-depth investigation of the historically contingent and constructed nature of archival arrangement and description within and across different jurisdictions. Nor has there been any investigation of the precise nature of the link between archival description and authenticity.

### The Link between Archival Description and Textual Criticism

One means of exploring the link between archival description and authenticity is through a comparison of archival description and textual criticism.<sup>19</sup> The archivist's work in arranging and describing records is analogous in many respects to the work performed by traditional textual critics in preparing a scholarly edition for publication. This is not surprising since both archivists and textual critics

<sup>16</sup> Terry Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 3–24; Terry Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2000): 14–35; Terry Cook, "What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 17–63; Verne Harris, "On (Archival) Odyssey(s)," *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2000): 2–13; Terry Cook, "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa," *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 132–41; Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meaning of Archives," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 131–41; Preben Mortensen, "The Place of Theory in Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999): 1–26; Tom Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the 'Ghosts' of Archival Theory," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999): 136–50.

<sup>17</sup> Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 78–100; Peter Horsman, "The Last Dance of the Phoenix, or The Re-discovery of the Archival Fonds," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002): 1–23; Peter Horsman, "Taming the Elephant: An Orthodox Approach to the Principle of Provenance," in *The Principle of Provenance*, 51–63; Peter Horsman, "Dirty Hands: A New Perspective on the Original Order," *Archives and Manuscripts* 27 (May 1999): 42–53; Laura Millar, "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002): 1–15; Joan Schwartz, "Coming to Terms with Photographs: Descriptive Standards, Linguistic 'Othering,' and the Margins of Archivy," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002): 142–71.

<sup>18</sup> Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 263–85; Michele Light and Tom Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 65 (Fall/Winter 2002): 216–30; Elizabeth Yakel, "Archival Representation," *Archival Science* 3 (2003): 1–25.

<sup>19</sup> Simply defined, textual criticism is the "comparison of a particular text with related materials in order to establish [its] authenticity." This definition may be found in the Wordnet database at <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwnat>. In this article, the kinds of texts that are the basis for the discussion of textual criticism are literary ones, such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* or James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

PICKING OUR TEXT: ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION,  
AUTHENTICITY, AND THE ARCHIVIST AS EDITOR

carry out their work using methodologies rooted in a shared tradition of philological criticism, albeit different branches. Within the tradition of Anglo-American textual scholarship, textual criticism concerns itself with the transmission of texts and the consequences for their authenticity. The task of the textual critic is to establish, from among the many variants of a text, a fixed, definitive one and to contextualize it through the preparation of a critical apparatus that contains notes and commentary on the text, the history of its variants, as well as the chronology of the author's life and works.<sup>20</sup> Margareta de Grazia maintains that, although the critical apparatus may seem to be

. . . merely a useful tool for an informed and responsible reading, it in fact specifies a text's ontology and epistemology: what it is (and is not), how it may be known (and not known). In determining the text's identity, the apparatus predisposes the reader to specific modes of reading and understanding. Its bracketing preliminaries and appendices and its interpenetrating notes encode the rules by which the content is to be valued and understood. As its epistemology suggests, an apparatus is not simply curatorial. It is preparatory: it prepares the text for the reader by submitting it to certain procedures, and it prepares the reader for the text by equipping him or her with certain kinds of information. Hence this preparation shapes both the textual object to be delivered and the cognitive spaces into which it is to be received.<sup>21</sup>

The traditional textual critic's efforts to restore a text as closely as possible to its original, authentic form mirrors the archivist's efforts to identify and represent the original order of a body of records through arrangement.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the critical apparatus that supports and frames the authority and meaning of the text is analogous to the archival description of a fonds, which supports and frames the meaning of the fonds by documenting the origins, history, and custody of the records, the activities they reflect, and their substance. In the same way that the critical apparatus provides the grounds for trusting the editor's representation of a text, archival description provides the grounds for trusting the archivist's representation of a fonds through arrangement.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Fredson Bowers, "Greg's 'Rationale of Copy-Text' Revisited," *Studies in Bibliography* 31 (1970): 90–161; W. W. Greg, "The Rationale of Copy-Text," *Studies in Bibliography* 3 (1950): 19–36; G. Thomas Tanselle, *A Rationale of Textual Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Margareta de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 11–12.

<sup>22</sup> A basic difference between the work of the textual critic and that of the archivist is that the textual critic attempts to restore a text to its original, authentic form by comparing different versions of texts; in principle the archivist deals with only one version of a fonds. This difference, however, is one of means not ends: the original, authentic form of a text is the one that best reflects the intentionality of the author; the original order of a body of records is the one that best reflects the intentionality of the fonds creator. Both the textual critic and the archivist aim to establish intentionality by reasoning from the relevant evidence; the difference is that they do not necessarily base their reasoning on the same kind of evidence. Moreover, while an archivist does not deal with different versions of a fonds, she does deal with different possible orders of a fonds and must choose the one that best reflects the intentionality of its creator.

The analogy may be extended further if we consider that both traditional textual critics and archivists are concerned with the relationship between material parts and imaginary wholes. The representation of a text provided by a scholarly edition is an abstraction: often the original text has perished and what survives are a number of derived forms or states of the text out of which the textual critic constructs an “ideal” text, that is, the one that embodies most completely the author’s final intentions. So, for example, out of the multiple working drafts, author-emended typescripts, and proofs of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the editor constructs the “uncorrupted” authorial text, the essential *Ulysses*. The representation of the fonds provided by archival arrangement and description is similarly abstract: the fonds as a whole no longer exists<sup>23</sup> and what remains are the fragments that have survived, either by accident or design, out of which the archivist attempts to construct some semblance of a whole. The analogy is even more pointed in the case of electronic records where, arguably, we are always dealing with derived states of the records.<sup>24</sup>

Over the past decade, traditional textual criticism and the editorial theory underpinning it have been subjected to critical scrutiny. Recent textual scholarship argues for a more complex and nuanced formulation of editorial theory, one that emphasizes the historically contingent and constructed nature of texts and the critical apparatus that supports them. Increasingly, textual editors are coming to realize that textual scholarship “cannot hope . . . to recover an ideal text. . . but only increase the self-awareness and internal consistency of the choices that [editors] make in constituting the [text] for [their] own time.”<sup>25</sup> This scholarship has resulted in a reexamination and expansion of traditional editorial theory<sup>26</sup> and exercised a substantial influence on the way on-line scholarly editions are envisaged<sup>27</sup> and prepared.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> It could be argued that a fonds never did exist at any given moment in time and space. See Horsman, “Last Dance of the Phoenix,” 1–23.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Ken Thibodeau, et al., “Trusting to Time: Preserving Authentic Records in the Long Term,” in *The Long Term Preservation of Authentic Electronic Records: The Findings of the InterPARES Project*, ed. Luciana Duranti (San Miniato, Italy: Archilab, 2005), 106.

<sup>25</sup> George Bornstein, “Introduction,” in *Palimpsest: Editorial Theory in the Humanities*, ed. George Bornstein and Ralph G. Williams (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 2. See also Ralph Williams, “I Shall Be Spoken: Textual Boundaries, Authors, and Intent,” in *Palimpsest*, 45–66; D. C. Greetham, *Theories of the Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, De Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim*; Greetham, *Theories of the Text*; Joseph Grigely, *Textuality: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Richard J. Finneran, ed., *The Literary Text in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the Word Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Jerome McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, *The William Blake Archive*, <http://www.blakearchive.org/>; *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Hypermedia Research Archive*, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/index.html>; *Henrik Ibsen’s Writings (HIW)*, <http://www.ibsen.uio.no/his/hjemmeside/english.html>.

PICKING OUR TEXT: ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION,  
AUTHENTICITY, AND THE ARCHIVIST AS EDITOR

The issues of what a critical apparatus does and does not contain, what can and cannot be reconstructed from the surviving evidence, and the nature and limits of representation are relevant to the theory and practice of archival arrangement and description. Indications may be found in the postmodern archival literature scrutinizing the traditional principles of provenance and original order<sup>29</sup> as well as in the contemporary archival debates concerning fonds- versus series-based arrangement and description<sup>30</sup> which are, essentially, debates over the nature and limits of an archival representation of a body of records. What remains to be explored are the implications of the connection between textual criticism and archival description: how might it shape our understanding of description as the archivists' "apparatus of authenticity"?

**Archival Description as the Archivists' "Apparatus of Authenticity": Three Lines of Research Inquiry**

Three lines of inquiry emerge from a comparison of archival description and textual criticism: 1) the link between archival description and authenticity and its implications for the role of the archivist; 2) the nature of finding aids<sup>31</sup> as socio-historical texts; and 3) models for archival description that might emerge from the first two lines of inquiry. This section will look at these lines of inquiry and identify, in a preliminary way, the kinds of research questions suitable for exploration within each line.

***1. The link between archival description and authenticity and its implications for the role of the archivist***

Although the link between archival description and authenticity has yet to be explored in a systematic way, it may be inferred from the foundational principles of archival science, specifically, the principle of provenance, which states that the records of a given creator should not be mixed with those of other creators, and the principle of respect for original order, which stipulates that records should be kept in the order in which they were maintained by the

<sup>29</sup> See footnotes 16, 17, and 18 above.

<sup>30</sup> See footnote 13 above.

<sup>31</sup> Examples of the kinds of finding aids that, historically, may be considered to have served an authenticating function, either explicitly or implicitly, are inventories, registers, and calendars. Such instruments are the products of extensive research into the history of a creator and its records, and their primary purpose is to provide researchers with the intellectual means of understanding and interpreting those records. Such purpose is quite distinct from that served by other types of archival finding aids, such as indexes and lists, which are designed primarily to provide researchers with a means of identifying and physically locating records. In this article, the term "finding aids" refers specifically to historical and contemporary descriptive instruments that aim to accomplish the former purpose, rather than the latter one.

creator. The first principle is directed toward protecting the unique identity of fonds, while the second aims to protect the integrity of the relationships between and among its parts.

These principles of archival arrangement also underpin archival description, the function of which is to communicate the original order of the fonds and the history of the records and their creator over time. By documenting the circumstances of the records' creation and use, archival description aims to stabilize and perpetuate the relationships between and among those records at the point at which they enter archival custody. In this manner, it is argued, archival description serves as a collective attestation of the authenticity of a fonds.<sup>32</sup>

In connecting archival description to authenticity we are also implicitly connecting it to archival accountability and, specifically, to the role of archivists as trusted custodians of the records in our care. If we consider accountability to be the obligation of a delegate to account for his or her actions, archival description is an important and public means by which we render an account of our actions with respect to the records in archival custody; the persons to whom the account is rendered are the users and owners of those records, both present and future. Archivists explain the records—and the additions or changes to them over time—to demonstrate to all interested persons that we have protected their authenticity.

Undoubtedly, we leave ourselves open to criticism by making our actions more transparent. But if we accept that there is a case to be made for linking archival description to authenticity, then this vulnerability is as it should be. Just as textual criticism involves conscious and deliberate decisions about the representation of texts, archival description involves conscious and deliberate decisions about the representation of archival documents. And because description constitutes the frame of reference that shapes the meaning and significance of those documents, archivists are obliged to render an account of our role and responsibility in the process of our representation.

Rendering an account of the archivists' role means, among other things, making that role visible. In textual editing circles this is sometimes referred to as "laying bare the device." For archivists it means surrendering our role as invisible and omniscient narrators and accepting that we are among the characters in the story told through our descriptions. The question is: What are some of the specific ways in which archivists might lay bare the device for the benefit of users? One means that has been proposed by Michele Light and Tom Hyry is to add a colophon to finding aids. In book printing, the colophon takes the form of an inscription at the end of a book that provides information about the book's production, identifies the names and roles of its chief physical creators; it may

<sup>32</sup> See footnote 31 above.

also include “personal comment from the craftsman who made it.”<sup>33</sup> Light and Hyry suggest that archivists could use a finding aid colophon to record information about the records’ chain of custody, the kinds of choices made by the archivist in the course of appraising, arranging, and describing those records, as well as information about the archivist and her perspective on the records.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, some of this information is already taken into account by the existing standards for archival description. Custodial history, for example, is an element of description in the American, Canadian, and international data content standards.<sup>35</sup> The American and international standards include elements relating to appraisal,<sup>36</sup> as well as a description control area that is used to record the date the description was originally prepared and subsequently revised, the archivist responsible for preparing or revising it, the sources used in its preparation, and so on.<sup>37</sup> As the authors point out, however, what is unique about the colophon is that it “represent[s] a self-conscious perspective that acknowledges the processor’s role in shaping a collection and presenting a specific view of it to patrons. It signifies an approach that may call a researcher’s attention to the mediating ‘I’ present in the finding aid and the materials it describes.”<sup>38</sup> For this reason, it is worth examining in more depth the kind of information appropriate for inclusion in a colophon and whether and how that information might differ from information found within the description proper.

Laying bare the device also implies paying closer attention to the use of language in archival description. More often than not a description of a body of records is constructed out of incomplete fragments of evidence; archivists weave those fragments together to create an integrated, coherent narrative. In so doing we may be creating a misleading impression of completeness. How do we signal to users the gaps in our knowledge? An approach advocated by Carlo Ginzburg in the context of writing historical narratives is to use conditional phrases such as “perhaps” and “may have been.” Ginzburg sees the use of conditional phrases and speculative language as a means by which the historian alerts the reader to the critical difference between “hard evidence” and “a space of historical possibilities.” He compares this approach “to modern art-restoration techniques,

<sup>33</sup> Light and Hyry, “Colophons and Annotations,” 223.

<sup>34</sup> Light and Hyry, “Colophons and Annotations,” 223.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Bureau of Canadian Archivists Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, *Rules for Archival Description*, rule 1.7C (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1992–continuing); *Describing Archives: A Data Content Standard* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004), rule 5.1; International Council on Archives, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, rule 3.2.3.

<sup>36</sup> *Describing Archives*, rules 5.2 and 5.3; *ISAD(G)*, rule 3.3.2.

<sup>37</sup> *Describing Archives*, rule 8.1; *ISAD(G)*, rule 3.7.

<sup>38</sup> Light and Hyry, “Colophons and Annotations,” 225–26.

like the so-called *rigatino*, in which the lacunae in the painted surface are emphasized by fine hatches instead of concealed by repainting, as they were in the past.”<sup>39</sup> In the context of archival description the questions that present themselves are: How would we characterize our written narratives? What authority do they convey? Do they communicate, either explicitly or implicitly, the difference between hard evidence and a space of historical possibilities? Do they tell the user what the archivist does not know as well as what she does know?

## 2. *Understanding archival finding aids as socio-historical texts*

The second line of inquiry stems from the recognition that finding aids, like scholarly editions, are not simply neutral tools for facilitating research. They are cultural texts, historically situated in time and place. They are shaped by particular ideologies and intentionalities, which in turn shape what they include and exclude, what they emphasize and what they ignore. The social construction of finding aids is an aspect of archival history that deserves further investigation. What currents of thought in the profession and society as a whole do they reflect? What audiences are they directed toward? To what extent does their mode of dissemination affect their content and structure? How have they changed over time and how do they compare across institutions and across cultures?

Pursuing this line of inquiry may force us to rethink or at least refine our understanding of the stability of archival descriptions. The prevailing notion of archival description as a means of providing a collective attestation of authenticity for a body of records is predicated on its role in stabilizing records once they cross the threshold into archival custody. But how stable are the representations themselves? Over the past decade many archival institutions have undertaken retrospective conversions of finding aids to conform to new concepts of arrangement, for example, conversion from record group to fonds and from fonds to series, which has resulted in a reinterpretation of what constitutes a recognizable totality of records. We have also witnessed the conversion of descriptions to conform to national and international standards,<sup>40</sup> which has resulted

<sup>39</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian,” in *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines*, ed. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 301.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description [RAD]; Describing Archives: A Data Content Standard*; Encoded Archival Description Working Group of the Society of American Archivists and the Network Development and MARC Standards Office of the Library of Congress, *Encoded Archival Description: Tag Library: Version 2002*, EAD Technical Document, No. 2 (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2002); *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*; International Council on Archives, *ISAAR (CPF): International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Australia, 2003).

in the reinterpretation of the necessary and sufficient elements of description. Viewed from the perspective of these conversions, it seems clear that archival description reflects, not one defining moment in the life of the records once they enter archival custody, but multiple defining moments. The question is, what effect do such conversions have on the representation of a body of records and, specifically, on the representation of the identity and integrity of those records?

One means of investigating the effect of such conversions is to trace the evolution of finding aids prepared for particular bodies of records in order to answer the following questions: What descriptive elements have contributed to communicating the records' identity and integrity? How have these elements changed over time? How are rearrangements of the intellectual order of a body of records in response to changes in criteria for determining the boundaries of a descriptive unit accounted for in finding aids? What specific impact has the emergence of technology-related standards such as the Machine-Readable Cataloging Format (MARC) and Encoded Archival Description (EAD) exercised on the breadth and depth of detail of on-line archival descriptions? Nicholson Baker has pointed out significant losses in the breadth and depth of descriptive and subject cataloging that occurred when library card catalogs were converted to on-line catalogs.<sup>41</sup> Are we witnessing similar losses as traditional finding aids are converted to the EAD format? If so, are any of those losses associated with elements that communicate the records' identity and integrity?

Elizabeth Yakel's examination of finding aids to records located in the Bentley Historical Library suggests that such conversions have resulted in both losses and gains.<sup>42</sup> By tracing the evolution of a number of finding aids, she demonstrates how changes to their form and content over time have brought about subtle shifts in the records' meaning. Her study provides a useful starting point for a more in-depth analysis of the effect of converting finding aids on the representation of the identity and integrity of a body of records.

### **3. Models of archival description that emerge from the first two lines of inquiry**

The third line of inquiry concerns potential models for an archival descriptive system that might emerge from the first two lines of inquiry and, specifically, from a deeper understanding of the relationship between and among description, authenticity, and archival accountability. The discussion that follows is necessarily speculative; its primary aim is to suggest some of the possible features

<sup>41</sup> Nicholson Baker, "Discards," in *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 125–81.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Yakel, "Archival Representation," *Archival Science* 3 (2003): 10–24.

of one such model, which draws on the theory and practice of the new textual scholarship and the potential of the World Wide Web.

The new textual scholarship reflects a shift in orientation away from traditional eclectic editing, in which the editor's efforts focus on restoring a text's intended state, and toward historical editing, in which her efforts focus on preserving a record of different iterations of the text manifest at different times.<sup>43</sup> The vision of scholarly editions presented by proponents of historical editing emphasizes variability over fixity of meaning, open-ended representation over closed representation, and the process of editing over its product. Not surprisingly, the World Wide Web is viewed as the ideal vehicle for exploiting this expanded vision and on-line scholarly editions as a promising means of transcending the artificial limits imposed by printed, bounded editions.<sup>44</sup>

The Web is also an ideal vehicle for transcending the artificial limits imposed by current descriptive practices and for exploiting an expanded vision of archival description; one that unseats the privileged status currently accorded to the standards-based finding aid and repositions it as part of a complex network of hyperlinked and interactive documentation relating to the history, appraisal, preservation, use, and interpretation of a body of records over time. Such a network could provide users with multiple pathways to explore, which the user would be free to pursue or ignore. It could also provide users with the opportunity to create new pathways by incorporating spaces in which users are free to contribute additional perspectives and alternative readings on the records and their representation.

Web-based annotations are a specific aspect of hypertext that open up interesting possibilities for creating some of these pathways. As Catherine Marshall describes it:

Annotation is a fundamental aspect of hypertext. In theory, hypertexts grow and change by way of addition—readers respond to hypertexts with commentary, make new connections and create new pathways, gather and interpret materials, and otherwise promote an accretion of both structure and content. In so doing, they crucially augment an existing body of interrelated materials.<sup>45</sup>

Drawing on the work of Marshall and others, Light and Hyry make the case for incorporating annotation systems into Web-based finding aids as a complement to colophons:

<sup>43</sup> Grigely, *Textuality*, 84.

<sup>44</sup> Ironically, part of the reinvention of scholarly editions in an on-line environment seems to involve renaming them as "archives." The Blake Archive and the Rossetti Archive, cited above at footnote 28, are two examples of this trend.

<sup>45</sup> Catherine C. Marshall, "Toward an Ecology of Hypertext Annotation," *Proceedings of the Ninth ACM Conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia* (New York: ACM, 1998), 40. Quoted (partially) in Light and Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations," 226.

PICKING OUR TEXT: ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION,  
AUTHENTICITY, AND THE ARCHIVIST AS EDITOR

While the colophon may self-consciously alert the researcher about the subjective and mediating role of the processor in appraising, arranging, and describing a set of records and recognizes their singular perspective, annotations to finding aids would allow multiple voices to express different perspectives and readings of a collection after processing is complete.<sup>46</sup>

They cite numerous examples of annotation systems currently available to various communities of users for the purpose of sharing information and commentary about documents.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, archivists need to be mindful of the perils of apparently limitless possibilities. As Phillip Doss observes in the context of scholarly editions: “The pitfalls that electronic media present for textual editors consist of the myriad opportunities for digression, which if sufficiently indulged do create the sort of dynamic, nonlinear, global system that is immensely gratifying perceptually, but effectively defeats analytic discourse.”<sup>48</sup> As a presentation tool, hypertext presents archivists with a new set of choices along with a new set of responsibilities. Given that a hypertext document generates meaning with every linkage, it is critical that, in constructing the pathways for these linkages, we make clear the rationale for each hypertext “leap.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, it is not enough to create associative links; we need to contextualize them and make their relevance clear to the user.

The need to assist the user in navigating a descriptive network of the kind just described means that likely there is still a place for standards-based description. While it is insufficient as a means of providing an adequate representation of a body of records, that does not mean that such description is irrelevant. Its continuing relevance is based precisely on its linear and predictable structure, which offers a necessary corrective to the associative and serendipitous potential of hypertext. Within a complex and richly detailed network containing myriad forms of documentation in a variety of media, a standards-based description offers the user a stable point of departure and return.

The overarching question to be addressed in pursuing this line of inquiry is: How does such a model specifically support the notion of description as the archivists’ apparatus of authenticity? Within that framework, specific questions include: What kinds of documentation could or should be included as hypertext links within the network? How detailed should such documentation be?

<sup>46</sup> Light and Hyry, “Colophons and Annotations,” 226.

<sup>47</sup> Light and Hyry, “Colophons and Annotations,” 226–27.

<sup>48</sup> Phillip E. Doss, “Traditional Theory and Innovative Practice: The Electronic Editor as Poststructuralist Reader,” *The Literary Text in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 221.

<sup>49</sup> Doss, “Traditional Theory and Innovative Practice,” 218–19.

How do we contextualize the hypertext links that are created?<sup>50</sup> Are there practical or legal limits to the kinds of documentation that can be made available to users? Are there practical or legal limits to the kinds of annotations that can be permitted? In what specific ways might a standards-based description serve as a navigational tool within a networked model of description?

### Conclusion

The title of this article—"Picking Our Text"—is taken from a quotation by the seventeenth-century English antiquarian and jurist John Selden, which reads as follows: "We pick out a text here and there to make it serve our turn; whereas, if we take it all together, and considered what went before and what followed after, we should find it meant no such thing."<sup>51</sup> The quotation encapsulates two themes that have been examined in this article: the first is the selectivity of archival representation, the second, the impossibility of completeness in representation. The fact is, we cannot take the records all together and know what went before and what followed after. We can, however, make the act of picking our text transparent to our users through description. This article has suggested, in a preliminary way, how we might begin that process.

The three broad lines of research inquiry identified in this article and the specific research questions associated with each line are currently the focus of a three-year research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada entitled "Archival Description and the Apparatus of Authenticity." It is hoped that this research will help to establish a more critical understanding of the theoretical and socio-historical foundation on which the relationship between archival description and authenticity rests, open up new lines of inquiry and new perspectives on that relationship and its representation in finding aids, and develop new models for communicating that relationship, especially in the emerging Web-based environment. It is also hoped that conceptual and methodological bridges can be built between the archival discipline and other humanities disciplines, such as textual criticism, concerned with the representation and preservation of texts and documents.

<sup>50</sup> The contextualization of hypertext links has been explored by Richard Kopak, who has developed a taxonomy of link types to assist users in their navigation of hypertext. For an introduction to the utility of functional link types, see Richard W. Kopak, "Functional Link Typing in Hypertext," *ACM Computing Surveys* 31 (December 1999): 16–22. A full taxonomy of link types is elaborated in his doctoral dissertation. See Kopak, "A Taxonomy of Link Types for Use in Hypertext," PhD diss. (University of Toronto, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> John Selden, "Bible, Scripture," *Table-talk: Being the Discourses of John Selden, Esq; or His Sense of Various Matters of Weight and High Consequence; Relating Especially to Religion and State*, 3rd ed. (London: Jacob Tonson and Awneham and John Churchill, 1716), 6.