DUTCH ARCHIVISTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN ARCHIVES

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When asked what the word "archives" means to them, many people might prefer to tackle the question by describing a picture rather than formulating a conceptual definition. They might think of a hidden, airless vault, its shelves cluttered with fragile ancient manuscripts, large, dusty volumes, and a queer assortment of historical artifacts, all in various stages of decay. There is nothing of what anyone would call living in the cemetery-like picture, with the possible exception of the archivist who is sitting, vulture-like, behind a massive oaken desk, jealously guarding the entrance to the vault. Appropriately enough, the archivist bears striking resemblance to a nineteenth-century undertaker: a thin, pale man in a heavy black suit, somewhere between the ages of 80 and 150, whose chiselled features reflect decades spent in deciphering the faded, cryptic writing of his manuscripts.

It is the esoteric and antiquarian obsessions of the archivist that have determined which documents, and the secrets they contain, have been squirrelled away in the chambers behind him. Therefore, in order to gain access to the documents, one must first gain the trust of the archivist, who is by nature suspicious of anyone who wishes to use what he considers his own personal property. In the unlikely event that such a trust is secured and entrance into the tomb granted, one quickly realizes that the contents of the vault have been organized according to a completely indecipherable classification--the very order of the documents, it turns out, follows the eccentric workings of the archivist's own mind. All of this matters little, however, for it is clear that no-one but the archivist himself ever consults the archives; they belong after all to the realm of the dead, not the land of the living.

This picture is somewhat exaggerated, but it does contain all the essential elements of the popular image of archives as impenetrable, secretive, and irrelevant institutions. It is an image that modern archivists have struggled to overcome, with varying degrees of success.

As difficult as it may be for many of us to believe, the methods which professional archivists use to administer archives are not designed to close off and confuse; rather, their purpose is to demystify and make archives usable for the general public. Such methods are the present-day manifestations of theories about archives which were developed mainly in the last quarter of the

nineteenth century. In particular, it is the ideas of a group of Dutch archivists, in their efforts to formulate professional standards for archival practice. Although acknowledged by the archival profession, very few "lay people" are aware of this Dutch contribution to the field of archives. By presenting their ideas here, I hope not only to give the Dutch their due, but also perhaps to increase our understanding of the nature of modern archival work.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, it has generally been acknowledged that the purpose of archival work consists of two major components: preservation and availability. Preservation means that the archivist is first of all committed to preserving the documentary record of society for future generations; availability means that the archivist must work to make such records available and useable for society. In their efforts to fulfil such purposes, archivists perform a number of basic functions: acquisition, by which archivists ensure that valuable records produced by individuals and institutions in society are eventually acquired by their archives; appraisal, by which archivists select, among the mass of records, those which will be preserved for posterity and those which will be destroyed; arrangement, by which the records are organized in a consistent and meaningful order; description, whereby details about the records significant for administrative and reference purposes are recorded; and conservation, by which the archivist preserves the physical integrity of the records.

At first glance, such goals and functions may seem to be fairly consistent with one another. However, archivists have come to realize that, at many times, the preservation of archives as documentary records sometimes compromises their availabilility to the public, and vice versa. This is due mainly to the unique and complex nature of archival material. It was the problems faced by nineteenth-century archivists in their efforts to arrange and describe according to these goals which the Dutch archivists attempted to solve with their new approach.

The first major attempt to administer archives for the dual purposes of preservation and availability was made during the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1790, the republican government established the *Archives Nationales* as a central repository of the nation's records and declared it open to all French citizens. In doing so they also recognized the value of archives for scholars and artists as well as administrators.[1]

In order to fulfil their mandate, archivists at the *Archives Nationales* needed to apply a comprehensive and useable system of arrangement to the records under their care. As many of these archivists were librarians by training, it is not surprising that they introduced the library practice of organizing material according to a preconceived classification scheme. This method of arranging archives also conformed to the rationalist tendencies of the era. The

Enlightenment idea of a rational universe governed by self-evident natural laws permeated much of the thinking of French scholars and administrators. The classification of archives according to preconceived subject headings merely reflected the attempt to order the documentary evidence of society in a rational manner, according to preexistent natural categories.[2] A number of large sections were established under the headings legislative, judicial, administrative, domanial, historical, and topographical archives, which contained within them a number of subsections. The important point is that the records were filed, by and large, with very little reference to the agency which originally produced them, and the order which that agency gave the records during the period of their original use. Following the French example, archivists and librarians throughout the nineteenth century used classifications as the basic method for arranging and describing their archives.[3]

The classification method also held advantages for archival description and, consequently, the availability of the records to the public. Such a method seemed to serve best the needs of researchers, especially historians, who usually extract information from the records by subject and date, not administrative function. Classification also allowed archivists to apply such library techniques as cataloguing and indexing to create a wide variety of finding aids. After all, as a German archivist of the 1830s maintained, archives, like libraries, serve primarily the interests of scholarship, not administration. If their usefulness to the original administration had lapsed, why should the reference aids for archives conform to the original function within the administration?[4]

In spite of all the advantages, applying library techniques of classification and description to archives posed serious practical problems for archivists, and by the mid-nineteenth century the appropriateness and viability of such methods of administering archives began to be questioned. It meant, first of all, that each individual document within a vast series of documents had to be evaluated in order to decide where it belonged in the classification scheme. When one considers that the volume of records produced by government agencies, even in the nineteenth century, are generally measured in cubic feet, not by the number of pages, one can see that this is an extremely onerous and time-consuming activity.

An even more serious problem was the fact that individual archival records did not seem to lend themselves very well to predetermined categories. It became apparent that many documents were being lost within the system and that those documents found were incomprehensible within the context of their classification or index heading. Thoughout Europe, archivists began looking for alternatives to library techniques. Both the French and the Germans found that, by keeping records of any one agency separate from those of another, many of these problems seemed to be alleviated, but

there existed no comprehensive theory which justified such an approach. Hence, most archivists were skeptical of its usefulness.[5]

The ideas presented in a manual for archival administration in the Netherlands provided the theoretical framework for the new method. The *Handleiding voor het ordenen en beschrijven van archieven*, published in Groningen in 1898, was the work of three Dutch archivists: Samuel Muller, State Archivist of Utrecht, Robert Fruin, an official at the Utrecht State Archives, and J. A. Feith, State Archivist of Groningen.[6] However, of the three, Muller is perhaps the most responsible for the conceptual structure. He was educated at the *Ecole des Chartes* in Paris, where he learned of the French method of arrangement by original function. As State Archivist at Utrecht, Muller had continued the work of his predecessor, P. J. Vermeulen, in arranging the archives, not in a chronological or subject classification, but according to their original context of use. The manual, therefore, provided an opportunity for Muller to set forth the principle behind this new practice.[7]

The first section of the manual dealt with a question which incredibly, up to that time, had never been adequately addressed: what are archives? The Dutch archivists' answer focussed on the nature of the records themselves rather than their usefulness for research, as had been previously done. "An archival collection," the manual explained, "is the whole of the written documents, drawings, and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials, in so far as these documents were intended to remain in the custody of that body or of that official."[8]

References to official custody in this definition, although important, are in recognition of the need to preserve the evidentiary qualities of archives for legal pruposes. The more important concepts are that archives are whole entities, and that they are produced during the course of an activity. This means, according to Muller, Feith, and Fruin, that "an archival collection is an organic whole, a living organism which grows, takes shape, and undergoes changes in accordance with fixed rules... (the archivist) must study the organism and ascertain the rules under which it was formed."[9] All of the parts of the organic whole must contribute to that process; in this way, an individual document only possesses meaning in relation to all other documents which make up the organic whole. The structure and meaning of an archive is therefore closely linked to the structure and function of the agency which produced it.

This definition of archives as an organic whole was, theoretically, quite convincing but the primary task of the authors of the Dutch manual was to formulate practical methods for arranging and describing archives. One thing was certain: the concept of archives as organic entities did not allow for classification according to a predetermined scheme. The old, classificatory approach resulted

in various documents originally produced by one office being intermixed with other offices under general headings. The organic relationship between the documents as structured during the period of their original use was therefore destroyed. Muller, Feith, and Fruin claimed that "it is not the first 'systemizer' that one meets--and still less the first historian--who is competent to arrange the archival collection, but only one who has studied its organization."[10]

They concluded that archives should be arranged according to *herkomstbeginsel*, or the principle of provenance. According to this principle, evidence of the organic process is best preserved by the original order which the agency that produced them imposed on the records, and the archivist should therefore restore this original order as much as possible; moreover, the original order very often paralleled the structure and functions of the record-creating agency. Even if the original agency had been taken over by another, or its duties split between two, and its archives incorporated into the new agency's records, the manual advised that the original order be restored before any deviations from the rule could be considered.[11] In this way, the work of the archivist in arranging archives, the authors concluded, closely resembles that of the paleontologist restoring the skeleton of a prehistoric animal: both are seeking to preserve evidence of organic activity through the original structure of the object.[12]

Description, too, must follow arrangement by original order. The manual instructed archivists to avoid attempts at describing the contents of the individual records; it advises them, rather, to draw up inventories which describe the collection as a whole, reflect the original arrangement, and reveal the original function of the records. As products of an organic process, the contents of records can only be understood when one knows their function.[13]

The success of Muller, Feith, and Fruin in revising modern archival theory and practice can be measured by the great popularity their manual enjoyed after its publication in 1897. It was quickly translated into French, German, and Italian, with an English translation appearing in 1940. Many archival theorists have relied heavily in their own writings on the concepts presented in the Dutch manual. Most noteworthy among these is the British archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson, whose 1922 manual served as the foundation for archival practice not only in Britain, but also in Australia, Canada, and many other Commonwealth countries.[14] Already in 1912, American historian Waldo Leland contended that, for the proposed development of a national archives in the United States, the Dutch *herkomstbeginsel* should be the guiding principle.[15] When the U. S. National Archives was finally established in 1934, a record group system was developed which is, in essence, based on that principle: the records of each government are treated as whole and complete entities, arranged according to their original structure and function, and described in inventories which reflect this arrangement.[16] Such

record and manuscript groups as the Public Archives of Canada represent another version of the American practice.[17]

Altogether, the organic approach developed by a group of Dutch archivists in the late nineteenth century for their own parochial purposes quickly overwhelmed, and continues to dominate, the development of modern archival techniques. Of course, an understanding of the influential archival theories they propounded may do little to satisfy many academics and researchers who demand the kind of "information cafeteria" they have come to expect from libraries, for instance; nor will it refute completely the convictions of some that archivists are mainly engaged in "collecting" and "hiding" secret information which will only be "discovered" many years later by the sleuthing researcher. However, an insight into the basic trade-off in archival administration between preservation and availability, and the Dutch contribution to resolving this dilemma may serve to ease the paranoia of the prospective archival researcher enough to allow her to profit from the system: retrieving and using information arranged and described according to the basic tenets of *herkomstbeginsel* can only lead to a better understanding of the meaning of the documentary source.

NOTES

[1]For accounts of the establishment of the *Archives Nationales*, see Carl Lokke, "Archives and the French Revolution," *American Archivist* 31 (1986), 23-31; Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development since the French Revolution," in *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner*, ed. Ken Munden (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967), pp.24-30; Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (1956: rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p.4-5.

[2]French archival historian Robert-Henri Bautier has pointed out the strong theoretical links between the systems developed by European librarians and archivists of the revolutionary era and the ideas of the *encyclopèdistes*: Bautier, "Les Archives," in Charles Samaran, ed., *L'Histoire et Ses Mèthodes* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Plèiade, 1961), p.1134.

[3]For an overview of the classification system instituted in the *Archives Nationales* during the nineteenth century, see Charles V. Langlois and H. Stein, *Les Archives de L'Histoire de France* (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1891); for an analysis of the system, see Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, p.169.

[4]Adolf Brenneke, *Archivkunde: ein Beitrag zur Theorie und Geschichte des europäischen Archivwesens*, ed. Wolfgang Leesch (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1953), pp.54-60.

[5]The practice of arranging archival material by the office of origin and according to the original order of the files has been traced back to the administrative orders instituted at the *Archives Dèpartementales* in France in 1841: see Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, p.172 and Posner, "Max Lehmann and the Genesis of the Principle of Provenance," in *Archives and the Public Interest*, pp.34-45. However, these practices were by and large products of administrative expediency and therefore lacked the theoretical justification needed to render them legitimate alternatives to the practice of subject classification.

[6]The English translation is titled *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, trans. Arthur H. Leavitt (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1940). I will be citing the English edition.

[7]F. C. J. Ketelaar, "S. Muller Fz. en het Nederlands archiefwezen," *Nederlands Archievenblad* 78 (1974), 201-205; A. E. M. Ribberink, "De toekomst en het verleden, het phenomeen Muller 1874, 1974," *Nederlands Archievenblad* 78 (1974), 194-195.

[8]*Manual*, p.13.

[9]*Manual*, p.19.

[10]*Manual*, p.19.

[11]*Manual*, pp.38ff.

[12]*Manual*, p.66.

[13]*Manual*, pp.101ff.

[14]*A Manual of Archive Administration* (London: Perry Lund, Humphries & Co., 1922).

[15]"The National Archives: A Programme," *American Historical Review* 17 (October 1912), 27.

[16]Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, pp.181-186.

[17]Carl Vincent, "The Record Group: A Concept in Evolution," *Archivaria* 3 (Winter, 1976-77), 3-16.