

# Articles

## *RAD* Past, Present, and Future



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**RÉSUMÉ** Les *Règles pour la description des documents d'archives (RDDA)* canadiennes ont maintenant un peu plus de vingt ans et il faut se demander si elles ont bien servi. Les *RDDA* ont été conçues à partir des modèles bibliographiques existants pour décrire des publications (*RCAA2*, *ISBD(G)*) et adaptées pour la description de fonds d'archives. Les succès des *RDDA* sont nombreux et leur impact sur la profession archivistique canadienne, profond. Cependant, ailleurs dans le monde archivistique, on a laissé de côté le cadre bibliographique et les bibliothécaires eux-mêmes l'ont révisé récemment; nous devons maintenant libérer les *RDDA* de ce cadre. La première section de cet article situe le développement des *RDDA* dans l'histoire des normes descriptives; la deuxième présente certains problèmes posés par les *RDDA* et la difficulté de les résoudre dans le cadre actuel. Tout au long de l'article, l'auteur effectue des comparaisons avec les normes descriptives créées après les *RDDA*, ainsi qu'avec les efforts de 2004 incomplets et non-adoptés pour réviser les *RDDA* comme les *RDDA2*. En conclusion, l'auteur examine brièvement des options pour l'avenir de ces normes. La proposition principale est que les *RDDA* ont besoin d'une révision complète qui pourrait les aligner davantage aux normes internationales, leur permettre de mieux gérer les défis liés à la description des objets numériques et qui pourrait inclure les nouvelles perspectives qui ont été explorées dans les écrits critiques récents au sujet de la description qui ont élargi la notion du contexte archivistique.

**ABSTRACT** The Canadian *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)* standard is now just over twenty years old. How well has *RAD* fared? *RAD* took over the framework of then-existing bibliographic models for describing library items (*AACR2*, *ISBD(G)*) and adapted it for the description of bodies of archives. *RAD*'s successes are many and its impact on the Canadian archival profession and system profound. But the bibliographic framework has been abandoned elsewhere in the archival world, and librarians themselves have recently revised it; now we need to liberate *RAD* from it. The first section of the paper situates the development of *RAD* in the history of descriptive standards; the second discusses a number of problems with *RAD* and the difficulty of resolving them in the current framework. Comparisons are made throughout to the post-*RAD* descriptive standards, as well as to the 2004 effort (not finalized or implemented) to rewrite *RAD* as *RAD2*. The conclusion looks briefly at options for the future of the standard. The main proposal is that *RAD* needs a thorough revision that would more closely align it with international standards, enable it to better handle the

descriptive challenges of digital objects, and accommodate the insights of recent critical writing on description that have expanded the notion of archival context.

## Introduction

The first chapters of the Canadian *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)* were published just over twenty years ago. The archival landscape has changed considerably in the ensuing two decades. International archival descriptive standards now appear where none existed previously. The bibliographic standards that formed the starting point for *RAD* have themselves been thoroughly revised. *RAD*'s media chapters looked to a world of physical, analog objects that are now routinely digitized for access and preservation purposes or are born digital from the outset.

How does *RAD* fare in this context? How well has it aged? Its successes are considerable. Taught in graduate programs and vigorously supported by the provincial and regional councils and associations, it provides a common language that transcends institutional practice. Canadian archivists have embraced it, and *RAD* compliance is a requirement for institutional participation in the national archival network. Researchers now have access to an ever-growing body of consistent descriptions through provincial and national networks of shared databases built around the standard. *RAD* was a collective project of the Canadian archival community, developed by multiple representative committees in a regular cycle of draft, community feedback, revision, and publication. This consultative process made it more than a manual or compendium of best practices; it has both helped to create and draw upon a reserve of goodwill for descriptive standards in Canada that was unimaginable twenty-five years ago. In many ways, *RAD* forms the backbone of the Canadian archival network, and it has moved to the centre of the Canadian archival practice.

But while we Canadian archivists are accustomed to telling or hearing a triumphal story of *RAD*, we have reached an impasse. When examined in the broader context of international archival standards or standards in other descriptive communities, *RAD* has fallen out of the mainstream. It now contains a wealth of tools for describing archives – elements, rules, as well as applications to specific cases, levels of arrangement, and media. There is no richer archival descriptive standard. But it is also burdened by an archaic structure inherited from bibliographic models of the library world that have been abandoned by archivists elsewhere and are no longer current among librarians. This structure makes for a cumbersome and repetitive document, unnecessarily difficult to access, learn, and teach; prone to inconsistencies; resource-intensive to maintain; not easily adjusted to incorporate new descriptive elements or practices; organized into media chapters rooted in an analog world; and ill equipped to meet the descriptive challenges of digital objects. But can we liberate *RAD*'s content from its structure? What are the options?

Here, we hit an impasse. On a day-to-day level, *RAD* works, and why fix something that isn't broken? On the other hand, the minor-tweaking approach to maintenance has perhaps run its course. To align *RAD* with international standards or incorporate insights from recent work elsewhere will require a protracted revision. However, the ambitious restructuring proposed in 2004 as *RAD2* was greeted by Canadian archivists with little consensus and some hostility against a general backdrop of indifference; it was not implemented. Perhaps it is the very success of descriptive standards in Canada – the centrality of *RAD* to Canadian professional archival life – that now works against any renewal. Satisfied with our standard, we have had little reason to look abroad, and with so much seemingly at stake and with so much already invested, the prospect of far-reaching change is alarming if not unimaginable. But without change, *RAD* slowly stagnates.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to what needs to be a wider debate about the future of our descriptive standard: what does and does not work, and what are the options? The first half of the article situates *RAD* in the history of descriptive standards. The remainder discusses in some detail a number of specific problems and suggests the difficulty of resolving them in the current structure. The paper concludes by sketching some options: old *RAD*, new *RAD*, or post-*RAD*?

### ***RAD* and the Bibliographic Inheritance**

When Canadian archivists began to draft *RAD* in the late 1980s, they opted to work within the broad framework provided by then-existing bibliographic standards – the *ISBD(G): General International Standard Bibliographic Description* and *AACR2*, the second edition of the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*.<sup>1</sup> These were themselves relatively recent products of the 1970s, but they had behind them a long tradition of thinking about cataloguing. The first modern cataloguing standard appeared in 1841, with Anthony Panizzi's *Rules for the Compilation of the Catalogue* for the British Museum, and by the end of the nineteenth century professional librarians' associations in the United States and Europe had consolidated national cataloguing codes.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, *ISBD(G): General International Standard Bibliographic Description* (London, 1977); Michael Gorman and Paul W. Winkler, eds., *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, Ottawa, and London, 1978).
- 2 For a survey of cataloguing practices from antiquity through modern times, see Ruth French Stout, "The Development of the Catalog and Cataloging Rules," *Library Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (October 1956): 254–75. See also William Denton, "FRBR and the History of Cataloging," in Arlene G. Taylor, ed., *Understanding FRBR: What It Is and How It Will Affect Our Retrieval* (Westport, CT, 2007), 35–57. Michael Gorman and Pat Oddy see "three ages of modern English-language descriptive cataloguing codes," moving from codes elaborated by single

International co-operative efforts led to the “Paris Principles” in 1961 (a statement of principles for cataloguing), and the first edition of *AACR* appeared in 1967.<sup>3</sup> In 1969, an international meeting in Copenhagen reviewed national cataloguing practices and found wide variance “in the order of descriptive data, the data included and excluded, and the abbreviations used in descriptions.”<sup>4</sup> The meeting mandated the development of an *International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD)* under the sponsorship of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Work began with special *ISBDs* for particular classes of material: *ISBD(M)* for monographical publications appeared in 1971 and *ISBD(S)* for serials in 1974, but in 1977 a general framework was produced, the *ISBD(G)*.<sup>5</sup> The focus of the *ISBD(G)* is to identify the required elements of a description and to prescribe their order of presentation and governing punctuation. The *ISBD(G)* provided the basis for a revision of *AACR* in 1978 (referred to herein as *AACR2*), with its detailed rules reorganized into the *ISBD* areas of description and elements.

From the bibliographic models of *ISBD(G)* and *AACR2*, *RAD* derived most of its areas and elements of description; a certain style of writing and presentation, numbering, and punctuation conventions; division into separate media chapters;<sup>6</sup> and the idea of access points and the interest in rules for the headings (names) to be used as access points. Although the library standards would provide the data structure and the model, the content of *RAD*’s rules would be driven by a rigorous commitment to archival principles: respect des fonds, multi-level description proceeding from the general to the specific, and the communication of context.

As the preface to the first edition (1990) stated, “*RAD* is based on the framework of *AACR2R*<sup>7</sup> with appropriate modifications to reflect those archival principles governing the arrangement and description of a fonds and its

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individuals in the nineteenth century to the national codifications produced by professional committees at the turn of the century to a third age ushered in by *AACR* in the post-war period; Michael Gorman and Pat Oddy, “The Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules Second Edition: Their History and Principles” (paper presented at the International Conference on the Principles and Future Development of *AACR2*, Toronto, 23–25 October 1997), [http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/300/jsc\\_aacr/aacr\\_sec/r-aacr2e.pdf](http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/300/jsc_aacr/aacr_sec/r-aacr2e.pdf) (accessed 8 November 2011), 2.

3 See Joint Steering Committee for the Development of *RDA*, “A Brief History of *AACR2*” (1 July 2009), <http://www.rda-jsc.org/history.html> (accessed 8 November 2011).

4 Gorman and Oddy, “The Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules Second Edition,” 7.

5 See the introduction to the 2007 edition of *ISBD(G)*, x.

6 Throughout this paper, the term “media chapters” is used to refer to *RAD*’s separate chapters for separate forms of materials. One of the difficulties with *RAD* is that neither the notion of “medium” nor the conceptual basis for the division into chapters is clearly defined or articulated. However, the use of the term “media chapters” has become a kind of conventional shorthand for referring to the various chapters of special rules as distinct from the general rules of Chapter 1, and it is in this sense that the term is used.

7 *AACR2* underwent a revision in 1988 that was referred to as *AACR2 Revised (AACR2R)*.

parts”); and again, the introduction to Part I of the 2008 edition states that *RAD* “follow[s] that framework [*ISBD(G)*] exactly in the order of elements and their prescribed punctuation.”<sup>8</sup> The reliance on the bibliographic model is most clear in the overall organization of the standard into areas of description: all but one area (*Archival description*) of the nine are taken directly from *ISBD(G)*; three (*Edition area*, *Publisher’s series area*, and *Standard number area*) are applicable only at the item level of description and only to publications.

### *Archival descriptive standards: the first generation*<sup>9</sup>

Why did Canadian archivists choose to develop *RAD* within this bibliographic framework? Through the 1980s, independent projects in the United States, Britain, and Canada worked out separate and somewhat distinctive archival descriptive standards, but each in its own way had to respond to the bibliographic model.

In the US, the initiative for archival descriptive standards came largely from manuscript archivists familiar with bibliographic cataloguing traditions and eager to seize on the possibilities of automation. It was dissatisfaction with *AACR2*’s chapter on manuscripts and its focus on item-level description that led Steven L. Hensen of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress to develop *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts (APPM)* in 1983.<sup>10</sup> This took the structure and elements of *AACR2* and adapted them to accommodate archival materials and aggregate-level description. A second edition was published in 1989 by the Society of American Archivists (SAA), which in that same year formally endorsed it as a standard and assumed responsibility for its maintenance. From another quarter, the SAA’s National Information System Task Force (NISTF), established in 1977, turned its attention to an archival adaptation of the MARC (MACHINE Readable Catalog) format. MARC had its origins in work done by the Library of Congress in the late 1960s to facilitate the exchange of shared catalogue records, and librarians were soon using MARC as the basis for multi-repository databases. By the 1980s, two of these databases in the US – the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) and the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) – were effectively becoming national bibliographic utilities geared to the identification of scholarly materials and were open to the inclusion of archival materials. With the release of

8 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description*, rev. ed. (Ottawa, 2008), xviii–xix, Rule 0.22.

9 The idea of “first generation” standards is borrowed from Adrian Cunningham, review of *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, *Journal of Archival Organization* 3, no. 1 (October 2005): 87–90.

10 Steven L. Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries* (Washington, 1983).

the MARC format for Archives and Manuscripts Control (MARC AMC) in 1983, archivists could contribute their descriptions to bibliographic databases. While *APPM* and MARC AMC began as independent projects, they soon came to be seen as complementary, with MARC AMC providing the data structure and *APPM* the rules governing the content that goes into the structure. Both in turn had their origins in *ISBD(G)* and *AACR2*.<sup>11</sup>

In Britain, standards development took a different direction, but there too the publication of *AACR2* stirred the first movements. It was in response to the appearance of *AACR2* that the Society of Archivists (SA) established a Methods of Listing Working Party (MLWP) in 1980. However, the group rejected the setting out of data elements in card catalogues as an inappropriate model for archival description and focused instead on developing a dictionary of data elements required for archival materials. Building on this work, Michael Cook and the Archival Description Project at the University of Liverpool produced the first edition of the *Manual of Archival Description (MAD)* in 1985. *MAD* sought to develop elements of description from the ground up, based on an analysis of existing finding aids and the requirements for representing archival materials, deliberately shunning bibliographic models as the starting point. *MAD* organized its elements into two “sectors”: one for archival description and another for management information (accessioning, appraisal, conservation). It made recommendations relating to the format of finding aids and provided models for describing particular types of material. A substantially revised second edition appeared in 1989, and the third and current edition in 2000.<sup>12</sup>

In Canada, the Bureau of Canadian Archivists (BCA) established the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards in 1983. Its

- 11 Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1989). For the history of *APPM* and MARC AMC, see Hensen, “The Use of Standards in the Application of the AMC Format,” *American Archivist* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 31–40; Hensen, “The First Shall Be First: *APPM* and Its Impact on American Archival Description,” *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 64–70; and Nancy A. Sahli, “Interpretation and Application of the AMC Format,” *American Archivist* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 9–20. For the SAA’s endorsement of *APPM*, see “Archival Description Standards: Establishing a Process for Their Development and Implementation: Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description,” *American Archivist* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 470 (recommendation 9).
- 12 Michael Cook, *Manual of Archival Description* (London, 1986). For the development of *MAD*, see various articles by Michael Cook: “Standards of Archival Description,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 8, no. 3 (April 1987): 181–88; “The British Move Toward Standards of Archival Description: The *MAD* Standard,” *American Archivist* 53, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 130–38; “Descriptive Standards: The Struggle Towards the Light,” *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992): 50–57; “Changing Times, Changing Aims,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 18, no. 1 (April 1997): 5–17; and Michael Cook and Margaret Procter, “*MAD2*: The Idea of an Archival Description Standard,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 12, no. 1 (March 1991): 7–14.

report in 1985, *Toward Descriptive Standards*,<sup>13</sup> laid out the course of the work that followed. It established the core principles (the fonds, levels of arrangement and description, description from the general to the specific) and recommended *APPM* and *AACR2* as the basis for developing rules along media-specific lines. All but one of the report's thirty-five recommendations were eventually implemented.<sup>14</sup> Work on *RAD* proper began in 1987 as the BCA established a Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards (PCDS), which in turn named separate working groups to draft different parts: one for general rules, seven for chapters dealing with particular forms of materials, and additional groups for terminology, subject indexing, and choice of access points. Throughout, the aim was to balance anglophone, francophone, and regional representation with participation of National Archives staff. Working groups prepared draft chapters, which were circulated for community review and comment, followed by revision and final publication. The first chapters on "General Rules" and "Textual Records" were published in 1990. Most of the media chapters had appeared by 1996 when the PCDS was formally disbanded. Maintenance of *RAD* passed to the newly formed Canadian Committee on Archival Description (CCAD), a committee of the Canadian Council of Archives (CCA).<sup>15</sup>

By the early 1990s, then, three distinct national archival descriptive standards had emerged. Canadian archivists tended to situate *RAD* as a "blend of European and American approaches to archival description."<sup>16</sup> *RAD* shared *MAD*'s emphasis on the need for distinct archival principles, but like the American standard, it developed its rules within the framework of *AACR2*. *RAD* distinguished itself from *APPM* with a clearer articulation of description as the representation of a fonds and its parts through multi-level description, as well as by its inclusion of detailed rules for special forms of material. *RAD* aimed to be a one-stop shop for "total description": both the special chapters

13 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa, 1985).

14 Kent M. Haworth, "The Development of Descriptive Standards in Canada: A Progress Report," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992): 75–90. The recommendation not implemented was number 7: "We recommend that all types of finding aids regularly produced by Canadian archival repositories be defined in standards which would give a name to the type of finding aid in question, state its purpose, characterize its contents, and establish a format for its presentation." The Planning Committee regarded this as beyond the scope: "*RAD* is a data content standard, and therefore does not address the issue of the format for the presentation of archival descriptions. Finding aids are data structure standards; accordingly, the question of standardization of finding aids is an institutional and inter-institutional one" (p. 77).

15 On the drafting process, see Jean Dryden, "Dancing the Continental: Archival Descriptive Standards in Canada," *American Archivist* 53, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 106–107; and Hugo L.P. Stibbe, "Archival Descriptive Standards and the Archival Community: A Retrospective, 1996," *Archivaria* 41 (Spring 1996): 260–61.

16 Haworth, "The Development of Descriptive Standards," 78.

for forms of material and the full instructions in Part II for headings (corporate bodies, geographical names, and persons) meant that *RAD* would not need to be supplemented by other specialist manuals.<sup>17</sup>

In retrospect, the reasoning behind the decision to use *AACR2* as the framework for description appears to have resulted from a number of considerations. First, Canadian archivists wanted to avoid reinventing the wheel and to build on existing standards wherever possible.<sup>18</sup> The Americans had shown with *APPM* that the bibliographic models of *AACR2* and *ISBD(G)* could be successfully adapted to archival purposes. As well, compatibility with *AACR2* ensured that archivists would have access to bibliographic databases and MARC. Furthermore, there was then no “comprehensive and systematic model of archival description covering all forms of archival material.”<sup>19</sup> The existence of special *ISBDs* for different classes of material and their corresponding chapters in *AACR2* supported the Canadian “total archives” tradition, with its commitment to the acquisition (and description) of materials in all documentary forms.<sup>20</sup> But perhaps above all, *AACR2* provided a basis that allowed archivists to just get started, to stop debating, and start producing actual rules.<sup>21</sup> And it was only through the work of adapting that framework to archives that many of its limitations became apparent.

### **ISAD(G): a better wheel**

There was, then, a considerable body of work and diverse models to draw upon when the International Council on Archives (ICA) turned its attention to the development of an international descriptive standard in the late 1980s. Canadian archivists played a significant role in this movement. The National Archives of Canada hosted the first planning meeting in October 1988, and it agreed to provide the secretariat when the ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards (ICA/DS) was established in 1990. Two Canadians

17 Kent M. Haworth, “The Voyage of *RAD*: From the Old World to the New,” *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993): 6.

18 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Toward Descriptive Standards*, 77.

19 Haworth, “The Voyage of *RAD*,” 11.

20 Cf. Wendy M. Duff and Kent M. Haworth, “The Reclamation of Archival Description: the Canadian Perspective,” *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990–91): 26–35. “This focus on the development of rules for all media is consistent with Canada’s ‘total archives’ tradition ...” (p. 30).

21 Cf. Hugo L.P. Stibbe’s comment: “Very few [on the *RAD* committees and working groups] had experience with writing rules and of applying them. Although there are and were conventions for preparing certain kinds of finding aids, the use of a code for the description of archival holdings is not a tradition in archives. Writing rules is a speciality akin to writing law. Thus the process of developing archival descriptive standards, although helped immensely by the initial decision to base them on the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, second edition revised (*AACR2R*), was an exercise in learning as much as it was in managing the development of the archival rules.” Stibbe, “Archival Descriptive Standards,” 262.



who had been active in drafting *RAD* – Kent Haworth and Hugo Stibbe – brought that experience to bear in their work on ICA/DS. By January 1992, the ICA committee had produced a *Statement of Principles* and the first draft of *ISAD(G)*, the *General International Standard Archival Description*.<sup>22</sup> Both were debated at the ICA Congress in Montreal later that year, and *ISAD(G)* was approved and formally published in 1993. *ISAD(G)* focused on the description of records. Almost immediately, work began on a companion standard for describing the creators of records, and *ISAAR(CPF)* – the *International Standard Archival Authority Record (Corporate Bodies, Persons, Families)* – was published in 1996.<sup>23</sup> Both *ISAD(G)* and *ISAAR(CPF)* were substantially revised (in 1999 and 2003, respectively), and the ICA has since added two further documents to its suite of standards: the *International Standard for Describing Functions (ISDF)* in 2007 and the *International Standard for Describing Institutions with Archival Holdings (ISDIAH)* in 2008.<sup>24</sup>

*ISAD(G)*'s title echoes librarians' *International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD)*, but what it took from this was not so much the substance (structure or content) as the idea of what an international standard could be and the role it could play for a particular descriptive community. Like *ISBD(G)*, *ISAD(G)* sets out elements organized into areas of description. And it envisions a separate series of authority records for creators linked to descriptions via access points, though this concept was only fully realized with the development of *ISAAR(CPF)* in 1996 and the subsequent revision of *ISAD(G)* in 1999. But unlike *APPM* or *RAD*, the ICA standard did not try to adapt *ISBD(G)* categories to archives. Instead, *ISAD(G)* developed its own elements and areas solely on the basis of archival requirements in light of the purposes of archival description as articulated in the *Statement of Principles*. The very assertion of *ISAD(G)* alongside the *ISBDs* signalled the intention to treat archival material as an independent type of descriptive object, on par with but distinct from bibliographic objects and requiring its own specific data struc-

22 The current (2nd) edition of *ISAD(G)* is available at <http://www.ica.org/7102/public-resources/isadg-general-international-standard-archival-description-second-edition.html> (accessed 15 November 2011). The *Statement of Principles* and the first edition can be found in *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992): 1–16 and 17–34, respectively.

23 Stibbe outlines the development of *ISAD(G)* and *ISAAR(CPF)* in “Archival Descriptive Standards,” 268–69; see also Michael Cook, “The International Description Standards: An Interim Report,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 16, no. 1 (1995): 15–25.

24 The ICA standards are available at <http://www.ica.org/10206/standards/standards-list.html> (accessed 19 June 2012); for *ISAAR(CPF)*, see International Council on Archives, *International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 2004); for *ISDF*, see International Council on Archives, *International Standard for Describing Functions*, 1st ed. (Paris, 2007); for *ISDIAH*, see International Council on Archives, *International Standard for Describing Institutions with Archival Holdings* (Paris, 2008).

ture. The first edition identified twenty-five descriptive elements organized into five areas of description. The second edition in 1999 included twenty-six elements, with one of the areas split into two, and a new area added for information about the description itself.

In many ways, the ICA standards succeeded in taking the best from the “first generation” standards while going beyond them. *ISAD(G)* acknowledged the bibliographic model not by adapting it but by presenting itself as a peer on par with it. Like *MAD*, it looked only to the nature of archives for its descriptive categories, but *ISAD(G)* harnessed this to a clear statement of purpose for archival description against which any prospective element must be assessed. Canadians’ experience working with *RAD* was reflected in the content of *ISAD(G)*, and virtually all *RAD* elements that appear as core fields in a typical aggregate-level *RAD* description can be found in the ICA standard. *ISAAR(CPF)* accommodated the ideas first championed by the Australians, i.e., the need for a clearer separation of information about records from information about creators of records.

### ***RAD and ISAD(G) compared***

When comparing the current version of *RAD* (*RAD* 2008) to *ISAD(G)*, a number of points stand out. *ISAD(G)*’s formal data structure appears much more logical from an archival point of view. *RAD* tries to make archival materials fit into the areas of description taken over from bibliographic cataloguing, whereas *ISAD(G)* elaborates its own areas of description based on analysis of the distinctive nature of archival materials. The areas of description for each standard are set out below. As can be seen, only the *Note area* is common to both.

<b><i>RAD</i> (2008 ed.)</b>	<b><i>ISAD(G)</i>, 2nd ed. (1999)</b>
Title and statement of responsibility area	Identity area
Edition area	Context area
Class of material specific details area	Content and structure area
Date(s) of creation, including publication, distribution etc. area	Condition of access and use area
Physical description area	Allied materials area
Publisher’s series area	Note area
Archival description area	Description control area
Note area	
Standard number area	

Virtually all elements that Canadian archivists commonly use in aggregate-level descriptions have almost exact counterparts in *ISAD(G)*. Thus, while the two standards are structured very differently in terms of areas of description, a typical *RAD* description contains more or less the same information as a typical *ISAD(G)* description.

Outside this core of common elements, *RAD* contains, in addition, two other kinds of elements: those applying to publications and those applying to special media. Three whole areas are given over to these (*Edition*, *Publisher's series*, and *Standard number*), but they are not commonly used. The elements that apply to specific forms of material are mainly at the item level and are mainly but not exclusively clustered in the *Physical description area* of the media chapters. It is worth noting that the first edition of *ISAD(G)* anticipated the development of a series of special *ISAD(G)*s based on form of material, but by the second edition this idea had been abandoned.<sup>25</sup>

A number of *ISAD(G)* elements have no *RAD* counterpart, including the entire *Description control area* added in the second edition. This is for information relating to “how, when and by whom the archival description was prepared” (*ISAD(G)* I.11). The area appears in all ICA descriptive standards but has evolved as the later standards were developed. *ISAD(G)* currently contains three elements, but it is likely that the next edition will harmonize this with the latest iteration of the *Control area* in *ISDIAH*, which includes nine elements.

Both *RAD* and *ISAD(G)* include a *Note area*, but it functions rather differently in each. In *ISAD(G)*, it is for “information that cannot be accommodated in any of the other areas” (3.6.1); no further guidance is given and it carries little freight in the overall description. In *RAD*, on the contrary, the *Note area* is prominent. It contains twenty-one separate elements; if sub-notes and media-specific notes are included, the total is over thirty. *RAD* uses the *Note area* (x.B1–11) to expand on information already entered in other areas; but also, and more importantly, it includes many specifically archival elements that have no bibliographic counterpart and therefore no home in any other area of description. Many of these belong to the core set of elements that *RAD* shares with *ISAD(G)*. But in *RAD* they are not really ordered by any principle.

25 See the preface to the first edition of *ISAD(G)* (as printed in *Archivaria* 34, Summer 1992, 19, par. P7): “Further specific rules should be formulated to guide the description of special types of material (such as cartographic materials, motion pictures or electronic files) and specific levels of description.” Reviewing the second edition of *ISAD(G)*, Stefano Vitali notes that the “decision not to develop specific standards for special materials” rested on two considerations: it would have required much activity to regularly update and maintain consistency, while existing specialist manuals can be adapted to describe particular kinds of material at the item level. See Stefano Vitali, “The Development of International Descriptive Standards and the Second Edition of ‘ISAD(G)’,” *Canadian Journal of Library and Information Science* 25, no. 4 (December 2000): 24.

And whereas *ISAD(G)* can evolve over time by adding elements to any area, in *RAD* almost all new elements will be forced into the unstructured *Note area*.

The style of writing is quite different. *ISAD(G)* clearly identifies and numbers each element, defines its purpose, provides a rule for its content, and supplies examples. *RAD*, following the style of *AACR2*, often embeds elements and sub-elements within narrative rules, which makes it difficult to see at a glance all the elements that are available for description. There is extensive detail in *RAD* that has no counterpart in *ISAD(G)*. Whereas one can read *ISAD(G)* in an afternoon and come away with a good sense of what is involved in archival description, *RAD*, at 700-plus pages, offers no such prospect. As an international and a general standard, *ISAD(G)* provides only minimal rules for the actual content of its elements. The expectation is that national archival jurisdictions will follow the overall structure of *ISAD(G)*, while developing more detailed content rules to ensure consistent national practices.

There are major differences in structure and style, then, but most of the actual elements of a *typical RAD* and *ISAD(G)* description are the same. It is as if *ISAD(G)* had taken the best elements of *RAD* while jettisoning the bibliographic framework in which they were ensconced. However, *RAD* is also rich in media-specific elements (mainly relating to item-level physical description) that *ISAD(G)* altogether lacks. On the other hand, the ICA standards have opened up a whole area that *RAD* has not explored – to convey information about the creation and maintenance of the description itself.

Looking back on the development of *ISAD(G)* and *ISAAR(CPF)*, Hugo Stibbe, Project Director and Secretary of ICA/DS, noted that the contributions of Canadian archivists had ensured that the ICA standards “fall well within the general approach and outline of *RAD* ... This means that, although *RAD* will have to adjust to the *ISAD(G)*s in some future edition, if it purports to follow the international standard, the adjustment will not be radical and therefore not painful.”<sup>26</sup> Such an adjustment was attempted in 2004 with *RAD2*; its fate suggests that Stibbe’s assessment was overly optimistic.

### ***CUSTARD, DACS, RAD2, RAD 2008***

When the SAA adopted *APPM* as a descriptive standard in 1989, it instituted a revision schedule requiring regular review. By the mid-1990s, this meant taking into account the rise of international descriptive standards and other national standards such as *RAD*, as well as the development of Encoded Archival Description (EAD).<sup>27</sup> A 1995 meeting of American and Canadian

26 Stibbe, “Archival Descriptive Standards,” 272.

27 EAD is a data structure standard developed by American archivists for encoding archival finding aids so they can be shared. See Society of American Archivists Encoded Archival

archivists at the Bentley Library at the University of Michigan concluded that a “thorough reconciliation and consolidation of *APPM2*, *RAD* and *ISAD(G)* was possible and desirable.”<sup>28</sup> American and Canadian experts on description met in Toronto in 1999 and produced the Toronto Accord on Descriptive Standards, which set out the principles and framework within which a common North American standard could be developed.<sup>29</sup> American archivists secured funding, and in 2001 the Canada–US Task Force on Archival Description (CUSTARD) was launched, a project to develop a single North American standard within the international framework of the ICA standards. The task force consisted of six representatives from Canada (the members of CCAD) and six representatives from the US (representing various SAA committees and key institutions). By 2003, CUSTARD had produced a statement of principles and a draft version of *Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)*. However, divergences between Canadians and Americans had developed. The main points of disagreement related “to the intended audience of the standard, the inclusion of rules for all media and for all levels of description, the upholding of the difference between fonds and collections and the identification of descriptive levels.”<sup>30</sup> In the end, the two countries agreed to proceed with their own separate (but closely related) standards, and in 2004 the Society of American Archivists published an edited version of the draft as *DACS*,<sup>31</sup> while the Canadians circulated their own version as *RAD2*.<sup>32</sup>

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Description Working Group and Library of Congress Network Development and MARC Standards Office, *Encoded Archival Description Tag Library: Version 1.0* (Chicago, 1998); and Society of American Archivists Encoded Archival Description Working Group, *Encoded Archival Description Application Guidelines: Version 1.0* (Chicago, 1999).

- 28 Jean Dryden, “Cooking the Perfect Custard,” *Archival Science* 3 (2003): 29.
- 29 The *Toronto Accord* is reproduced in Dryden, “Cooking the Perfect Custard,” 41–42.
- 30 Canadian Committee on Archival Description, *Toward a Second Edition of RAD: A Report* (June 2005), <http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/archdesreport1.html> (accessed 25 November 2011), 3. See Dryden, “Cooking the Perfect Custard,” especially 32–37. Jean Dryden, who was CUSTARD Editor and Project Manager, identified a number of tensions that the group had to try to resolve: specific differences between *APPM* and *RAD*; the American tradition of pragmatic, quick “can do” solutions versus the Canadian preference (as exemplified in the drafting of *RAD*) for a slower, more deliberative and consultative approach; divisions within the American community between archivists working in government and corporate records on the one hand and those focused on personal papers and private manuscripts on the other, leading to divergent views on what should be included in the rules and what should not; and differences between those who sought a “one-stop shopping” approach that would incorporate all relevant rules from other standards (e.g., *AACR2*), opposed by others who wanted the focus to be on rules specific to archival materials, with numerous referrals to other standards as required.
- 31 Society of American Archivists, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Chicago, 2004). *DACS* was officially adopted as a standard by the SAA in 2005.
- 32 The draft of *RAD2* was circulated but never finalized or published. CCAD also produced a *RAD2 Backgrounder Report* (2004) to accompany the draft. Both were formerly available on the CCAD page of the CCA’s website at <http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/archdes.html>, but

Both *DACS* and *RAD2* patterned their data structure on *ISAD(G)* and *ISAAR(CPF)*, thus leaving behind the bibliographic models that *APPM* and *RAD* had inherited from *AACR2/ISBD(G)*. *RAD2* proposed abandoning the division into separate media chapters, retaining most of the rules specific to particular forms of material but now organized by descriptive element (so that all special rules relating to titles, for example, were brought together under the *Title* element). *RAD*'s punctuation rules – derived from *ISBD(G)* – were made optional, and the series system for arrangement was accommodated by allowing the series as well as the fonds to be the highest level of description. *RAD2* carried over more or less unchanged *RAD*'s Part II rules relating to headings for personal, geographic, and corporate names.

The Canadian Committee on Archival Description (CCAD) circulated *RAD2* for comment and consultation over the first eight months of 2004. CCAD received relatively little feedback (twenty-four responses, thirteen from institutions). It found little consensus over the proposed restructuring and noted criticisms calling for a broader and more comprehensive consultation process.<sup>33</sup> Canadian archivists faced a dilemma. The centrality of *RAD* to the national archival system made CCAD loath to effect changes unilaterally or without a broad consensus from the community. The response to *RAD2* was in a sense the worst-case scenario: lack of interest (evidenced by the low response rate), and where there was interest, lack of basic agreement. CCAD was unable to recommend proceeding with *RAD2*. Instead, a plan was set to implement those changes that did garner consensus: the new statement of principles, the use of fonds or series as the highest level of description, the inclusion of rules for the description of collections and discrete items, and inclusion of the subject matter of records in the *Scope and content* of fonds-level descriptions.<sup>34</sup> This minimal revision (herein referred to as *RAD 2008*) was completed in 2008.

### ***Librarians and their standards: Resource Description and Access (RDA)***

In the twenty years since *RAD* first appeared, librarians have not been idle in relation to their own descriptive standards. They began to question whether the apparatus of *AACR2/ISBD(G)* was adequate for describing the digital materials that were becoming increasingly prominent in their collections, and thus the bibliographic models that formed *RAD*'s starting point have since been thoroughly revised.

Cataloguers had long made the distinction between a work (an intellectual entity) and the physical object that embodied it (a particular book, film, map,

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have since been removed and were no longer available at the time of writing.

33 Canadian Committee on Archival Description, *Toward a Second Edition of RAD*, 14.

34 *Ibid.*, 123.

etc.). But descriptive cataloguing took the physical exemplar as its starting point. This becomes problematic in a digital environment where the same work can exist in multiple formats on multiple types of objects. It brings into sharper focus the question of what precisely the description is trying to describe: is it “one (physical) thing” or a number of logically distinct but related aspects or entities? During the mid-1990s, a working group at IFLA pursued this analysis and published in 1998 the *Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR)*. This was later joined by the *Functional Requirements for Authority Data (FRAD)* and *Functional Requirements for Subject Authority Data (FRSAD)*.<sup>35</sup>

*FRBR* sets out the purpose of bibliographic description in terms of enabling the user to find, identify, select, and obtain access to a resource.<sup>36</sup> It categorizes the world of bibliographic description into three broad groups of entities: Group 1 entities are products of intellectual or artistic endeavour (work, expression, manifestation, item); Group 2 entities are those responsible for the intellectual or artistic content (person, corporate body); and Group 3 entities serve as the subjects of intellectual or artistic endeavour (concept, object, event, place, plus all Group 2 entities). Each entity has its own distinct set of attributes and enters into relationships with other entities. *FRBR* identifies the data elements required to represent these attributes and relationships in light of the overall purpose of description (that is, to help users find, identify, select, and access resources).

*FRBR*'s analysis formed the basis for the revision of the *AACR2* cataloguing standard. An international conference on the future of *AACR* convened in Toronto in 1997, and out of its recommendations a plan was in place by 2002 for developing *AACR3*. The Joint Steering Committee produced a draft in 2004 but decided that more extensive changes were required, and in 2005 the standard was renamed *Resource Description and Access (RDA)*. Drafting and constituency review took place between 2006 and 2008, and in June 2010 *RDA* was released.<sup>37</sup> The initial goals for the revision had been to conduct a logical

35 See International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), “Functional Requirements: the FRBR Family of Models,” <http://www.ifla.org/en/node/2016> (accessed 15 November 2011); for *FRBR*, see IFLA Study Group on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, *Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, Final Report* as amended and corrected through February 2009, <http://www.ifla.org/en/publications/functional-requirements-for-bibliographic-records> (accessed 15 November 2011); for *FRAD*, see IFLA Working Group on Functional Requirements and Numbering of Authority Records, *Functional Requirements for Authority Data* (München, 2009); for *FRSAD*, see IFLA Working Group on Functional Requirements for Subject Authority Records, *Functional Requirements for Subject Authority Data, A Conceptual Model* (München, 2011).

36 IFLA, *Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, Final Report*, 8.

37 See RDA Toolkit, “News Archive,” news release posted June 2010, “RDA Toolkit Goes Live June 23!,” <http://www.rdatoolkit.org/news/60> (accessed 22 June 2012). *RDA* is available through the RDA Toolkit site (<http://access.rdatoolkit.org>); access requires individual or

analysis of the existing rules, create a statement of cataloguing principles, and separate rules for content from rules for physical carriers.<sup>38</sup> But by the end of the process, *RDA* had gone much further, and its reorganization had explicitly aligned it with the *FRBR* models. Consequently, it does not follow the overall organization of *ISBD(G)*: while all the elements of the *ISBDs* are still represented in the standard, *RDA* is not organized by *ISBD*'s areas of description. Instead, it is structured in two parts: attributes of entities and relationships between entities, with each part broken down into a number of sections.

A number of other changes to *AACR2* should be interesting to archivists because they relate to features that *RDA* shares with *AACR2*. *RDA* has replaced the *AACR2* categories of *general material designation* and *specific material designation* with a three-fold division into *content type*, *media type*, and *carrier type*. The first relates to the intellectual content and the second two to physical attributes, with *media type* being the broader category and *carrier type* the more specific. *RDA* prescribes controlled terms for each.

*RDA* no longer divides the standard into separate media chapters. Rules for specific forms of material are brought together under the relevant element, while media-specific elements for physical description are included in *Describing carriers*, a sub-section of *Recording attributes of manifestations and items*.

*RDA* does not prescribe how descriptions should be output. There are no punctuation rules. It does include an appendix (D) that maps *ISBD* to *RDA* elements so that *RDA* can be used to produce an *ISBD*-compliant description, complete with *ISBD*-required punctuation. But this is optional, not required.

How relevant is any of this to archival description? *FRBR*'s "product" entities (Group 1: *work*, *expression*, *manifestation*, *item*) all essentially operate at what for archives is the item level of description. *RDA*, like *AACR2*, is aimed at the single resource and cannot easily handle aggregate objects that require multi-level description. For all that *RDA* wants to accommodate the needs of other descriptive communities, it remains the case that bibliographic and archival objects of description are different beasts. But the idea of a more rigorous separation of information about intellectual content from information about physical carrier is highly relevant for archival description. I will argue below that it provides a basis for taking a fresh look at *RDA* 2008's so-called media chapters.

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institutional subscription, but its overall organization into sections, chapters, and elements is visible in the sidebar. For an overview of the drafting process, see Cory Nimer, "RDA and Archives," *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 3–4 (July 2010): 227–43, especially 229–31. For an overview of the standard, see Chris Oliver, *Introduction to RDA: A Guide to the Basics* (Chicago, 2010). For additional background, see Joint Steering Committee for the Development of RDA, <http://www.rda-jsc.org> (accessed 15 November 2011).

38 Nimer, "RDA and Archives," 229.



Looking over twenty years of archival standards development, Adrian Cunningham saw “first generation” standards giving way to the “second generation,” inaugurated by the ICA’s *ISAD(G)* and *ISAAR(CPF)* in their mature second editions.<sup>39</sup> The 2008 revision of *RAD* still left it firmly within a first-generational perspective, with an organization into areas of description based on *AACR2*, separate media chapters based on a world of analog objects, and punctuation requirements that have their origin in the need to fit cataloguing data onto the small surface of an index card. It is a model that no other archival jurisdiction still follows. The paradox of *RAD* today is that it is a standard for describing archives structured on a model for describing publications that archivists elsewhere have abandoned and librarians have replaced. Does this matter? After all, *RAD* appears to work on a day-to-day basis. However, it is worth examining *RAD* more closely to see whether there is a price to be paid for the way that it works.

### ***RAD* 2008: some issues**

In 1993, when reviewing the development of *RAD*, Kent Haworth spoke of “*RAD*’s voyage on a sea of archival principle in a bibliographic vessel.”<sup>40</sup> The remainder of this article will make the case that it is time to jump ship. The vessel has served us well, but it is no longer seaworthy. A number of *RAD*-specific problems will be taken up here: *RAD*’s role as a content standard, its organization into areas of description, its division into separate media chapters, the notion of levels of detail, the rules for punctuation, the treatment of access points, and *RAD*’s ability to respond to the body of critical writing on description that has emerged in recent years. The focus here is on the 2008 edition of *RAD*. In what follows, all references to *RAD* refer to *RAD* 2008; any references to the draft restructuring proposed in 2004 but never implemented will be cited as *RAD2*.<sup>41</sup> In the event that Canadian archivists undertake a far-reaching review and revision, *RAD2* will still form the starting point.

39 Cunningham, review of *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, 88.

40 Haworth, “The Voyage of *RAD*,” 9.

41 As noted above (n32), *RAD2* is no longer available on the CCAD website. The edition being referenced is a PDF copy of the draft circulated in 2004; it is labelled (on the Table of Contents) *Rules for Archival Description, 2nd ed. (RAD2)*. Readers wishing to consult a copy should contact the author at radancy@sfu.ca.

***Standards: data structure, data content, data value***

By the 1990s, archivists were accustomed to distinguishing different types of descriptive standards:

- *Data structure standards* define the elements that make up a description (the “buckets”).
- *Data content standards* specify rules for the information to include in the elements (what “stuff” goes into the buckets).
- *Data value standards* provide controlled lists of terms to use when entering data into a particular element.<sup>42</sup>

Within this categorization, *RAD* positioned itself as a data content standard. In a number of places, *RAD* ventures into data value standards, either recommending that institutions develop a standardized vocabulary or providing the required terms (e.g., forms of material at 1.1B4b, footnote 9; general material designations at 1.1C1).

Viewing *RAD* purely as a data content standard is problematic. It allows us to evade the need to rigorously define *RAD*'s elements and demonstrate how any given element supports the overall purpose of archival description. The strategy of adapting the bibliographic framework meant that *RAD* took over its data structure as a given from *ISBD(G)*. On the one hand, this left *RAD* carrying a number of dubious elements that apply only at item level to publications. On the other hand, it overlooked the fact that *RAD* freely creates new elements not in *ISBD(G)* or *AACR2* when these are required specifically for archival description. Thus, *RAD* adds an *Archival description area* that includes *Administrative history/Biographical sketch*, *Custodial history*, and *Scope and content*; and *RAD* uses the *Note area* as the home for new elements that do not fit anywhere else. There is nothing wrong with the elements themselves; indeed *RAD* is at its most productive here. But the refusal to derive all elements in a single, principled way from the nature of archival materials lends a certain ad hoc quality to the specifically archival elements that are tacked on to the inherited bibliographic categories.

Any data content standard presupposes the validity of a certain data structure; you cannot talk about the “stuff” that is to go into the “buckets” without first having the buckets to hand. And even the most minimal statement of data structure relies on some understanding of what kind of stuff can and cannot

42 See Society of American Archivists, “Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description,” *American Archivist* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 454. The report includes another type, *Information system standards*, that “operate at the highest level” and address all the components of a descriptive system (p. 454). Dryden uses the “bucket” analogy to distinguish data structure and data content standards in “A Structure Standard for Archival Context: EAC-CPF is Here,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 2 (May 2010): 161.

be included in the various buckets. In this sense, what we are really dealing with here are not different types of standards but different types of statements available to any standard: some statements will define the elements (structure), some will provide rules for what to include in the elements (content), and some will prescribe lists of controlled terms for data entry (data values). Any given standard may be weighted more heavily toward one type of statement than the others, but a comprehensive descriptive standard needs to include all three.

What are the options for *RAD*? At a minimum and without altering the existing framework, we could extract from *RAD* all the possible data elements that it currently makes available across all chapters and present these in an appendix as a simple list of elements organized by area of description. This would at least make the actual data structure more visible. Such a list could also be used to identify those elements flagged as appropriate for controlled vocabularies and link them to a separate presentation of the actual lists. Again, the immediate value here is to make visible information that is currently buried in the text; in the longer term, it is a first step toward better management of data value standards within *RAD*. Anything beyond this simple listing, however, suggests a more extensive revision. The requirements at least are clear: every element should be identified and defined, with the rules for each logically grouped according to whether they relate to structure, content, or controlled values.

### ***RAD's areas of description***

Part I of *RAD*, "Description," is divided into thirteen chapters: Chapter 1 provides "General Rules" that apply to all archival material, while each of the others give instructions for applying those rules to a particular form of material. Each chapter is organized into the same nine areas of description. All but one (*Archival description area*) derive from the bibliographic standard *ISBD(G)*. A consistent numbering system ensures that the same areas use the same numbering scheme in every chapter.

For a standard that enshrines the principle of proceeding from the general to the specific (1.0A2a), *RAD* turns over a lot of real estate to areas (three out of nine) that apply only to item-level description of publications: *Edition area* (x.2), *Publisher's series area* (x.6), and *Standard number area* (x.9). Hugo Stibbe noted that it was only after the various *RAD* drafting groups were far into their work that the irreducibly "bibliographic" nature of certain *AACR2* elements became apparent. These "are not archival elements of description *per se*, and only became so when material that has been published becomes part of a fonds."<sup>43</sup> As such they were disallowed for aggregate-level description,

43 Stibbe, "Archival Descriptive Standards," 263.

but retained at the item level for description of publications. *RAD2*'s proposed solution was to move them into a single *Specialized elements* area. But retaining purely bibliographic elements in an archival standard leaves us with two bad choices in terms of long-term maintenance: either we always align these with the latest version of the library standard (a difficult task) or we risk promoting what may be obsolete cataloguing practices. Ideally, we should eliminate these elements. Archival description is generally interested in publications not as bibliographic objects but as records related to the actions that brought them into the fonds. In practical terms, problems mainly arise when preparing file or item lists for series that include publications (newspapers, journals, books), and there are questions about what to include in the item title and how to format it. But then it should be possible to adapt the rules of genuinely archival elements (e.g., *Title*) to handle difficulties presented by the special case of item-level description of publications.

*RAD*'s *Title and statement of responsibility area* (x.1) and the *Date(s) of creation, including publication, distribution etc. area* (x.4) convey key information about the material under description. But both are restrictive, allowing only one title and one date for each description; information about variant titles and dates (e.g., date of accumulation versus date of document creation) are relegated to the *Note area*. The rules could be considerably simplified if we allowed multiple title and date statements at every level of description, with a small number of sub-elements for each; for example, a *Date statement* would consist of *Date*, *Type of date*, *Date note*, and a *Title statement* would consist of *Title*, *Type of title*, *Title dates*, and *Title note*. Controlled terms could be developed for *Type of date* (e.g., date of document creation, date of accumulation, date of broadcast, etc.) and *Type of title* (e.g., authorized title, previous title, creator's title, variant title, etc.). The whole paraphernalia of *formal title proper* versus *supplied title proper* could be dropped with little loss. It was inherited from bibliographic description in which the idea that every work objectively has a property conferred on it by the act of publication (formal title) makes sense; it is the job of the cataloguer to discover this property, and failing to find it, one settles for a supplied title. It is not clear that the distinction makes sense in an archival context of bodies of typically unpublished documents that are by-products of activities.<sup>44</sup> What is needed is to be able to distinguish between the title supplied by the archivist and the various names by which it has been known in different contexts over different times – by creators, custo-

44 See Laura Millar's comment: "The fact is, fonds don't have titles. This is not Alice in Wonderland. They don't come into repositories in boxes with little white labels that read 'I am a fonds. Archive me.' When creating a title for a fonds, archivists have to supply one." Laura Millar, "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002): 6.

dians, archivists, and researchers. Multiple title statements would allow us to better record and communicate this information.

The heart of a *RAD* description is the *Archival description area* (x.7): *Administrative history/biographical sketch*, *Scope and content*, and *Custodial history*. With *ISAAR(CPF)*, the ICA provided a formal structure for something that archivists had long discussed, namely the separation of data about creators from information about records. *RAD* accommodates institutions that want to maintain creator history in separate archival authority records, but many of the *ISAAR(CPF)* elements have no formal counterpart in *RAD*. Moreover, the driving force behind the idea of separation was the Australian series system, with its capacity to associate one series with multiple creators over time. The 2008 edition of *RAD* permits institutions to designate series (instead of the fonds) as the highest level of description, but it is not clear that it can accommodate the idea of multiple creators. There is no formal element in *RAD* that corresponds to *ISAD(G)* 3.2.1, *Name of creator(s)*, which would allow multiple creators with links back to separate administrative histories. Instead, *RAD* still seems to work on the principle “one description, one administrative history,” whether that administrative history resides in a separate authority file or not.

*RAD*'s *Note area* (x.8) plays a prominent role in description because it includes many core elements that had no counterparts in *AACR2* and therefore no home in any other area. As such, it has been a fruitful and creative field. But the status of notes as elements is ambiguous. *RAD* instructs that “when appropriate, combine two or more notes to make one note” (1.8A1), thus blurring their boundaries. The organization of the *Note area*, moreover, is problematic. The first eleven notes in Chapter 1 (1.8B1–11) allow for additional information on data already entered elsewhere; these follow the order in which the corresponding elements are given in their original areas. The remaining notes (1.8B12–21) are not really ordered by any principle, although some structure is introduced with the division of certain notes into sub-elements (e.g., the four sub-notes under 1.8B16, *Restrictions on access, use, reproduction, and publication*). One problem here is that the *Note area* is the main place in *RAD* that can incorporate new descriptive practices and elements; but they can only be tacked on to what becomes over time an undifferentiated list.

The latest chapter added to the 2008 revision – Chapter 13, “Discrete Items” – includes what appears to be a whole new area: *Examples* (13.10). Whereas all chapters (including Chapter 13) include examples throughout the text to illustrate particular rules, Chapter 13 uses this area to supply in addition a complete description of a discrete item to illustrate the whole set of rules. This may or may not be a good idea, but it has not been implemented in any other chapter. In a way, it shows the difficulty of incorporating into *RAD* new ideas for description: it is not enough to make one change in one place; it needs to be implemented consistently across thirteen different chapters.

To sum up, even after twenty years, the strangeness of *RAD*'s language for areas of description has not diminished; *edition*, *dates of distribution*, *publisher's series*, and *standard number* still strike an odd note in the context of archival description. Several areas are hardly used at all, while the unstructured *Note area* is forced to carry too much weight. There seems little point in trying to tweak this aspect of *RAD*: the whole thing needs a thorough revision. The original motive of being compatible with *ISBD(G)/AACR2* has little force, especially now that librarians themselves no longer organize their own descriptive standard around this schema. It is compatibility with the international archival descriptive standards that is more relevant, and indeed *RAD2* proposed moving precisely in this direction. *ISAD(G)* and *ISAAR(CPF)* separate information about records from information about creators. The recent work of librarians in reforming their own cataloguing code opens a further prospect of separating information about items from information about physical carriers.

### ***Media chapters and physical description***

One might expect that *RAD*'s *Class of material specific details area* (x.3) would bring together in one place all elements specific to a form of material in a given chapter. In fact, such elements spread across other areas, especially the *Physical description* and *Note* areas. Only three chapters actually include *class of material specific details*: "Cartographic Materials" (Chapter 5), "Architectural and Technical Drawings" (Chapter 6), and "Philatelic Records" (Chapter 12). The difference between a material-specific *detail* belonging to the x.3 area and a material-specific *note* belonging in x.8 seems particularly unclear.

*RAD* distinguishes itself from other archival descriptive standards by the richness of the categories it provides in the *Physical description area* (x.5) of the various media chapters, mainly applicable at the item level in the *Other physical details* element. It is one of the strengths of the standard. But there are also several difficulties.

First, what is the conceptual basis for the division into chapters? They generally follow the list of *General material designations* (GMDs) provided in 1.IC1 (architectural and technical drawings, cartographic materials, graphic materials, moving images, philatelic records, sound recordings, and textual records). According to the Glossary, a GMD is "a term indicating the broad class of material to which the unit being described belongs," but this gives no indication of the basis on which distinctions are made between different GMDs: is it an intellectual or a physical characteristic that defines a GMD, or a combination of both? Nevertheless, the individual GMDs are all defined and the terms have become standard among Canadian archivists. But while most of *RAD*'s media chapters represent one GMD, some do not, and this introduces

a certain incoherence into the overall structure. Thus “Records in Electronic Form” (Chapter 9) and “Records in Microform” (Chapter 10) are not GMDs but types of support on which records in most GMDs can be carried (e.g., an architectural record can exist on paper, on microfilm, and in digital form). “Objects” (Chapter 11) are defined as “three-dimensional records” (11.0A1), though some GMDs already include three-dimensional objects in their scope (architectural drawings and cartographic materials), and there those rules take precedence. The chapter on “Discrete Items” (13) refers to something that is neither a GMD nor a carrier/support, but a kind of level of arrangement (an orphaned item that can be connected to no higher unit of description). The lack of a consistent basis for chapters makes *RAD* a more cumbersome document, as the archivist confronted with a complex multimedia body of records is required to jump around to find information that has been scattered across several chapters.

A second problem relates to repetition of information. Many of the rules in the special chapters simply refer the reader back to the instructions in the “General Rules” of Chapter 1. While the character of the media chapters partly reflects *RAD*’s drafting process (where the working groups proceeded concurrently), it also seems to make each chapter a kind of mini-manual in its own right, with all the elements listed even if the rules are given elsewhere. This may be convenient for a user who works with only one kind of material, but for most archives this is not the typical situation. From a maintenance point of view, *RAD*’s structure compounds the difficulties of adding, removing, or revising individual elements; not one but all thirteen chapters must be updated and kept in sync. A good part of the bulk of *RAD* could be reduced just by applying its own principle of “non-repetition of information”: assume Chapter 1 is the only complete chapter and include in the media chapters only those rules that are specific to that class of material.

A third difficulty relates to the various item-level elements for physical description. These are useful, but *RAD* deploys them within an assumption of a one-to-one relationship between the intellectual item and the physical object. Even in the analog environment this was not always valid, but in a digital environment the disjunction between an item and its carrier is more evident.

Consider a not uncommon case: in the 1980s, an archives acquired a reel-to-reel audio tape that included six distinct recordings; in the 1990s, the content was copied from the reel to a set of three audio cassettes for access purposes; ten years on, the archives digitized the cassettes on two CDs that also included other material; later, they were digitized again in different formats (.wav, .ogg) and stored on a file server. What exactly is the item here? Initially, the archives probably logged the reel-to-reel tape as the item and described the recordings on it collectively, providing a single title, date, scope and content, etc., while applying to the reel the physical categories in *RAD*’s “Sound Recordings” chapter. But the subsequent duplication of the separate recordings onto different carriers makes this problematic; it is

the individual recording that is the distinct intellectual item, and it needs a description of its own.

From the standpoint of the intellectual item, what does “physical description” even mean? One could perhaps justify privileging the original format (the reel), while relegating information about the subsequent copies to internal archival management. But many of the same descriptive categories apply across originals, access, and preservation copies; and for researchers seeking access, the format of the access copy may be just as important, or even more so, than information about the original physical format. The solution is to recognize that here we are dealing with not one but two descriptive entities: the intellectual item and the physical carrier. From this standpoint, physical description is not an “area” within a single descriptive record but relates to a logically separate entity (the support object) that needs to be described on its own and related back to the various intellectual entities (themselves described separately) that it carries.

Each GMD chapter attempts to address how to relate the intellectual item to the physical object, with different results. Thus, the chapter on “Graphic Materials” treats *medium* as the base or support substance (4.5C2), while “Cartographic Records” calls this the *material* (5.5C7) and reserves *medium* for the ink or pencil that carries the lines of a drawing (5.5C4). What is needed here is a step back to develop an abstract, conceptual model of the entities involved in description and their attributes and relationships. We are still operating with a definition of “item” that seems rather crude: “the smallest intellectually indivisible archival unit” (*ISAD(G)* Glossary); “an archival unit that can be distinguished from a group and that is complete in itself” (*RAD* Glossary). These definitions mask the reality that archival items can be involved in a number of different relationships that archivists need to describe: (i) wholes and parts (e.g., the cartographic item that includes several different maps drawn to different scales); (ii) originals and archival copies (e.g., the original item, a photocopy made for access, a microfilm made for preservation, and several digitized formats for access); (iii) intellectual entities and physical objects (e.g., the speech and the reel-to-reel tape that carries it, along with several other different items); and (iv) items and actors (the various agents involved with the item over time). We need a conceptual model that breaks down the item level. This would identify generic elements (probably few in number) that are applicable to all physical description and provide a common terminology. On this basis, truly form-of-material specific elements could then be elaborated. For this, however, the GMDs are pitched at too high a level. What is needed for physical description are not elements for “moving images” but elements for film reels, videotapes, and digital files. That is, specific element sets need to be focused on specific physical formats rather than the more general intellectual characteristics of GMDs.



A connection has sometimes been noted between *RAD*'s division into special media chapters and the Canadian tradition of total archives, with its commitment to the broad acquisition of public and private archives in all media. If this is so, it would appear to be more the “bad” sense of total archives that Terry Cook inveighed against over thirty years ago: the division of an institution into separate, self-contained media units leading to “a *de facto* fragmentation of the archival whole ....”<sup>45</sup> *RAD*'s media organization seems more suited for providing such units with their own chapter. Nevertheless, at the item level, the media-specific elements for physical description remain vital; they just need to be liberated from the current framework. We need to take a fresh look at *RAD*'s material-specific elements from a perspective that separates item from carrier. This also opens up the possibility of better integrating descriptive and preservation metadata.

### *Levels of detail*

*RAD* provides for two levels of detail of description (1.0D). The first level of detail specifies a minimum set of elements that must be included in a description, and it differs somewhat for each level; the second level of detail simply includes all the elements that are applicable. The main difficulty here is that it is too general: the minimum set for each level of description includes *Note(s)* but does not specify precisely which of the more than thirty notes are to be used. In place of this general treatment, we need a more precise statement for each element as to its status (mandatory, mandatory if applicable, optional).

The “principle of non-repetition of information” (1.0A2d) somewhat complicates the matter. Descriptions at lower levels should not repeat information that has already been given at higher levels and that applies to all component parts. This principle means that some of the elements in the minimum set (first level of detail) carry the proviso that they should be used only “if appropriate.” Thus *Custodial history* and *Administrative history/biographical sketch* are part of the minimum set for series descriptions, but can be omitted if the information has already been supplied in a higher-level description. There needs to be some distinction between elements that are mandatory in all circumstances and those that are mandatory only when applicable.

In a review of *MAD*, Jonathan Pepler pointed out that the principle of non-repetition of information was largely formulated in an environment for paper finding aids, where the reader's experience could be structured and forced to follow the hierarchy of arrangement; by the time they get to a file list, users

45 Terry Cook, “The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on ‘Total Archives,’” *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979–80): 142.

have already had to look at the fonds and series descriptions. In an online environment, these assumptions do not hold. Users run queries that return unstructured lists of search results. In this context, the user may start with the file or item description and never navigate back up the hierarchy.<sup>46</sup> In this environment, we need to rethink the principle of non-repetition on an element-by-element basis. There may be some elements that should always be included in a description whether or not this repeats information from a higher level. For example, if all the files in a series have the same restrictions, it may be enough according to the principle of non-repetition to state this once at the series level and omit it subsequently for the files. But in an online environment, it is probably better to include this information with every file so that the user scanning a search results list is alerted to access issues from the outset and may thus be motivated to obtain the details from the higher level.

All this suggests that we should replace *RAD*'s general treatment of levels of detail with a more precise statement that would indicate the status of each element (mandatory, mandatory if applicable, optional) at different levels of description or with different forms of material.

### ***Punctuation rules***

As a data content standard, *RAD* professes to be indifferent to how descriptions are actually output – that is, their appearance or format as finding aids – except, apparently, when it comes to punctuation: *RAD* prescribes very detailed rules for marking the beginning and end of elements and areas of description with precise forms of punctuation. Each area of description is to be separated by “full stop, space, dash, space (. –)” (1.0C1), while the elements within an area each have their own special rules for separators. Some separators are supposed to include spaces before and after, some only before, some only after, and some no spaces at all.

The main argument for standardized punctuation is that we need a way to consistently show where one element ends and another begins. *RAD* derives its punctuation rules from *ISBD(G)*, but these in turn have their origins in the library cataloguer's former need to compress large volumes of data onto the small surface of an index card. Even traditional archival paper finding aids were not typically subject to this limitation. In a digital world, it is even less significant. If it is important to be able to differentiate data elements, the simplest (and most user-friendly) solution is to just label each piece of information with the name of its element. This seems far preferable to requiring researchers to master the arcane details of *RAD* punctuation. My sense is

46 Jonathan Pepler, review of *Manual of Archival Description*, 3rd ed., by Margaret Proctor and Michael Cook, *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 22, no. 2 (October 2001): 285.

that this is already common practice among Canadian archivists, who for the most part quite sensibly ignore *RAD*'s punctuation rules when they do not suit them.

There is one situation where explicit labelling is difficult and punctuation separators perhaps makes sense: in elements that are structured as multiple statements, each of which includes separate sub-elements. See, for example, the following examples from 1.5D1:

75 photographs : b&w ; 21 x 26 cm  
6 albums ; 54 x 50 cm  
2 film reels : sd., col. ; 16 mm and 35 mm

But even here, it is not easy to combine the punctuation rules of a GMD chapter with those of Chapter 9 for electronic records (9.5B) when one wants to include information about the digital file in the extent statement – for example, file formats (tiff, jpeg) or total computing size (5 GB). In general, an explicit labelling approach necessitates far less guesswork on the part of the user.

One possibility would be to retain *RAD*'s punctuation as is but make it optional (in effect, this is the current reality). Another would be to develop punctuation rules only where they are really needed (for repeating statements with multiple elements) and keep them as simple as possible. Or, finally, we could just stick to the principle that elements should generally be labelled and leave it to institutions to output this however they want. *RAD* took its punctuation rules from the bibliographic standards, but librarians themselves have now abandoned required punctuation and abbreviations in *RDA*. In general, the more *RAD* can move away from prescribed outputs and punctuation, the better. I doubt that many users – archivists or researchers – would miss it.

### *Access points*

Part II of *RAD*, “Headings and References,” deals with the application of access points to descriptions. The notion of the access point is one of the lasting legacies of the adaptation of the bibliographic model to archival description. British archivists long refused it as an illegitimate library interloper but have since changed their view following its acceptance in *ISAD(G)* in 1993.<sup>47</sup> For archival purposes, the idea is to take terms or names from controlled vocabularies and apply them to descriptions in order to indicate the existence of records that relate in some way to the term or name, thus facilitating access and retrieval.

*RAD* Chapter 21 provides rules for applying non-subject access points. These are “the names of persons, families, or corporate bodies having some

47 Cook, “The International Description Standards,” 22.

responsibility for the creation and/or accumulation and use, or intellectual or artistic content of the unit being described” (21.0A1). *RAD* allows the following types of access point:

- *Provenance*: name of the creator.
- *Custodian*: actor who is not the creator but had custody of the material.
- *Author*: names of authors of documents included in the material.
- *Officers*: persons who were agents of/in the corporate body that is the creator.
- *Offices*: positions in corporate bodies held by the person that is the creator.
- *Family members*: names of persons belonging to a family that is the creator.

*RAD* acknowledges that the list is not exhaustive and that institutions may want to develop other types of non-subject access points (21.8, footnote 3). It provides an option to include the designation of the type of relationship in the access point (21.0D). Finally, a key requirement is that the access point “must be apparent from the archival description” (21.0B): the user should not have to guess why a name is assigned to a description; it must be mentioned somewhere in the description.

Both *RAD* and *ISAD(G)* glossaries define “access point” in a way that suggests its purpose is to index descriptions: “a name, term, etc., by which a descriptive record may be searched and identified” (*RAD*); “a name, term, keyword, phrase or code that may be used to search, identify and locate an archival description” (*ISAD(G)*). But this seems to omit the key point: to alert the user to the existence of materials relating to the name or term. This purpose is what controls the decision to assign an access point or not. Simply because a name is mentioned in a description does not mean that there are records relating to it in the materials being described. For example, an administrative history may provide additional context by indicating the organizational units to which the fonds’ creator reported. But there may be no records in the fonds actually relating to those units, and it seems ill advised to make access points for them even though they are included in the description. In this sense, access points do not simply index the description.

But if *RAD*’s definition is too general, its application in terms of the types of access point allowed is too narrow. It seems odd to speak of *authors* at the series or file level, while *officer*, *office*, and *family member* indicate relationships between persons, corporate bodies, and families rather than between those entities and the records. What is needed here might be better expressed as *contributor*, *correspondent*, or *record subject* access points: these would indicate agents who are not the archival creator but who contributed to the formation of the records as officers of a body, external correspondents with it, or clients who interacted with it. The key question in all these cases is whether

or not their activities left significant traces in the records so that a researcher who is interested in the agent (enough to use its name as a search term) should be alerted to the existence of these records.

*RAD* does not go beyond *non-subject* access points; however, this leaves out many types of access points that Canadian archives want to use and – in the absence of any guidance from the standard – do in fact use, such as subjects, functions, places, events, and forms of material. Subject indexing in archives is a notoriously slippery concept. But the idea is not entirely without an archival pedigree. Earlier writers on arrangement sometimes identified a level below the repository but above the fonds to be used for grouping various fonds, typically for administrative purposes. Rather than arrangement, this can be seen as a kind of fonds-level indexing; it offers very broad ways of indicating the relevance of various bodies of archives to various lines of inquiry (“environment,” “labour”), and the same fonds can be grouped under any number of headings. At the series level, function and event may be more useful than subject. But in all this murky territory, little headway will be made by leaving it outside the standard. On access points generally, *RAD* lags behind archival practice.

The bulk of *RAD* Part II (Chapters 22 to 26) is taken up with detailed rules for how to form the headings that will be used in access points (names of persons, geographical places, and corporate bodies) and how to establish cross-references between them. The level of detail here aims to cover every possible scenario: names in different languages, titles of nobility and royalty, names of spirits, and so on. Such rules are an essential aspect of authority control, which supports the creation of consistent and unambiguous names that serve as access points to enable the discovery of descriptions and the records they represent. This is important where archival descriptions are incorporated into shared catalogues and databases – shared among multiple archival repositories or within a single institution among different units (e.g., archival descriptions in a library catalogue). But if authority control is important for archives, does a standard for archival description need to include rules for authority control? If *RAD* were to allow subject access points, we would not require an additional chapter on how to construct a thesaurus of controlled subject terms. Authority control is a tool that archival description uses, but a tool that can be built somewhere else, outside the rules for description.

For access points, archivists need a list of controlled terms and names. Many, if not most, of the names needed for local description (creators, officers, administrative units) will not appear on existing lists such as the *Canadiana* Authorities maintained by Library and Archives Canada. Accordingly, institutions also need some guidelines for creating and maintaining their own lists and consistently adding new entries. The ideal would be to separate from *RAD* the detailed authority control chapters as a stand-alone document and to devise a very small number of rules that would cover most local archival needs, refer-

ring users to the detailed rules when needed for special cases. This may be easier said than done, and in the end it may be better to just leave well enough alone. But it is a peculiarity of *RAD*'s treatment of access points that it devotes too much attention to questions that are not really matters of archival description (how to form a name) and too little to those that genuinely are (what types of access points do we need and how should they be applied in different circumstances?).<sup>48</sup>

### ***RAD description: what's missing?***

What is missing from *RAD*? There are three places to look: (1) common and enduring features of Canadian descriptive practice that have not found their way into the standard; (2) information about the description itself and its changes over time; and (3) recent critical writing about archival description, which has identified a number of limitations in traditional practice.

With respect to the first, *RAD* has no element for *Name of creator(s)*, *Level of description*, or *Reference code*. All three are commonly used by Canadian archives, and all appear in *ISAD(G)* and should be treated somewhere in *RAD*. *RAD* restricts *Statement of responsibility* (1.1F) to the item level only. There is a place for the creator's *Administrative history/biographical sketch* and provision for a *Provenance access point*, but there is no formal element corresponding to *ISAD(G)*'s *Name of creator(s)* (3.2.1), which provides the link between an archival description and a creator authority record and in principle allows a description to be associated with multiple creators. *RAD* also treats the inherited *ISBD(G)* element *Standard number* (1.9B) as a purely bibliographic one, applicable only at the item level (for things like a book's ISBN number). But this means that there is no real place for archival *Reference codes*. With descriptions increasingly shared across multi-repository databases, there is a need to think about standardized identifiers. Finally, *Level of description* is obviously a central idea in *RAD*, but it lacks an element that formally represents it.

*RAD* is generally lacking in elements that provide information about the description itself. Looking at the four ICA standards' *Control area*, useful elements here would include *Rules and/or conventions used*, *Status* (e.g., draft, finalized, revised), *Level of detail* (e.g., minimal, partial, full), *Maintenance*

48 Do Canadian archivists need their own separate authority control rules, i.e., rules for establishing name headings that are different than those needed by libraries or museums or galleries for their own descriptions? Is this not a duplication of effort? Ideally there would be one list of Canadian name authorities that all descriptive communities could draw on, one set of rules for contributing new entries, and one joint body to maintain the rules. This will likely become more important as various communities move toward shared descriptive databases; see, for example, the Canadiana Discovery Portal, <http://alouette.ourontario.ca> (accessed 8 November 2011).

*notes* (documenting changes over time), *Language* (of the original description and the availability of translations), and *Sources* (indicating documents the archivist consulted in preparing the description). A common scenario for most archives is a requirement to acknowledge special funding from grants agencies; a *Funding* element might also be a useful addition here.

Looking more broadly, recent critical writing on archival description has centred on ideas of archival accountability and broadening the notion of archival context and the ways it can be represented in description. Much of this work has been animated by the postmodern stream of archival writing, which works to expose a certain irreducible subjectivity in archival decision-making that itself helps shape the archival record, is bound up in processes of power, and marks archival discourse as partial and decidedly non-neutral.<sup>49</sup> For description, the practical implications that have been suggested are that archivists need to direct more attention to the effects of their own choices and actions on the material under description (accountability); and to recognize the partiality of their own perspective by opening up the finding aid to other voices and allowing descriptive content from other sources, including record subjects and archival users. No doubt these issues go beyond simply adding new descriptive elements, and the thrust of much of this work is “not so much a challenge to existing data structure standards, but rather a push towards reconfiguring the tone, intent, and honesty of their content.”<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, some practical possibilities do emerge.

A number of writers have suggested that archival description has privileged the records’ original context of creation at the expense of the more complicated story of the records’ subsequent journey through changes in the creator’s recordkeeping practices, transfers of ownership and custody, and the effects of the archival actions of appraisal, selection, arrangement, rehousing, conservation, and reproduction.<sup>51</sup> The concept of the fonds, Laura Millar

49 For the idea of “streams” of archival writing, see Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, “Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 264–65. The authors distinguish a *traditional* stream based on Enlightenment assumptions; a *critical* one that questioned some of these assumptions while focusing on appraisal and selection; and finally the *postmodern* archival writing of the last decades of the twentieth century, which looks at the archivist as a storyteller and archival description as a kind of narrative. The three streams have tended to flow past one another; the authors call for them to “churn against one another” in the same channel (p. 265), and their article is a contribution to that end.

50 Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, “Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid,” *American Archivist* 65, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2002): 225.

51 See, for example, Millar, “The Death of the Fonds,” 1–15; Heather MacNeil, “Trusting Description: Authenticity, Accountability, and Archival Description Standards,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 7, no. 3 (September 2009): 96–97; Geoffrey Yeo, “Debates About Description,” in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, CA, 2010): 99–100.

argues, has beguiled archivists into forgetting that what we have in our holdings are just the remains of a fonds – the residue and not the whole.<sup>52</sup> The forces of subtraction – no less than the forces of creation – are important for understanding what remains. But *RAD*'s descriptive categories are primarily geared toward the latter; for the former, we must make do with *Custodial history* (1.7C) and the notes on *Immediate source of acquisition* (1.8B12) and *Arrangement* (1.8B13). *ISAD(G)* goes further, with an element for *Appraisal, destructions and scheduling information* (3.3.2). And in its second edition, it changed *Custodial history* to *Archival history* and broadened the scope to take in all actions on the material that are “significant for its authenticity, integrity and interpretation” (*ISAD(G)* 3.2.3), whether these occurred before or after transfer to archives. More broadly, Millar argues that we need to redefine provenance to address three components: creator history, records history, and custodial history.<sup>53</sup> Taking up these distinctions in the context of *ISAD(G)*, Heather MacNeil suggests splitting off a *Creator history area* (*Name of creator(s), Administrative/biographical history*) and an *Archival history area* (*Name of custodian(s), Custodial history, and History of records' arrangement and finding aids*), as well as adding elements for *Preservation history* and *Reproduction history* to the *Content and structure area*.<sup>54</sup> From a *RAD* standpoint, at a minimum we should consider adding the *ISAD(G)* element for appraisal, scheduling, and destruction. More ambitiously, MacNeil's proposals could form the starting point for rethinking how *RAD* handles this type of information. It seems clear, however, that *RAD*'s current unstructured *Note area* is not well suited to the task.

Traditional description is sometimes said to be mono-hierarchical. That is, it assumes that any given record fits into one and only one hierarchical structure: one item belongs to one file that belongs to one series that is part of one fonds that has one creator.<sup>55</sup> Peter Scott and the Australians identified problems with this model in a paper environment at the series level: unstable administrative structures mean that over time the same series may pass through the control of multiple agencies. In an electronic environment, the difficulties move below the series level. Shared databases and automated workflow processes mean information may be created, accessed, edited, and used by any number of different administrative bodies; and the organization of corporation-wide electronic recordkeeping systems may reflect functional

52 Millar, “The Death of the Fonds,” 6.

53 *Ibid.*, 12–14.

54 MacNeil, “Trusting Description,” 99–101.

55 See, for example, David A. Bearman and Richard H. Lytle, “The Power of the Principle of Provenance,” *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985–86): 17; Max J. Evans, “Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept,” *American Archivist* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 252; Yeo, “Debates About Description,” 91–94.



rather than organizational structures. Geoffrey Yeo has suggested that descriptive systems need to move away from hierarchical to relational models, accommodating the records' multiple relationships with other records and actors in various contexts over time.<sup>56</sup> From another angle, Tom Nesmith has noted the tendency over the past thirty years to expand the concept of context outwards, taking into account the social forces behind record-creating and record-keeping. "Social circumstances shape what information may be known, what may be recorded, and what may not, and how it may be recorded."<sup>57</sup> Nesmith urges a reorientation toward "societal provenance" to incorporate this expansive contextuality into practical archival work.

How might *RAD* try to accommodate some of these ideas? There are ways it could be made more relational: allow multiple creators, dates, and titles at all levels of description; formalize the various notes on copies, originals, and related and associated materials into a *Related materials statement* with standardized sub-elements (e.g., name of related unit, location, type of relation, type of material, dates of relation, note on relation); allow multiple *Related material statements* at all levels of description; at the item level, separate intellectual from physical description and link carriers to the multiple items they support. I would suggest too that we rethink *RAD*'s *Statement of responsibility* element (1.1F). Currently, it is treated as a purely "bibliographic" element applicable only at the item level for information relating to authorship. But it could be made more general to indicate, at any level of description, a person, corporate body, or family that had some role in shaping the records under description: creator, correspondent, contributor, record subject, recordkeeper, custodian, appraiser, conservator, arranger, and so on.

This section has identified a number of *RAD* issues and suggested the difficulties in resolving them within the current framework. Various possibilities for reforming *RAD* emerge, but most point to a comprehensive overhaul. Some specific suggestions:

1. Clearly identify, define, and justify all descriptive elements.
2. For each element, clearly differentiate rules that relate to structure, content, and data values.
3. Revise the areas of description, aligning these with *ISAD(G)* instead of *ISBD(G)*.
4. Abolish the division of the standard into separate chapters based on forms of material; instead, organize the rules by area of description and element, bringing together all media-specific rules by descriptive element.

56 Yeo, "Debates About Description," 94.

57 Tom Nesmith, "The Concept of Societal Provenance and Records of Nineteenth-Century Aboriginal-European Relations in Western Canada: Implications for Archival Theory and Practice," *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 352.

5. Develop a conceptual model for the entities involved in archival description, from the fonds to the item level, identifying their attributes and relationships.
6. Separate information about items as intellectual entities from information about the physical objects that support or carry them.
7. Develop sets of descriptive elements for physical description, targeted at specific physical/carrier formats (including digital formats) rather than at the general GMD level.
8. Replace the current general treatment of *Levels of detail of description* with a clear statement for each element, indicating whether it is mandatory in all circumstances, mandatory if applicable, or optional.
9. Abolish the punctuation rules and adopt the principle that descriptive elements should generally be labelled; or make the punctuation rules optional.
10. Clearly define the purpose of access points and broaden the types of access points allowed.
11. Condense the rules relating to formation of names (Chapters 22 to 26, how to establish name headings) to a small number that cover most cases; move the detailed rules out of *RAD* to a separate document for reference when needed.
12. Add elements for *Creator*, *Reference code*, and *Level of description*.
13. Add elements for *Description control*, modelling these on the ICA standards.
14. Add/expand existing elements for information relating to custodial history and archival actions on materials, including appraisal, destruction, scheduling, and reformatting.
15. Make *RAD* more relational by allowing multiple titles, dates, statements of responsibility, and related material statements at all levels of description.

### **Conclusion: Old *RAD*, Post-*RAD*, or New *RAD*?**

“The development of standards,” Hugo Stibbe remarked, “is never ‘finished.’ When standards are actively used by a community, they are continually revised in response to a variety of factors.”<sup>58</sup> But after the 2008 revisions, *RAD* feels finished; it is hard to see how much more can be done within the current framework. Looking ahead, what are the options? Simply put, they are: carry on with the status quo (old *RAD*); abandon *RAD* altogether and just adopt the ICA suite of standards (post-*RAD*); or attempt once again to rewrite *RAD* to align it with the international standards (new *RAD*).

58 Stibbe, “Archival Descriptive Standards,” 271.

The sky is not falling on *RAD* – it works, it can continue to work. But within the world of descriptive standards, it is increasingly isolated and idiosyncratic, and there are intellectual costs associated with this position: *RAD* seems ill equipped to adjust to new archival realities – the influx of digital objects, the need for more flexible relational models of description, and calls for an expanded notion of archival context. There are also financial costs: Canadian archives are a small corner of a small world, and most descriptive software for archives (open source or proprietary) will likely be oriented to international standards. Accommodating *RAD*'s idiosyncrasies – if even attempted – adds another layer of complexity (and cost) to the programming required.

Why do we need a specifically *Canadian* descriptive standard? Why can we not just use the ICA international standards that have since been developed? Those standards were never intended to replace national ones; rather, they are “to be used in conjunction with existing national standards or as the basis for the development of national standards” (*ISAD(G)* I.1). The ICA standards are pitched at a certain level of generality on the expectation that they will be supplemented by national codes that will provide more detailed guidance as required. They function as a kind of *meta-standard* (rather than a *super-standard*), not a one-size-fits-all but rather a common set of categories that can be implemented in a number of different ways.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, a simple abandonment of *RAD* would be throwing out the baby with the bathwater. *RAD* now contains more than twenty years of experience by Canadian archivists' applying rules at all levels of description to records in all media. If we can reform the structure of *RAD*, we should be able to put its detail to good use.

This leaves the option to overhaul. The 2004 draft of *RAD2* should form the starting point. But more than anything else, what is needed now is a period of debate in which the Canadian archival community begins to look critically at its standard. Part of the difficulty *RAD2* faced was that it provided answers to questions very few Canadian archivists were asking. *RAD* is a community standard: it does not need fixing if the community does not perceive anything wrong with it. Without a broad consensus about current problems and future directions, efforts to improve it will not make much headway. And the one thing Canadian archivists cannot squander is the reservoir of goodwill toward descriptive standards that we have accumulated through the collective experience of creating and using *RAD*.

59 I wish to acknowledge Massimiliano Grandi (personal communication) for this point: the ICA standards do not try to become an archival Esperanto.