

## The canonization of Peter Scott

I am not alone in distinguishing between two strands in the development of what you are calling “Series System”: viz.

- **inheritors** (practitioners who have applied some of the ideas and generally have either misunderstood them or progressively dumbed them down) and
- **continuator**s (viz. who have theorised, e.g. continuum, without having to take the trouble of applying their ideas).

Your agenda seems to be a review of this process of development and divergence as a basis for stabilising and going forward.

The prior question, for me, is this – what is the Canon (i.e. the foundation conceptualisation by reference to which both inheritance and continuation can be measured and understood)? Without one, the work you propose will only compound and further confuse, whether you mean it to or not, the intellectual framework you are trying to clarify. Everyone thinks they know what the “Series System” is but when you get down to it you find they all have different ideas. Just look at the well-meaning efforts of those (myself included) to explain it over the years. No one who didn’t already know something about it could take away a coherent understanding and, if they took anything away, it would likely confuse matters further. Even if you take the postmodern view that every text can be construed in a multitude of ways, there still has to be a text to construe. A cohesive intellectual framework derives from many things including:

- a) New work must clearly reference a set of ideas being extended or contested.
- b) Those new ideas must evolve as a coherent body of thought including other ideas that extend the cannon.
- c) Mainstream, variations, and dissent must be clearly delineated within that body of thought.
- d) Differences must be resolvable by reference to an agreed intellectual framework.

The single greatest flaw we now live with is that Peter Scott spent his whole career advancing the conceptualisation (such as it is) through implementation and a single published account of it. He never reached the end (before he retired hurt) nor did he commit a coherent account of his own post-1966 thinking to paper (the Scott, Smith, Finlay articles being a catastrophic detour, recapitulating old ideas instead of documenting new ones or consolidating the old ones). The same error has occurred in the work of the continuators who have added to the model on a (more-or-less) shared understanding of the conceptual underpinning w/o ever stabilising it or properly articulating it. These strictures apply to me as much as anyone, although I did at least try with HCPR. So, what “we” think of as the system is an amorphous will-o-the-wisp, capable now of being interpreted by anyone in any way they like (almost). There is no orthodoxy. Instead of an orthodox foundation by reference to which further useful continuation could and can occur, the basis for an understanding of important post-Scott differences that have arisen and important developments that have occurred doesn’t exist. Any new advance in thinking must be articulated in a rootless, un-contextualised miasma instead of being hooked into a coherent, documented, and accessible body of evolving ideas which one wants to augment or develop further. More and more in my own writing I found myself having to articulate what I thought the system entailed because I couldn’t be sure any reader would share my understanding of the foundation upon which

the enhancements I wanted to discuss were built. Perhaps the fault lies in the personalities of the continuators who were more eager to conceptualise on their own account than to codify.

Let me give an example. My essay on PJS for the Duranti/Franks Biographical Dictionary includes the following passage:

*As originally formulated, the CRS System treats a Series as a diachronic singularity – along with its contents (an item belongs to only one Series). This follows long-standing descriptive practice which uses inclusion or containment within a singularity as the preferred way to show relationships, embodied in the so-called Multi-Level Rule in which objects of description are treated as component parts of a singular entity and their qualities include some which are derived through inheritance from a parent entity and shared with all other child-entities ... Two views, synchronous and diachronous, which Scott took of the Series and its context, must now also be taken within the Series because of the nature of electronic recordkeeping. The approach is scalable to all “levels” of the records-making enterprise. Even a single documentary object has provenance which can be understood within its own local ambience.*

Taken with the rest of the essay, I am

- articulating the Scott canon regarding series/item relationships;
- disagreeing with Scott’s conceptualisation on this point; and
- proposing a better view to extend the canonical conceptualisation.

In the course of 5 sentences, I have had to

- use a term of my own devising (“ambience”) which is not universally accepted within canonical writings and
- identify a flaw in Scott’s thinking that so far as I am aware no one else has ever commented on (containment of items in series).

I am able to include reference to that flaw not because it is anywhere to be found in Scott’s writings but because he and I had several knock-down arguments about it face-to-face. I then throw out a proposal to re-conceptualise on this point without any conviction that I can convey to readers that the correction has been accepted (or disputed) within a canon that has never articulated it in the first place. To my shame, at several points in that part of the essay (“Legacy”) I had to fudge whether I was giving an account of an accepted view of post-Scott developments or merely my own opinions.

I think this is the situation you are trying to remedy and, if it were possible to remedy it, I would be all in favour. But my reservations concern how to go about it. On the basis of an agreed canon, the kind of analysis you are now proposing viz.

- Series System conceptualisation and history of intellectual thought (and how it morphed into continuum thinking)
- Implementation compromises - Sets of intellectual compromises (e.g. standards) due to risk management or needing to deal with constraints vs unknowing introduction of flaws vs Belinda’s point of ‘hostile’ people getting there by accident.
- Compromises due to systems implementations e.g. institutional technology, size of market, understanding, getting systems to work, etc.
- Consequences of decisions or compromises.

could proceed on the basis you suggest (viz. examining the understanding, development, compromises, and misunderstanding found in various writings and implementations).

Without such a canon, however, the work you propose risks compounding the confusion (at best) or degenerating into mayhem (at worst) unless any sensible audience was bored rigid and lost interest at this kind of navel-gazing long before violence was occasioned. In short, you can't simultaneously develop a framework and critique it.

The first step, therefore, would be to develop a canonical statement of the "Series System" as a starting point for whatever comes next. The problem with Peter's articulated demonstrations is that they are open to too many interpretations and there is too little of Peter's articulation to serve as a conceptual foundation w/o mediation by continuators who are simultaneously changing the conception while they are articulating it. I don't think it would be all that difficult to remedy this – perhaps not before May - but previous unsuccessful attempts (the unfortunate DAIC, for example) would suggest I am wrong. So, my suggestion for << a 20m presentation that will be the foundation for a section intro or chapter(s) in the Always Becoming book >> would be what I have said above by way of introducing a first draft of a Canonical Statement, but you won't warm to that suggestion if you don't share my analysis of the problem.

**<< I don't see Scott as the lone creator of the canon >>**

I quite agree and I hope I have myself made a contribution. It is precisely because the body of Maclean/Scott writings is so slender that the canon must be sought more broadly. What I meant was that it is possible (even on the basis of the relatively thin body of writing by Maclean/Scott) to discern a set of .... what? (principles, assumptions, ideas, signposts) which serve as a starting point rather than simply a foundation for what followed. However articulated, at their most basic, these include -

- focus on systems not artefacts (r/keeping not custodial, continuum not life cycle);
- entity definition (focusing on component elements in a r/keeping process not just documentary products)
- synchronic/diachronic method (avoiding entrapment within a purely time-bound view of the process, application to current r/keeping)
- relationship definition (articulating the ways in which the process operates, distinguishing entities from what they do).

Broadly speaking, these are the boundary posts within which I believe I have worked and (although he might not concur) within which I think I can place much of Frank's continuum work also, and Sue's, and Barbara's, etc etc (to say nothing of Glenda's "relics" piece). We have all gone beyond Maclean/Scott but have we been clearing new territory or reworking the same ground more productively? Either way, I agree it is the work of many hands.

In what part of the intellectual landscape would the canon be found? Is it about archival description, r/keeping, systems thinking, data quality, or the meaning of life? Is it, as I once described it, an "Australian" system? Does it embody a uniquely antipodean approach or is it simply a tradition alongside other approaches traversing the same territory? Where does it stand in relation to the work of others who have (or are said to have) developed, or even anticipated, similar ideas - particularly in Nth America? What relationship (if any) now exists between the canon (however defined) and international developments - ISAD, RiC, RM and metadata standards, schemas, etc etc?

PS. As to sources : there is one valuable one which, so far as I am aware, is no longer available. For a period, NAA put up the *CRS Manual* on its website. For some years this was heavily influenced by Peter's post-1966 thinking and then, after Peter's retirement, it began to document the long internal decline under the hands of the inheritors. I used to glance at it from time to time to see how things were going and for a bit of a chortle. So far as I know it then disappeared (but I may be wrong). It would be fascinating (but time consuming) to trawl through the several versions to extract documentary evidence for some of Peter's post-1966 ideas before the rot set in (I mean the rotting of NAA's implementation of Peter's ideas not of PJS himself).

**<< CRS Manual is available online still...Wayback machine also has some versions captured (2009 the earliest) >>**

I think a lot of PJS would have been bleached out of the *Manual* by 2009. My use of it goes back to the 1990s. Still, it's good that it's still around and available and it should certainly be consulted, or at least glanced at, for this project. The other source would be the internal NAA files (many, many, many files) in which Peter meticulously documented the developments in lengthy minutes addressed to Keith Penny and others. I'm sure they were being written for posterity. A full scale research project would need to look for and at these and most would now be well within the 30-year limit on access. I believe Adrian Cunningham has spent time going through these files so he might be able to give a clue as to how useful they would be.