The provenance method of retrieving information from archival records has rarely been employed fully. The description of the provenance or institutional creator of records is often merely the name of an administrative department. This thesis emphasizes the importance of understanding how records-creating institutions function in order to understand their records and retrieve the information contained within them.

In demonstrating a functional approach to provenance, this thesis provides an archival administrative history of the Northern Stores Department of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1959-1987. The Northern Stores Department operated for twenty-eight years during which time it ran over 200 stores in the northern and remote communities of Canada, often as the sole supplier of groceries and other essential goods. It had an important impact on the people of the North and is thus of considerable interest to researchers. The department developed out of the company's Fur Trade Department, which gradually expanded into the area of general merchandising during the 1940s. It was renamed the Northern Stores Department in 1959 to reflect the changing mandate. While maintaining an interest in furs, the Northern Stores Department was primarily engaged in retailing. Its stores were administered separately from those of the rest of the company due to the special conditions of retailing in the North. The department was equipped with its own personnel, accounting, merchandise, transportation, distribution and fur collection operations. It functioned with a certain degree of autonomy from the company's overall business and was eventually sold in 1987 to become a company in itself, The North West Company.

Chapter one provides a broad overview of the history of the Hudson's Bay Company from 1670-1959 with emphasis on the departmentalization of the company's activities and, specifically, the development of the Fur Trade Department. It was during this time that many of the activities undertaken by the Northern Stores Department became formal administrative areas. Chapter two provides a close examination of the department's mandate and administrative structure between 1959 and 1987. Emphasis is placed on the upper levels of management and those who played a significant role in shaping the department's administrative structure. Chapter three analyzes the purpose and activities of each of the administrative divisions within the department. This chapter provides a description of the functions of reach of the administrative divisions and the department overall as the key to understanding its records. This information sets the records within their proper context and allows the user to interpret the information in the records in relation to this context. Furthermore, much can be inferred about the type of information in the records, and where this information might be found, based on knowledge of the functions of the department. It is this type of functional access to information that will open archival records to greater usefulness and easier access. A chapter on the records-keeping systems and the records of the department concludes the thesis. It again underlines the importance of functional access to archival records because the records-keeping system of the department were structured upon a functional basis.