Conundrums for Rare Book Catalogers

JACKIE M. DOOLEY

Rare book cataloging can be a lonely business. Many institutions employ a single rare book cataloger, or perhaps half of a rare book cataloger, who bears responsibility for conceiving, rationalizing, and implementing a sensible, cost-effective rare book cataloging program. In addition to whizzing through massive backlogs, preferably at the speed of light, we single-handedly establish descriptive cataloging policies, find the means to implement an array of special files, and try to ensure that the needs of rare materials are not forgotten in development of online catalogs. It is a complex job, and when we are on our own, it is hard to be confident that we are doing it right.

In the world of archives they call this the “lone arranger” syndrome, and organizations such as the Society of American Archivists have long realized that continuing education and conferences are critical for bringing these lone arrangers into contact with others of their species in order to attend workshops and panel presentations, meet vendors, exchange ideas, and generally learn from one another. For rare book catalogers, this Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL) seminar is a watershed event: opportunities to engage in dialog for more than an hour or two at a time are otherwise limited. I applaud PACSCL and its Rare Book Catalogers’ Discussion Group for the work they have done as a group and for convening a three-day gathering of stimulating papers and discussion devoted to the rare book cataloging enterprise.

My comments set the stage for the more specific papers which follow by taking a broad look at our cataloging environment: the rules we use, the choices they present, and the decisions we must make both as individuals and as a community of rare book catalogers. My vantage point is not that of an expert in cataloging 19th-century imprints, nor as defender of any particular set of rules, but as a fellow cataloger seeking focused debate on issues of import to us all. I trust that each member of this seminar will take an active voice and leave Philadelphia not only with an enriched understand-

Jackie M. Dooley is Head of Collections Cataloging at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Santa Monica, California, and is currently serving as vice-chair/chair-elect of ACRL’s Rare Books and Manuscripts Section.
ing of a variety of issues and renewed confidence in our own talents and experience, but with a positive attitude about the fact that we may find ourselves heading for home with more new questions than firm answers in our satchels.

First, some comments on the rare book cataloging rules, Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Books (DCRB): Suzy Taraba, Belinda Urquiza, and I, together with numerous colleagues, including some participants in this conference, were members of the Bibliographic Description of Rare Books (BDRB) revision team that produced DCRB, and from that experience we can offer certain insights as to the meaning and intent of particular rules. We also have our personal opinions on matters of interpretation, since there are no Library of Congress (LC) or Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) "rule interpretations" for DCRB.

Throughout the BDRB revision process, Ben Tucker of the Library of Congress insisted that the rare book rules be kept flexible, since they are used to describe books and other printed materials from many times and places and of extremely variable character. Even so, DCRB is quite biased toward the descriptive needs of pre-1801 books hand-printed in the European tradition, although it may be used for any material judged appropriate for such detailed treatment by a cataloging agency. No set of rules can account for the endless idiosyncrasies of printed books, and this flexibility necessarily means that much is left to each cataloger's judgment.

For 19th-century materials, which generally have a character that does not easily square with either DCRB or AACR2, special collections catalogers face a quandary: which is the more appropriate code? The answer lies in the purpose of particular catalog records, and so that purpose must be established before selecting a set of rules. DCRB is transcription-oriented and makes requirements which are expressly disallowed by AACR2, including transcription of edition statements without use of abbreviations, placement of early printers in the "publisher" position, fuller transcription of imprint information, notes describing all transposed Area I data, a different approach to "With:" notes, and a physical description that accounts for every page and leaf, regardless of the presence or absence of page numbering or foliation. DCRB further permits practices not permitted by AACR2, such as transcription of original punctuation, of all publishers or booksellers, and of Roman numeral dates. In addition, DCRB provides detailed note rules with examples geared to the needs of early printed books; in many cases, this guidance could be usefully applied to AACR2 records without "breaking the rules."

If one uses AACR2 instead, what happens to the catalog records? Original punctuation may not be used, edition statements must be abbreviated, lengthy imprint statements are truncated, Roman numerals must be converted into Arabic numerals, and physical descriptions include only numbered sequences and "significant" unnumbered sequences, to cite a few basic differences. In the context of 19th-century imprints, are these or any other omissions problematic? Keep in mind that variations are possible under AACR2, despite not being routine components of modern book
cataloging. For example, titles do not have to be abbreviated, extra notes may be added, and any special added entry may be used which the cataloging agency deems useful.

What are the arguments for using DCRB for 19th-century materials, particularly machine-printed books? We need lively discussion on this topic within our profession.

One final thought with regard to the rules: in my view, we definitely do not need yet another descriptive cataloging code specifically focused on 19th-century books. We would benefit greatly, however, from some thoughtful additions to the rare book cataloging literature to illustrate the pros and cons of each existing code in the context of 19th-century books. It is important that we understand the effects of the early printed book bias of DCRB, as well as the chief differences between DCRB and AACR2 records, so that we can select the code that best matches our cataloging objectives in any given circumstance. It is equally important that we trust our ability to make decisions on matters not explicitly mandated by the rules. But perhaps most important is the need to prioritize our problems and questions and to put our energies into solving those that matter most. We all must spend our limited time and resources wisely.

Let me illustrate this need to prioritize in the context of four suggested discussion topics submitted to Suzy Taraba, Belinda Urquiza, and me by the PACSCL Rare Book Catalogers’ Discussion Group. The questions were:

1. What problems does DCRB present for MARC tagging? The use of subfields “e” and “f” in the 260 field were mentioned as one point of confusion.

2. When do we create separate records for variants, and when do we describe them in notes?

3. How do we record signatures for 19th-century books in situations that are not addressed by Gaskell?

4. What progress has been made on the proposed handbook of DCRB examples? Should we contribute 19th-century examples?

In addition, the minutes of monthly PACSCL catalogers’ meetings reveal broad concern with a fifth topic, that of variable local practices for special files, including use of nonstandard MARC tags, levels of authority work, and selective assignment of genre and physical evidence terminology.

Where do we find the answers to these questions? And are they of equal importance? Let’s consider each in turn.

First, MARC tagging of DCRB records. For better or worse, cataloging rules such as AACR2 and DCRB exist independently of the MARC formats, and we rely on network documentation such as the RLIN Field Guide Supplement and OCLC’s Books Format to interpret the rules in the context of the format. For DCRB, the handbook of examples being compiled by the RBMS Bibliographic Standards Committee will provide this type of guidance for a limited universe of examples. What tagging problems have catalogers identified? Most importantly, are there any inconsistent tagging practices which impede access? If so, let us be sure to get these represented in the handbook.
As for the one specific issue raised, namely use of subfields “e” and “f” in the 260 field, I would agree that DCRB does not explicitly prohibit use of these subfields but would suggest that since early printers already appear in subfield “b” when there is no publisher, little is gained by placing later printers in subfield “f.” The purpose of MARC tags is to provide for consistent arrangement and identification of data elements, and in DCRB records the very nature of the materials we catalog prevents us from consistently distinguishing printers from publishers via subfield tags. Whatever the solution, this particular tagging problem has virtually no effect on either effective description or access, so I would favor a quick decision, however arbitrary.

The next question, regarding variants, is both enormously complex and extremely significant. Unfortunately, neither AACR2 nor DCRB contains, to my knowledge, any rules regarding the description of variants; they simply describe how to catalog a particular piece in hand. The bibliographic networks and the Library of Congress have guidelines which are specific to their contexts, and most libraries establish additional internal policies for the treatment of “copies.”

If a standard approach is to be devised for rare books in order to facilitate the identification and distinguishing of variants, it is we who must devise it, and it is urgent that we begin doing so before the USMARC holdings format is widely implemented. The draft guidelines for cataloging reproductions (known also as the multiple versions guidelines) that will be circulated soon for comment throughout the cataloging profession also bear scrutiny in the context of rare book variants. PACSCL catalogers have suggested that variants might be a useful topic for the RBMS Bibliographic Standards Committee to undertake, and I would urge you to make the committee aware of your views. This might be most usefully done by submitting a discussion paper illustrating the issues which have been identified and the preferred solutions.

The third question relates to recording signatures for 19th-century books in situations not addressed by Gaskell. Since DCRB simply refers to Gaskell (and, optionally, to Bowers) for instructions on constructing collation formulae, the answer again lies outside the rules. I would, however, respond by asking several additional questions (and in doing so, reveal my ignorance): What does the existing literature on 19th-century bibliography advise on these issues? What is the value of signature statements in catalog records for 19th-century stereotyped editions? How many libraries can afford to record signatures for 19th-century books at all and would therefore have interest in the solution? If descriptive bibliographers have not devised formulae for describing the idiosyncrasies of 19th-century signatures, should catalogers do so?

The fourth question posed by PACSCL catalogers relates to progress on the handbook of DCRB examples. Suzy Taraba is coordinating this effort for the Bibliographic Standards Committee and, if all goes according to plan, the handbook will be available by summer 1993. I wonder, however, whether the very posing of this
question indicates a need for better dissemination of information regarding committee efforts, as well as quicker action by catalogers who wish to be involved.

The PACSCL catalogers’ discussion group has discussed developing a “Catalogers’ Desk Reference” manual containing locally produced tools such as additions to Standard Citation Forms, subject heading lists, and authority files of local printers and booksellers. The Bibliographic Standards Committee is considering publication of a rare book catalogers’ manual, and perhaps this seminar will suggest areas of appropriate content to the committee.

A final issue of interest to PACSCL catalogers was special files, another enormously complex and important area which straddles description and access. The USMARC format accommodates all of the data elements needed for the standard array of rare book special files, but libraries’ implementations have spanned the continuum from completely nonstandard to near adherence to standards, and many have been unable to put special files online at all due to local system constraints. We desperately need opportunities to discuss these issues so that we can benefit from each others’ experiences and attempt to identify viable, standard solutions. Rare book catalogers absolutely must be actively involved in design and enhancement of local systems and must accept responsibility for rationalizing the inclusion of special files. The economics of systems development being what they are, one’s efforts may or may not pay off quickly, but we are certain to get nowhere if we do not try.

We are a relatively small community of rare book catalogers, and each of us must take responsibility for helping find the answers to our mutual problems. In addition to making our voices heard at this seminar, we must consider how to become involved on a continuing basis. During the BDRB revision process, it was exciting to see dozens of rare book catalogers beyond the membership of the Bibliographic Standards Committee submit copious comments, attend meetings, and speak their piece. We must try not to lose that momentum. We must stay involved in the committee’s efforts so that its agenda cannot lose touch with our most urgent needs. We must attend American Library Association conferences, make our voices heard, volunteer for committee membership, and be prepared to work; there is plenty of work to go around, and never enough volunteers. Additionally, it is important that more members of our profession think carefully about which of our many cataloging problems are the most critical, work on them, and get our thoughts and experience into print. The published literature of rare book cataloging is paltry, and we are all to blame.

Several questions and comments gleaned from the monthly minutes of the PACSCL Rare Book Catalogers’ Discussion Group provide food for thought as we consider the problems of cataloging 19th-century imprints for special collections:

“How do we differ in our cataloging, and which differences matter?” “One aspect of descriptive cataloging of 19th-century titles must concern efficiency vs. idealism.” “Does [more] detail get us anything more than we would have with less detail?” “Access might be an important consideration.”
NOTES

1. The draft, *Guidelines for Bibliographic Description of Reproductions* were made available by the Association of Library Collections and Technical Services Cataloging and Classification Section in December 1992.
SWANN GALLERIES

is the oldest and largest U.S. auction house specializing in Rare Books
Autographs & Manuscripts
Photographs
Hebraica & Judaica
Works of Art on Paper

We conduct 35 auctions a year, including spring and fall Rare Books sales and two or more sales devoted to Autographs. We handle single items as well as major collections and are accustomed to working with Rare Book Librarians.

Our quarterly newsletter with full auction schedule and our brochure, *Selling and Buying at Swann*, are available on request.

To discuss consigning to future auctions, please contact Tobias Abeloff, Senior Cataloguer at (212) 254-4710.
We like books!

This may seem a strange thing to have to say, but with all the babble about the demise of books and the onslaught of the information age (too often reflected in draconian budget cuts for libraries), we thought it was worth stressing. After twenty years of antiquarian bookselling, and a decade of designing and printing, we retain an undiminished affection and enthusiasm for rare books and the libraries that preserve them.

We have produced books, exhibition catalogues, fundraising brochures, bookplates – virtually every kind of printing a library requires – for the Library of Congress, Duke University, Southern Methodist University, the University of Texas, Baylor University, and many others. Our long experience with rare books, combined with a bibliographic reference library of over 7,000 volumes, allows us to assist with accurate editing and proofreading. Our design and production standards ensure a piece of printing that will satisfy a discriminating eye.

If you have a project that would benefit from the care and attention it is our pleasure to provide, please get in touch.

W. THOMAS TAYLOR
Printers, Publishers, & Antiquarian Booksellers
1906 Miriam, Austin, Texas 78722
(512) 478-7628