“What the Bibliographer Says to the Cataloger”

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The title of my paper, “What the Bibliographer Says to the Cataloger,” is borrowed from a talk that Thomas Franklin Currier gave on April 17, 1940, to the Boston Group of Catalogers and Classifiers. Currier is one of my heroes, and in some ways my own work has depended and built on his. He was qualified to talk on this topic for he made important contributions both as cataloger and as bibliographer. Born in Roxbury, Massachusetts, in 1873, Currier was educated at the Roxbury Latin School and Harvard College. After a brief stint of six months as an assistant in the Boston Athenaeum, he joined the Catalog Department at the Harvard College Library in 1894. He became head of that department in 1902 and continued to oversee its operations until he retired in 1940—a cataloger at Harvard for 45 years.

As one of his duties he had charge of maintaining Harvard’s union catalog, the old Widener “OC,” which is presently being converted into electronic form. I have spent many, many hours working with that catalog and admire it tremendously; I love its little quirks and treasures. I have often said that when Harvard finally decides to get rid of it, I would buy it at scrap prices, set it up in my basement, and charge a small fee to scholars who wished or needed to use it.

Currier was also an accomplished bibliographer, responsible for two of the best descriptive bibliographies of American authors that we have: Bibliography of John Greenleaf Whittier (Harvard University Press, 1937) and Bibliography of Oliver Wendell Holmes (ed. Eleanor Tilton; New York University Press, 1953). I am most familiar with the first, as I had it constantly by my side as I worked for over a year on the Whittier list for the final volume of Bibliography of American Literature (BAL).

His was a remarkable career; Currier was one of those rare scholars who both made library catalogs and used them. I have no doubt that his work, both as cataloger and as bibliographer, was better as a result. Nor do I have any doubt that our work, both as catalogers and as bibliographers, would be better if we were to talk to each other more, to share ideas, problems, and insights.

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As for Currier's 1940 talk, I find little to quarrel with in it, even though it evokes a past world where catalogs were made of cards and texts were stable and printed, which seems perhaps a bit quaint in our postmodern era.

In this paper I will offer my thoughts on three separate issues. First, I will examine the relationship between cataloging and bibliography. Second, I will reflect on how changes in cataloging and catalogs over the past few decades—I am thinking particularly of the introduction of computers—have changed the ways that bibliographers and other scholars use libraries. Third, I will consider the special features of books printed during the 19th century and suggest how these might be treated by catalogers. Most of my opinions about cataloging grow out of my own experience working on BAL, work which since 1976 has taken me to hundreds of different libraries and catalogs and brought me face to face with thousands upon thousands of catalog records.

These thoughts are offered tentatively since, unlike Currier, I am not a cataloger. The only catalog records that I have produced were in library school and those certainly do not count. But my comments are intended to serve as the basis for discussion, for greater openness between catalogers and bibliographers.

COMPARING CATALOGING AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

What is the relationship between library cataloging and bibliography? I know of no better concise statement of the "first principles" of cataloging than those given by Charles Ammi Cutter in his influential Rules for a Printed Dictionary Catalogue, first published in 1876. The objects of the library catalog, according to Cutter, are three: first, to enable a person to find a book of which either the author, title, or subject is known; second, to show what the library has by a given author, on a given subject, or in a given kind of literature; and third, to assist in the choice of a book as to its edition (bibliographically) or its character (literary or topical). Although today we expand the catalog to encompass a broad range of library materials and use technology unimagined by Cutter, his principles seem to me to be just as relevant to the 20th century—should I say 21st?—as to the 19th.

As for bibliography, I follow D. F. McKenzie in taking a broad view. I take bibliography to be the discipline that studies and analyzes texts as recorded forms, investigating both the technical and social processes of their production, dissemination, and reception. This includes the examination and analysis of textual versions and their physical forms; the technical, political, and institutional facts of their transmission and control; as well as their perceived meanings and social effects. In his "Panizzi Lectures," McKenzie noted that in the past bibliography has been

the only discipline which has consistently studied the composition, formal design and transmission of texts by writers, printers, and publishers; their distribution through different communities by wholesalers, retailers, and teachers; their collection and classification by librarians; their meaning for, and—I must add—their
creative regeneration by, readers. However we define it, no part of that series of human and institutional interactions is alien to bibliography as we have, traditionally, practised it.3

The straightforward manner in which McKenzie’s view of bibliography bases itself on past practice probably conceals just how exceptional and new this view is. Usually 20th-century bibliographers have attempted to define and describe bibliography in a systematic and positivistic way, dividing and classifying it into a set of subdisciplines.4 Thus we are most used to speaking not of bibliography as a whole, but of bibliographies: enumerative, descriptive, analytic, critical, historical, textual and so on. The assumption is that these separate subdisciplines somehow represent distinct activities and, worse still, that they require different amounts of skill and have different amounts of scholarly value. According to these bibliographers, enumerative bibliography has always had a bit of a stigma—it does not require real scholarship—and historical bibliography has always been a bit difficult to fit in—it should probably be thought of as a branch of history rather than of bibliography. And library cataloging simply does not make the list because, according to this view, it is not bibliography at all, but rather a confusingly close relation of some sort.

None of this has ever made much sense to me, at least when I have tried to square it with my work on BAL. I could never decide when BAL stopped being enumerative and became descriptive, or how I could possibly describe something without analyzing it, or how any of it was to make sense unless I was able to put it within some sort of historical and social context. Do not title-page transcriptions involve me in textual decisions? Neither could I ever understand how one was supposed to rank the different bibliographical subdisciplines. Some of the most elaborate examples of “analytical” bibliography seem to me to be strewn with folly, whereas some of the most elegant and useful works of scholarship that I know of are “enumerative” bibliographies. And within the magical realm of academic politics, this ranking seems doubly absurd since all “bibliography” has a reputation for being dull work performed by drudges too unimaginative to read or criticize the texts with which they are concerned.

I am not trying to argue that all bibliographical activity is the same but, rather, that all bibliographical activity is part of the same enterprise, a bibliographical enterprise that McKenzie sums up with his phrase “the sociology of texts.” From this point of view, cataloging is clearly a bibliographical activity and, in fact—if we consider for a moment the amount of money and human resources that we as a nation expend each year on library cataloging—one of the major bibliographical activities of our age.

I might be accused of blurring useful distinctions here. Are not catalogers concerned only with the “particular copies of books that happen to be in a given collection”? Are not bibliographers concerned with “books which are related in some way, but not with specific copies of those books”? The word “only” in the first question implies that cataloging is somehow limited and of less value. This same prejudice reappears in the frequently stated belief that the goal of a descriptive bibliography is
to describe an "ideal" copy of each book, defined by Bowers as representing "the final and most perfect state of that book." But is this really true? Do not catalogers compare the copy of a book in hand with other copies in the collection, with published descriptions in both bibliographies as well as earlier cataloging records? Do they not analyze this information in an attempt to discover and describe how this copy is related to other copies in other collections? Is not a catalog record normally based on an "ideal" description, perhaps an old printed LC card or an electronic record chosen from OCLC or RLIN? Catalogers have to assign subject headings and call numbers, activities that require some sort of historical and critical understanding that reaches beyond the particular copy in hand. And do not bibliographers of necessity base their descriptions on actual copies, the very same ones that catalogers have cataloged. Are they only interested in ideal copies, the result often of what I like to think of as psychic bibliography? Have they no interest in copy-specific details that give clues to how a work was produced, distributed, and read?

In reality the relationship between cataloging and bibliography is much more complicated than it first seems, but the simple distinction between particular and ideal copy does not seem to hold up. We must all agree that a library catalog represents a tremendous amount of bibliographical activity—enumerative, descriptive, analytical, textual. However, cataloging is a special kind of bibliographical activity, one undertaken with a specific goal in mind. Here we return to Cutter's principles: we can best judge the value and success of a catalog not according to some sort of absolute bibliographical ideal, but rather by determining just how well it manages to achieve the objects outlined by Cutter. Perhaps there are other objects that a catalog should achieve, but I wonder what those are.

Let me state in passing that we must learn to apply a similar standard to what are usually referred to as descriptive bibliographies: judging them not so much on the amount and intricacy of descriptive detail that they contain, but rather on their usefulness. Is the argument which lies behind the impulse or need to describe these particular books clearly stated? Is the evidence clearly organized and presented in a way which supports that argument? I am sure that users of bibliographies can think of many examples that fail to achieve these simple goals.

EXAMINING CUTTER'S PRINCIPLES

Cutter's principles imply several points which deserve emphasis and further discussion. First, a library catalog is meant to assist a library's patrons and must therefore serve the purposes they are likely to require of it. This same principle will of course also be reflected in a library's collections, as well as its acquisition and preservation policies. What might be appropriate cataloging for one library would be totally inappropriate for another. For example, a library which has an important collection of Bibles might want to identify different versions, translations, and the presence or absence of various parts of the canon, whereas another library with but a single copy of the Bible contained
in the reference collection would have little need of such detail. This is the point that Cutter was making when he began his exposition with the following statement: “No code of cataloguing could be adopted in all points by everyone, because the libraries for study and the libraries for reading have different objects, and those which combine the two do so in different proportions.”

Second, the catalog is primarily a means of assisting the patron—the scholar or researcher—in finding or choosing particular books, but it is not a substitute for those books. In this regard, Currier quotes a remark attributed to Harvard College Librarian Archibald Cary Coolidge: “Why should the card catalog describe the book? The library has it.” No doubt a certain amount of detail is necessary to allow one to distinguish between copies and editions and to choose between them, but I often worry at the amount of detail that sometimes creeps into cataloging records. The correct amount of detail is a matter of judgment and will vary according to a library’s resources and collection strengths, but too much detail may conceal the very piece of information that is most relevant. A cataloging record will never reproduce the text in its entirety or satisfy the scholar’s needs for the original, nor can it provide access by every possible point of scholarly interest. I, for one, would prefer short, accurate, and clear records of a library’s entire holdings over long, elaborated ones that conceal, and to some extent cause, a tremendous cataloging backlog of inaccessible, and thus generally useless, materials.

Finally, Cutter states that the choice of a book can be based on either its “character” or its “edition.” The first refers to the text and its contents; the second to the physical facts of its production and distribution. While these two features of a book are integrally connected—a text can only be realized in some sort of physical form—we must all recognize that the contents and subject matter of a text are of primary significance to the majority of library users. This is true even in rare books and research libraries, which often make a special commitment to the preservation of texts in original and unadulterated physical form, and should be kept in mind when deciding how to catalog materials. This is in part a practical matter since scholars whose primary interest is in the physical features of books will insist on examining originals in any case in order to confirm their understanding of those books’ physical makeup—they will not be satisfied with a cataloger’s statement or description.

AUTOMATION—DREAM COME TRUE OR NIGHTMARE?
The introduction of the computer changed cataloging practices and techniques and affected the ways that scholars use research libraries. I am by no means an expert on automated cataloging systems, so my remarks are necessarily subjective and personal. Also, I realize that this is a rapidly changing field; that what is new today may be obsolete tomorrow. New developments are happening everywhere and everyday, but perhaps this is the very reason why we, both makers and users of catalogs, need to pause and discuss and exchange our views.
When I ponder the world of automated, computer-assisted cataloging, I find myself continually facing a perplexing array of contradictions symbolized by the profound differences between the two large brokers, OCLC and RLIN. The reality of shared cataloging in an automated environment calls for rigid adherence to catalog rules and national standards, yet electronic cataloging records as they actually appear on the catalog terminal screen vary in regard to quantity, selection, arrangement, and access of information much more from library to library today than in the past when the widespread use of Library of Congress cards meant that most catalog records had a comforting familiarity. Of course those Library of Congress catalog cards were frequently annotated or altered to reflect copy-specific information, a practice that served to emphasize the special features of that library's copy which today may disappear in video regularity. The same contradictions are evident in regard to search strategies and access points; a familiar world of dictionary catalogs, subject catalogs, and special files has been replaced by a confusing array of commands, truncation signs, and search delimiters. Each library seems to have its own special set. These same contradictions probably show up in the costs of cataloging. The computer allows one to meter and charge for connect time or number of searches, whereas sets of LC cards were remarkably cheap and, once filed (and perhaps altered or annotated), could be searched over and over at no expense. Has the electronic catalog actually proven to be as cost-effective or efficient as promised?

We tend to forget to distinguish between the promise of technology and what it actually delivers. Computers are wonderful tools that allow more flexible access to a much greater number of electronic catalog records, but the reality is often less pleasing. I am interested in publishing history and for fifteen years have been promised the opportunity to search the imprint field of catalog records, but this capability is still not widely available. On the other hand, I have very little interest in LC card numbers, ISBNs, and OCLC record numbers, but find that these are often quite easy to search.

I understand that there are reasons for this, that these numbers are useful for catalogers, and that adding other access points or searching capability can be very expensive. But one might ask: is the catalog in a research library designed for catalogers or for scholars? How do scholars use the catalog? Are their needs being met by the design and access points of the online catalog?

Similarly, the bibliographical information available online through OCLC and RLIN is truly wonderful. But is it being used by scholars? And how? My guess is that these resources are not much used; nor is their use much encouraged. At the University of Texas at Austin, as far as I am aware, there is a single public OCLC terminal tucked into the reference room, serving a student body of just under 50,000. There is no public access to RLIN at all. I find it frustrating and worrisome that these important cataloging resources are in practice primarily restricted for use by catalogers.
A cataloger's catalog—a dream come true! Or is it a nightmare? It depends on your point of view, but as one who is paid to train future scholars, these are questions that trouble me. Certainly my students are not very sophisticated in their understanding and use of online databases, library catalogs, subject headings, and access points, and I suspect that my colleagues are not either. If all this complicated and expensive cataloging is not being used by scholars, is it worth the effort and expense? And when it exists, is it truly made available to scholars for use?

The technology of computer cataloging is working to shift costs from the library to the researcher. This shift is happening everywhere in the library and, especially in these difficult economic times, may be one of the greatest forces driving the introduction of new technology. The budget for reference books can be cut if the same information is available online, but who pays for connect time? And is the online search really more flexible if it requires a scholar to make an appointment to discuss search strategies with a busy and overworked reference librarian? Electronic document delivery (EDD) is a justification for cutting the acquisitions budget for periodicals—but again who pays? In practice, “EDD” has had as yet no effect on my library use, but with cuts in periodical subscriptions, I pester the interlibrary loan department more and usually end up paying a fee for each book borrowed, plus sales tax, or 25 cents per page for each photocopied article.

No doubt computers do make it easier for scholars to gain access to catalogs, especially from remote sites by means of a modem. Using Internet and Telnet, I can in Austin quickly log into and search online catalogs in libraries around the world. This is getting easier to do, although I still find the variety of computer protocols and catalog designs bewildering and frustrating. Also, I cannot help but think that it might be more useful to have ready and more flexible access to OCLC or RLIN, the source for most of the records in these online catalogs. My experience is that it is mostly librarians—not my colleagues or students—that are using their computers to gain access to distant library catalogs.

One feature of online catalogs is that as they become larger and more common, they tend to encourage us to forget the history of their creation and development. Most of us work in libraries that were founded decades if not centuries ago, but the online catalog is a recent development. How much of the collection is represented there? How was retrospective conversion carried out? systematically or haphazardly? from old cataloging records or from examination of the book? Are searches by special access points available for all records or for only a few, usually those cataloged most recently? What materials are not covered? What special files are there that must be consulted in conjunction with the online catalog? Answers to these and other questions must be kept constantly in mind if we are to use the online catalog effectively, but how easy it is to forget them. And how much real effort is put into making this information available to scholars and other patrons? Should they not be warned against assuming that a book not recorded in an online catalog may yet be present in the collections? And
should they not have it explained to them why this is so and how one might gain access to such books? Is this not a cataloger's job?

This forgetfulness arises from a common assumption about technology: new technology—like new money—drives out old; in this case, the new online catalog replaces the old card catalog. We only need to look around at libraries today to recognize that this is rarely true in practice, and it is not necessarily true of technology in general. Sometimes a new technology makes an old technology obsolete, but in many other instances it simply provides an additional, alternative means to performing a process or achieving an end. Sometimes technology may have an important effect on who controls the means of production or on who pays for the product. With a little thought, we will understand that card catalogs perform in certain ways that are far superior to online catalogs and that online catalogs perform in other ways that are far superior to card catalogs. They supplement each other as much as they duplicate each other. This is what makes me want somehow to preserve the old Harvard OC in my basement, for that catalog does things for me and for other scholars that Hollis, the new online catalog, cannot now nor ever will do. This dream of preserving Harvard's OC is as unrealistic as it is to suppose that large research libraries are in a position to afford the luxury of maintaining two parallel catalogs, electronic and card. But as we think about building the library catalogs of the future, would it not be wise to recognize the strengths of the card catalog and to preserve as many of these strengths as are necessary and possible?

Over the past 25 years, fundamental changes in libraries and the ways they operate have occurred. The change in catalogs and cataloging is just one of many, and although all these changes are interconnected, I hesitate to suggest any cause or effect. But, just as the introduction of online cataloging usually heralded a break in the catalog, it often also heralded a break in the collections themselves. In many libraries, newly acquired books appearing in the new online catalog were cataloged according to a new cataloging code, AACR2 and Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Books, and were often classified according to the LC system and shelved separately from older books, often classified according to Dewey or an in-house system. These new acquisitions were less likely to seem integral to the collections; to be adding to something that had taken the resources and the expertise of many librarians over many years to build. As the collections grew, so did space and conservation problems, and as librarians sought solutions, this break in the collections often came to be taken for granted and used as the basis for action. A vision was lost, one that for nearly a century had driven the formation, growth, and operation of American research libraries. At the same time, trends and fashions in the academy meant that many scholars were much less interested in those kinds of research that traditionally were based on library collections—they do not use or hone traditional research skills nor do they teach or demand these skills. I think that these developments are important to keep in mind as we think about library catalogs, assess their successes and failures, and plan for their future.
CONSIDERING 19TH-CENTURY MATERIALS

Let me now turn to my field of expertise, books printed in the 19th century, by stating something very obvious: 19th-century books are more similar to other books, both those printed before and since, than dissimilar. In most regards, they do not need special treatment by library catalogers—again remember Cutter’s first principles! Remember also that I always prefer brief and complete records for the entire collection over elaborate records for a selection.

Three important features distinguishing 19th-century books from earlier books are of interest to catalogers. First, they were manufactured in greater quantities than earlier books, greater in both the number of works and, generally, the number of copies of each work. Second, the widespread introduction of the printing plate altered the facts of production fundamentally, especially the profile of a work’s production through time. Third, books were for the first time issued in publishers’ bindings—permanent, decorated packages designed to advertise the contents and to attract purchasers and readers as much as to protect the sheets.

It is foremost the quantity of 19th-century books in our collections that distinguishes them and makes them a problem for catalogers: their number convinces many librarians that it would be impractical to catalog them with the care and detail which is reserved for earlier books. Once started, where would it end? Would it ever end?

I am not sure that I understand this reasoning, for it seems to me that the essence of Cutter’s principles is that the detail in a library catalog should be determined by the needs of the library’s patrons and the strengths of the collections, not by relative scarcity, age, or an abstract chronological principle. The 1855 first edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is a very common book, as are most of Whitman’s other works, and yet it is usual for these books to be cataloged in great detail. Scholars that use early-printed books are usually more interested in the physical details of those books and are usually more accustomed to travelling to examine works in a number of collections than most scholars that use 19th-century books. I suppose that these facts lie behind the common practice of cataloging earlier books in greater detail. However, if a collection is concentrated in the 19th century and most useful for scholars of the 19th century, then these facts should be kept in mind and should influence the way that collection is cataloged. No single standard or practice will serve every collection or catalog.

In a talk on preservation and conservation at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section preconference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1991 I discussed the problem of the survival of 19th-century books in American collections, especially those books described in BAL. As I mentioned then, I am struck with how fast these books are disappearing, despite their apparent ubiquity. They disappear because they are fragile and because they are neglected. Cataloging plays a role here, for an uncataloged book is a neglected one, and it is much less likely to be cared for than a cataloged one.
Paradoxically, however, a cataloged book is also much more likely to be used and thus used up. This is a real danger, but one that we must accept, since only through using books will we learn their value and learn why and how to care for them.

One of the greatest difficulties in cataloging 19th-century books is in deciding how much detail to include and more particularly what details are useful, especially in distinguishing between copies of the same work. This problem is caused primarily, I believe, by printing plates and publisher’s bindings: the former because they make different copies of a work appear identical, the latter because they make those copies seem different.

Stereotyping and electrotyping managed to freeze and store the act of composition, thus allowing the printer to use his type and the publisher his capital more effectively. Once a work had been stereotyped or electrotyped, the publisher could order numerous small runs of that work over many years as the market demanded. Whereas it is usually very easy to distinguish between two copies of an early printed work that were printed at different times or in different shops—they are different editions, after all, printed from separate acts of composition—this is not true of books printed from plates. Copies tend to look the same, even when printed years apart or by two printers or in two different places. But there are frequently telltale signs—changes on the title page, on the copyright page, in the signature collation, paper stock, or the integral advertisements, for example—that bibliographers and catalogers have learned to recognize as indications that two copies are from different impressions. However, these signs are frequently difficult to discover or interpret unless multiple copies of a work are closely examined. A very detailed cataloging record would be required to record them all, especially if the cataloger or bibliographer has not yet determined which, if any, serves to distinguish between printings. But is it worth it? Does it serve the patron?

The widespread introduction of publishers’ cloth-covered case binding frequently means that two copies of a work manufactured and issued simultaneously may appear to be completely different. This difference may be a matter of the color or grain of the binding cloth, the amount of gilt used, or in the cover design and lettering. Because the binding was meant to appeal to as many tastes as possible, publishers frequently chose to offer a book in a variety of colors and binding styles. Another factor contributed to the variation: the normal trade practice in the 19th century was to keep the sheets from each printing in storage and to bind them up in lots only as demand required. There was frequently no understanding that the same cloth or stamps should be used on successive bindings up.

It is hardly surprising that bibliographers and catalogers have in the past paid more attention to binding variants; they are easier to spot and easier to describe. Indeed, elaborate systems have been devised for describing precisely the color and grain of binding cloth. And certainly these binding variants are of interest, perhaps chiefly to booksellers who may talk collectors into buying multiple copies of a work in different
bindings, and to binding historians. For bibliographers and most serious scholars of 19th-century books, the details that distinguish between impressions printed from a single set of printing plates are of greater interest, because they carry important implications about the transmission of the text, its production history, and its reception.

Whatever our interests or prejudices, should the catalog records of 19th-century books routinely contain the detail necessary to distinguish between printings from the same plates or binding variants? I doubt it. I would never suggest that the cataloging of 19th-century books should adhere to a single standard or should emphasize some detail over another, for I think that a single standard or attention to a prescribed set of details is not what is needed. Instead, I encourage catalogers to aspire toward a greater sensitivity to library patrons, their research needs and interests, and to a greater familiarity with the books in the collection, their production and reception history.

I appreciate all those catalogers whose quiet, and often unrecognized, expertise has contributed to my own work, as well as that of all scholars, in so many important ways. My comments should not be taken as criticism of cataloging practices but rather as an attempt to raise issues that may help to improve the catalog as a tool for research. Back in 1940 Currier began his essay on bibliography and cataloging by stating that “the essential role that cataloging plays . . . may not be disregarded.” Nor should it be taken for granted.

NOTES


8. Ibid., p. 21.