

Review Articles

Is the Golden Age Really Over?

A discussion based upon the following recent publications: Andrew D. Osborn's The Crisis in Cataloging (American Library Institute, 1941); A.L.A. Catalog Rules; Author and Title Entries (Prepared by the A.L.A. Catalog Code Revision Committee with the collaboration of a committee of the British Library Association. Preliminary American second edition. American Library Association, 1941); Catalogers' and Classifiers' Yearbook No. 9 (American Library Association, 1941).

ALMOST two decades ago, Cutter in the A¹prefatory note to the fourth edition of *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog*¹ stated that he doubted the need for another edition of the work, since the cooperative cataloging activity of the Library of Congress was destined to solve the major cataloging problems of libraries. Although there would be some books that the libraries would need to catalog without benefit of L.C. services, Cutter wrote: "Still I cannot help thinking that the golden age of cataloging is over, and the difficulties and discussions which have furnished an innocent pleasure to so many will interest them no more. Another lost art."²

Much has happened since 1904. The statement that L.C. printed cards and other services have aided considerably in reducing the problems of cataloging in large libraries is undeniable. To state

that they have eliminated all difficulties of cataloging in the large library is stretching the truth beyond its elasticity. The present discussion of cataloging problems by Osborn and the several writers in the ninth *Catalogers' and Classifiers' Yearbook* indicates clearly that cataloging problems are assuming the importance that they once held.

Although we have established an elaborate catalog code and systems of classification, administrators and catalogers apparently are not satisfied with current conditions. The presence of large arrears and the high costs of the technical processes, combined with a recognition of the difficulties arising from the size and complexity of catalogs and obsolescence of classification systems, have precipitated a number of suggestions for change. We, therefore, look at a library situation torn by argument and counter-proposals that extend more widely and run deeper than any other library history has shown since 1876 or the early years of the twentieth century. The existence of the catalog code and of the systems of book arrangement seems insufficient to prevent the so-called "crisis in cataloging." Instead, it seems as if progress in the technical processes has served to complicate, rather than simplify, service to readers.

Such a state of affairs has led to some confusion and pessimism among librarians. "Frustration" and "complexity" have become bywords of speakers and writers, and drastic and radical alternatives in cataloging and classification policies and

¹ Cutter, C. A. *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog*. Washington, Government Printing Office, 1904, p. 5.
² *Loc. cit.*

practices have been proposed. Arrears in large libraries are explained as inevitable parts of a chaotic condition brought about by the inability to make detailed, bibliographical cataloging, unsystematic and illogical subject heading work, and close classification meet satisfactorily the problems created by the presence of vast book collections. Pessimism is evident in the administrators' attacks upon the high costs of the technical processes. It does not seem to matter much with administrators that their criticisms are too general. They do not stop to examine just where the confusion or difficulty lies. Strictly speaking, it does not lie with the catalog code, in either its old form or in the preliminary American second edition, or with classifications. Although possessing limitations, the code and systems of arrangement are extraordinarily suitable for the purposes for which they have been designed. But despite this, it is clear that some essential factors have been generally overlooked.

Catalogers' and Classifiers' Yearbook

In the ninth *Catalogers' and Classifiers' Yearbook*, for example, there are discussions of such matters as the distinction between bibliography and cataloging, the value of the work of the decimal classification section at the Library of Congress, the form that state author headings should take, the available sources for subject headings, how to teach document cataloging from the point of view of document catalogers, and costs of cataloging. All these are important questions to both administrators and catalogers, yet they are concerned primarily with techniques rather than with results or use. The yearbooks of former years follow a similar pattern. Articles by Grace O. Kelley and William M. Randall in the second *Catalogers' and*

Classifiers' Yearbook (1930) clearly indicated that unless we learn more about the results of classification and cataloging, practices will continue to be based on notions conceived by our predecessors living in a different era and faced with different problems. Osborn emphasizes this fact. His attempt to categorize cataloging practice on the basis of four theories—legalistic, perfectionist, bibliographic, and pragmatic—is successful to the extent that it gives us an idea of the different approaches to the problem. It fails to the extent that it implies that cataloging can be legalistic without being pragmatic, or pragmatic without being legalistic. All four categories overlap one another.

Osborn's criticism of detailed cataloging is not without point, yet the criticism seems somewhat misdirected. The rules themselves are not to blame for a crisis in cataloging; neither are the compilers who are putting into form practices according to the expressed wishes of catalogers. Probably the censure, if censuring must be done, should be aimed at four groups of individuals: (1) catalogers, (2) administrators, including both chief librarians and head catalogers, (3) reference librarians, and (4) teachers of cataloging.

It has been repeated from time to time that catalogers have been unable to discriminate between essentials and nonessentials, and have thus failed to integrate their work with the demands and approach of users. It might be stated that there has been no careful plan of recruiting cataloging personnel. As a result, it is not surprising that catalogers as a group contain too many individuals who are inclined to follow rather than to question. It is trite but true, of course, that administrators and head catalogers have too infrequently given catalogers a chance to ex-

press themselves. Reference librarians who wish the card catalog to answer every possible question without considering the consequences of their demands upon the catalog department have been responsible to a larger degree than has generally been believed for the development of what Osborn has termed legalistic, perfectionist, and bibliographical cataloging. Finally, library school instructors of cataloging who have failed to keep in touch with practice have continued to teach young librarians theory without serious attempts to instil in them the urge to examine their work on the basis of individual cases or from the standpoint of users.

Publications Important

The three publications under discussion, therefore, are important at this time when administrators and catalogers have begun to wonder seriously about cataloging rules and processes. The new edition of the *A.L.A. Catalog Rules* appears as a result of the demands for uniformity in practice. The development of cooperative cataloging and union catalogs undoubtedly has increased the pressure for a set of rules which would provide guidance on matters which were not in existence when the 1908 rules were compiled. The inclusion of a considerable number of examples seems particularly useful. Sensibly, acceptable variations in practice are noted. The fact that the volume contains so many details and rules does not discredit it. If librarianship is to be scientific at all, codification of rules and principles seems basic. Osborn actually indicts American catalogers when he implies that they are incapable of using intelligence in applying rules to practical needs.

It might be pointed out that the division

of the new edition of the rules into two parts—I. Entry and Heading, and II. Description of Book—is a highly desirable feature. It is to be expected that library practice so far as entry and heading are concerned will be uniform. Practice in regard to the description of the books should undoubtedly vary.

The golden age of cataloging in its old sense may be over. But it is on the threshold of an interesting and challenging era. There can be but one conclusion to the present difficulties in cataloging so far as large libraries are concerned: increased and systematic cooperation and centralization. Administrators, catalogers, reference librarians, and teachers of cataloging will need to expend considerable thought on the problem if cataloging will meet the needs of users effectively and economically. And it is necessary to determine accurately just what the users—patrons and staff members—really require. Future numbers of the *Catalogers' and Classifiers' Yearbook* might well be devoted to a further discussion of these problems.—*Maurice F. Tauber, University of Chicago Libraries.*

Incunabula in American Libraries. Edited by Margaret Bingham Stillwell. Bibliographical Society of America, New York, 1940: 8vo., xiv, 619 p.

THE FIRST of anything exerts a strong appeal upon well-nigh everyone and the sentimental attraction seems often to be in inverse ratio to its current usefulness or even to the comprehension of those who are the most fervent worshippers at its shrine. Nothing has exemplified this more curiously than the books of the fifteenth century, long segregated in highly honored seclusion under the impressive caption of "incunabula."