
The Teaching of Bibliography

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THERE ARE THREE MAIN GROUPS of students who can be regarded as having some concern with bibliography and therefore liable to tuition in this subject. The first group consists of those who are pursuing literary studies within a university; secondly, those who are studying for librarianship, and thirdly, those who are preparing to enter some part of the book trade, especially on the antiquarian side. The requirements of each of these three groups will incline to be somewhat individual in their final applications, but their introductions to the study of bibliography should cover a certain amount of common ground. It is, indeed, considerably to the advantage of all who are concerned with the use of books that there should be some knowledge of the contiguous areas of scholarship. It must, of course, be understood that these three groups are by no means mutually exclusive since those who are reading literature in their undergraduate years are likely candidates for librarianship and a small proportion of them may well enter the antiquarian book trade.

Since the application of bibliography to literary studies is itself of fairly recent growth, it is not entirely surprising to find that many universities are making only inadequate attempts at providing any kind of bibliographical training. Writing for a periodical which is due to be published eventually in the English language, it is not unnatural in this connection to think primarily of English literary studies. An enormous amount has been done during the last fifty to seventy-five years to direct the main stream of bibliographical work to various chronological areas of English literary studies. While it is true that the earliest bibliographers who attained to any eminence at all were concerned primarily, if not exclusively, with the period of incunabula, bibliographical studies were fairly rapidly extended to cover early printed books generally. While these studies were progress-

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ing there was an almost equal amount of attention being paid to the particular and peculiar problems of manuscripts. This was very largely due to the influence of a more scientific study of historical documents generally which emerged slowly throughout the nineteenth century.

In the early years of this present century it became apparent that the major effort in bibliographical work was being directed, by that notable trio of R. B. McKerrow, A. W. Pollard, and Sir W. W. Greg, towards the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century literature in general and the drama in particular.

From those early years onward and particularly with the appearance of such milestones as McKerrow's edition of Nashe, Pollard's work on the Shakespearian folios and quartos and the beginnings of Greg's lifetime study of the English printed drama, there was a growing awareness that bibliographical studies were revolutionizing this field completely. Texts began to be published which were based on far more solid and verifiable evidence than had generally been the case before. The later years of this present century have seen a gradual enlargement of that chronological boundary; the work of men like Sir Geoffrey Keynes in the late seventeenth century, Sir Harold Williams and Herbert Davis in the eighteenth century, John Carter and Michael Sadleir in the nineteenth century. To go no further than these few, who in England alone have made notable contributions, shows how far the study has advanced in a comparatively short time.

The result of many of their labors has been the creation of a text which can be relied upon to a greater extent than before as being the text which is the nearest to the author's intentions. Since bibliographical scholars have set the editing and publication of good texts as one of their chief aims it seems strange that so many of the English schools and departments within our universities pay so little attention to bibliography as a basic discipline. Ever since 1927, when McKerrow published his *Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students* the main text book for such work has been readily to hand and the thirty or so years since its publication have brought a wealth of supplementary material which now enables the subject to be studied with very real application to the immediate problems of textual emendation and editing. The fact that far too little is being done in the majority of universities is in itself significant, but the position seems somewhat worse when we read of the attitude towards this newer discipline of some of those who are directing literary studies. In his book *The Muse Unchained*, E. M. W. Tillyard has provided what is

almost the extreme viewpoint that could be expressed by a great literary scholar towards the subject of bibliography. It is to be hoped that as time goes by the English faculties will come to realize the truth of Greg's remark that often more misplaced ingenuity is devoted to defending a wrong reading than to emending it and it should surely be a fundamental part of all literary studies to ascertain the authority of a text before long hours are spent in building up a critical approach to it.

The position so far as librarians are concerned is somewhat different. Librarians are concerned with the study of this subject not with a view to editing a text but rather to knowing something about the editorial practice which will enable them more efficiently to utilize the materials which are under their control. In general terms it would be reasonable to suggest that if a librarian stocks twenty-four different editions of *Hamlet* in his library, and this is by no means unlikely, then it is his bounden duty as a librarian to know something of editorial practice in general and, in particular, the differences in the texts which are on his shelves and the varieties of editorial practice which have created them. It is practically impossible for a librarian to do any serious book selection in a field where more than one edition of a work is available unless he understands sufficient about bibliography to be able to appreciate the differences between the various printings with which he may be presented. This is something which affects not simply the largest libraries and certainly not only those which have collections of older and rarer books. In most years there are a number of new editions of literary works published which are assuredly widely bought by librarians and it would be heartening to think that in their considerations they always gave due emphasis to the standing of the text itself. There are very few works which a librarian of any type of library can add to stock in a course of one year in which some understanding of editorial method is not necessary if he is to discharge his duties with any kind of serious purpose.

Although librarians are not normally called upon, in their own work as librarians, to produce bibliographies of any particular size or complexity, yet the examples which Fredson Bowers has quoted in his article show full clearly that many librarians are not describing their own stock in sufficient detail to enable the scholar to find what he needs. An enormous amount of time in all kinds of libraries is devoted to the cataloging of new acquisitions, yet in many cases it would be true to say that the cataloging procedure which the books undergo is

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so rudimentary as to reveal very little about the book. In view of the number of years during which we have had cataloging codes, or have been working towards new ones, it is disheartening to think that there are comparatively few libraries which have catalogs of which they might justly be proud. They are frequently little more than elementary finding and check lists with no apparent attempt to reveal the resources of the libraries as exemplified in their book stock. It would be wrong to suggest that descriptive bibliography, as Bowers has outlined it, would solve the problem in all cases. Obviously it would not; but it would be markedly effective in the case of certain classes of material and within those areas an acute understanding of bibliography and its problems is essential if anything worth-while is to be accomplished. This is a matter which the profession must take far more seriously than hitherto since they have few duties which can be regarded as more important than revealing the resources of their libraries to aspiring readers.

The third reason why librarians need to have a good grounding in bibliography is that they may be able to use the bibliographical tools which they have arrayed around themselves. It takes considerable knowledge and skill to compile a good catalog or a good bibliography and it is equally to be remembered that they require a considerable amount of skill in their use. Anybody who has little or no knowledge of basic bibliography is liable to be completely lost with even the simplest bibliographical tool or even the simplest bookseller's catalog. As the tools themselves become more complex and more detailed, so the librarian's knowledge in this area needs to advance considerably if he is to make any adequate use of his material at all.

Some of the finest bibliographical tools which are readily available to many librarians are the catalogs of the great book shops and it is here that we find the third group of people whose knowledge of bibliography needs to be surely founded. The only thing that one can say here is that, of the three categories, it is probably among this body of people that the greatest practical knowledge of bibliography exists at the present time. They are perpetually creating tools which are used not only by those interested in the possibilities of immediate purchase, but also by scholars and by librarians for years to come. It is because of the needs of the antiquarian book trade in this direction that one would welcome a livelier approach to the problem within many of the universities, although after some kind of initial training it is undoubtedly true that the best training is likely to be given within

the great book shops themselves. There is no reason why we should not see a far greater exchange of staff in the future between book shops and libraries as we have already seen in some few instances to the great benefit, one imagines, of both sides. The accession of David Randall to the rare book collection of Indiana University from Messrs. Scribner is a case in point and one would wish to see more moves of this kind in both directions.

There is such a wide variety of areas in which the teaching of bibliography can be carried out that it is difficult to select the most generally important ones without regard to a student's individual requirements. It would seem that there are at least six major areas in which some grounding in bibliographical background would be of value.

The first of these is undoubtedly to have some clear understanding of the term itself and the function of bibliography. For too long bibliography has been a term which has been capable of manifold interpretations especially in courses directed towards librarians. The major difficulty has probably been that in the past, courses have been provided on particular aspects of bibliography without there ever having been sufficient time made to introduce courses which attempt a *conspectus* of the whole of bibliographical work. There are few library schools which do not provide courses on subject areas of bibliography, yet many students enter upon such courses without adequate preparation in general bibliography and their understanding of subject bibliography must, in consequence, be severely limited. In particular it tends to create a situation where subject bibliographical work is little more than mere listing. Equally, with other specialized courses which have been arranged; although they are not inadequate in themselves, they are inclined to give a student who is new to the subject some lack of balance between his part of the subject field and others with which he might later come into contact. Admittedly, it is not easy to produce any simple definition of the term which will satisfy all needs. There are, however, a number of works and articles which should be regarded as absolutely basic reading to anyone who has started to study any part of bibliography since they alone can provide an adequate background.

Secondly, no bibliographical work can be pursued with any real chance of success if it is done without some knowledge of printing house and publishing procedure of all periods. While it is difficult to say exactly what the limits of knowledge of printing practice should

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be in relation to this, it will perhaps prove most satisfactory to say that it is the kind of treatment which McKerrow gave in his *Introduction to Bibliography*. In that work he enunciated the idea that a bibliographer stands a better chance of being able to solve the problem with which he is faced if he knows sufficient about the printing practice of the period with which he is concerned to be able to imagine himself standing behind the printer's shoulder and to oversee all his actions. If only it were possible for a bibliographer to do this in all cases of doubt and confusion, things would be much clearer. It is here that historical bibliography, which is sometimes treated as being little more than a rather minor aspect of cultural history, or at its best something which provides a certain liberalizing element in the program of a library school, can be of very real use to the student bibliographer. When he is faced with a problem he is helped enormously if he can study that problem within the context of a wide knowledge of publishing, of authorship, of bookselling and of printing. It is this which he needs more than anything else. It need hardly be said that in order to gain this understanding of printing practice there is no reason for him to dabble in the aesthetic sides of book production as he is compelled to by some present day courses.

Apart from its bibliographical implications the librarian needs to be conscious of the physical form of the book as a finished product and a greater awareness of this in the profession could help to remove some minor irritations. One small, perhaps unimportant but annually frustrating, feature of American periodical publications in the field of librarianship argues this lack of book consciousness among librarians. The final issues in each volume of the *A.L.A. Bulletin* and the *Library Quarterly* both include title leaves which it is impossible to use for the proper purpose of title leaves without considerable difficulty. In the December 1958 issue of *A.L.A. Bulletin* the title leaf to Volume 52 is conjugate with pages 797/798. In binding this entails the unsatisfactory tipping-in of the title leaf and, if it is wished to retain pages 797/798 also, although they are only advertisements, this leaf will need similar treatment. In the October 1958 issue of *The Library Quarterly* the title leaf to Volume 28 and the contents leaf to the volume are conjugate with two leaves of text. Unless, therefore, one wishes to sacrifice four pages of Douglas Bryant's paper this arrangement necessitates the tipping-in of four separate leaves in binding. It is not suggested that these are major problems of bibliography but they appear to be symptomatic of a profession

which is increasingly losing contact with the physical structure of the book.

When the student has done sufficient thinking on the subject to enable him to be able to approach practical problems there is then nothing more necessary than that he should do some work for himself. The most important initial task should be to be able to collate and describe a number of selected examples. Selection is necessary because a tutor needs to feel certain that a student would be faced with a sufficient variety of problems to extend him over this area of his practical work. The student also gains by taking some small area, either a subject field or the work of an author or, perhaps even better, one individual work and setting himself to do some kind of bibliographical survey.

To suggest to him that he should produce a bibliography, in the proper sense of the word, would be to bring him up with entirely the wrong ideas. The compilation of a bibliography is the work of years, in some cases of a lifetime, and it is a dis-service to a student to set him a problem which can obviously not be encompassed in the time available, forcing him to accept a standard which he might later come to regard as an acceptable one. An exercise in the compilation of a bibliography is also often associated too much with the problem of arrangement. No scheme for the arrangement of a bibliography can possibly be evolved until the major part of the material has been gathered together. To ask a student to discuss the arrangement of a bibliography when he is not aware of the full range of material to be included in an essay is foolishness which distorts a student's understanding of bibliography. If, however, a student were given the task of investigating the bibliographical history of, shall we say, one particular book, it would cause him to range over existing bibliographical tools, many of which he would prove, by his own analysis, to be imperfect. At the same time he would have to do a considerable amount of comparative work between the various printings of his subject matter. There are many other ways in which one can imagine practical work being meted out to a student but these are two which this writer believes could be especially fruitful. It could be equally advantageous if he were to work with a tutor who was engaged in a bibliographical study in which the student could play a part. This could mean that he would be engaged upon something which was more realistic in terms of the final outcome and also that he would have the benefit of working with someone of greater experience. The danger

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would be that research students of this kind are occasionally used to doing soul destroying drudgery which, although it is not in itself a bad thing, can sometimes be sterile and crush any possible interest on the part of the student.

The next three fields are of background interest to a greater extent than the three foregoing. A student is, almost by definition, one who has not been around long enough to have accumulated any considerable amount of experience in the particular area in which he is studying. For this reason he must use every possible means to remedy that lack of personal experience. So far as bibliography is concerned he can add measurably to his background by reading extensively in the writings of those who have themselves been concerned with books for a major part of their lives.

Librarians have never been among the most important authors of their generations and very few of them have chosen to write widely on bookish matters, nor have many of them had sufficient experience of matters relating to bibliography in their working lives. There is far more fruitful material among the writings which are sometimes dismissed almost contemptuously by bibliographers as being little more than expressions of amateurish book collecting. Admittedly the practicing book-collector covers so wide a range of individuals as to be almost meaningless but there are books written about book collecting which help to provide an important background for the young student. Titles spring to mind fairly easy and one thinks of works as different from each other as the *Phillipps Studies*, recently completed under the editorship of A.N.L. Munby, or Wilmarth Lewis's *Collector's Progress*. The literature of book collecting and book-selling is vast and next to the enjoyment which can be derived from talking to experienced booksellers and book collectors is the opportunity to read of their activities.

Apart from the contact with his tutor, we have so far left the young student in rather lonely isolation. Bibliography is not, on the whole, a subject which is suited to over-much isolation since it depends for its well-being on the kind of human contacts which bring forth argument and discussion with kindred spirits. To this end it is a good thing that many of the larger libraries of the world have themselves been founts of great bibliographical endeavor and some of the greatest projects have, in fact, been born within them. One need only think of the devoted work of Proctor on the early printed books in the British Museum and in the Bodleian Library to realize how much

he, and other bibliographers after him in turn, relied upon the wealth of those two collections. The great libraries have also sponsored large numbers of important bibliographical tools, and to think of the British Museum, the Bodleian Library, Cambridge University Library, John Rylands Library, the Library of Congress, Harvard University Library, and the Henry E. Huntington Library, is to realize how much richer the world of bibliography is because of these great collections. It is not simply that, as collections, they have brought together this enormous quantity of important material but also that they have encouraged, and are encouraging, work to be done upon those collections. Running side by side with these, although in somewhat more informal guise, are the societies which endeavor to cultivate an interest in bibliographical affairs. The more venerable ones such as the Roxburghe Club in Great Britain or the Grolier Club in New York may have been designed originally for a rather dilettante book collector but they have certainly changed as the years have gone by, while the newer bibliographical societies which have followed in their wake have been responsible for a great mine of important bibliographical work.

In the United Kingdom the Bibliographical Society and the Bibliographical Societies of Oxford and Cambridge have done and are continuing to do important work, which is mirrored in the United States by the activities of the Bibliographical Society of America and the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia. Again, to look at the list of their publications is to see only a part of the pattern. In the long run their influence may well prove to have been the greater because they provided a meeting place at which people with similar interests could meet and discuss their enthusiasms and problems. Certainly the growth of bibliographical studies in this century would have assumed a very much less important pattern had it not been for the great libraries and the societies. The student bibliographer can never do better when he is beginning to widen his interests than to explore the collections in the libraries to the greatest extent possible and to join a bibliographical society and so meet his fellow practitioners. There is an off-shoot of this which although it rarely receives any great amount of attention is equally important and might, to a certain type of person, be of supreme interest. Bibliography and gastronomy have always gone, if not hand in hand, at least fairly closely side by side, and one would always wish to pay tribute to those societies which, under the guise of dining clubs, have provided

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a meeting place for those choice spirits which have two great interests in common.

When a student has at last been led through periods of instruction and of self education in all these various areas he should, if all has gone well, have given himself the background which he will need if he is to enlarge his technical experience as the years go by. One thing more is possible. Sir Thomas Browne said that it was opportune to look back and contemplate our forefathers. The forefathers of modern bibliography may not be many and their careers may not be sufficiently well documented to enable the modern student to understand their work in any detail. Nevertheless, this writer would never wish to leave a student on this subject without suggesting that the reading of biographies of bibliographers is in itself not only a legitimate pastime but can also be a singularly helpful one. Some have come to be regarded as important biographies in their own right and M. R. James said that Prothero's *Memoir of Henry Bradshaw* was "something of a classic, I think, among biographies of scholars."¹ It is certainly one which reveals its subject remarkably well. Its defects are little more serious than those which one can expect to find in a slightly biased biography of the late nineteenth century. But whether they be major critical studies or charming expressions of an unforgettable personality such as S. G. Lubbock's² delightful little memoir of M. R. James himself, they will not infrequently refresh the minds of the student and, in contemplation, lead him to further and fuller efforts.

References

1. James, M. R.: *Eton and King's*. London, 1926, p. 110.
2. Lubbock, S. G.: *A Memoir of Montague Rhodes James*. Cambridge, University Press, 1939.

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