



# Manuscripts and the Library

W. H. BOND

MANUSCRIPTS ARE AT LEAST as varied in form, content, and material as any other general class of artifacts. Even a relatively small library may contain specimens as widely different as clay tablets and modern correspondence, papyri, and recent literary papers. The manuscript department may even be regarded as a suitable place for "anything that is not a book"—clippings, photographs, prints, memorabilia, and so on. But let us not even consider such counsels of desperation.

Like all artifacts that are not mass produced, every manuscript is unique. Spanning a much longer period of time than printed books, infinitely more varied in their physical characteristics, manuscripts do not yield to such a systematic approach as that which has been so fruitful during the last half century when applied to the bibliography of printed books.<sup>1</sup> The field is made up of a great many small specialties, the only unifying principle being that all materials in it were written by hand (and some with the intervention of a writing-machine). Even a generously staffed manuscript department can hardly supply an expert to deal with every problem that arises, while in most libraries a relatively few catalogers and reference librarians must cope with this staggering variety.

The quantities are often staggering too. The amount of shelving that would accommodate four or five hundred printed volumes might easily hold boxes containing twenty or thirty thousand pieces of correspondence, each with some claim to individual attention, each needing to be so located that it can be found or referred to at will. And such a correspondence may well be only one among several received in a year's accessions, and one among many in a library's holdings. Pressure on some of the largest archival repositories is so great that they have been reduced to describing collections simply in terms of the linear or cubic feet they occupy. They are flooded with archives in such

---

<sup>1</sup>The author is Curator of Manuscripts, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

number and size that no other course is possible, the alternative being either dead storage or destruction. It is a fortunate library that has a large enough staff to deal with its manuscript acquisitions in the detail they deserve, and a fortunate reader whose research centers in such a library.

Manuscripts are so varied in content that they may defy all but the broadest kinds of cataloging. A printed book is usually the end product of a process of synthesis, if not of pure creation; it is a purposive drawing together of elements with a definite aim in mind. Manuscripts, on the other hand, are truly raw material, and are far more likely to be diffuse and unsystematic in their contents. Unless, of course, the manuscript represents the penultimate stage in the production of a printed book. One need only consider the problem of making a full subject-catalog based on, say, Pepys's diary or the correspondence of Goethe—and then multiply the result by the number of such items in manuscript in a good-sized library. The task is immense, and its result to some extent unpredictable. No two persons would index such complex bodies of material in precisely the same way or with the same emphasis. Furthermore, even the wisest subject-cataloger cannot anticipate every question that might be brought to a collection of papers and answered by them. Chronology itself is against the cataloger: who among those who amassed and preserved the papers of the early missionaries in the Pacific could have guessed that these manuscripts would solve problems involving the works of Herman Melville, or help prepare the successful invasion of fortified islands in a great war?

It is not enough to consider only the manuscripts themselves in attacking the special problems involved in cataloging them. Manuscripts are collected, preserved, and cataloged for readers who are usually more specialized in their interests and more advanced in scholarly technique than the general run of readers of printed books. It is reasonable to assume, though the assumption is sometimes over-optimistic, that a scholar turning to manuscripts will have thoroughly explored the printed sources available to him, and will be in command of the basic facts involved. Not only will he have a special point of view, but he will also have a good idea of what he is looking for, and he will be able to fend for himself to a greater degree than the average library user. He will expect to be led to his material, but not told all about it; elaborately detailed cataloging will be wasted, because he will rightly prefer to draw conclusions based upon his own examination. He will ask questions if he thinks the staff can aid him further,

### *Manuscripts and the Library*

and the special knowledge he brings may in turn help the cataloger to a more accurate description.

If a reader approaches manuscript material without a proper background in his subject, he is in no position to make the best use of it. The librarian has a clear moral responsibility to see that manuscripts in his care receive the best scholarly treatment possible, in so far as his control extends; he cannot, perhaps, be an absolute dictator, but he need not and should not cater to the uninformed and unprepared. In no case should a manuscript collection be regarded as a mine of unpublished material designed to produce easy publications.

The high degree of specialization among users of manuscripts also means that, from the point of view of the reader, different kinds of manuscripts require widely differing treatment at the hands of the cataloger. Medieval manuscripts will be consulted by palaeographers, historians, textual critics, art historians, and other specialists, each from his own special angle. The catalog information that will be useful to them will not greatly resemble what is needed by scholars consulting a modern literary correspondence; and this again will differ from cataloging suitable for diaries, commonplace books, diplomatic and other official papers, and so on. And not all manuscripts of the same general type and period require exactly the same treatment. For example, the correspondence of an eminent literary or political person may be filled with letters of other eminent persons, while a family correspondence (equally interesting for its own reasons) may contain no names to be found in biographical dictionaries and history books. It is obviously wasteful to analyze the latter in the same detail as the former. If the nature of manuscripts is greatly varied, the useful approaches to what manuscripts contain are infinitely more so.

It follows from these considerations that no single code of rules for cataloging manuscripts is possible, unless it is so detailed that it is unwieldy, or so general that it is virtually meaningless. Instead, manuscript cataloging requires a high degree of flexibility within a basic framework governed by common sense in accordance with the cataloging practice in other parts of the library. Certainly the headings in the manuscript catalog should conform as nearly as possible to those in the catalog of printed books, so that a reader can turn from one portion of the library to the other with a minimum of difficulty. Of course, conformity to norms established elsewhere in the library is also necessary in many subordinate details. For example, classical and medieval texts often go under widely variant titles, or no title at all,

in different manuscripts. Whatever the practice in an individual manuscript, the cataloger should adopt the accepted title employed in printed editions. It is perhaps an affectation even to use square brackets in a case like this. Once the necessary gesture of conformity has been made, the manuscript cataloger should be allowed, and should be willing to accept, a wide latitude in selecting and treating the rest of the information that makes up the catalog entry. It is his responsibility to judge to the best of his ability in each case the kind of cataloging and the degree of detail that will best serve the reader, giving him all he needs but without superfluous information. The cataloger's most useful exercise will be to try to place himself in the position of the reader. He will be aided in this by his reference correspondence and by the accumulated experience of his reading room. To this point it should be noted that the library will surely profit if the cataloger is from time to time enabled and encouraged to view the reading room from the floor rather than from the dais, and to embark upon independent research in his own and other libraries. A change of perspective can be a salutary experience. Conservation is the first obligation of the manuscript librarian for the most elaborate catalog is at best only a secondary source if the objects it describes are not carefully preserved. The two most important functions of a manuscript department and its catalog are identification, and location according to a scheme that facilitates ready and precise reference. Any additional niceties of cataloging should be supplied only when these basic requirements have been satisfied. We return again to points made earlier: even the wisest cataloger cannot anticipate the range and variety of questions to be brought to his collection in the future, and even the largest cataloging department cannot provide an expert in every field, or allow him the time for exhaustive exploration of every problem. Too elaborate cataloging trespasses at least to some extent upon the sphere of the reader. It is not the business of the library in every case to say the last word about the materials in its care.

This must not be taken to mean that the manuscript librarian's functions should be confined to conservation, identification, and location. He can and should perform many other services for the reader. But it is more sensible to supply many of the possible refinements on a demand or reference basis, of course always recording any advance in basic knowledge about a given manuscript or collection.

The manuscript department should be prepared to offer aid and advice in the decipherment of difficult hands and the dating of manu-

### *Manuscripts and the Library*

scripts from physical evidence. In dealing with both of these problems there is no substitute for experience. But as an aid to dating, the library might well maintain a catalog file of its dated specimens, as least those earlier than 1600 or even 1700. The number of useful palaeographic works increases yearly, incorporating excellent facsimiles with diplomatic transcripts to help train the reader's eye. A library with any considerable number of early manuscripts should also keep up to date with its printed works on palaeography. The manuscript department should be ready to supply or to assist a reader to prepare a more elaborate physical description of the manuscripts in its collection. For example, a simple enumeration of the leaves of a codex is sufficient for cataloging purposes, but special studies may require a detailed collation, sometimes with notes on ruling, ink, and such matters. The department should be equipped with at least a few basic tools for scientific examination: low-power magnification, a simple raking light, an ultra-violet lamp.<sup>2</sup> If it cannot provide its own photographic services, it should have arrangements with a good photographic laboratory to provide readers not only with photostats and microfilms, but also with color, high-contrast, ultraviolet, and infrared photography if needed.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is needless to add that the library should be well provided with the basic printed reference works indispensable in the study of manuscripts: dictionaries, catalogs, indexes of incipits, and other books which surely need no enumeration here.

The rather discursive nature of these remarks should not disguise the fact that progress in manuscript studies as they apply to library problems is significant, continuous, and extremely useful. The progress is on many fronts, and involves many specialties, some of which are divided by gulfs as great as that between the hand-printed book and that produced by photographic typesetting. But most libraries cannot afford the luxury of continual detailed refinement of their catalogs as advances are made. The degree of application of these advances and the balance between maximum and minimum cataloging must be determined by pragmatic considerations based on the amount of staff time available in relation to the amount of material to be handled. In fact, so many variables are involved in the establishment and maintenance of a practical cataloging scheme in any given library that a national or regional union catalog of manuscripts presents much more complex problems than a union catalog of printed books. Whatever the level of cataloging practice that a given library is able to adopt, the best service to the reader—which is, after all, the *raison d'être* of the library

—is to preserve his source material, identify it accurately but not elaborately, and make it readily available to him. The reading room is in the highest sense a court for the examination of evidence, evidence which must be guarded from deterioration no less than from tampering, and must be presented as fairly and completely as possible. The jury very properly will prefer to bring in its own verdicts.

### *Bibliographical Notes*

1. An excellent summary of the present state of technical knowledge concerning medieval manuscripts and their production is by G. S. Ivy, The Bibliography of the Manuscript-Book, *The English Library before 1700*, ed. by Francis Wormald and C. E. Wright, London, 1958, pp. 32-65. There is no similar comprehensive study dealing with the bibliographical problems of modern manuscripts, papers, documents, and correspondence.

2. The best summary discussion of such instruments and their use is still R. B. Haselden's monograph, *Scientific Aids for the Study of Manuscripts*. Oxford: for the Bibliographical Society, 1935, which also contains much additional useful information on allied topics.

3. Besides Haselden's notes on special photography, there should be noted the more detailed study by A. H. Smith, The Photography of Manuscripts, *London Mediaeval Studies*, 1:179-201, 1938. An interesting exploration of the use of the Polaroid Land Camera in combination with a low-power microscope was made by Evelyn Seltzer Ehrlich, Photomicrography as a Bibliographical Tool, *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 4:123-126, Winter 1950.