The Library of Congress: Its Role in Cooperative and Centralized Cataloging

JOHN M. DAWSON

The movement, if such it can be called, toward centralized cataloging in the United States is a venerable one with a documented history of one hundred and twenty years, and it is more than likely that unknown librarians had conceived of it still earlier in a conceivably happier age when librarians were not conditioned to break into print with every wave of thought. The history is long and faltering; it is studded with the names of men who were giants of librarianship; it is replete with vast dreams and crushing disappointments. But now, in this second half of the twentieth century, the old hopes for a comprehensive plan of centralized cataloging from the Library of Congress appear to be on the threshold of realization.

Centralized and cooperative cataloging first reached print with the oft-told story of Charles Coffin Jewett's proposal that the Smithsonian Institution accumulate stereotype blocks of its cataloging and that of other libraries for the mutual benefit of all. Either because of technical difficulties or because of the administrative conflict between Jewett and Joseph Henry, the Secretary of the Institution, the plan came to naught. Had Jewett's view prevailed, the Smithsonian library might have become the national library of the United States and centralized cataloging a reality almost half a century before the Library of Congress assumed the task. Jewett's plan was significant, not alone because of his plan for stereotyped entries, but equally because of his recognition of the need for uniform cataloging.

The year 1876 saw the founding of the American Library Association, and from that day to this it has been goading and encouraging the Library of Congress, first to embark upon and later to expand its programs of cooperative and centralized cataloging. At the Philadelphia convention at which the ALA was founded, Melvil Dewey raised...
the question of cooperative cataloging and later, as editor of the
Library Journal, urged centralized cataloging. Dewey asked, "Shall
we try to establish a central cataloguing bureau supported by the
Association? Can the publishers be induced to prepare suitable titles
and furnish them with books? Is it practical for the Library of Con-
gress to catalogue for the whole country?" 2 While the Association
and commercial enterprises did indeed attempt to provide both co-
operative and centralized cataloging, Dewey continued to point to
the Library of Congress as the logical agency to undertake the burden.

In 1900 the Cooperation Committee of the ALA announced its plans
for the Publishing Board to print cards from cooperating libraries and
arrangements were made for the Library of Congress to sell these
cards for the Publishing Board.3 Dewey, who had been frustrated by
the multiplicity of committees and the concomitant lack of action,
applauded the scheme, but suggested that a better solution was for
the Library of Congress, as part of its function as the library center
of the country, to print and distribute its own catalog cards.4

In September, 1901 the new Librarian of Congress, Herbert Put-
nam, announced that the Library of Congress was prepared to dis-
tribute copies of its own printed cards directly to libraries that
wanted them,5 and in October of that year he issued a circular de-
scribing the Library's plan for selling cards—at two cents for the first
copy and one-half cent for each additional copy. At last the Library
of Congress had accepted at least part of its responsibility for central-
ized cataloging by distributing its cards at cost plus ten percent. In
addition to selling its cards, it distributed to a select list of libraries
(twenty-one in the first year) one free copy of each card printed.6
This was the beginning of the depository catalog program which
was and, in one form or another, continues to be an invaluable service
to scholarship. That a need existed and that the Library of Congress
could fulfill it was quickly demonstrated: in its first nine months the
card service sold cards to 212 libraries, made cash sales of $3,785.19
and received deposit accounts in the amount of $6,451.53.7

When other government libraries agreed to furnish copy for print-
ing and distribution, the card service became more useful. The Library
of the Department of Agriculture was first, followed by the Geological
Survey, and eventually eighteen government agencies contributed
copy. The Washington, D.C. Public Library began to contribute copy
in 1905 and other non-governmental libraries soon followed suit. The
stock of cards grew rapidly: at the end of 1902 cards were available
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for some 90,000 titles; six years later they were available for over 347,000 titles, and the number has grown steadily and rapidly ever since. In 1910 the Library of Congress developed another source for copy by asking those libraries which had been designated to receive depository catalogs, plus some half-dozen others, to supply copy for printing for titles which the Library of Congress did not anticipate acquiring; about one-third did begin to participate in this cooperative venture. As more libraries adopted LC cards for their own catalogs the number of libraries supplying copy for printing increased and approximately ten percent of the copy for cards printed between 1910 and 1932 was supplied by other libraries.

In spite of the successful card distribution program and the growing stock of cards, the needs of the research libraries of the country still had not been met. In 1923 the American Library Association appointed a Committee on Bibliography under the chairmanship of Ernest Cushing Richardson, Librarian of Princeton University. Richardson and his committee had great visions but produced little; the profession saw no solutions to its problems emerging. A symposium on cooperative cataloging in 1927 under the auspices of the Association’s Catalog Section produced another committee which later reported “college and university libraries are reporting that from twenty to seventy-five per cent of their annual accessions are not covered by Library of Congress printed cards,” and urged that the Association support an investigation of cooperative cataloging. This Special Committee in 1931 asked that a permanent committee be appointed to investigate and nurture cooperative cataloging. This was done, with Keyes Metcalf as chairman, and a grant of $13,500 was secured from the General Education Board to finance the investigation.

Metcalf’s committee studied the duplication of original cataloging in forty-nine libraries, the coverage by LC cards of foreign publications acquired by those libraries, and the savings that libraries could have made had LC cards been available. They estimated the costs of soliciting, revising, printing and distributing cards from copy contributed by cooperating libraries, and evolved a plan to establish an office at the Library of Congress to solicit and revise copy. The cards were to be printed and distributed by the Library of Congress at a price of ten cents per title above the price of regular LC cards. The General Education Board provided a grant of $45,000 to finance the project for its first three years, after which, it was hoped, the income
from the sale of cards would enable the office to be self-sustaining. In 1932 the office began operations. In its first fifteen months thirty-three libraries had contributed copy for 6,181 titles, 2,326 of them foreign, and for 4,492 monographs in series. In June, 1934 the office was reorganized as a division of the Library of Congress—the Cooperative Cataloging and Classification Service—including in its work the assignment of Dewey Decimal Classification numbers and (beginning in 1936) the revision of copy supplied under earlier agreements. This service operated under the joint auspices of the Cooperative Cataloging Committee and the Library of Congress—subsidized by the latter—until 1940. On July 1 of that year as a part of the general reorganization of the Processing Department, the service was reconstituted as the Cooperative Cataloging Section of the Descriptive Cataloging Division and severed its relationship with the Cooperative Cataloging Committee. Cooperative cataloging increased in the post-war years when the libraries included in the Cooperative Acquisitions Program agreed to furnish copy for titles received in the fields in which they had priority of acquisition. Similar agreements later provided cooperative copy from libraries participating in the Farmington Plan for the acquisition of foreign titles.

Cooperative cataloging had, through June of 1965, provided copy for about 518,000 titles. The high-water mark was reached in 1959 when over 16,000 titles were cataloged with cooperative copy; the flow declined sharply in 1962 when university libraries were no longer asked to provide copy for their own dissertations (the Library of Congress having worked out an arrangement with University Microfilms for Dissertation Abstracts). At the same time the Farmington Plan libraries began reporting their acquisitions directly to the National Union Catalog instead of submitting cooperative copy. In 1965 only 6,415 titles were cataloged with cooperative copy. Cooperative cataloging had never been envisioned as an adequate substitute for centralized cataloging. It had, however, contributed significantly to the Card Division's stock and added another increment to the card service. Recent developments within the Library of Congress indicate that cooperative cataloging may soon disappear as a factor of any significance.

In 1942 appeared the first volumes of the Library of Congress Catalog of Printed Cards; publication was completed in 1946 in a total of 167 volumes. This great enterprise, sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries with the cooperation of the Library of Congress,
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introduced a new era in American bibliography. Many depository libraries abandoned their depository catalogs which were space-consuming and expensive to maintain. (Indeed, many libraries were hopelessly in arrears in filing.) Other libraries which had no depository catalogs were able to buy the book catalog, and the entire cataloging copy of the Library of Congress was thus available to them. Supplements were published through 1952; after that cards from other libraries sent to the National Union Catalog were included and the title was changed to The National Union Catalog, still published currently. At the time of writing (December, 1966) the Library of Congress and the American Library Association have signed an agreement which will result in publication of the entries received by the National Union Catalog before 1952. Since book catalogs are dealt with elsewhere in this issue, their use and importance will not be discussed here.

After years of slow but steady progress, the card distribution program received a setback when, in 1948, in response to the ill-vised dictate of the House Committee on Appropriations, the average price per card was increased from three to four cents so that a portion of the costs of cataloging within the Library of Congress could be recaptured. This action resulted in higher income but a decline in the number of cards sold. After hearing testimony from the library profession and the Librarian of Congress, the Committee wisely reversed itself in 1949, expressing the opinion “that this activity, which has approximately 8,300 customers, should not be singled out for separate and distinct treatment... and, accordingly, suggests that when the price structure is revised for the fiscal year 1950, the cataloging cost element be excluded.”14 Since then, except for the increase required when Public Law 286 (1954) required all government agencies to pay their own costs of postage, increases in the price of cards have been due solely to rising costs.

In 1948 Ralph Ellsworth proposed that the Library of Congress become the centralized cataloging agency for the entire country; his plan called for it to undertake the cataloging of all new books added to the libraries of the United States. The costs of this program were to be borne by assessing each library for its share of the cataloging.15 Ellsworth’s proposal was far-reaching in its implications, but it seems to have stunned the librarians of the country rather than have caught their imaginations. Even the Librarian of Congress remarked on how little response there was to the proposal. Perhaps it was impractical—
the writer does not think so—but certainly it was imaginative and challenging and deserved the support of the profession. Obviously it was ahead of its time. It died from sheer inertia.

A continuing problem in the use of LC cards has always been to find the LC card number easily so as to order at the lowest price. In 1947 Publishers’ Weekly and the Library of Congress arranged to provide LC card numbers with the listings of new books in the “Weekly Record” section. In 1951 some publishers agreed to print the LC card number in their books, and by 1952 over one hundred publishers were doing so; the number has grown steadily over the years.

In 1953 the Library of Congress inaugurated its “All-the-Books” program, by which publishers sent copies of their books to the Library in advance of the publication date so that printed cards could be made available to libraries promptly. Developed in conjunction with the publication of the United States Quarterly Book Review, the program was later expanded by securing on loan from Publishers’ Weekly and Library Journal copies of books they received for listing which had not already been acquired by the Library.

The cataloging of oriental works was added to the card stock when, in 1950, the cataloging of the Orientalia Division and of six other libraries with major oriental collections was made available by photo-offset reproduction. In 1958 printed cards for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean works became available following acquisition of the required typesetting equipment, and, again, other libraries were invited to contribute their copy for printing.

Many librarians have long considered that having the text of catalog cards printed in the book itself was the ideal means for achieving centralized cataloging, for then the cataloger would have in hand, without the need for some extraneous “tool,” both the book and the cataloging information. This, in tandem with a camera on every cataloger’s desk, would, it was thought, produce instant cataloging at the lowest possible cost. In the 1890's there were several attempts to provide such “cataloging-in-source,” none of which had any widespread or lasting success. Yet the dream had survived. In 1958 the Council on Library Resources made a grant to the Library of Congress for an exploration of “cataloging-in-source,” and Andrew Osborn’s preliminary report recommended that a pilot project be undertaken to test the feasibility of the concept. The Council on Library Resources thereupon made another grant, this one for $55,000, to the
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Library of Congress for a one-year experiment to test the problems involved in cataloging from page proof furnished by publishers and including the text of the cataloging somewhere in the book. The utilization of cataloging-in-source was also to be looked into. During the experimental period some 1,200 publications were cataloged from page proof and the cataloging copy printed in the books as they were published, and two hundred libraries were visited by members of a "consumers' reaction" panel. At the termination of the experiment the panel concluded that, "The only conclusion to be drawn from the Consumer Reaction Survey is that Cataloging-in-Source is indeed wanted, would be used, and is needed." The Librarian of Congress, on the other hand, was sure that a permanent full-scale program could not be justified in terms of financing, technical considerations, or utility. He was "compelled to the conclusion that . . . the Library of Congress should not seek funds for a further experiment along these lines." So died Cataloging-in-Source.

The early and unexpected demise of Cataloging-in-Source was a shock to a large segment of the library profession and caused some bitter reaction. Paul Dunkin called the report "an unexpected abdication of leadership by what we had come to look to as the National Library." In truth, Cataloging-in-Source had been a source of much difficulty for the library of Congress and for the publishers; while it was asserted that Cataloging-in-Source was highly useful even without the chimerical "cataloger's camera" ("a new kind of copying machine, inexpensive, dry-process, which can reproduce positive copy directly on to catalog cards and capable of reducing or enlarging copy"), most librarians had expected that the two would go together. (This camera, incidentally, is yet to be developed.) The brief duration of the experiment produced only some 1,200 entries and made no impact on cataloging; the brevity of the experiment is questionable. Equally questionable was the consumer reaction method of determining its usefulness. No matter . . . Cataloging-in-Source died. The nearest thing it has had to a resurrection is the program, initiated in 1961 by the Library of Congress, to induce book jobbers to insert sets of LC cards in books distributed to libraries.

In spite of the growth and improvement of the card service, the research libraries of the country continued to feel that their needs were but imperfectly met and, indeed, a study of the cataloging of nine large university libraries in 1952 had found Library of Congress cards and copy used for only 52 percent of the books acquired by
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those libraries. The Shared Cataloging Committee of the Association of Research Libraries, wishing to demonstrate to the Library of Congress and to the appropriate committees of Congress that there had been little change and that the scope of the Library of Congress’ cataloging should be enlarged, repeated a portion of the 1952 study in 1965, using the cataloging of the same nine libraries. Again it was found that these libraries were cataloging only 52 percent of their acquisitions with cards or copy available from the Library of Congress. This astonishing correlation of results from two samples thirteen years apart continues: in 1952 LC cards were available but not used for 8 percent of the sample; in 1965, for 9 percent. In 1952, cooperative copy (as distinguished from LC copy) was available but not used for 9 percent of the sample; in 1965, copy other than LC copy was available but not used for 8 percent of the sample. In short, in both studies, either Library of Congress cards or copy or other copy obtainable through the Library of Congress was available but not used for some 17 percent of the samples.

The Association of Research Libraries had been urging expansion of the Library of Congress’ cataloging before making its study and it continued to do so. The success of its efforts may be judged by the wording of Title II C of the Higher Education Act of 1965 which charged the Library of Congress with “(1) acquiring so far as possible, all library materials currently published throughout the world which are of value to scholarship; and (2) providing catalog information for these materials promptly after receipt. . . .” The implications of this simple statement have not yet been fully realized by the library profession at large, but they mean, in essence, that at long last the Library of Congress has a mandate from Congress to serve as the central cataloging agency for the nation.

The Library of Congress has accepted this charge with remarkable vigor and alacrity. Through an arrangement with the British National Bibliography, catalog cards for British books published in 1966 and thereafter became available in the regular Library of Congress card series on April 15, 1966. The BNB descriptive cataloging is used without change, and the entry is changed only when necessary to accord with Library of Congress practice; subject cataloging and classification numbers are added by the Library of Congress. The Library of Congress has found it feasible to accept for its cards the standard descriptions used in the national bibliographies of a number of other countries, again with modifications of entry when necessary. Where
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arrangements to receive copy from national bibliographies cannot be worked out, or where such bibliographies do not exist, attempts are being made to secure serviceable copy from national libraries. On July 1, 1966 the Shared Cataloging Division was organized in the Processing Department of the Library of Congress to handle this immense flow of cataloging. At this writing (December, 1966) copy is being received from the United Kingdom, East and West Germany, Austria, Norway, France, and Canada. Plans are under way to obtain copy from Denmark, Sweden, Finland, South Africa, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the U.S.S.R., and it is hoped that the shared cataloging program can, in 1967, be extended to Argentina, Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Portugal. Israel and India are covered under Public Law 480 arrangements, and acquisitions centers in Nairobi and Rio de Janeiro are bringing in greatly increased quantities of material from East Africa and Latin America for prompt cataloging.

Depository sets of cards from Shared Cataloging are going to selected large research libraries that have agreed to check their foreign orders against these files; should they find a title not included, a copy of their order slip is sent to the Shared Cataloging Division so that the Library of Congress can secure a copy of the publication for its collections and for cataloging. Thus materials which somehow escape the Library of Congress dragnet abroad should be caught by this back-up system. (It should be obvious, too, that this program will not only make available a vast supply of cataloging copy, it will also bring to the Library of Congress great numbers of foreign titles to strengthen and enrich its collections.)

The first tapes from the MARC Project have already been distributed to participating libraries. The project, to experiment with a "machine-readable catalog record" (whence the acronym), funded jointly by the Council on Library Resources and the Library of Congress, is the first step toward computerized centralized cataloging (CCC?). Based on the hypothesis that "it is feasible to produce a standardized machine-readable catalog record that can be manipulated and reformatted in local institutions to serve local practices and needs," Project MARC began in 1965 with the development of a proposed format for this record. During the experimental period MARC tapes will be prepared for all English language materials (with a few exceptions) cataloged at the Library of Congress—about 125 titles a
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day—and sent weekly to sixteen libraries which will use these tapes not only in catalog preparation but for a number of other operations as well. These libraries will provide the necessary consumer feedback to the MARC office. Since a limit has been placed on duration of the project, a report on it should be forthcoming within a reasonable time.

After a slow and reluctant beginning and a long period of relatively minor improvements and expansion, the Library of Congress is about to become what Dewey in 1876 said it should be: the central cataloging agency for the nation. When Putnam in 1901 announced that the Library of Congress would distribute its catalog cards, it seemed that centralized cataloging had arrived. It soon became apparent that this estimate had been overly optimistic. For years librarians, committees and associations pointed to the deficiencies of the system, urged the Library of Congress to expand its efforts, and sought ways of adding their own efforts to provide the necessary coverage. The Library of Congress often seemed sluggish, even reluctant; Congress itself, through its committees, was disinclined to support centralized cataloging, and the library profession, with little political know-how and even less “muscle,” seemed unable to convince the legislators of the need. The increasing emphasis on education and research has increased the Congress’ awareness of library problems and the library profession has belatedly achieved some degree of political sophistication, so that the climate for centralized cataloging is more favorable than at any other time in history.

It is not difficult to accuse the Library of Congress of inaction, of shirking its responsibilities, of sluggishness. And at times it has been guilty of all these sins. Yet it has created a system which in fiscal 1966 sold 63,214,294 catalog cards to some 19,000 libraries; it has developed a technique of reproduction so that now no LC card is out of print; and it has undertaken with enthusiasm and dispatch a program of expanding acquisitions and cataloging such as the world has not before seen.

It would seem then, that at long last the dreams of Jewett and Dewey are about to become reality. Flaws there will be, and librarians to point them out—all as it should be. But perhaps now it is time for libraries using the product of centralized cataloging to examine critically and with an open mind their own practice of “adapting” Library of Congress cards to fit idiosyncratic local practice.
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References

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