DESCRIPTIVE CATALOGUING.

WHEN an examination is made of a number of the book reviews which appear in literary journals and daily newspapers, one is often led to speculate as to their value to the ordinary book-buyer. How much do they influence his choice, and what amount of information do they convey concerning the actual contents of books? Although this is not an inquiry into the question, it is an interesting branch of the subject of book description, and as such demands a little notice, especially as it has a direct bearing on the matter of book selection and its necessary outcome—book cataloguing. It is a fact that librarians are compelled, in the absence of more satisfactory methods, to order many new books on the strength of critical notices which appear in journals. It is equally a fact that, in a large proportion of cases, the guidance afforded by these notices is unreliable and often misleading, because the reviewer neglects to tell what books are about in his anxiety to display his own skill in phrase-making, and his mastery of the technique of the art of printing. Many a modern book-review is more like an examination of the work by a proof-reader, than an attempt by a competent judge to inform the reader as to its subject-matter and scope. After all is said, a comma standing on its head does not vitiate any fact it helps to punctuate, nor does any other misprint, so long as it is obvious, constitute a fault about which to make a pother. Yet it is on such trivialities that good books are often condemned by careless critics, who ignore the intention, scope, and usefulness of books in their never-ending search for literals. Frequently one will see

whole columns of a journal filled with a laudatory or condemnatory review of a book, in which its literary style, the personality of the author, the art of the printer, paper maker, and binder, may all be solemnly passed in review, yet not a word be said as to the real contents, limits, and intention of the book. Such notices are of everyday occurrence, and they form the chief source from which publishers select those unmeaning laudatory tit-bits which figure so often in catalogues of books, as 'opinions of the press.' The average book review is one of the principal hindrances to the intelligent selection and cataloguing of good books with which librarians and the general public have to contend. The publisher's catalogue or announcement is another distinct hindrance, because he depends upon the reviewer for his annotations, and as these are rarely descriptive, the information conveyed to the intending book purchaser is very meagre. This carelessness in the important matter of describing the contents of books in an accurate and helpful manner, has not only a harmful effect on the circulation and choice of books generally, but it aids in retarding the work of describing and indexing what is recorded in books, so that readers as well as buyers are hindered in their quest for information.

It is only within the past few years that any attempt has been made to annotate the entries of books in public library catalogues, so as to make their contents available. A few public libraries have accomplished this work for all their books, whilst others have begun to annotate or describe every new book added. When one considers how misleading and void of information the average book-title is, it becomes evident that some means must be adopted of telling intending readers what books are about, when choice must be made from brief catalogue entries, and not by actual examination of the books themselves. Generally speaking, very few title-pages are true guides to the contents of the books which they distinguish, and as often as not, they are misleading. If words were devised to con-

ceal thought, it is just as certain that modern title-pages were invented to hide the subject-matter of books. The old-time title-page, with its solemn procession of descriptive lines, some picked out in red ink, may have been a trifle embarrassing, but it honestly set forth what was contained behind it, as far as was thought needful. The present-day title-page, following the prevailing taste for tit-bits and snippets, has been reduced to the limits of a motto or trade mark, sufficient, no doubt, to distinguish it from its fellows, but utterly inadequate for the purpose of informing its reader what story its author has to tell. But this is not a plea for descriptive title-pages. It is an argument in favour of supplementing their deficiencies, by the addition of notes to catalogue entries which will give the information title-pages cannot supply. A title-page is but a distinguishing name, a mere heading or sign, by which authors hope their names will descend to posterity. Its value as an indicator of the contents of a book can only be very slight, and in no case can it convey the same amount of information as a table of contents. For this reason the mere wording of a title-page is of very little consequence, providing it is sufficiently explicit to distinguish a volume of verse from one on the art of painting; or a collection of sermons from a novel. That even this amount of distinction is frequently not gained, because of the fantastic titles adopted, every librarian knows. Two amusing instances may be cited, which are tolerably well known, though the fun is chiefly perceived by the bystander. Two books of modern verse—one dubbed ‘Oils and Water-Colours,’ and the other, ‘Rough Castings’—have been frequently mistaken and purchased for works on painting and ironfounding respectively, to the confusion and wrath of their buyers. I have myself been often misled by entries in literary journals of new books which seemed to fill some gap in the library and were ordered in consequence. In one case, a book which seemed to be an illustrated account of a recent tour in

Holland, turned out to be a collection of short Scotch and Dutch stories; while in other cases books have been delivered which have not fulfilled the promise of their title-pages in any respect.

For all these reasons it is manifest that the time is ripe for some drastic reform in the method of describing books, and nothing seems to meet the needs of the case so completely as the addition of purely descriptive notes to catalogue entries. In the case of very large libraries of old standing this would be a formidable undertaking, and in some cases would be an enterprise beyond the means and resources of the institutions. But there is no reason why the municipal libraries, with their comparatively small collections and accessions, should not attempt this method of rendering intelligible the contents of books. The great majority of persons who use public libraries in the United Kingdom are compelled to make their choice of suitable literature and books for study from catalogues which merely transcribe title-pages more or less fully. The further aid of subject headings in such catalogues is also afforded; but it must be remembered that, as no effort is made, save in a few cases, to indicate the scope of different books, these headings only help readers to find in one place a few of the books which may happen to be described on their title-pages as treating of the same subject. This is no great aid to the intelligent selection of books, because no distinction is made between the entry of a treatise of a hundred years ago and one of yesterday. Thus, readers are induced to borrow Marco Polo's travels for up-to-date information about modern India, or Gordon Cumming's book on South Africa for an account of the Johannesburg gold mines. Again, in fiction the want of some kind of information as to the period, place, action, or motive of novels leads to a great deal of unnecessary disappointment on the part of borrowers. Generally the merest hint is enough, because, though novels are seldom read for the information they often contain, they are read

for recreation by people who have a pretty well-defined notion of the class of novel they prefer. Thus, there are certain minds which cannot appreciate or relish novels which are written about murders or soul-curdling situations. It is not always easy to characterize such books concisely, or in such a way that an ordinary mind can grasp the principal motive and important subsidiary sections with intelligence; and especially to scent murder, which, with love, seems to be the pivot on which the majority of novels turn. For example, in such an elaborate novel as 'Martin Chuzzlewit,' with its complex plot, its varied scenes, and characters, and teaching as a kind of sermon against selfishness and avarice, it would be very difficult briefly to summarize its main features. But surely, for the benefit of those readers who require a little direction in their reading, such a note as the following would not come amiss:

DICKENS, Charles. 'Martin Chuzzlewit.'

The scene is principally laid in the neighbourhood of Salisbury, in London, and in the United States, during the first part of the nineteenth century. Selfishness, avarice, and the punishment of a conscience-stricken murderer are central motives. There is much satirical reflection on the American people. The humorous characters are Pecksniff, Mrs. Gamp, and Mark Tapley.

Or this could be condensed as follows:

Salisbury, London, United States, early 19 c. Selfishness, avarice, murder. Humorous minor characters.

In any case, the unlettered reader would be greatly aided in his choice, and due importance might be accorded to every great novel if treated on similar lines.

In the case of novels of minor importance a few words would generally serve. Here are some examples:

CRAWFORD, F. Marion. 'Mr. Isaacs.'

India. Hindoo mysticism. Date 19 c.

KINGSLEY, Henry. 'Geoffrey Hamlyn.'

Life in Australian bush. Middle of 19 c.

MARRYAT, Frederick. 'Dog Fiend.'

Holland, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth, 1699. Jacobite plots and smuggling. Contains adventures of a dog which seems to have a charmed life.

These notes would be invaluable to the reader who hates novels which have their theatre of action in foreign countries, and there are very many persons who cannot appreciate a simple love-story, however well told, if the scene is laid in Italy, Egypt, or elsewhere out of England. This curious prejudice extends also to dialect novels, whether American, Irish, Scotch, or Yorkshire. Unfamiliar names and departures from ordinary Civil Service spelling are as poison to the type of reader specified.

There are other very important points requiring consideration in the question of how best to describe books, so that the public may get the most benefit from them, but they must wait for a future occasion. Meanwhile, there is one practical suggestion which could be adopted without trouble and very little cost, and would do much to render the exposition of the contents of books easy. It is this. Let every author draw up a six- or ten-line note on the scope, period, exact contents, and motive of his work, which could be printed on a slip, and placed in every copy of the book, so that every reader, librarian, and particularly critic, could easily see it, and profit accordingly. Prefaces are never very helpful. Many are long-winded and miss the point. Others are apologies for appearances in print, or simply invitations to read the book and find out what it contains. The slip suggested seems a happy compromise.

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