Notes on Shelf-Classification by the Dewey System.¹

THE following notes from actual experience in the shelf classification of books are offered without pretence that the difficulties of that important portion of a librarian's activity can be disposed of by this or any paper. Nor does the writer hope for an immediate change in the opinions of those who differ from his conclusions. There has been too much of the dogmatic in human controversies, and the best causes are often injured by the feeling of opposition which the dogmatic attitude is sure to arouse. Practical librarianship is like politics in this—that men who are agreed on general principles may find themselves in opposition as to the way in which these principles can be best manifested in action; and as it is one of the most valuable of human virtues to keep personal friendship intact notwithstanding political difference, it is one of the most valuable of the humanities for librarians that they agree to differ, remembering the extraordinary diversity of the libraries of the world in history, purpose, and general circumstances; a diversity which makes it difficult to decide what is best for each library without the most careful consideration of its peculiar nature. By disclaiming at the outset all pretension to the note of infallibility, the writer desires to win for the remarks of this paper the interest of fellow members of the Association who remain unconvinced of the value of practical methods which it advocates for some libraries. To my friends who do not care for the Dewey decimal system I observe that my attitude is merely that of one who, having worked the system, finds it so extremely useful that it would be disingenuous not to speak when occasion calls.

Fine classification of books on library shelves has many difficulties. I suppose that no words need be expended on the proof of this. The more able and conscientious the classifier,

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the more the difficulties of the decision are felt. Some of the puzzles are inherent in the nature of the work, and will always exist and can only be met by patient intelligence and industry, and clever compromise; but a large measure of relief can be brought to the classifier by careful avoidance of the effort to make Classification an equivalent to a Subject Index. To grasp the truth that the subject index and physical classification of the books do not serve exactly the same purpose, and that they are in fact supplements of each other, is essential. He who does not grasp this truth will be maddened by his task, for he will be engaged unceasingly in attempting the impossible. In the subject catalogue a book may be shown in all its various relations. Let us select an instance:

BENTLEY (Richard): *Dissertations upon the Epistles of Phalaris, Themistocles, Socrates, Euripides, and the Fables of Æsop*, edited . . . by Wilhelm Wagner, Ph.D. 18 + 626 pp., 8vo. London: Ball, 1883.

Here is the main entry in a dictionary catalogue of a work which must be mentioned under several other headings. (For library subject-catalogues I strongly prefer the alphabetical arrangement, and think the Boston Athenæum Library Catalogue one of the best models.) Now the classifier must place this book (Bentley on the *Epistles of Phalaris*) in *one* place, and his problem is to choose the most characteristic and useful place. As to the comparative importance of his subject entries he has been neutral, because he could give as many as he thought needful. But in shelf-classification he cannot be neutral, he must make up his mind to *one* place. If he is harassed by the conception that shelf-classification can perform the functions of a subject catalogue it is evident that a wholly useless weight of worry is added to the natural difficulties of his work.

However, even if this fallacy of confusing the powers of shelf-classification with those of a subject catalogue be not present, the difficulty of fine shelf-classification in practice is very great. (The question here is not the question of *framing* a scheme of classification, but of fitting books to any good scheme when formed.) Sometimes the jaded worker wishes that he had no more difficult decisions to make, that he had but to put the artificial shelf-marks on the new volumes, and place the *Student's Hume* beside Todhunter's *Trigonometry*, or Finlay's *Greece* beside Smith's *Mezzotinis*! But such moods of scepticism are short. When the hour of fatigue has gone by,

when the librarian moves among the shelves, and sees the reciprocal illustration of each other which the mere juxtaposition of classified books gives, he feels that even for the sake of his own mental interests he would refuse to part with the task of marking books for place by an intelligent scheme which takes into account their nature and purpose. There is also the vivid sense of the *distinction* of the task, the feeling that it is one of the marks that librarianship is a liberal profession. How much this feeling is heightened by the perception of the result of classification in increasing the usefulness of the library to others is a truth familiar to most of us, and to be insisted on in its due place; but also be it insisted that the function of a library is to do good to men in general; and that consequently part of its office is to train admirable librarians, who, no less than the readers, are human beings, needing improvement and education!

Shelf-classification, it has been observed, cannot do the work of a subject catalogue; but, *so far as it goes*, it is superior to a subject catalogue, because it shows the books themselves side by side, and enables a student to decide much more rapidly what book will be of service. Of course, in large and nobly-administered libraries a student's table is heaped at his desire, with as many books on his topic as he can use. But in an unclassified library this is done specially and for the moment only; when the student has finished his task, the group of books is dissipated, and the work done for him must be done over again for the next student of the subject. In a classified collection of books the gathering on the student's table will be probably made vastly more satisfactory by the ease with which he can examine various groups on the shelves, and decide with more sureness than through the best subject catalogue which books would really be useful. The concrete book, the book itself, can often be accepted or rejected at a glance, while the name in a list may leave one doubtful. No doubt, were there infinite numbers of library assistants in every library, this argument would be weakened, though not entirely invalidated. If we proceed on the hypothesis that cost and time do not matter, we may arrive anywhere, and we need think no more about it! In a classified library the task of preparing for students before their coming, and while their particular needs are still unknown, is ceaselessly pursued. It is being pursued, not with the disadvantage of nervous anxiety and worry, always unavoidable when we know

that some one is waiting; not with the no less cruel disadvantage of suddenly confronting a new problem for which the mind is unprepared; not when the librarian knows that another student is ready with a fresh problem. It is being pursued with deliberation, with the best help in references and guides of which the librarian is mentally able to make profitable use, with the intellectual pleasure of seeing a work grow beneath the hands of the worker, a pleasure which helps to insure vitality and certainty in the performance. In fact, classification is one of the labour-saving devices, and so obviously desirable that it prevails in all money-making business. Large shops do not mix wax-candles and soaps with ribbons and millinery; and the subject catalogue of the Army and Navy Stores is not believed by the manager to render specialization of department unnecessary in the actual arrangement of his goods.

When this paper was first projected I thought of writing of the difficulties of fine classification without special reference to any system; I thought that this might be acceptable both to those who find the Dewey system applicable to their libraries, and a useful aid in their daily work, and to those to whom it is not convenient to use it, and who shrink from a certain Philistinism which is encountered in this system, as perhaps in all actual labour when confronted with the ideal. But I found that the effort to translate into general terms would be beyond my powers in the time at my disposal, and, moreover, that what I might say thus would probably not be as useful to those who prefer various other schemes of classification. He who wishes to write well should use his own language, let others make their translations! Accordingly, I here speak of some questions which have occurred day by day in using the Dewey classification. To the abler exponents of that classification these questions may not seem difficult, and probably my mode of answering them will not seem the best mode.

Given the Transactions of the *Early English Text Society* and of the *Scottish Text Society*, how shall an anxious classifier deal with them? If he has his English Poetry division admirably arranged and labelled, how he longs to place beside the edition of Barbour's *Bruce* already on his shelves the two editions issued by these societies, both edited by Skeat! We have felt this wish in the National Library of Ireland. But to our judgment it has seemed not wise to gratify it. We leave it to our catalogue to tell the resources of the library under the head

Barbour. We think it most convenient for rapid finding purposes, to allow the publications of these Societies to remain unbroken sets on the shelves, and our catalogue contains lists of the publications of the Societies, referring to main entries under the authors of the works. Thus, a reader who wishes to know what the library contains of Dunbar, or Barbour, or Lyndesay, will find the editions of these writers, or any other known writers which are contributed by the E. E. T. S., or the S. T. S., fully catalogued in the author entry, while a reader who is anxious in a general way to see what the Societies have done for his studies will find a careful list under the heading of the Society's title. Famous romances like *Sir Tristrem* also have their main entry under SIR TRISTREM. But miscellaneous collections, volumes owing their existence to the modern editor, such as No. 46 of the Original Series of the E. E. T. S.—

“Legends of the Holy Rood; Symbols of the Passion and the Cross: Poems in Old English of the 11th, 14th, and 15th Centuries, edited by Richard Morris”—

have their main entry under their number in the E. E. T. S. list, with, of course, careful cross-reference in the rest of the catalogue from every heading which we can think of as one which might occur to a student who wanted the volume.

These observations on cataloguing, which must seem very elementary, are made because they illustrate how the ultimate key to the resources of a library can only be the catalogue. In one's pleasure in shelf-classification it is quite possible to forget this truth. Some librarians break up, not only collections like those of the E. E. T. S., and there is much to be said for doing so, but the collected works of an author who has written on many subjects. The latter proceeding cannot be useful unless the librarian makes his catalogue from the beginning with such an arrangement in mind. Even then frightful masses of difficulty present themselves. I have known of a librarian who broke up the Collected Works of Locke, sending one volume to Education, another to Biography, others to Psychology, others to English Essays. He did not even reform his catalogue, which was one of the meagre, old-fashioned, high and dry catalogues, and presented merely this entry—

Locke: The Works of, 10 volumes, 8vo.

He could never have done such a deed if he had not believed that shelf-classification could be made do the work of a catalogue. It will readily be anticipated that unspeakable confusion

was the result. But even had this librarian reformed his catalogue to match his heroic treatment of Locke's Collected Works, he would have met fresh difficulties. (I do not insist now on the bibliographical enormity of the deed!) Some of the volumes contain differing works, which ought to go to differing places. The librarian must either pursue the logical course of breaking up these volumes and rebinding the parts, or must place them in the portion of his library devoted to encyclopædic books. But if he is forced to the latter course, ought he to have broken the set originally? He has arrogated to himself the work of editor and publisher in addition to that of librarian, but has shrunk from pursuing his ravages to the bitter end!

Of course such action as this is wrong because our primary purpose in shelf arrangement is to find not *subjects* but *books* easily. The advocates of shelf-classification do not forget this, but allege with truth that arrangement by subject, when governed by good sense and literary feeling, makes the finding of books far more rapid and easy, because it furnishes the best mnemonic system, and does not compel the library assistant to demand an artificial shelf-mark from the applicant in every instance. The advocates of shelf-classification go, however, farther still, and allege that while our primary purpose in shelf-arrangement is the finding of the *book*, it is supplemented by another purpose, that of finding the *subject*, and that in a huge majority of cases there is no discordance between the two purposes, and that it is an enormous advantage when they can be combined.

The solution of the question as to Locke's Collected Works which we adopt in the National Library of Ireland, is to place them all in Philosophy in the section 192, British Philosophers, where Dewey allots 1922 to Locke. There, in fact, we place all literature relating to John Locke, and there all his works, for we conceive that the weight of his own personality is now greater in importance as a subject, so far as those books are concerned, than the topic of which any of them profess to treat. We are also strengthened in this view by our conception of the immense mnemonic value of the great name, and we do not think that any student of Education will fail to think of Locke on Education because the work is not in our group of books on Education. The list of books on Education gives it, it is of great fame, and cannot be forgotten; and arrangement with the rest of Locke's works seems to be decided by the strong

attracting power of Locke's personality, and of his position as a memorable English philosopher, and, as before said, by the mnemonic value of such an arrangement.

Another of the thousands of questions of classification is—How to arrange the Biography section of a library in the most useful way? Undoubtedly, it seems to us, the best plan is *not* the classification into subject headings as "Eccentrics," Phrenologists, Atheists, Mormons, Librarians. Many men fit several of these headings at a time, and it is but the introduction of a new puzzle without corresponding advantage to endeavour to say whether a man is a librarian or an "eccentric"! We arrange by alphabetical order of the names of the subjects as a Biographical Dictionary arranges its articles. Lives of sovereigns we arrange in the alphabetical order of the names at the end of the History sections which relate to the countries of which the sovereigns have been rulers. The alphabetical order is marked by large clear labels on the shelves. Collective Lives of the Popes go to 282, the Catholic Church. Lives of the individual Popes are retained in the general alphabetical order in Biography.

A question on which we differed from another library occurred lately. We found that works which dealt with a great man's life and work, without being a chronological account of that life, were being placed by the librarian in English Essays! It is unnecessary to dwell on the incorrectness of this decision. But it may be remarked that this division in Dewey (824, English Essays) is to be kept down to its rigid limitations by careful consideration of the possibility of finding for books which a hasty classifier might send into it, a place where the books are more usefully arranged by their *subject*.¹ Our friend the librarian mentioned above had placed among "Essays" many books far more characteristically suitable for other positions. Three may be mentioned:—Stopford Brooke's book on Tennyson, Jessopp's *Coming of the Friars*, and Saintsbury's *Essays in English Literature*, 1780-1860. It is evident that Stopford Brooke's book on Tennyson ought to be in Biography under its subject, Tennyson. The word Biography in its full sense signifies anything which deals with the whole or part of a man's life, whether the treatment be chronological or not. We should not place in Biography, it is true, Elsdale's book on the

Of course "Essays" is a *Form* Class, not a Subject Class.

Idylls, or Gatty's book on *In Memoriam*. These are most usefully placed beside Tennyson's poems in class 821, English Poetry.

Jessopp's *Coming of the Friars and other Essays* is most usefully placed in 904, "Essays on History," and some other volumes by Jessopp, such as *Studies by a Recluse* and *Random Roaming*, may be ranged beside it.

Saintsbury's *Essays in English Literature from 1780 to 1860* should go as a contribution to the Histories of English Literature, 8209. Thus these three volumes are removed from 824 to places where they will be more useful to inquirers in the subjects with which they deal.

A real difficulty in a small library sometimes is found in deciding how to arrange the literatures of various foreign peoples. Until the collection has grown to exceed 4,000 volumes in French or in German literature, it is perhaps most convenient to avoid sub-division into Poetry, Drama, Fiction, Essays, and when you have provided at the beginning for Dictionaries of the Literature, Histories of the Literature, &c., to arrange the section by placing the authors in alphabetical order. The full Dewey numbers may be assigned to every volume, but the agreement is well understood that only the first two figures count for the present. Thus the library assistant knows that in a book marked 843 he is to consider only the 84, and he puts *Père Goriot* into its place among the volumes of Balzac without inquiry where French novels are, and the book is within a few shelves of Baudelaire's verse, and among all the other Bs of French literature. When the collection grows into a large one, needing careful subdivision if it is to be of service to the specialist, there are three courses open to one who uses the Dewey system. Either he may proceed to the uttermost length in subdividing — first into forms, such as Fiction, Drama, &c., and then each forms into periods; or secondly, he may stop short with form, and arrange alphabetically; or thirdly, he may retain the first simple arrangement of the whole literature by authors, and he will perhaps set up an elaborate Table of French Literature as a guide near the collection, and then the specialist student can scan the Table, and find what authors belong to the scope of his inquiry, and having decided on them can select them by going to the place where they fall by alphabetical arrangement.

It would be vain to attempt to decide which is the absolute

best of these modes of arrangement. There is very often no absolute best in the world of practical action, there are generally only comparative bests,—bests, that is, for the circumstances. Given a large, well-educated staff, splendid means of arranging the volumes and exhibiting the labels, and a very copious French collection to exemplify the excellence of a chronological order, should we unanimously choose the finely elaborated arrangement first mentioned? But it would neither be useful nor practicable in any but some very fine library with a staff of specialists. The second mode of treatment, namely proceeding as far as the subdivision into the various forms, in the case of French literature would be useful in perhaps a hundred public libraries in Great Britain and Ireland. The third mode would be useful in ten thousand libraries. It would present its cruxes, of course, but they can be answered. How to deal with anonymous works in alphabetical arrangement on the shelves is one of these questions, and others will occur to everyone here.

Shall we divide Brash on Oghams and Ferguson on Oghams from MacAlister's new *Irish Epigraphy* because the two first works treat at some length the Oghams of England, Scotland and Wales, while MacAlister expressly confines his study to Ireland? Shall the new Life of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, by Archbishop Benson, go to the Biography shelves, or to the Early History of the Church? We think the latter the better place. Is it better to place the works of Bossuet, Fénelon, Massillon in "French Literature" or in "Theology"? We think Theology the more characteristic and useful place. On the other hand, when a few of Renan's books, such as those on the archæology of Palestine and early Christian history, have been placed with the subjects, does not the magnetic force of the writer's greatness draw to French Literature books which, if written by a smaller writer, would have been better placed with their ostensible topics? In fact, a collection of Renan's Works is dominated by *Renan* as a *subject*, is it not?

I have chosen, quite at random, a few from the very many questions always being proposed, and I venture to think that an exact science of classification of books on the shelves is shown by these questions not to be possible. Good sense, more and more information, an educated mind, a nature not given to

demanding crudely marked black and white divisions in a world where all distinctions shade into each other, are elements of fitness in the classifier whose work is to be useful to others. As one thinks out these questions, a few guiding thoughts or principles seem to assert themselves more and more, which render one's task in classification less distracting in its difficulty. They have been mentioned or implied in the preceding pages. The first undoubtedly is Let us not confound the functions of a catalogue with the usefulness of class-arrangement on the shelves; a second, Let us remember constantly that one among the important purposes of classification is to furnish an admirable mnemonic system for the more rapid finding of a given book, with the corollary—let us try, therefore, without departure from system, to seek the *obvious* grouping (obvious, of course, to an adequately cultured mind). A third thought which springs from the two preceding ones is, Let us not forget that with the best efforts we shall not produce anything flawless; that, as all men discover in time, the road to usefulness and success in the world of practical action is through wise compromise. These remarks apply, whatever be the system of classification.

As to the superseding of shelf-marking by decimal notation, I have nothing original to say. In the use of the Decimal Notation we have almost come to the conclusion that special shelf-marking of books is not necessary, and in this agree with many others who have tried that notation. From the beginning mark the classification down to a fine point; use for arrangement on the shelves just as far as you need it; and then, when really subdivision is unnecessary, arrange alphabetically; and if there be several editions of the same work, arrange them by order of date. Of course have shelf-lists; and shelf-lists of a collection arranged by the decimal classification will be that enormously valuable aid to the librarian, the Dewey Decimal Catalogue. When a division on the shelves grows too large, if you have not ~~used~~ the Dewey numerals down to their utmost powers, proceed to do so; and when satisfied again arrange alphabetically. Do not alter Dewey's numerals at all, but take advantage of the liberty of variation in the use of the numerals which he plainly contemplates in his Introduction. If you alter the numerals you lose the overwhelming advantage of the Index—and it is not likely that you gain enough to compensate for that. However, this is another subject.

In conclusion, I wish to say that I know that all I have written here has been written before. But we were reminded at the Buxton meeting by Mr. Abbott that it is good to repeat what we think useful and true; besides, though the foregoing paper probably contains nothing that is absolutely original, yet all that it says is ethically original—it is original to the writer, it is what has come to be thought out in actual practice. All the friendly hearers present know well that the huge subject of this paper cannot be dealt with in a paper, it would need a book, and indeed would be more interesting when thus treated at length than it appears in such a fragment. With this remark I leave what has been said to your consideration.

T. W. Lyster.