

Some Observations on the Dewey Notation and Classification, as applied to the Arrangement of Books on Library Shelves.¹

THERE is no librarian in the world who does not regard some classification of the books in libraries as of importance. To anyone who denies this thoughtlessly, it is only necessary to observe, "Do you, then, place duodecimos beside folios and quartos?" Some classification is natural to the feeblest human mind, and really the only point disputed (and there is not much ardour in the dispute, for the minority is exceeding small, and will soon be wholly converted) is the question—Shall the classification be based on reason? Shall the arrangement of libraries depend on the essential nature of books, or shall mere accidents of the material existence of the books wholly determine that arrangement? There is really no glory to be gained now by standing up for classification by subject in public libraries; the victory has been won by men who went before me. Some are present here to-day, and I believe that they will be glad to be reminded how my fore-runner in the National Library of Ireland, Mr. William Archer, F.R.S., not only advocated classification by subject with his whole energy and heart, but, with admirable insight, nearly twenty years ago accepted that splendid system of Decimal Notation which has really done away with the practical difficulties of classification by subject.

For it is important to recall the fact that it was certain practical difficulties which chiefly impeded the cause of classification by subject. The greatest of these difficulties was the absence of elasticity in library notation. Were we to conceive of a library as a collection finished, not having any works added to it from time to time, we could arrange it by subject, and then press-mark, by some artificial signs, the collection in

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the rooms occupied by it, and there it might stand until the end of the world and of libraries, and do its work excellently. (It is true that even in such an unchanging, ungrowing collection, it would be a considerable advantage to use the Dewey Notation; but the indispensableness of the extraordinary elasticity which that notation possesses would not be forced on the library keeper). It is when we come to consider *growth* of libraries that we are compelled to discover some plan of marking new books, to take their place beside older works on the same subjects. No one can measure what space will be required for even the next ten years' incomings in any particular branch of science, literature, art, or history. Accordingly, no one can leave on his shelves exactly those spaces required for the additions of even the next ten years—and so, if he faithfully adhere to his plan of classification by subject, he will have to move on his rows of works, now in this book-case, now in that; and in the final event, the whole collection must move. Now, if the marking of the books be artificial—Room A, Press B, Shelf j, Volume 17—all that marking goes by degrees to ruin, and must be replaced by a new marking; and only those who constantly have to attend to all that is implied by alteration of the marking of volumes, can judge of the weary drudgery which this adds to the quite sufficient amount of drudgery implied in the care of a public library. Elastic or expanding systems of notation were then absolutely essential if classification on the shelves by subject was to succeed. I am not learned in the history of the attempts to obtain elasticity or expansive quality in systems of notation. Clever schemes other than that of Mr. Dewey have been devised. But Mr. Archer taught us in Dublin the excellence of the Decimal Notation; and it seems to us, with every increase of experience, to be absolutely satisfactory, for it is capable of application to new and unthought-of cases.

A rapid description of this Notation will, perhaps, be pardoned by those already familiar with it—since there may be some present who have not examined it for themselves. I will endeavour to make its marvellous simplicity felt by beginning with the most elementary considerations. Suppose, in some building, a large collection of volumes, without arrangement, and without any marking of locality. This, for practical service of students, is not a library; it is a wilderness! Enter Mr. Dewey. He causes a carpenter to erect ten book-cases. He then takes up a volume. He finds that its subject is Theology.

He writes the figure 2 on the title-page, marks a book-case with the same figure, and places the book marked 2 in the book-case marked 2. Then he takes up another volume, and finds that it is the second volume of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. This he marks with the figure 0, and places it in the first of his row of book-cases, which first book-case is also marked 0. Mr. Dewey proceeds thus with volume after volume—he does not mind which come first; and, at last, all the volumes on Theology are marked 2, and are in book-case 2; all the Encyclopædic works are marked 0, and are duly placed in book-case 0, until all the collection, in fact, is divided into ten parts by subject, and each part is in a book-case. Already something has been done, for now it is probably ten times as easy to find a book as it would have been in the original collection. And if Mr. Dewey finds that one of his book-cases is not large enough for all the books allotted to any particular number—if, for instance, Literature, No. 8, overruns its case, because of the multitude of novels and romances! he summons his carpenter again; has an eleventh book-case put up, moves all the 9's into it, and marks it 9; then lets the 8's run on into the case formerly marked 9, and changes the marking. Note that he need not change the marks inside the volumes, or in the desk-catalogue, or in the card-catalogue; he has to change only the big figures on the book-cases—a very easy thing. This is the *elastic* quality of the Decimal Notation—the notation press-marks, because the order of the digits is constant, and universally known.

But, as yet, Mr. Dewey has only had the collection divided into ten parts. Well, the tenth part of a large library is itself a library, and the labour of finding books within it very great indeed. So he has the volumes from case 0, or 1, or 2, or 3, brought to him. I will choose case 5, which contains books on the Sciences, as one which the most easily illustrates his proceedings. Taking up one book, Mr. Dewey finds that it is of general interest in science, containing essays on several sciences—on botany, zoology, chemistry, geology. To the figure 5, already noted on the title page of this volume, Mr. Dewey adds 0, which, as we have seen already, is the cyclopædic mark. This book will now be placed by the classifier near the beginning of case 5; and all other volumes which deal with several sciences will stand with it. Mr. Dewey now proceeds, in all the volumes of case 5, to add to the original 5 various other digits. All books on mathematics thus get marked 5 1; all on astronomy,

5 2 ; all on experimental science, 5 3 ; all on chemistry, 5 4 ; all on geology, 5 5 ; palæontology, 5 6 ; biology, 5 7 ; botany, 5 8 ; zoology, 5 9 ; until at length class 5 is divided into ten parts, as it was itself the tenth part of the original chaotic collection. Now if all the ten classes are thus divided, each into ten parts, we have the original library sub-divided into 100 parts. This does not, of course, suffice and the classifier goes on to sub-divide each of these *hundredths* into *thousandths*, marking the sub-division by the addition of a third digit. I will not protract this description, which, I fear, is very tiresome ; but will simply observe that the addition of a fourth figure, to mark a *ten-thousandth* of the original collection, brings the classification of the books much nearer completion, and makes the collection begin to truly deserve the august name, Library.

Mr. Dewey deserves well of the world by his clear scheming of this Decimal Notation, and he deserves well also because of the energy, industry, tenacity with which he has elaborated a Subject Classification. For his notation idea is independent of any particular classification, and could be applied in any library to the arrangements existing there.

But in a large volume Mr. Dewey has provided a full Table of his Notation applied to a Classification, and more—he has made a splendid and minute Index to the Table, besides, in a lucid Introduction, giving an explanation of the classification and notation, which would enable any fairly educated person to apply them. Thus it is certain that nearly all libraries in the world in fifty years will be arranged in an order largely determined by this classification ; for no one can ignore the vast practical convenience of the Table, the Index, and the Explanation provided by the wonderful industry of Mr. Dewey, and connected so closely with a Notation, which, in its idea, is as near perfection as can be hoped of anything of its kind. Hence the enormous importance of criticising now in its early years this classification. The first edition of the Table was published in 1877 ; the latest, the fourth, in 1891. Before 1996 there will be many more editions. A large part of the book, as it is now, will remain unchanged. But it would be a very good thing if the next, the fifth edition, could introduce certain improvements. All the libraries that have not yet adopted the Dewey scheme would get this fifth edition. The libraries already arranged may very well stay as they are—they are excellently arranged ; or they

might gradually adopt the reforms—for *it is peculiarly easy to do so* with this notation.

I cannot pretend this afternoon, to offer anything like a complete criticism on this huge classification Table. I may remark that many times what seemed flaws to me originally, have proved, on closer examination, excellent points in view of their practical usefulness. And other objections, which I felt at the beginning, seem to be confirmed by experience. But it is evident that the author of the scheme is prepared for this. He frequently drops remarks which show that he contemplates variation in the use of his tables with various minds. But the grave warning is offered by him, and should be repeated, that in this forest of difficulty very great care should be taken to blaze every step of one's progress, to mark the Table, to mark the Index, with records of the alterations; and, if there be not time to do this most carefully, it is madness to leave the broad avenue through the woodland for apparent short-cuts amid the tangled thicket.

The title of my paper is meant to be unpretending, to describe exactly what alone I can endeavour to do to-day. I now venture to offer a few "Observations" on the Classification so closely connected with Mr. Dewey's Notation.

Men of science find fault with the classification in botany and zoology, but especially in zoology, of the lower forms of life. This is inevitable,—for portions of this field have not yet been accurately mapped. A magnificent attempt to fix the terminology is now being begun in Germany; a *Tierreich* to be issued through the next twenty or thirty years. Therefore it is certainly best, unless, like Mr. W. E. Hoyle, the critic is a strong zoologist, to leave Dewey's work alone, even if you have doubts of its ideal accuracy. But in this region there is one point which I do submit to be of importance:—

Palæontology is marked	56
Biology	„	...	57
Botany	„	...	58
Zoology	„	...	59

It is my suggestion that the fact that these are not sister subjects should be marked; that biology, the science of life, should be made to include botany and zoology as sub-headings. How to treat palæontology is more doubtful. I advocate making it a sub-heading of the same dignity as botany and zoology, though this is not perfectly logical. The practical convenience

of making biology to include zoology and botany will immediately be felt when you consider the question how to place a book which treats of comparative morphology, both vegetable and animal, or a general natural history. At present, in the National Library of Ireland, we place these by conventional agreement in zoology.

I leave this region of the library for class 8, for Literature; and here the first and elucidatory observation is one already made with emphasis by Mr. Cutter, that our whole principle of classification suddenly changes. In all the rest of a library we arrange books by considering what are the topics of which they treat. In Literature we do not care about the topics; we are thinking of the *form* of the work. It is nothing to you that *Lear* treats of the mythic English age, and *Julius Caesar* of Roman history; this does not separate them, they are both tragedies, and stand side by side.

A second point in the Literature section of a library is that personality of authors constitutes a classification reason. It is not so elsewhere (except, I plead, in Philosophy; to this I turn later). For Darwin's works are widely separated; his book on *Coral Islands* goes to physiography; *The Voyage of the Beagle* to scientific travels.

But we gather all Shakespeare together; for I contend, if there be a separate edition of the sonnets, it is better not to mark that for poetry apart from drama. The breaking up of the works of an author in the Literature section of a library is a great evil, because the very essence of literature is personality; and, though we may agree that it is expedient to exclude some of the noblest literary monuments from the division specifically marked Literature (*e.g.*, Gibbon's *History* is best placed in Class 9), yet when we do bring books into the Literature division, we should bear in mind continually *why* they are there, and bear in mind the peculiar principles which determine classification within that division.

Now the chief defect of the Dewey system in Literature is confronted when the works of a writer like Thomas Fuller are considered. Why is it so eminently desirable to have Fuller's works in a library at all? Surely not because the *Worthies of England and Wales* is a valuable biographical dictionary, or because *A Pisgah Sight of Palestine* is a valuable guide to the archæology and topography of the Holy Land. No; the main value of Fuller's works is, that they reveal to the reader the personality of Fuller himself. I will mention Sir Thomas Browne

and Henry More as examples of English prose writers, whose work, like that of Fuller, ought, in my opinion, to have a special place assigned within the Literature division. It is *not* excellent arrangement to put the *Hydriotaphia* among the treatises on urn-burial, widely separate from the *Religio Medici* in theology!

In Philosophy I plead for a large development of the personality idea in classification. I hate the isms—"realism," "idealism," "pantheism," and the rest of them; and, moreover, you cannot get people to agree as to their meaning. There must be some use of them, I don't forget that. But I should like to gather all Plato, and writers on Plato, together, and let the book-cases which contain them be marked, as Mr. Dewey has arranged, 184, to stand immediately after the case containing 183, the Sophistic philosophers, and just before 185 the Aristotelian. In the division Philosophy, it certainly is desirable to get all the modern treatises on the exacter subjects, logics, ethics, placed under these subjects. But the great personalities of a nation's great men should outweigh philosophical systems, such as *Intuitionism*, *Monism*, *Eclecticism*. I am not belittling the wonderful Dewey table, from which I have learned so much. I only plead for a certain openness of mind in the use of it.

One important point which I wish to urge in this connection is that which Mr. Ogle makes in the introduction to his catalogue of Bootle Public Library. No matter how careful the classification on the shelves it cannot do the work of a subject catalogue or index. This is obvious when it is considered that all books are of significance in more than one relation, and that some are of significance in very many relations. In order to have a complete classification, then, a library should possess more than one copy of every book, and of some works many copies. Take one book as a specimen, Professor Alfred Cort Haddon's *Evolution in Art*. In the National Library of Ireland we have placed this book in anthropology, because it is, as the author himself is careful to tell, a study of the "arts of design from a biological or natural history point of view." But the book is of interest also to the student of decoration and design, to the student of psychology and the ethnologist, while the geographer will desire to see it. Must we then procure several copies? No; because the invention of the Subject-Index renders possible a method of assuring the art student, the ethnologist, and the geographer, that no book on their various subjects which the library contains shall escape their search.

On this point of Mr. Ogle's it is important to dwell, in view of my attack on the *isms*. Only index "associationalism," "intuitionism," "meliorism" in the catalogue carefully, and it becomes of no great importance that all the works in which they are treated do not group under these names on the shelves. Everyone who comes to the library and finds the row of great English philosophers grouped with each other in chronological order will, I believe, be struck by the superiority of the educating force of such an arrangement. There they stand in order—Bacon and all his works, and all works about him; Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Joseph Butler, Hume, Reid, Dugald Stewart, Mill, Herbert Spencer. I have been encouraged by observing the pleasure of the library assistants in arranging thus the great philosophers of all countries in a natural way. France exhibits side by side Descartes, Malebranche, Condillac; and Germany: Leibnitz, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel.

The general aim of these "Observations" is to induce librarians who shrink from the Dewey Table to examine it again before finally rejecting it. The objections urged by men of culture sometimes are: first, that it is unphilosophical, because it agrees with no great theory of the Categories or the Division of the Universe. But Mr. Dewey never supposed that he could claim philosophical unity and perfection for the scheme. His purpose is, essentially, to frame a system of division to which can be applied the admirable idea of the Decimal Notation.

A second objection is that the classification is too rigid, that it does away with originality. It assuredly does away with a certain bad kind of originality, the originality of complete blunder and confusion. But anyone who desires can establish variations which he perceives to be more useful in his case than the lines of Dewey. The fact is that objectors have not realised the wonderful forethought with which Mr. Dewey has provided an answer to almost all possible objections, in his capable and thorough Introduction. Almost every day, in allotting places to books in Dublin, we use the liberty of variation which he contemplates. Of course, constant reference to the shelves, and constant examination of the mode in which cognate books have been arranged already, is necessary to prevent inconsistency in this variation; but I urge that constant reference to the shelves is necessary no matter how faithfully you may follow Dewey, that it is the necessary safe-

guard by which one keeps the past, the present, and the future of one's library in unity.

Here, Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, I bring to an end these fragmentary observations. I believe that no one will refuse to allow that if a good scheme of library notation and classification has been made a little more acceptable by my words, the extreme dryness of my paper, and its repetition of what is already well-known to many who are present, may be forgiven.

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