

The National Libraries of Great Britain and France, and their Catalogues.¹

THE scope of the present paper is not, I fear, exactly expressed by its title. My intention merely is to lay before you a short comparison of the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris, the sources and nature of their riches, and the construction of their general author-catalogues. Such a comparison first became possible in August last, when the first volume of the *General Catalogue of Printed Books in the Bibliothèque Nationale* appeared, and was laid before the International Library Conference.

The National Library of France has the reputation of being the largest and richest in the world, while the British Museum is universally admitted to be the next in importance. It is probable, as I shall afterwards endeavour to show, that this superiority could not be demonstrated on the basis of printed books alone, and that it arises from the extraordinary richness of the MS. collections at Paris. It must, however, be a matter for astonishment that our National Library should be able even to rival that of France, when we consider the history of the two institutions. The British Museum Library was founded in 1753, and was formed by the amalgamation of four collections, the Cottonian, Harleian, Sloanian, and Royal Libraries, the latter consisting of about 12,000 MSS. and printed books. At the same date the Royal Library of France contained 200,000 volumes of printed books, to say nothing of MSS. The reasons for this vast disparity are not to be sought in a comparison of dates. In the Middle Ages neither English nor French Sovereigns were distinguished as book-collectors. The first solid foundations for a National Library were laid at the same period in France and England, the end of the fifteenth century, under Charles VIII. and Henry VII., respectively, who both collected books for their private pleasure. The destinies attending these

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collections of theirs were widely different, and until long after the formation of the British Museum, kept this country in a lamentable state of inferiority. Henry VIII. did little to increase his father's library, how little is evident from the meagre disbursements for books recorded in the Privy Purse Expenses of his Court. Edward VI., as might have been expected from so scholarly a monarch, incurs this reproach to a less degree, and atoned for much by making Roger Ascham his librarian. The other Tudors did nothing, or next to nothing. Of the Stuarts, only Prince Henry, that son of James I. who died before his father, procured any increase to the Royal Library, the acquisition of the Arundel MSS. being due to his influence. The periods of the Orange and Hanover dynasties were almost entirely barren, up to the date we are at this moment considering. Note the contrast in France. Louis XII., the successor of Charles VIII., added to his father's collection the library gathered by the Dukes of Milan, at Parà. Under Francis I., and his successors of the cultured House of Valois, no pains were spared in making additions, more especially of classical MSS., to the royal collections, and a regular librarian, the "Master of the King's Library," was appointed. During the seventeenth century, the Golden Age of French literature, the library received enormous accessions under the fostering care of Colbert, the great minister of Louis XIV. Every species of machinery was by him set in motion to obtain rare books and MSS. He sent emissaries through Europe and the East, or utilised the efforts of local scholars, and often too the Ambassadors of France received instructions to co-operate. Thus Dom Mabillon, during his travels in Italy, obtained 4,000 books, and D'Avaux, Minister at the Court of Charles II., enriched the library with treasures of English literature and spoils from the hoards of English collectors. All through the eighteenth century these varied efforts were kept up—as an instance may be taken the labours of the Abbé Sevin, who in two years, amassed in Constantinople, over 600 Oriental MSS. These official exertions, as might naturally be supposed, were largely aided by private munificence, and a constant stream of donations and bequests poured in. These were by no means of the nature of private gifts to the Sovereign, for already under the Valois Kings the Royal Library had become accessible to scholars. In England, on the other hand, the neglected Royal Library, inaccessible to the public, received no such impetus. Another source of gain to a National Li-

brary, the deposit of copies for legal purposes, began a century earlier in France than here, namely, under Henry II., in 1556, and was kept up ever after with more or less regularity. The first enactment of the kind in England was the Sedition Act of Charles II. (1673). This, however, only lasted a few years, and though the supply of books from this source was periodically ordered by the various monarchs, it was not permanently established until the beginning of the present century. From these considerations it is evident that the progress of the British Museum, when once instituted, was extraordinarily rapid, since in 140 years it has arrived so nearly on a level with its great rival. This feat would under any circumstances have been astonishing, but is rendered the more so from the enormous additions made to the French Library by revolutionary confiscation, a process which, fortunately or unfortunately, the British Museum has never had a chance to profit by. The libraries of the religious communities, and of the fugitive nobles, formed a mass of books of which the exact number can never be known, but which must be counted by millions, and the greater part of them were absorbed by the Bibliothèque Nationale. Two causes, I think, have operated to enable the British Museum to attain its position against these overwhelming initial odds. First, the generosity of donors, for though the Paris Library has continually profited from this source, it cannot point to such splendid accessions as the Library of George III., presented by George IV., the Cracherode, Banksian, and Grenville collections. Secondly, as if to make up for past neglect, the British Museum has always been in receipt of a liberal endowment, and this at the present day, it may without exaggeration be said, enables it to purchase every new book, from all over the world, that is worth buying. The purchase of old and rare books must of necessity fall short of the ideal. Against collectors the Treasury itself fights in vain.

It is not possible, and probably never will be, to determine exactly the relative size of the collections in the Bibliothèque Nationale and the British Museum, since the census of their contents has been made on varying bases. It is, however, possible, now that the first half of letter A of the French catalogue has been published, to compare that portion with the corresponding section of the Museum Library, and to form some general conclusions. It must, however, be admitted that data drawn from a comparison of about one-thirtieth of the

complete collections, can hardly be regarded as final. An attempt of this kind has been made by a recent writer in the *Times*, and after careful testing I am led to adopt his conclusions as correct. The Bibliothèque is the stronger in incunabula, as might be expected from the number of monastic libraries incorporated with it. In the sixteenth century the balance of numbers in books other than French and English is fairly even, in the seventeenth it begins to incline to the British side, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the preponderance of the Museum is perfectly patent. In the present century it is evident the French authorities have merely aimed at securing *useful* books, as distinguished from *belles-lettres*, and books in well-known, rather than obscure languages. This limited programme, it ought to be admitted, has been achieved. In the foregoing comparison French and English books are not taken into account. It is hardly necessary to state that each of the two Libraries is infinitely superior in the literature of its own country. The French books at the Bibliothèque are, however, much more numerous than the English books at the Museum, no doubt because of the early enforcement of the Copyright Acts. The English collection of French books is much better than the French collection of English books, but whether that is a credit to our literary position in past ages is a matter for question.

I have, in making these comparisons, had regard, of course, to the particular scope of the French catalogue, so as to make the basis fair. It comprises only *works of which the author is known*, excluding periodicals, many publications of learned societies, unassigned anonyma, and various classes of books which it has been thought expedient to reserve for future separate catalogues.

Reduced to these limits, the Catalogue cannot present many doubtful points, and the titles are drawn up pretty much as those of the Museum Catalogue. They are characterised by a remarkable freedom from misprints, which the Museum Catalogue, under letter A, at any rate, displays to a degree which only the haste of its production could excuse. On the other hand, it is evident that many forenames that might have been ascertained from various official name-lists, have been left in blank. The titles of books in languages other than Greek, Latin, English, and the modern Romance languages, are furnished with a translation in a footnote. While appreciating the compliment paid to the extensive use of English, one may wonder why as much

space was taken up with translations of titles for the benefit of those who cannot read the books they represent. The pagination of the books is not given, whereby an important help in identifying editions is sacrificed. The publisher's name, however, is always supplied where possible, in contrast to the Museum Catalogue in which, except in cases of special interest, it is given only in English books, and in books of all languages published before 1700.

The typographical execution of the book leaves nothing to be desired, except that the pages, which are merely large octavos, are printed in double columns, so that the lines are shorter than is pleasant for the eye. It is to be hoped that this great work will be regularly continued, and that its production may rival in speed that of the British Museum Catalogue, which, there is every reason to believe, will be brought to a conclusion in the year 1899.

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