

Historical Bibliography and Library History

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The fields of historical bibliography and library history have drawn upon each other and long been linked in their scholarship. The history of the book interest of recent years has shown further interdisciplinary relationships. Several predicaments that result when the two fields are juxtaposed underscore some of the problems that remain to be dealt with. The Western orientation of both fields is also largely assumed in both, and not always for the better.

Library history and historical bibliography work together like a stereopticon: two objects on paper, one image in the viewer. In antiquity they were one: Egyptian libraries are a story of papyrus and scribes, the history of Mesopotamian literature is being revised at the Ebla library, both accounts are informed by Socrates' parable of Thoth. Readers of this journal, on the other hand, are usually better versed in recent history, and here the two are separate. Indeed, it pushes an odd envelope to tie together such near-contemporaries as Anthony Panizzi and William Blake, T. J. Cobden-Sanderson and Andrew Carnegie, Charles Ammi Cutter and Henry Bradshaw, the Grabhorns and the Farmington Plan. William Morris and Melvil Dewey may have had much in common (ants in the pants, broadly speaking, for instance), but sadly they never met, and I can't imagine what we might make of it if they had.

The two fields remain very close, particularly in their literatures. Many writings fit in both fields, and those that appear to address only one are often germane to the other as well. Library historians use book history sources, which they find out about through contents pages, indexes, footnotes, and bibliographical guides. Historical bibliographers look at journals like this one for current awareness of library history, often retrospective awareness as well.

The fields have moved apart over the past few centuries, as their objects of study have come to appeal to different affections, for bibliography the acts of reading, for library history the institutions of reading. The former appeals to printers, collectors, and booksellers, also to such librarians as are fortunate to still remember the experience of reading that told them to become librarians in the first place: their academic

friends are mostly in literature and philology departments. The academic counterparts of the latter are historians, also such social scientists as are not petrified at the thought of history. In work with colleagues and in the world of learning at large, historical bibliographers thus learn to cope with allegations of preciousness and solipsism, while library historians learn to write as if they respected their readers.

Over time both fields have become fragmented. Both are enriched by dialectics (some will say built on fault-lines) that emerged once the fields were first established. Both are also searching for broader agendas. The tensions and paradigm shifts, as usual, both traumatize and excite: the tensions confirm that some do really care, while the paradigm shifts suggest that they are very much alive.

Bibliography, for instance, has long separated the listing and description of books from the accounts of their history and lore. This may make sense in theory, but in practice we know how lists often make lucid and exciting reading matter, while descriptive prose bogs down so as to work like a listing. In classic library administrative structure, however, the descriptive side is still easy to associate with the technical services (cataloging and now conservation in particular), the history and lore side with public service and outreach.

As for the descriptive side, it is guided by, and tries valiantly to reconcile, the rigors of AACR-2 cataloging practices, scary to those who have trouble living with things Procrustean, and the rigors of Greg-Bowers, scary to those who are frightened by the precision of formulas in general. Those who want the latter to go away should be reminded that the cornerstone course at the Rare Book School at the University of Virginia, and still the most popular, is in descriptive bibliography. As for cataloging rules, the continuing intensity of the discourse in committee meetings, particularly for historical materials, could be ample evidence that permanent solutions, such as might be delegated to a computer, lie ahead of us.

Description is a key to access, but it informs other activities as well. Critical readers love, learn from, and trust “hard evidence” such as can be coaxed out of study of the rich heritages of the printing crafts. Technology has clearly captured today’s imagination, so the pursuit of bibliographical forensics would appear to be particularly promising. In any event, two words widely used today (ugly noun hybrids they may be, but they do fill the bill) are “physicality” and “materiality.”

Descriptive bibliography and library cataloging are mostly based on book production—the printing primarily, the content secondarily. Rarely can they delve into later historical events—the circulation and use of books, involving distributors, criticism, and readers. Study of the “post-natal” events is thus inherited—along with the accounts, contexts, and criticism of the printing processes—by the other world of bibliography,

devoted to the history and lore of books. Its writings range from displays of erudition by antiquarian booksellers and collectors, typically casual but often both delightful and deep, over to academic work that, in spite of and sometimes because of its awesome rigor, often seems superficial. Mutual respect (or at least as much as learned colleagues can ever muster) unified the field in days when the literature was smaller and scholars better able to cross linguistic and ideological border lines.

Is there any difference between historical bibliography and book history? There may be a generation gap; it is also possible that the scholarship is now more strongly based in academia (History Departments are seen, by others more than by themselves, as the power brokers). Nor am I sure where *histoire du livre* fits in the picture. To some it is one more participant now sharing the bibliography stage who would happily take over the whole stage; to others it is the same as book history. In the study of books, its French *Annales* methods range from the refreshing and stimulating to the apocalyptic and impenetrable. In fact, a case can be made (strong to some, infuriating to others) for it being mostly book lore written up by sociology Ph.D.'s. Personally, I like it that both historical bibliography/book history and library history have largely succeeded in avoiding the heavy breathing of pseudo-scientific methodology. Both scholarly communities have typically been more literate than numerate, although quantitative work in both has often been provocative. But self-consciousness is important in academia today. One difference between historical bibliography and *histoire du livre* is that the former assumes descriptive bibliography to be basic, the latter sees it is an option. (But is bibliographical description a methodology? I leave this for others to debate.)

As for library history, it has not subdivided its specialties like bibliography, but it is not without partisanship. (In Francis Bacon's analogy of ants, spiders, and bees, the bees are always one's own specialty, the other two are one's protagonists.) "House history" may contrast with "revisionism," but both have their places, the former, for instance, in its archival source work, the latter in its bold agenda. If the former seems dotty and uncritical, the latter seems unwilling to formulate a definition of "elitism." As the outspoken partisans label each other as fogies or pinkos, they are joined by the geeks, committed either to saving everything, or to dumping libraries and starting over from scratch, or to doing both at the same time, but above all to doing something with modern technology.

Bibliography comes to life through its physical objects; library history, in contrast, comes to life as it reminds us that its subject is cultural institutions basic to our civilization itself. It comes to life through its crossovers—as biographies involve the history of institutions, as histories

of institutions study evolving practices, as studies of evolving practices reflect historical ideologies, as ideologies come into focus in the work of their main advocates. If library history is enriched by its centrifugal forces, historical bibliography has honored its specialties by directing them inward to make them even more specialized. Bibliography still addresses broad historical questions, and not only in matters of the post-natal importance of books. Its scholarship usually suggests social, artistic, and technological perspectives, although the particulars often need to be coaxed out of its citations and prose accounts.

Journal editors in both fields, in any event, are much to be envied: the paradigm shifts, trauma, fun, nonsense, and posturing make for interesting times. Both fields might be happier if their arguments were less shrill, although the politics of academic turf may never allow this. Simplistic ideas, however, in the spirit of Gresham's law, do tend to drive out large ones. Both fields keep a wary eye on those of our intellectually impoverished administrators and colleagues who wonder why either field should be of interest to anybody (especially since neither one usually makes any money). And even historians have been known to enjoy playing lifeboat games (which one should survive, library history or bibliography?), ignoring the need for the two to enrich each other.

Latent tensions of greater substance between library history and bibliography come to the surface when the two are juxtaposed. Historical bibliography is right to reach beyond the worlds of book production into the worlds of dissemination and use. The evidence has long been clear, however: only a small proportion of the press output was ever meant to, or did, or ever will find its way into libraries. Personal copies are almost always cherished more than library copies.

Are libraries then not less central to learning than librarians care to admit? What we think libraries were and might have been is not the same as what they ought to be. As repositories of sources, they are a place for transactions. But they are also organic processes that redefine themselves as they help redefine scholarship and society. Their preservation role becomes all the more important. And thus the classic maxim that "libraries are for use" may no longer be our useful cornerstone for financial support. Preservation and access may belong together, but it is one of the purposes of libraries to redefine the meanings of this Article of Faith.

Nor will history ever be all that kind to library classification systems. If (to paraphrase Heisenberg) we can measure position or momentum but not both, then assuming any position in the totality of knowledge is permanent is an invitation to obsolescence. To some, of course, the battles are over: the electronic media have wiped out history, along with both books and libraries and including all their battlefields, making the notion of an electronic library an oxymoron.

Far happier, and more responsible, would we be to live with, try to understand, and work around all the uncertainties, embarrassments, and anomalies that result when library history and historical bibliography are juxtaposed. Here are a few of our predicaments:

- Those who enjoy hating rare books, and those who do battle with them, need also to explain why libraries and museums are attracted to each other but frightened by each other at the same time.
- The slogan “All politics is local” is crucial to the survival of libraries but all the harder to appreciate when librarians find global thinking less painful and dangerous than local action.
- Libraries must be “state of the art” and commit their limited funds to new thought as well as to new computer upgrades. Historical bibliography thus becomes all the more important in reminding us (even if it is usually in vain) that out of today’s discards tomorrow’s reference questions will be answered, tomorrow’s treasures selected, and tomorrow’s insights developed.

Perhaps the hardest questions of all are ones that neither bibliography nor library history can address. Books and libraries, as objects, institutions, and ideas, are tied down to the heritages of Western missionary printers and modern proponents of national library development. Such memories make it all the harder to grasp how the bridges we have built to other civilizations are also barriers to understanding as well. The quest for power denies the perspectives that may ever understand the workings of hubris. The value of studying history, of both books and libraries, lies in its insights; even if, in both fields, the need for theory to grow out of practice must remain a mystery to those who do not understand the practice.

A Note on Sources

Since this brief text can do little more than touch on underlying relationships, I must do what all good librarians and bibliographers are expected to do: cite and recommend sources. One of the nicest is surely Paul Raabe’s “Library History and the History of Books: Two Fields of Research for Librarians,” which appeared in *Journal of Library History*, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 282–97, the editor having spotted it in the *Essays in Honor of James Edward Walsh* (Cambridge, Mass.: Goethe Institute, 1983), 7–22. For another provocative overview, see *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society*, the Clark Lectures, 1986–87 (London: British Library, 1993), notably “A New Model for the Study of the Book” by Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker, with valuable references at the end. And librarians who have not read the late D. F. McKenzie’s inaugural Panizzi Lectures, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London: British Library, 1986), ought to be ashamed of themselves. Much to be awaited are the collected essays that Ian R. Willison has long promised: among them should be *Toward a General Theory of Historical Bibliography* (School of Librarianship, North-Western Polytechnic, Occasional Papers 11, 1958),

and *On the History of Libraries and Scholarship*, his lecture for the Library History Round Table on 26 June 1979, which was published by the Library of Congress in 1980. This and other Center for the Book lectures, and indeed the very mission of the Center itself, are salutary both in their own right and as efforts to merge the best of library history and bibliography. Another argument in defense of the interrelationship between the fields must, of course, be Jorge Luis Borges's essay on "The Library of Babel," perhaps for no other reason than that it is so hard to say why. Nor should the ratiocinations of the late Isaiah Berlin be forgotten: his notions of positive and negative liberty are a valuable explanation, all too easily overlooked, of why the rationale of libraries is so central to the cause of intellectual freedom.

Among current literature guides, two works—the *Annual Bibliography of the History of Printed Books and Libraries* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973–) and the *Bibliographie der Buch- und Bibliotheksgeschichte* ("BBB"; Bad Iburg: Horst Meyer, 1982–)—seek to cover both fields (although, of course, many of the most interesting sources will, as usual, fall outside the intended scope). G. Thomas Tanselle's annual *Studies in Bibliography* essays include two in particular that library historians need to know: "Bibliographical History as a Field of Study," 41 (1988): 33–63, and "Printing History and Other History," 48 (1995): 269–89.