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THE CLASSIFICATION OF BOOKS

THE
CLASSIFICATION OF BOOKS

An Inquiry into its Usefulness to the Reader

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PREFACE

CONDITIONS within the field of librarianship, though changing gradually along with those within the spheres of other social institutions, are still under the spell of tradition. The thoughtful observer will find, however, that librarians are more and more convinced of the need for a wise readjustment in their thinking and in their present programs of activity. It is becoming clear to them that the service of libraries must be adjusted to a widening horizon of thought, to a broader area of usefulness, and to a world that is a going and changing concern. Above all, their object is to discover in what way and to what extent this service can contribute increasingly intelligent direction to future social and educational progress.

Toward this end librarians are becoming more and more active in opening up the resources of their libraries and in devising ways to bring the right books to those readers who can make the best possible use of them. Collections of books in libraries can be thought of as partial, or even, in some few cases, as almost complete representations in print of the world's knowledge. But it is evident that this knowledge, if stored in books which are not used, is dead. On the other hand, if the subject-matter can be brought into contact with living and productive minds, it becomes alive and in this way new ideas and knowledge tend to be created. In helping to make possible this vital contact the library assumes an important educational function.

In what ways, then, are books and readers brought together? For our present purpose, we shall stress, out of various ways, but two such forms of library procedure, namely, the classification of books and, to a lesser extent, subject-cataloging. One may think of these two processes, singly or together, as the Great American Library Dream—that dream of librarians which strives

to reveal to readers the subject-contents in books. For the well-known and aspiring aim of both is to interpret and record the subject-matter in books in such a way as to make it easily and almost automatically available for use by the patrons of the library.

It should, however, be perfectly clear that effective results of this kind are not easily and automatically attained. Such ends can be achieved by librarians only when work along these lines is based upon a wide, accurate, historical, and interrelated knowledge of the subject-matter in books, upon an intelligent understanding of the specific needs of the various readers, and upon a library technique through which decisions can be accurately expressed and which can be developed and improved as need arises.

Up to the present time these conditions have been met but partially by librarians. Thus the Dream remains a dream, its fulfillment possible only through a complete understanding of the nature and importance of the problems involved.

A rich field is now available for an objective examination of the results of classification and subject-cataloging. Great numbers of books stand classified on the shelves of great numbers of libraries as the static evidence of the effort made by the librarians of our generation to apply present systems of classification to collections of books. Year by year these arrangements as such are becoming more extensive, more complex and chaotic, and increasingly difficult to use. Also, dictionary catalogs of vast dimensions contain our further efforts to express and transmit to the readers a conception of the subject-matter contained in the books.

We are offering these arrangements of books and these card-records of subjects to the public to be used. But do they achieve their purpose and are they endorsed by those for whom they are made? What will be the judgment passed upon our work by serious users of the library and by future generations of readers and librarians? That something is yet to be desired by those

who would be expected to depend upon these library methods. is evident from the questions which have been voiced by thoughtful readers of the library:

“Why do the methods of classification and subject-cataloging bring to light such a small proportion of a library’s material on a definite subject?”

“Why is it that the books on a subject in which one is interested are scattered in so many places on the shelves? Under the number indicated for a definite subject we usually find but a small proportion of the material we are seeking. The subject-catalog may yield more titles on the same subject, but even there the record appears to us far from complete.”

Any attempt to answer such questions as these would call for an explanation of how classification works; that is to say, what can be expected of it in actual results, in terms of use, in view of the great variety of factors, inherent and imposed, which affect its method of operation and application.

The theme of such a study has been in the writer’s mind for a number of years, and only gradually has it assumed definite form. The inquiry was undertaken first with the object of analyzing certain technical processes commonly used in libraries. Later, though retaining suggestions for change and improvement of library service of interest to librarians, the form of presentation was modified with a view to explaining to the library reader the nature of the use of books made possible through the present techniques of classification and subject-cataloging.

In other words, emphasis has been placed, not so much upon a description of these processes as such, as upon an effort to carry over their significance, as expressed in concrete terms of service rendered, to the reader who uses the books on the shelves but who has little or no understanding of the principles which govern their arrangement. The point of view of the latter has been held constantly in mind.

— Our object thus has been twofold: to present to the library reader reasons for the insufficiencies and frustrations met with

•in using arrangements of books and card-records; and to offer, at the same time, practical suggestions to librarian and reader for lessening, in some measure, these same fundamental weaknesses.--

Thus the results of detailed, systematic classification for libraries, apart from any single scheme, are dealt with primarily. Yet, nevertheless, the adoption of the Dewey Decimal Classification, and, to a lesser extent, of the Library of Congress system, has been so widespread in the libraries of America that in many circles the term classification is synonymous with these systems. This being true, in discussing classification in general, the individual schemes enter in.

The writer wishes to take this opportunity to express respect and admiration for the way in which the able editors of the Decimal Classification have carried on the difficult work of expanding the tables of that system. The increasing difficulties connected with continued and detailed expansions together with the almost insuperable obstacles standing in the way of their application to growing collections of books may justify, in some measure, the present inquiry whose aim is to suggest ways of simplifying the problems of classification in the light of the practical usefulness of resulting arrangements of books.

Following an introduction in which the reader's point of view is developed, we consider the recent historical situation with respect to classification. The need for availability of subject-matter is brought out in Chapter III, and also the way in which librarians have met this need. Thirteen elements which affect adversely the usefulness of classified arrangements of books are described in Chapter IV, followed in Chapters V and VI by two studies analyzing certain of these elements. A brief conclusion in Chapter VII is followed, in Chapter VIII, by a rather extensive but selective Bibliography. The Appendix is devoted to a statement of certain problems which are considered suitable for further study in the fields of classification and subject-cataloging.

English and foreign literature on classification is voluminous, only a minor portion of it, however, being devoted to discussions on the organization of knowledge in relation to the classification of books. Literature on subject-cataloging is so far meager and remains to be written. The present Bibliography makes no pretence of being exhaustive. Titles have been chosen whose contents contribute something, even though slight, to some phase of the present discussion upon the use of classified books and subject-catalogs.

In making the acknowledgments customary on such occasions as this, it is a pleasure to recall and to express gratitude for advice received from the members of the faculty of the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago. My thanks go also to Charles Martel, of the Library of Congress, who read and criticized the manuscript in its early form; to Henry E. Bliss, of the College of the City of New York, whose opinions, though sometimes differing from my own, have been helpful and stimulating; and to Professor Truman L. Kelley, of Harvard University, for criticism, encouragement, and sustained interest in my theme.

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