

## The Function of the Catalog

ONE OF THE MOST troublesome questions which has afflicted our discussion of cataloging at conferences and in the professional literature is that of the function of the catalog. Whenever our method of cataloging was seriously challenged, the criticism levelled against it was parried with the question "Well, but what is the function of the catalog—is it to serve as a *finding list* or as a *reference tool*?" and there the argument stood. It seemed futile to go on discussing cataloging rules and practices before it was decided what objectives or purposes the catalog was to serve. It is therefore natural that the consideration given to the prospective revision of our cataloging rules should have evoked again, as a basic issue, the question whether the proposed revision should contemplate a "finding-list" or "reference-tool" catalog. The question is one of special interest and importance to the librarian, for it is the librarian, who is responsible for library policy, who must decide what should be the function of the catalog as an instrument of library management and service; and now is the time when he can determine what it should be. If he fails to act now, when the cataloging rules are under review, he will have abdicated his responsibility for the catalog and will have forfeited the right to criticize the revised rules later should he discover that they have provided for objectives which he regards as irrelevant or unwarranted or that they have failed to provide for objectives which he considers requisite or essential.

But if it is the librarian's responsibility

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to decide what function the library's catalog should be designed to serve, it is the cataloger's responsibility to clarify for the librarian the issues involved in a manner that will enable him to make a reasonable decision; and if the librarian has evidenced a reluctance to decide the question, it is perhaps because he was presented with a choice not of tangible objectives, but of illusive and elusive conceptions of a finding list and a reference tool—ideological will-o'-the-wisps—which he was unable to grasp, examine, and evaluate.

For what is a finding list? Is it a list of entries which should enable an inquirer to find a given book under its author and title? Should it enable one to find a certain work if he looks for it under an earlier or later name of the author or under the title of a different edition? Should it enable the user of the catalog to find the earliest or latest edition of the work he wants? Should it help one to find the editions which a library has of a given work or the works which the library has of a given author? Obviously, all catalogs are intended to serve as finding lists, but they may and do differ very considerably in what may be found in them. What, then, is a finding-list catalog?

And what, by contrast, is a reference-tool catalog? A reference tool is, of course, a source of certain information. As a record of the materials in a library every catalog will contain some information about the authors and the works recorded in it; does not that make every catalog a reference tool? The question whether the catalog should serve as a reference tool, in contrast to a finding list, implies that it might be made to provide certain information apart from

that which it must include as a record of the materials in the library; if so, *what* information should the catalog provide? Should it be unlimited in scope and serve as a universal source of information on cards? It has been demonstrated, for example, that the catalog can often be utilized as a source of biographical information; does it mean that it should be redesigned to serve, among other things, as a source of biographical information? If so, why should it include only the names of people represented in it as authors or subjects and not also other names? And why, then, should the biographical information given in the catalog include only names, dates, and certain titles of the people entered and not also data about their occupation, interests, marital status, residence, etc., as other biographical reference works do? Is it not clear that the suggestion that the catalog might be designed to serve as a reference tool represents another misconception, one born from a confusion of the potentialities of the catalog with its purposes, and that the question of the function of the catalog cannot be decided in terms of an ambiguous finding list or reference tool but in terms of the specific objectives which the catalog should be made to serve as a guide to the library's resources?

As a guide to the library's resources, the specific objectives of the catalog can be concretely defined, their merits evaluated, and the problem of the function of the catalog resolved. The first and primary objective of the catalog is, undoubtedly, to enable its users to locate in it as easily as possible a given author and title. This is an elementary objective and one without which a library would cease to function. Before a library acquires and processes an item it must determine whether the item is not already in the library, and before the item can be served to a reader it must be found in the catalog by the reader or someone else. The objective requires a minimum of cataloging and some of those who advo-

cate a finding-list catalog have this objective solely in mind. Their argument could be epitomized as follows (a) The purpose of a catalog is to indicate whether or not the library has a given book; (b) a book is identified by the author and title given on the title page; (c) if the author and title are copied from the title page onto a card which is then filed in the catalog, the book will readily be found by the reader and cataloging will be a simple, expeditious, and inexpensive operation.

This is a plausible argument, and some libraries, particularly small ones, must and do follow this course with or without the blessing of the official cataloging code in effect. If college and university librarians were to find this course adequate for their purposes, cataloging would greatly be simplified and the problem of cataloging costs and arrearages would vanish. But the argument does not go far enough. For the seeker of a *book* is all-too-often concerned not with the physical form of the book but with the intellectual *work* contained in it, and the cataloging of a work is more complicated and exacting than the cataloging of a book. For while the book is readily identified by the author and title given on the title page, the work embodied in it may be issued simultaneously under different titles, as under a British title and an American title, or may be issued successively under different titles and also under different names of the author if the author has not always used his real name or has changed his name in the course of time. The question which the college and university librarian must therefore decide is whether he would consider the catalog adequate if a student or member of the faculty looking for a work under a given name and title cited in some source would fail to find that the library has that work, or another edition of it, under another name of the author or under another title. Would he consider the catalog adequate if it failed to

indicate what editions and translations the library has of a given work, or what works his library has of a given author? Would he consider the catalog adequate if it failed to help an inquirer to find a work in the library because he had an inaccurate citation of the title or forgot the accurate wording of the title although he knew well the name of the author? If his answer to all these questions is in the affirmative, he should act accordingly and require that the objective of the catalog should be limited to assisting an inquirer to find in it a given author and title—and nothing else. He will then also assume responsibility for the consequent failures of students and faculty members to find in the catalog many works which they may urgently need and which may be in the library.

If, however, his answer to the questions is in the negative, then he must require that the catalog should serve also a second objective—to relate the editions of a work and the works of an author. He will then follow the late Pierce Butler who called attention to “the bibliographical function of the library” and who characterized the catalog as “a bibliography of the books in a particular collection.”<sup>1</sup> The method of relating the editions of a work and the works of an author is a subsidiary question which need not be discussed at this time. The basic question is whether or not the librarian wishes to undertake this biblio-

<sup>1</sup> Pierce Butler, “The Bibliographical Function of the Library,” *Journal of Cataloging and Classification*, IX (1953), 3-11.

graphical function and make it an objective of the catalog. If he does, the cataloging rules will have to provide accordingly and cataloging will be more complex and expensive than would be required by the first objective alone, but the catalog will also be a more effective and reliable guide to the library's resources. This objective will also require the librarian to define and adopt a policy to guide the cataloger in deciding how much time and effort he should spend in his attempt to relate the editions of a work and the works of an author: but this, too, is a subsidiary question which need not now be considered.

These are concrete objectives whose usefulness for the operations and services of the library can be weighed and evaluated. The two objectives considered—to facilitate the location of a given author and title and to relate the editions of a work and the works of an author—will, of course, not resolve all cataloging questions, and they leave out of consideration the rules of description and of subject cataloging which are not included in the prospective revision; but they are essential to a rational and systematic development of the rules of entry which determine the basic features of the catalog and which are now under review. If the issues involved in these objectives are fully considered and a wise decision is made, we may have a cataloging practice which will be guided by the recognized objectives of the catalog and not by any delusive will-o'-the-wisps.

## ACRL Luncheon at Miami Beach

After investigation of luncheon possibilities at the Miami Beach hotels it has been decided to transfer the ACRL luncheon to the University of Miami, where it will be held in connection with the tour of the university and its beautiful campus Wednesday

afternoon, June 20. Special buses will be on hand and will leave the hotel where the Circles of Information are held, probably at about 12:30, when the circles break up. Luncheon is tentatively scheduled for 1:30. The price will not exceed \$1.75.