

# Some Remarks on Bibliography<sup>1</sup>

IN THIS PAPER I propose to offer a few random comments and variations on the principal duty of librarians, which, reduced to its simplest terms, I take to be merely this: to get the right books on the shelves and to make them available to readers. The effort to fulfil that duty in these complicated days has run us square against two troublesome problems: What are we to do about the cascade of printed materials in the world? What are we to do about the growing mountains of catalog cards? Any consideration of those two problems brings us in time to two other queries: What is the purpose and character of modern scholarship? and Are we making the right books available to the right readers? All four of these questions are related, and I don't for a moment pretend to give an answer. Time, practical considerations of costs, and bad paper will probably solve them, though perhaps not in the best way, and all I want to do is to suggest some interrelations and ride a hobby. Let me begin with two stories:

As a professional group, we librarians are blood brothers to a gentleman of whom I know, the possessor years ago of a large house and a growing family, who also loved books. He bought them whenever occasion offered; he went out of his way to create occasions; he bought them low, he bought them high, he bought them of all sizes and kinds. Books came every post, a constant Niagara of books, and by and by, when he had filled his bookcases in the library, study, living room, dining room, bedrooms,

and the shelves he put in the attic and in the basement, he began to pile books on tables, under the beds, on the chairs. They continued to arrive; they spilled out from the spaces under the beds, grew around the beds, covered the beds, hid in time the beds, the chairs, the tables; they swelled and swelled, like some monstrous evil growth, overflowing into the kitchen, the bath, the fireplaces—until the family had to flee to an outhouse and leave the books sole and useless masters of the field.

Isaac Disraeli, in the *Curiosities of Literature*, has a sentence on this "*bibliomania*, or the collecting an enormous heap of books without intelligent curiosity, [which] has, since libraries have existed, infected weak minds, who imagine that they themselves acquire knowledge when they keep it on their shelves. Their motley libraries have been called *the madhouses* of the human mind."

Obviously private individuals with such libraries need a scalpel, and the courage to wield it; some criteria for selection, in other words, a bibliography. And we professional librarians, who might be said to be infected at times with a bit of bibliomania ourselves, could perhaps use a scalpel too.

Now for a second story. Consider the case, fictitious if you like, of the young eager reader, coming blithely some fair morning to read a good book or two on Rome, or Shakespeare, or prehistoric man. Ignorant of the mystery of libraries, blessed only with the laudable democratic impulse to find out for himself, he makes inquiries at the desk and is told where to find the catalog and how to fill out slips. The catalog has

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the midwinter meeting, 1945, of the Association of College and Reference Libraries.

two drawers, at the least, on Rome, depending on the size of the library, and, if it is a fine, up-to-date scholarly library, letting nothing escape its grasp, it may have five, six, or more. He starts in, and after the first half hour of turning over cards on "The Topographical Study in Rome in 1581," "The Italian Letters of a Diplomat's Wife," "Historical Illustrations of the 4th Canto of *Childe Harold*, Containing Dissertations on the Ruins of Rome," he gives up and, being an intelligent reader, makes further inquiry of the reference librarian. Knowing the ropes, she directs him to the *World Bibliography of Bibliographies*, where he dutifully fills out the sixty slips for the general bibliographies on Rome, sends for the books, and sits, in growing stupefaction, as the lists of titles unroll before him. You can finish this story—already it is twelve o'clock; by luck our reader, if his ambition still holds, may find some sort of book by three.

#### *An Example: Lincoln*

A Lincoln collection today, to be a Lincoln collection, must have 3500 to 4000 separate titles, not counting editions or variants. One of the best Lincoln scholars in the country tells me that there are about seventy good books on Lincoln. How, in the creaking apparatus of modern libraries, do you lead the inquirer to those seventy books? He doesn't need to be the beginner, but the college student, the graduate student, and even the finished scholar. For, believe me, the authors of the best books on Lincoln have never read the four thousand titles. You don't write a good book by reading four thousand others—you read the right ones, and think.

Of these 4000 Lincoln titles, 1340 have been printed in the last twenty-five years, 36 per cent of them are recent. This figure is not surprising, the Lincoln cult being

fairly recent, but other figures are not greatly dissimilar. Of some 1800 titles under "Abd" in the L.C. catalog of printed cards, 500 bear a date within the last twenty-five years, 28 per cent. At this rate, which I don't pretend to be accurate enough to satisfy the statisticians, 600,000 of the two million cards in the L.C. catalog are of post-1920 titles. The books are getting out from under the beds. Another fifty years, and they will have won. We'll have to start burning them, and the trouble with book burning is that the wrong ones always get burned.

Without becoming emotional and developing *weltschmerz*, I can see some national implications here which seem serious to me. Ninety per cent of the use of most libraries is by comparatively uninformed readers, citizens and future citizens on whose sound judgment the country depends for its survival as a free democracy. Fifty years ago, much more so a century ago, a man who wanted to learn law was given Blackstone as a matter of course; if he wanted something on the Constitution, he read the *Federalist*; if on American history, Bancroft. What can he be given today in any of those subjects, or in any subject, as readily and as satisfactorily? Granted that we know more—or is it less?—about all these subjects, we are rapidly reaching a point where we cannot serve the public's basic needs. Readers are eager for guidance; we give them card catalogs. There is a connection between the existence of great sprawling mysterious libraries and the prevalence of cheap short-cuts to information, which have taken the place of understanding, short-cuts like digest magazines and radio quiz programs.

What we have done is to make most research libraries into scholars' libraries—that is, we serve the 5 per cent and neglect the 95 per cent. We accept the notion of a

scholar as a man with a whim, any whim at all. If he wants to spend his time reading miserably inferior books and pleads his immunity as a scholar from all considerations of space and costs, we defer as librarians to the magic word—scholarship—and accord him greater privileges than anyone else in our modern society gets. We take seriously his fetish about bad books. Even though we know a book is bad, though everyone who has ever looked at it knows it is a bad book, though any scholar, after five minutes' examination, will throw it aside, we still keep it on the shelves in order that some other scholar, fifty years hence, will have the privilege of tossing it aside after another five minutes.

You remember the question which it occurred to the young John Stuart Mill to ask about Benthamism. Here was this elaborate cult, this scientifically conceived scheme for bringing about the greatest happiness of the greatest number, and Mill asked, "If everything that I am working for were gained, would I be happy?" Of course he had to answer "no." If all the books that had ever been printed, and all the pamphlets, sermons, broadsides, and wedding invitations, were available in American libraries, and all of them were properly listed on cards and in union catalogs, would scholarship be any better than it is now? My guess would be that the answer is "no."

I say "my guess" simply because we have seen very few books on the history of scholarship and we do not know exactly what it is that creates a great and distinguished school of scholars in a field. It is interesting that scholars are or have been quite un-historical about themselves; their motives and their purposes they appear to hold as above the need for study; they seem to think that every scholar, since the world began, has been impelled by precisely the same mo-

tives as they. Some American historians, the other day, were insulted when a businessman, using and using faithfully all the apparatus of scholarship, upset one of their cherished convictions about the character of railway land grants. His motives, they cried, were impure; he was not a disinterested person and, therefore, nothing that he said could be true. I have a sneaking suspicion that much great scholarship in the past, as with, shall we say, Catholic historians or Protestant historians, has not been disinterested but has been great.

### *Investigate in Library Schools*

One place where the history of scholarship might be investigated is in library schools. No one is as deeply concerned about the purposes of scholarship as the librarian, for he must constantly hazard a guess at the direction that scholarship is taking. Historians are fond of saying that a man can look only so far into the future as he can see into the past. Here is a field where that aphorism can be tested and applied, to very sound purpose. A library school's course in the history of scholarship might do worse than to start examining Carl Becker's remark, that any history written for history's own sake is nothing but sterile antiquarianism, not worth the time it takes. Presumably Becker would be willing to add that he doubted whether books so inspired were worth preserving for all time, or for any time at all, on a library shelf.

To return to the 95 per cent of our readers, what ought we to be doing for them? I suggest that we might go to work preparing bibliographies. I use that word in a highly specialized sense. Andrew Keogh used to refuse to call a mere list of books, however long, a bibliography; to deserve that honorable name some evidence of intelligent discrimination, some form of annotation or comment, was necessary. I

rather like that insistence of his. Bibliography means writing about books, and a list, whether it be a list of first issues, or a list of everything an author wrote, including the material which he and everyone else wish might be forgotten, or the kind of padded list which one finds in doctoral dissertations, or just a list of all the books in a library on some subject, is not writing about books. These lists, these lists! Whom do they serve? I have been trying for some years now to finish a bibliography myself, in which I want to include all the books, with at least some sort of descriptive or evaluating sentence, which a sane and reasonable man might consider to be the best and next to best books on eighteenth-century England. A few of the fields I know a little something about. But in many of them I have to trust the judgment of others. I look around to find the judgment of others, and it doesn't exist. I have sat for hours turning over the pages of so-called classified bibliographies, lists of hundreds of books on Scotland, say, or mathematics, as helpless before those lists as the eager fledgling of whom I told you, who wanted a good book on Rome. Other scholars tell me the same things about lists. For every one that they serve, there are a thousand whom they disappoint. Has this civilization of ours so lost all confidence in itself that it does not even try to distinguish between a wise, comprehensive, intelligent book and a job done by some student to get a job?

### *Teaching of Bibliography*

Here is another useful subject for library schools: the teaching of bibliography. I do not believe that a man need be a specialist in a field to know the good books. Anyone who knows something of the technique of

scholarship can learn the tricks, acquire the feel, by which he can spot the phonies. We tried this at Newberry, and staff members who had never made a critical, selective bibliography before learned to do it. The nonspecialist may miss 5 or 10 per cent—but the scholars themselves agree on no more than 90 per cent—and that is a good enough figure for the nefarious suggestion which I am about to make.

### *Indicate Good Books*

This suggestion is that we print the titles of good books on pink cards or, if you think that procedure attended with too many technical difficulties, including the one of finding a paper that would not fade to white in twenty-five years, I'll compromise by suggesting that we have a separate card catalog for the good books. This will be the catalog for the 95 per cent of our readers. And if any member of your faculty wonders why his book is not in it, you make him show cause. Tell him, in a kindly way, of course, that you don't believe his book would be understood by the 95 per cent; tell him that you have room only for Aristotle or Gibbon and that in a few hundred years he may make the grade. Don't let him question your judgment; you are the librarian, and yours is the decision.

These random remarks are nearly finished. I don't expect them to carry much weight. I was shown today an article written by a former librarian of the University of Nebraska forty-three years ago which made somewhat the same points. Since the Vannevar Bushes and not the Whiteheads are setting the pace for us, we shall continue to regard the building of libraries as a scientific performance instead of the philosophic and artistic job that it really is.