The Function of Bibliography

Roy Stokes

Second Edition

A Grafton Book

THE FUNCTION OF BIBLIOGRAPHY

Second edition

目录学的作用

Roy Stokes

Gower

A Grafton Book

First published in 1969 by
André Deutsch Limited

This edition published by
Gower Publishing Company Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hants GU11 3HR

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Stokes, Roy
The function of bibliography.—2nd ed.
1. Bibliography
I. Title
010 Z1001

ISBN 0 566 03440 9

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

Acknowledgements

Over the years during which I have been teaching bibliography, the problems surrounding its definition and function have been constantly under review. My first thanks must, as always, be extended to the students with whom these questions have been discussed without cease since 1946. This includes those during twenty-four years at Loughborough, England and latterly during the past eleven years at the University of British Columbia. In between these I recall with pleasure discussions with bibliographically inclined students at the University of Illinois; Syracuse University; University of California (Los Angeles); Simmons College, Boston and at the University of Pittsburgh. They will possibly recall conversations which helped to form what appears in these pages. No teacher can ever have anything but the sincerest gratitude to the students who have played so great a part in the common enterprise.

It is difficult to write on any aspect of bibliography without a consciousness of the debt to the bibliographers of the past and, in particular to the great triumvirate of Pollard, McKerrow and Greg. Their influence will continue to be felt for generations to come. Much of their work was done under the general auspices of the Bibliographical Society and I am grateful to the Council of the Bibliographical Society for permission to quote from the publications of the Society and particularly from the contributions of Pollard and Greg to the *Transactions* of the Society. Many potent forces are still at work in bibliographical studies and the words and ideas of several living bibliographers will also be found in these pages. I owe an especial debt of gratitude to Professor Fredson Bowers of the University of Virginia for allowing me to quote from several of his writings.

Introduction

Anyone who is working in any field of bibliography soon becomes accustomed to the question, 'What *is* bibliography?' The standard answers to this are inclined to leave as many problems behind them as they satisfy, because the question must generally be interpreted in the light of the practitioner's own personal interests. In an age of increasing specialization bibliography has reaped all the advantages and disadvantages which are consequent upon this development. The present century has seen notable progress in bibliographical studies and this field, which a century ago could be comprehended by one man, now nurtures hundreds of specialists. The strides which have been made have revolutionized the whole of bibliography and many of its specialized aspects have reached a degree of sophistication and maturity which could not have been envisaged only a short time ago. What is, perhaps, even more important is that the rate of change does not appear to slacken and each year's progress raises important issues. This has been, and continues to be, to the general good but there is a darker side to the moon as well.

We have witnessed a half century or so in which specialists can no longer talk with real understanding to other specialists in what is broadly the same field of study. The details are splendid but the picture as a whole loses a lot of its impact. As soon as any field of study loses contact with related studies and attempts to exist in isolation it begins to lose its effectiveness. Something then needs to be done to build up the parts and create a mutual awareness of interdependency. The chapters which follow are an essay along these lines, intended primarily for the student who is

beginning to need some kind of guide in the early days. It is a matter of concern that before detailed studies begin in any field, the definition of the area should be clearly perceived. Many workers in bibliographical studies will, perforce, find that they are frequently working, whether by necessity or choice, in one limited context. Their work will never be fully effective unless they become aware of related studies which react with their own.

A definition, even a good definition, can produce a picture of the original without it ever really becoming alive. How can one describe a colour to somebody who has never received the gift of sight? Even tangible things present difficulties in precise definitions. An orange and a spiral staircase have for generations been posed as problems of this kind. The only valid definition of an orange is to eat one or of a spiral staircase to climb one. Or, as a children's book has put it with commendable clarity, 'A hole is to dig'. Because of this, these chapters on the various aspects of bibliography define their subjects in different ways. In the main I have attempted to indicate the function of bibliography through the activities, the problems, the utility and the practice of the constituent parts. The work of great and of competent bibliographers demonstrates more clearly than any definition what they understand their study to be. The reaction of others to that work shows that there is not one single and undivided truth or, if there is, we have not yet succeeded in plumbing the very bottom of the well. But to stand by the side of a bibliographer and to watch how the problems are approached is to understand the methodology of the pursuit. Not all of it can be set down in words. There is no way in which to describe the instincts by means of which years of experience can say, 'This does not *seem* right' or 'I fancy that there is something odd about this item'. Yet it is from hunches such as these that many detailed bibliographical investigations have sprung. In the long run, nothing can supplant experience; but the longest journey has to begin with a single step.

It is possible, or in these days even probable, that some readers may be surprised and disappointed not to find more reference to machine applications in bibliographical work. The omission is deliberate and important. There are few areas of bibliographical work which have not felt the impact of modern technology of many different kinds. Photography itself was an important first step, micro-photography even more radical in its effect. Each succeeding technological advance has created change until the computer appears to have achieved a revolution. Nobody would want, or should try, to minimize the consequences of this explosion of involvement, but their effect has been on our methodology. The machines have not affected the underlying purpose of bibliographical studies. If we are fortunate – and the machinery manages to survive the

energy-starved future – we shall be able to perform tasks more quickly, more thoroughly, with greater reliance on less original minds and possibly even with greater accuracy. But the function of bibliography, which will surely change and develop in the future as it has in the past, will not be changed radically by the new technology. We shall, nevertheless, harness the possibilities opening up to us each year, but we shall still be in pursuit of the centuries-old goals.

As each segment of the whole pattern of bibliography takes on some definite form and substance it should be easier to appreciate not only the role of each part but also the interrelationships of them all. It is a very opportune moment to reflect upon the mutual aid which should exist among bibliographical studies, because this has not always been apparent in recent years. They are, as A. W. Pollard said, all studies under 'the big umbrella'.

Contents

1 The Definition of Bibliography

No initial difficulty in approaching the study of bibliography is greater than gaining an understanding of precisely what is meant by the word. A basic confusion is rooted in the fact that it is a term of which one very common meaning has tended to overshadow all others. In the majority of cases the word is used to convey the simple idea of 'a list of books'. Even in this most limited of all connotations it is more usual to misapply the word to cover any such listing of books, irrespective of selectivity or comprehensiveness, than to employ it with any bibliographical significance.

To the average layman this is all that is implied by bibliography, if indeed there is any consciousness of the word at all, and a bibliographer is nothing more than the individual who compiles such a list. The bibliographer can expect to assume all the benign indignity which was showered upon the lexicographer with Johnson's definition of 'a harmless drudge'. Any correction of this general impression would now, after many years of regular usage, be difficult; especially so since the meaning is not so much incorrect as partial.

It has frequently been pointed out that the word itself is unfortunate since, etymologically, it means the *writing* of books. This is the first meaning given to the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but it is designated there as obsolete. This same source gives as the earliest use in this sense the definition by Edward Phillips in 1678 in the fourth edition of his dictionary.[1] It seems that around this late period of the seventeenth century this usage was beginning to gain currency. The earlier editions of

Phillips' work, back to the first in 1658, had no such entry. Even in 1678 it was hardly given full acceptance. It appeared with the definition 'Bibliography (Greek), a writing of Books' under the heading, 'A collection of such affected words from the *Latin* or *Greek*, as are either to be used warily, and upon occasion only, or totally to be rejected as Barbarous, and illegally compounded and derived; the most notorious of which last are noted with an *Obelisk*.' The only crumb of comfort to be derived from this is that the word escaped the shame of an obelisk. Phillips also kept the older terms alive in having an entry for 'scribe' with the definition 'a writer, notary or scrivener'.

The word 'bibliographer' as distinct from bibliography appears to be a slightly earlier one and was recorded by Thomas Blount in 1656.[2] His entry was for 'Bibliographer (bibliographia), a writer of books, a Scrivener' and was accompanied by 'Bibliotheque (bibliotheca), a library or study of books' and 'Bibliopolist (bibliopola), a Bookseller'. The use of the word in this specialized sense of a scrivener was of limited duration. Its last usage was traced by A.W. Pollard to 1761.[3] Fenning's dictionary of that year described a bibliographer as 'one who writes or copies books'.[4] Just prior to this final listing, Dr Johnson had remained faithful to his age in ignoring 'bibliography' but defining a bibliographer as 'a writer of books: a transcriber'.[5] Apart from the period from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, during which this usage was in some currency, it is unlikely that this will ever be encountered to any great extent. It is, indeed, difficult to imagine that its use could ever have been considerable in either Blount's or Phillips' time since much longer established words were already current. Throughout the whole of the manuscript period, during which books were being extensively written, in a non-authorial sense, or copied, the terms 'copyist' or 'scrivener', seem to have sufficed. It is difficult to see exactly why this particular usage of 'bibliography' and 'bibliographer' should have arisen at this particular time. The reason for the cessation of its use is more understandable. Pollard believed that it was in France in the eighteenth century that the change was accomplished from the meaning of 'a writing of books' to 'a writing about books'. This was perfectly consistent with the increase in that kind of writing, chiefly under the stimulus of the new wave of book collecting, especially in France. De Bure's *Bibliographie instructive* of 1763 stands as a witness to this new style of writing and also of the changing sense of the word.[6]

This usage gained somewhat more formal support decades later when Peignot defined a bibliographer as one who made a special study of the knowledge of books, of literary history, and of all that related to the art of printing.[7] The new meaning gained acceptance in England in the writings

of Thomas Frognall Dibdin early in the nineteenth century and met with considerable approval among other writers. There was some rivalry to the word. Robert Southey preferred 'bibliology' but received very little general support, although the term 'book-lore' has occasionally been used in an attempt to shift the emphasis in the same direction. If support for Southey's usage has been limited on a strictly statistical count, it can, nevertheless, claim to have had some authoritative support. When A.W. Pollard wrote the article on the subject for the 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, he headed it 'Bibliography and bibliology'. On two separate occasions, in addresses to the Bibliographical Society in 1912 and 1932, Sir Walter Greg also half regretted 'that "bibliology" is past praying for' since it defined the study more precisely than the accepted word.[8] Such championship cannot be lightly set aside, nevertheless it is now quite certain that 'bibliography', incorrect and unfortunate as it may be, is here to stay and the situation must be accepted.

There is still current, however, a frequent wish to try to reserve the term bibliography for what may increasingly be regarded as the scholarly or 'scientific' study of books. Much of the writing about books, quite apart from those who write of the contents of books, is basically emotional rather than rational. This is not to denigrate such writing, much of which is extremely valuable. It is, however, of a different order from what is now regarded as bibliography and is by analogy best called 'book-lore', but nowadays more commonly called bibliophily. It is largely associated with book collecting and much of the writing surrounding it has been from that specialized viewpoint. The kind of writing which has extolled the pleasures of collecting books, the aesthetic considerations of the physical nature of the book, the sense of camaraderie experienced in meeting with other devotees, all these are not unworthy of some kind of celebration. But such writing is not bibliographical. Before the days of the new bibliography few writers felt the need to distinguish in this manner. Thus Emerson was thinking essentially of the bibliophilic approach to books when writing of the Roxburgh sale.

> The annals of bibliography afford many examples of the delirious extent to which book-fancying can go, when the legitimate delight in a book is transferred to a rare edition or to a manuscript. This mania reached its height about the beginning of the present century.[9]

Isaac Disraeli, on the other hand, felt the need to coin the word 'bibliognost' to indicate a somewhat similar enthusiasm, 'one knowing in title-pages and colophons . . . and all the minutiæ of a book.[10]

The difficulty which is experienced in tracing the history of the group of words which have been used for these related activities is some indication

of the changes in bibliographical studies. The present position is, in fact, almost precisely the opposite of the situation as it appeared up to the end of the nineteenth century. Before that time a group of loosely related studies were known by a number of ill-defined and changing terms. Now one term, or at the most two, if 'bibliophily' is also accepted as current, is in general use. Although the word itself has now passed out of the area of controversy the same is not true of its meaning. Over the century and a half which separates us from the time of Dibdin, definition has followed definition and gradually something of a pattern has emerged. The special emphasis within bibliographical studies at a particular period has, of necessity, been reflected in the definitions of the time. Whatever have been the varying interpretations of the past, the starting point now must be the most satisfying of the modern definitions.

In 1945 the Bibliographical Society published its commemorative volume *The Bibliographical Society, 1892–1942. Studies in Retrospect.*[11] The key to the subject was contributed by Sir Walter Greg in his chapter entitled 'Bibliography — a retrospect'.[12] In this, Sir Walter wrote:

> To avoid ambiguity I would define 'bibliography' to mean the study of books as material objects. The qualification is important. It is a sort of filioque clause directed against a particular heresy; one which is or has been wide spread, is still popular, but is in my opinion none the less damnable. It seems obvious that I may study the Book of Genesis, or the *Odyssey*, or *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, or *The Origin of Species*, or *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts*, and never come within a hundred miles of bibliography, because bibliography has nothing whatever to do with the subject or literary content of the book.[13]

There is no better starting point for a discussion of the function of bibliography than Greg's emphasis on the study of the book as a physical object and there is no more important qualification to be borne in mind than the final phrase of the extract quoted, which disallowed the connection between bibliography and the literary or subject content of the book.

In essence the problem resolves itself into something which is quite simple. Books, in the sense in which Greg applied the term, must be interpreted as inclusive of all those material objects on which ideas were communicated by means of a record which was designed to be, if not permanent, at least lasting. He was even prepared, in 1945, to leave the question open for future discussion as to 'whether a phonographic record is a book'.[14]

There have been times when mankind has had to be content that the

expression of their ideas should be entirely transitory and vanish with their voices. On other occasions, through the media of increasingly sophisticated inventions, they have been able to make speech itself achieve a measure of permanence. On still other occasions, and these provide the bulk of the material with which bibliography has had to concern itself up to the present, they have utilized whatever physical means were appropriate to their time and the standard of the civilization in which they lived. Cave paintings, baked clay tablets, papyrus rolls, vellum, parchment and paper manuscripts; movable type printing; all these have in the past, for varying periods proved the material objects by means of which men have communicated with their fellows from whom they have been separated by space or time or both. As time goes by, the modern inventive mind multiplies these media and the bibliographical picture becomes increasingly complicated. Nevertheless, however complex the media for the preservation of human ideas may become in the future, nothing will or can change the role of bibliography. Its function will always be, as it always has been, the study of the 'material means by which literature is transmitted'. If the study of the handwriting of Thomas Aquinas and Shakespeare have been an integral part of the study of their texts, so it is important to study the problems of the typewriters which T.S. Eliot used.[15]

Although bibliography is concerned with the physical problems and aspects of such material, there is little to be gained, apart from purely antiquarian pleasure, in unravelling such problems for their own sake. The major interest will always lie in some relationship to the text which is being transmitted. The bibliographer's interest in manuscripts lies fundamentally in the text which the manuscripts contain; the concern with printed books as physical objects is in order that the text contained within them may be more effectively understood. The function of bibliography resolves itself into the consideration of the relationship of these forms of related material to each other.

Every book, whatever its text may contain, begins as an idea in an author's mind. Up to that moment bibliography is not involved; but as soon as the author begins to set first drafts down on paper, the initial manuscript item is created and it is the first moment when there is anything of bibliographical significance. Although it is natural to think in terms of 'a' manuscript, there are, in many instances, a whole range of manuscripts. This applies equally to the 'foul papers' of a Shakespearean play or the early drafts of a Malcolm Lowry story. The growth of the text can be followed prior to any published form. In many instances one manuscript comes to occupy a pre-eminent position; the prompt-copy for use in the theatre or the polished version which Lowry sent to the printer.

The first printed text will probably be made from that manuscript. Bibliography will then become concerned with the physical problems of those copies individually, with the relationship of all the copies of that first printing to each other and their relationship to the manuscript from which they all sprang. As months and years and generations go by, later printings will be based sometimes upon earlier printings, sometimes upon the original manuscripts and sometimes based very largely upon an editorial interpretation of what the author might conceivably have written. The province of bibliography is to attempt to understand and explain the complex relationship which now exists between perhaps dozens of printings, thousands of copies and the probably small number of extant manuscripts and, above everything else, to relate all this to the text which it was the author's original intention to have written.

The field of bibliography is so wide and, at first glance, so ill-defined that it has to be regarded in its constituent parts if it is to have any significance as a whole. Since these parts are so closely interrelated, it is difficult to think of them in evolutionary terms with the neat structure of a family tree. Rather, they appear as points around a circle in which each aspect is supported by all its neighbours, but in varying degrees according to the emphasis of a particular piece of work. The nomenclature of the division or areas of bibliography has varied over the years with as much resultant confusion as that which attends the general name itself. It differs, however, in that there is now less agreement over the naming of the parts than of the whole. Fredson Bowers is scarcely a sufficiently conformist figure in the world of bibliography for his definition of the parts to secure wide and general agreement. On the other hand, no one else has provided such a useful starting point for the trail which, as Lawrence Wroth wrote, 'leads far'.

In some recent printings of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Bowers has written,

> . . .in modern times the word bibliography is ordinarily associated with two sets of activities: (1) enumerative (or systematic) bibliography, the listing according to some system or reference scheme of books that have a formal relationship; and (2) analytical (or critical) bibliography, the examination of books as tangible objects with a view to the recovery of the details of the physical process of their manufacture, and the analysis of the effect of this production process on the physical characteristics of any specific copy of a book.
>
> Analytical bibliography can be pursued independently of any limited objective; that is, it may be studied as a pure discipline concerned with recovering and interpreting evidence about

> production processes as preserved in the physical features of books of various periods. The application of such information, however, usually takes the form of (a) descriptive bibliography; or (b) textual bibliography.[16]

In Bowers' many writings since the first appearance of this text his viewpoint has not changed radically so far as this small part of the article is concerned. Any dispute which has ranged around Bowers' writings has been much less because of his division of the subject field than because of the weight which he has given to some of the parts.

The strictly enumerative aspect of bibliography has never seriously been called in doubt so far as its general function is concerned. The scope and methodology of enumeration is, however, in the throes of revolution. For so long the desirable ends of enumerative bibliography have seemed to be an impossible pipe-dream. Now the impossible may, truly, only be that which takes a little longer. At least, it is sufficiently feasible to make it worth while thinking out afresh what the role of enumeration really is in bibliography. Its chief objective is to create a record of all the material which exists, or which has been known to exist, within a particular category. The category may be limited and reasonably easy to comprehend. It may be large and complex, extending even to the age-old dream of a record of all the material which has ever been created. It is of fundamental importance to the study of any subject that the material related to it should be known to exist. This has, traditionally, been the role of enumerative or systematic bibliography. What is more arguable is whether or not it is a bibliographical pursuit at all since it bears little relationship to the physical nature of the book. It is frequently more logical to regard it as one aspect of the knowledge and competence of a specialist within the subject field.

Analytical bibliography, on the other hand, is still in the process of being thought out for the first time and has no public image to change. Here, Greg's study of the physical nature of the book becomes the most detailed. It is a study which is still within its first century of life and has gained in complexity throughout each decade. The bounds of analytical bibliography are impossible to define because the potential of new weapons in the armoury is unknown. In the broadest and most general terms it consists of discovering and explaining every fact about the 'means of transmission' from the manuscripts to the finished product. It covers what Ferguson termed the 'biography of the book'. The idea of a biography, with its normal acceptance of some form of chronological approach, is a valid one in this instance.

In bibliography, as in many subjects, the great foundation study is historical. It is impossible to assess how a text has developed in relation to

the materials of transmission unless the sequence of operations which produced that material object is well known. This entails a study of manuscript transmission, the methods of printing, of house practice at various periods, the background of publishing, of printing, of authorship, of bookselling. All of these are facets of which the bibliographer must be aware if there is to be any hope of success in solving the problems of transmission. The background of historical bibliography is the one against which all other matters must be viewed. The sequence of operation which produce a variety of stages of the single text from manuscript drafts to latest printing all take place within a specific time scale. When that order of succession is unknown or unclear, then its establishment is a prime task of critical bibliography. The order of printed sheets from the press, the order of plates as they are pulled, the progressive deterioration of woodcuts or of plates, the priorities of nineteenth-century casings, all provide examples of the minutiae of historical evidence. The grand design is visible in the sweep of development from baked clay tablets to computerized typesetting. Each stage has emerged from a previous one and the line is unbroken; in Lord Acton's words, 'in society as in nature, the structure is continuous, and we can trace things back uninterruptedly, until we dimly descry the Declaration of Independence in the forests of Germany'.[17]

Unity is essential to the full appreciation, but unfortunately, historical bibliographical studies have proved to be particularly subject to bifurcation. Bibliographical work on manuscripts has become widely separated from that on printed books. Papyrology is now a study almost completely on its own and distinct from manuscript studies in general. Palaeography is rarely associated now with typographical studies, whereas they were once indivisible. Incunabulists tend to inhabit a world of their own which is remote from those concerned with later printed books. All this is not to be impulsively regretted since specialized studies can advance in no other way, but synthesis becomes increasingly important and dishearteningly more difficult.

Bowers has always placed great stress on his opinion that analytical bibliography is a subject which can be pursued as an entirely independent area of study for its own sake. It is, he has averred, a discipline of its own and can be treated as such. On the other hand, he has given equal stress to the two chief uses which have normally been made of such analytical work. Descriptive bibliography has long been acknowledged as one primary field of bibliographical activity and greeted especially warmly by those who wish to see a strictly utilitarian end for these studies. Once the idea of enumerative bibliography has been accepted, it is no great step to descriptive work which places increasing stress on the bibliographical

problems of the items described. It removes the concern which has already been expressed as to the stage at which a recording function becomes truly the concern of the bibliographer. From the simplest form of descriptive work, which begins the process of emphasizing bibliographical detail beyond the range of simple enumeration, to the most complex examples, one factor is abundantly clear — the description, at every stage of its elaboration, depends more and more upon the resolution of bibliographical problems during the process of analysis. It is not a simple general expansion of a description but an increasing emphasis upon aspects of the book, some of which are now revealing for the first time matters of bibliographical importance. It is not always readily understood that as analytical studies have become more refined, so descriptive bibliographical work has developed to the stage at which it bears little relationship at all to enumerative work. In its early days the connection was not difficult to establish; now increasingly, it is.

The other end product which Bowers has stressed is the one with which he has been most closely identified personally and which is more controversial and less liable to general acceptance. For the past fifty or so years increasing stress has been laid on the relationship between the bibliographical aspects of a work and the understanding of the text. Some critics regard it as unfortunate that the term textual bibliography has come to be applied to this branch of the study but, nevertheless, this is the term by which it is most generally known. Since, in Greg's phrase, books are the 'material means by which literature is transmitted', then it seems not illogical to suggest that a close study of the materials may throw some light on the history of the text. Rather than textual bibliography it may be better to regard it as bibliography applied to the problems of textual studies, but, however it is regarded and however it is labelled, it is an area of bibliographical study which is currently extremely lively and on behalf of which many important claims are being made.

It has often been difficult for some to reconcile Greg's 'nothing whatever to do with the subject or literary content of the book' with the idea of bibliography and textual studies. The aspect of literary content with which bibliography must disclaim any connection is that of critical evaluation. It is a distinction which is made in other connections also. A.E. Housman developed the theme in his Inaugural Lecture at Cambridge in 1911 in drawing a distinction between the literary critic and the scholar.

> By a literary critic I understand a man who has things to say about literature which are both true and new. Appreciation of literature, and the ability to say things about it which are true but not new, is a much commoner endowment. That a scholar should appreciate