

Archivists, Librarians, and the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections

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THIS PAPER will appear to be addressed more directly to librarians than to archivists. That this is so stems in large part from the fact that the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections reflects the dominance of the librarian's approach to manuscripts and archives. The archivist's viewpoint was represented in the development of rules and procedures, but that of the librarian seems to have prevailed in the final result. It will also be demonstrated, however, that the archivist, in turn, does not realize that the librarian who is working with "manuscript collections" is in reality dealing with problems that are essentially archival in character.

THE CATALOG

The NUCMC¹ represents a monumental undertaking and is unquestionably one of the most important cataloging enterprises in the United States. It crowns the efforts of many devoted people and organizations who have worked for more than two decades toward the production of such a catalog. But, like many pioneering enterprises, its culmination marks but a new beginning and a fresh opportunity. We can expect now that something systematic will be done to deal professionally with the bibliographic problems in this field.

Some have argued that the initiation of the NUCMC should have been postponed until standards of practice had been established, and there is indeed great merit to this view. There has long been an acute need, however, for some form of preliminary bibliographic controls over these elusive primary research materials, and the NUCMC and the *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in*

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¹Library of Congress, *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections 1959-1961* (Ann Arbor, Edwards, 1962).

*the United States*² provide this. If we had continued to await the development of standards even these rudimentary controls would have been delayed for another decade or so. Such a long wait would be hard to justify, for there is no assurance that delay would not follow delay. As it is, there is perhaps no better way of dramatizing the chaos that exists—and the need to do something about it. The catalogers at the Library of Congress can bear testimony to this chaos in the course of their admirable efforts to transform hundreds of widely varied reports into uniform catalog entries. Their oral complaints should be recorded to demonstrate the need for standards. Examination of the Hamer *Guide* will be similarly suggestive. Practices are, in fact, as varied as the number of repositories.

The work toward a national union catalog of manuscripts is a major step in the direction of standardization. But it would be unfortunate and needlessly expensive if budgets were to be committed to the cataloging of individual manuscript collections on the basis of the guidelines employed by the Library of Congress for the NUCMC. There is a strong probability that its techniques will be simply carried over as rules having general application unless some precautionary qualifications concerning those rules are made explicit. The Library's guidelines are useful for this one undertaking, but *they are not a substitute for general standards*. The Library of Congress did not intend such a role for its cataloging rules; they are not meant to be generally valid for bibliographical management of manuscript and archival materials. With the publication of the Hamer *Guide* and the first volume³ of the *National Union Catalog*, however, the time is now propitious to seek agreement on standards and to develop sound general principles.

Practices of archivists, particularly those at the National Archives, have benefited many librarians who have been called to archival duty in library situations. But librarians have had little guidance to pick and choose from the conflicting advice that abounds. They are woefully unprepared to make wise judgments. Information about archival practices is diffuse; no synthesis exists. The influence of the National Archives, consequently, has been spotty at best. Odd mixtures and adaptations of standard library practices

² Phillip M. Hamer, ed., *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* (New Haven, 1961).

³ Since this paper was read additional volumes as follows have been published: *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections 1962* (Hamden, Conn., Shoe String Press, 1964) and *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections Index 1959-1962* (Hamden, Conn., Shoe String Press, 1964). For a review of these, see p. 413.—Ed.

governing published materials frequently coexist with adaptations of archival techniques.⁴ And, as a class, librarians have contributed less to sound practice than they should have, considering the length of time the problem has faced them. Perhaps they have not recognized the existence of an "archival" problem, for that, essentially, is what it is. Lack of recognition may well be attributed to their preoccupation with publications, which has conditioned their approach to manuscript material appearing in archival form. The main points of reference for the librarian are within the overall context of theories and techniques that librarians have developed in dealing with published items. As a result of this they tend to ignore the differences between the two kinds of material. In their preoccupation with converting data on manuscript and archival materials into the bibliographical forms with which they are familiar, librarians also tend to ignore the manner in which those materials are used and how they can provide clues for the researcher.

When librarians undertake the task of administering manuscript collections they are inclined to consider manuscripts as if they were publications or, more precisely, books. Thus librarians tend to choose and catalog individual items, trying to represent each item chosen with a separate catalog card description. This practice continues in the face of mounting backlogs. *Comprehensive control*, if this is really the goal, is futile so long as attention is concentrated on the individual item. There seems to be little recognition that modern manuscript collections resemble archives in their mass and in the completeness with which individual groups of manuscripts document any given line of social action and that they should be treated accordingly. Few major manuscript collections now consist of accretions of single or small units of manuscripts, sought adoringly for some unique characteristics they may have, to be tenderly displayed between cellulose acetate layers in properly humidified cases for the edification of the owning institution.

The really serious drawback of the NUCMC is that it lends encouragement to the practice of individual item cataloging by reducing the information provided in the original data report sheets to the classic catalog card form meant for books. The data report sheet is a step forward in bibliographic control, whereas the reduction of the information to card catalog form is a backward step. By implication the Library of Congress seems to commend this practice to others, and in its leadership role its apparition beckons them

⁴ Nathan Reingold, "Subject Analysis and Description of Manuscript Collections," in *Isis*, 53:106-112 (Mar. 1962), provides a useful review of practice.

to follow. The form of the NUCMC is perhaps suited to its objective of reducing the varied data reports to a recognizable and presentable standard; but, in appearing to equate manuscripts with books, it implies that this form should direct actual bibliographic practice within any one given repository. Those cooperators in the project who chose to do original cataloging (on cards), rather than to report on data sheets, were required to follow the rules developed by the Advisory Committee. In both cases the actual information is converted into a form modeled upon the book catalog card.

The NUCMC illustrates a kind of reflex transfer of manuscript and archival bibliographical data by librarians onto the card catalog form intended for books. When the data for the first volume and the actual catalog cards were compiled, the style, precisely, of the book catalog card was followed. A unit card was made for each collection and supplemental cards were issued to serve as added entry cards. Subject and author tracings at the bottom of the unit card provided the source for the added entry cards. Those repositories subscribing to a full "dictionary set" would then (at least potentially) be able to have added entry cards typed and filed in one alphabetical sequence. As it turned out, only nine repositories subscribed to the complete dictionary set. For this reason and others, the matter was reviewed by the Advisory Committee and it was decided to discontinue the card subscription service (after consulting the nine subscribers). Henceforth, only the Union Catalog at the Library of Congress itself would be a complete dictionary set.

It seems clear that if librarians at the highest echelons of the profession react to the data and problems in the manner illustrated above, less experienced persons at the local level will be even more likely to do so. Yet, even if the abandonment of the Union Catalog in card form (except for internal use) was sound, it appears to have been done for the *wrong reasons*. The *apparent* reasons were that the clerical expense for typing added entry cards and filing were prohibitive (even for the nine subscribers to the full dictionary set). Furthermore, the full potentialities of the catalog could not be realized unless a dictionary set were subscribed to and maintained. There being only nine subscribers, it was clear that a reevaluation was in order.

The *real* reason—and the more important one, I submit—is that the catalog card form is simply not adapted to the problems and the data of manuscript and archival material. The Advisory Committee for the NUCMC, however, apparently did not draw appropriate

conclusions from its action. The actual outcome was that the NUCMC appearing in book form would really resemble an inventory with name and subject indexes. Had they seen this, they might well have considered a review of their rules for descriptive cataloging and perhaps of the entire matter. Perhaps the archivists on the Advisory Committee also never realized they were dealing with a truly "archival" problem. In this may lie the explanation of their abandoning the leadership to the librarians on the committee.

At this point it should be stressed that every time a special entry is made in the card catalog for one item in a group of manuscripts or archives—an "interesting" or an "important" letter—this is *individual item cataloging*, regardless of the actual form in which the data appear on the card. Such cataloging ignores the way in which manuscripts are used and infringes upon the area of selection, an area best left to the researcher. Some experienced observers claim that individual item cataloging is no longer the current practice in manuscript repositories, yet it has been my observation that the contrary is true. It occurs whenever one item is selected for special entry in the card catalog, a practice prevailing at all repositories I know.

Another instance of this reflex transfer of manuscript and archival data by librarians to bibliographic forms that are familiar to the librarian—regardless of the relevance to the actual problem at hand—is the use of the Library of Congress *List of Subject Headings* for subject entries. This practice, too, has been abandoned now by the union catalogers and a topical subject heading format will henceforth be employed in the NUCMC.⁵ The *List* was much more specific than required, but this was not the expressed reason for discarding it. The expressed reason was that it consumed too much space on the card. Again, *right* for the *wrong* reason.

THE INVENTORY: A BETTER MODEL

The preliminary inventory, developed at the National Archives and adopted in various forms by some governmental units elsewhere (including the Library of Congress), provides a better model for this work than the model of book cataloging. Only by this or a

⁵ T. R. Schellenberg has suggested the use of major subject headings representing the major areas of human activity. These could in turn be subdivided by subject and geographical area. At the University of Washington we have experimented with this idea and have found it nicely adapted to our purposes. We have selected 13 major subject headings and subdivided by use of boldface headings in the Library of Congress *List of Subject Headings*. Dr. Schellenberg's criticism of the former system (and this would apply to the union catalog practice) is that it was trying to be more specific in its subject reference than it could reliably be. His criticism has proved sound, because it takes into account the manner in which these materials are used.

variant technique can libraries begin to cope with the archival-type units that our modern manuscript collections comprise. There are, however, some critical problems concerning manuscript collections in libraries that are not encountered in typical governmental archives. In recommending National Archives practice as a suitable model, therefore, one should note that this provides only a good point of departure, a suitable frame of reference. To move from this point on, it will be necessary to review the problem carefully and to develop the elements of good practice systematically.

For example, *names* need to be indexed with greater care in manuscript collections than in archives. Most questions addressed to the administrator of manuscript collections are *questions about names*: whether his collection has letters written by some particular person or organization, or whether the collection has the actual papers of that person or organization. An archive—business or governmental—need not concentrate upon names or even subjects, for this information is *predefined*. This is one reason why governmental archives are not represented in the NUCMC. That is, a business or governmental unit has its subject defined in its constitutional make-up, and the names of persons associated with either are also “given” in a large sense. Thus, a biographer of Leland Olds will learn quickly that he was a member of the Federal Power Commission and the New York Power Authority, and that the biographer can seek these administrative papers at their respective archives. But, because Mr. Olds had broader interests, it is important to learn where other papers of his might be, and the biographer will learn that the main collection of his personal papers is at the Library of Congress. The searcher will also consult other repositories, asking about correspondence and other papers of Mr. Olds in their collections. He might also ask about FPC and NYPA papers in their collections.

NEED FOR TRAINING

It should be clear that archivists and librarians really seek to reveal the same kind of data, but that the manuscript librarian needs to reveal more of some types—particularly names and subjects—than does the archivist. Because they are both concerned with the same kind of data, standards should be developed that take this fact into account. Central to this work is the incorporation of courses on archival management into library school curricula. By this means a forum could be provided for the requisite interplay of theory and practice, and an intellectual grasp of the subject could be gained.

It is tacitly assumed by librarians that the responsibility for the training should fall upon the archivists, despite the fact that libraries house most of the major collections.⁶ In addition, the archival profession is not organized through a national system of schools to offer training; furthermore the archival profession should not be expected to train librarians. Because the NUCMC is preeminently a product of librarians⁷ it seems clear that much, if not most, of the leadership in this field in the future is expected to come from librarians.

Because libraries are being concerned more and more with manuscript and archival problems, they should be able to draw upon people who are qualified to deal with these problems effectively, yet no library school in the Nation offers a regular course in archival management. One of the few times, if not the only time, when a library school presented an archival course was in the summer of 1962, at the University of Washington. The special courses offered at the American University, the University of Denver, and Wayne State University (and formerly at Radcliffe College) are significant, but they reach too few to be effective nationally, and all such courses still await the creation of a central and accepted core of knowledge and principles. Their cumulative experience should be helpful in the task that lies ahead. In addition, the effectiveness of the Society of American Archivists is weakened because the Society tends to be centered too much in Washington. This gravitation stems probably from the Society's close linkage with the National Archives, which has provided its main stimulus and leadership. This, combined with the neglect of archival problems by librarians, has resulted in a gap in communication between archivists and librarians, to the detriment of both. The NUCMC partially reflects this insularity; although archivists were consulted, the result shows little of their influence. Besides this, the Society's journal, the *American Archivist*, overflows with accounts of individual practices, thus contributing to the individualism in the field. Archival management courses in library schools would counter this often pointless individuality and make possible the synthesis for which the field is now prepared.

But apart from ineffective communication, the problem is that, although librarians are not being trained to cope with manuscript

⁶ Usually librarians in historical societies are assigned responsibility for manuscript collections.

⁷ The Council on Library Resources has provided the financial support to date. Many eminent archivists participated in the project, but the published result seems to reflect the dominance of library, not archival, thinking.

collections and archives, they are expected to do such work in libraries. That they fumble in an anarchy of modern and archaic practices is understandable, for there is little to guide them. Library schools would be assuming a legitimate responsibility by preparing them to deal effectively with these important and unique research materials.

Unfortunately most of those who are qualified to teach cannot be spared simultaneously from their own archival work. A small group of teachers, however, could be trained readily if some faculty members from library schools in each of the major regions could be selected for intensive training. The training could be offered during the summer. The Council on Library Resources might appropriately be asked to sponsor such a summer training program. Its experience as supporter of the NUCMC has familiarized it with the problems and with the obvious need to do something further in meeting them. The Council's sponsorship, in fact, would be a reasonable extension of its involvement to date.⁸

Other benefits would flow from training librarians in archival work. Among the benefits would be a code of ethical practice that would emphasize the primary obligation of administrators of manuscript collections to the community of researchers at large. This would mean greater cooperation in making these materials available in microforms, either by purchase or by interlibrary loan. More and better research would result from the greater accessibility of manuscripts, and fresh subjects would receive the attention they deserve. The strong sense of individual property that is associated with this form of library material would gradually be weakened, as has that sense of property formerly identified with library ownership of published material. Although there are special problems here, much can be done to make research easier for the scholar and to stimulate his interests.

Another benefit would be to effect greater economies by a more rapid processing of these materials for use. Because many, if not most, of the major repositories do not permit access before processing, faster processing also will contribute to the research effort by making more manuscripts available. Indeed, the worth of manuscripts as research data will be enhanced as the sense of property in manuscripts is weakened. In addition, when librarians learn of the problems and importance of manuscripts and archives they may be more generous in allocating their budgets.

⁸ This proposal was first made by the author in an article, "The Management of Manuscript Collections," in *Library Journal*, Apr. 15, 1963.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

In conclusion, I recommend that the Society of American Archivists, the American Association for State and Local History, the American Historical Association, and the Manuscript Society establish a joint committee to work with the American Library Association in setting up standards that apply to the work of all organizations and intellectual disciplines concerned.

With respect to the standards that should be set, it should be stressed that the differences between manuscript collections and archives are not nearly so important as the elements that manuscripts and archival materials have *in common*. In fact, if the archivists on the Advisory Committee had been more impressed with the *common elements*, they might have insisted more strongly on the archival approach to manuscript collections.

Bibliographic techniques should be keyed to the manner in which the materials are used. Manuscripts usually represent record units occurring in series. The series attributes vary, but the series is the primary feature to be brought under bibliographic control, and not its discrete components (unless exceptional priorities justify it). Historical documentation, for example, must normally rely upon a massive documentary apparatus; modern collecting is now being done more in harmony with, and in anticipation of, this demand. Yet, as backlogs pile up on the shelves, librarians patiently and hopelessly catalog individual items, as though oblivious to the real dimensions of the problem that is theirs to solve. It is as if, once on an escalator, they have decided to walk against its direction. They fail to get comprehensive control; their devotion to elaborating details, if this is their purpose, is largely useless; and the elaboration is enormously expensive.

One of the first considerations should be the relevancy of the card catalog form for this work. I would contend that the card catalog form is irrelevant, misleading, and unjustifiably expensive. It also ignores the way in which manuscripts are used, and this consideration should guide us in formulating standards.

"Standards" includes much more than nomenclature; attention to standards should be directed toward actual *arrangement and description*. Because researchers normally approach these materials through subject references—or, even more often, through names of organizations and persons—one of the first objectives should be to reveal these elements. They can be revealed most cheaply by simple name and subject indexes; *indexes to inventories*, in fact.