

logique under ANATOMY, ARTISTIC instead of ANATOMY, PATHOLOGICAL. Although the heading FLUIDS AND HUMORS, ANIMAL was abandoned late in 1948 in favor of the more modern term BODY FLUIDS, one title is listed under the older heading in the present issue. And on page 360, there is both an entry under and a *see* reference from TROPICAL FRUIT (in this case the reference should read *see also*). Such errors are admittedly isolated examples and not typical of the careful editing and freedom from error which characterize the bulk of the catalog.

The general excellence of the catalog far outweighs its minor faults, however. There can be no question but that this added key to the contents of current literature will be invaluable to scholars and librarians alike. Since the materials included are not limited by language, subject, or country of origin, this subject bibliography is unique. As the most comprehensive bibliography of its type available to library patrons, it is likely to be one of the first and most heavily used. Its

usefulness to the librarian in reference work, cataloging, and perhaps book selection is apparent enough, but enterprising librarians will not be slow to discover added uses. What the ultimate effect of this new catalog may be upon the future of the present costly subject analysis in library card catalogs cannot yet be foreseen, but it would be unrealistic to suppose that it will not in time have some. Indeed, if the *Subject Catalog* follows in the footsteps of its predecessor, the *Author Catalog*, its impact upon library methods and technique may result in a variety of new practices and added economies.

A worthy venture has been well launched, and the world of learning owes the Library of Congress another debt of gratitude. It is to be hoped that the *Subject Catalog* will receive the support it so justifiably deserves; indeed, it is hard to conceive that any library attempting to give maximum service to its serious users can afford to be without this newest bibliographical tool.—*Carlyle J. Frarey, College of the City of New York Library.*

Problems of Bibliographical Description

Standards of Bibliographical Description. By Curt F. Bühler, James G. McManaway and Lawrence C. Wroth. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 1949, viii, 120p. (A Publication of The A.S.W. Rosenbach Fellowship in Bibliography.) \$2.00.

Principles of Bibliographical Description. By Fredson Bowers. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1949, xvii, 505p., facsimiles. \$10.00.

Descriptive bibliography is a form of activity that has long engaged the attention of students of the history of printing, scholars concerned with textual criticism, and bibliophiles eagerly pursuing "points" which enhance the market value of their rare-book purchases. As a discipline it is concerned with the physical characteristics of the book or pamphlet quite apart from the intellectual content of the work, and therefore must be content to serve always as handmaiden to the research investigations of other disciplines. Its values, therefore, are never self-sufficient or self-evident, but are always buried in the measurement of the significance of the larger contribution. In other words, the results of descriptive bibliography can never be more

important than the findings of textual criticism itself or than the detailed knowledge of the minutiae of printing in the early centuries. At its best it has made some fairly important contributions to our knowledge of the methods of work of the fifteenth-century European printers and to our understanding of the plays of Shakespeare. At its worst, it has degenerated into an empty pedantry that has probably done no real harm to sound scholarship except, perhaps, to help support the artificial price structure of the rare-book market.

For Dr. Greg the task of descriptive bibliography is to "reconstruct for each particular book the history of its life, to make it reveal in its most intimate detail the story of its birth and adventures as the material vehicle of the living work." To Copinger descriptive bibliography is, somewhat pompously, "the grammar of literary investigation," but most workers in the field would probably agree with Lawrence Wroth that "the end of bibliographical analysis is the elucidation of the history of texts . . . not an end but a means, a process in the study of the transmission of texts."¹ Whatever definition of the objectives of descriptive bibliography one

¹ Bühler, *et al*, p.105.

may accept, or whatever opinion one may hold as to its ultimate significance, certainly there is no better statement of the rationale underlying the discipline than is to be found in Bowers' first chapter, in which he discusses the relationship of standards of description to the purpose of the particular bibliography.

Both of the books reviewed here are directed primarily toward a problem which has long harassed conscientious bibliographers—the lack of standardized techniques for description. The methods used heretofore have been so complex and so variable that even the experienced practitioner soon finds himself floundering in a welter of detail concerning title transcriptions, in which several type faces and other idiosyncratic typographical features are faithfully reproduced; collations by signature, by contents, in which the heading of each section is precisely measured and transcribed; editions; cancels; watermarks; and many other fortuitous physical features, all set forth with a labored attention to meticulousness that obscures, or even deliberately neglects, recognition of the central problem of bibliography, which is concern with the intellectual content of the text. Thus, under its burden of irrelevant minutiae, descriptive bibliography threatens to become the pastime of an effete intellectualism, a pseudo-scholarship which, like proficiency in billiards, may be indicative of an ill-spent life. Yet upon these uncertain foundations, these strivings to make of descriptive bibliography a precise science, has been erected a superstructure of historical interpretation that often is little more than guess work. Witness Bühler's belief that because the "f" signature in his copy of Laertius' *Vita de Philosophi* had substituted for it a comparable signature taken from the *Letters* of Phalaris, produced by the same printer less than two months previously, he can thereby deduce "some interesting side-lights on the methods of book production by a characteristic Florentine firm of the fifteenth century."²

In recognition, then, of the growing need for standards of uniformity in bibliographical description, those in charge of the Rosenbach Fellowships at the University of Pennsylvania departed from their usual practice of inviting one scholar each year to present the fellowship addresses, and for the 1946-47 series invited Curt F. Bühler of the Pierpont Morgan

² *Ibid*, p. 14.

Library, James G. McManaway of the Folger Library, and Lawrence C. Wroth of the John Carter Brown Library, representing respectively the the fields of incunabula, English literature from 1475 to 1700, and Americana to the year 1800, in the hope that three such distinguished scholars could make some "advance toward acceptable minimum standards." Defeat is openly admitted, for John Alden, who wrote the introduction, frankly acknowledges that he "would not now maintain that even this limited objective has been wholly achieved."³ Each of the three is convinced that the problems peculiar to the materials of his own field of specialization make any real common denominator extremely difficult to discover. Indeed, even Bowers, whose book is an attempt to establish rather than to "approach" a standard of uniformity, grants that the *amount* of description required will vary with the kinds of materials being described and with the specific objectives of the bibliography being compiled.

The work of the American Library Association and "kindred organizations" in attempting to standardize techniques of description is mentioned only by Bühler, who quickly dismisses such efforts as being inappropriate to incunabula. Even he does not seem to be aware that such material was included in the 1941 *A.L.A. Rules*; the *L.C. Rules*, of course, had not been published at the time of his presentation.

But if the three lecturers failed to reach agreement on the formulation of minimum standards, at least they were keenly aware that each type of material presents special problems in description which, in turn, determine the kind and amount of detail necessary. Bühler forcefully argues that incunabula already adequately described in standard bibliographies such as those of Hain and Copinger, need not be elaborately redescribed. Wroth even goes so far as to present two standards of descriptive procedure for Americana. Certainly this trend toward the realization that even within groups of quite similar materials varying standards of description may be necessary is wholly admirable, and when properly applied should result in the elimination of much pedantry and in the concentration of attention upon purpose to be achieved rather than upon technique alone.

Although all three speakers acknowledge

³ *Ibid*, p. viii.

the importance of the new photographic techniques as aids to bibliographical description, none points out the seemingly obvious fact that while in the days of Hain and his contemporaries, when materials were widely scattered and inspection difficult, minute description may have been necessary, today that necessity is all but eliminated. With microfilm and microcard, an accurate photographic copy of the complete text is almost always available to the serious investigator at a relatively slight cost, and much of the labor of the descriptive bibliographer seems to be mispent effort and economic waste.

Almost as though in refutation of the arguments against standardization presented by the Rosenbach speakers, there followed almost immediately the publication of the volume by Fredson Bowers which presents detailed instructions for a standardized procedure of description, subject to modification in the amount of description required for different materials but uniform in the way in which information is to be presented. The notation to be used is supposedly more economical of space, but actually there would seem to be little or no saving in many cases. The system as a whole is based solidly upon the work of McKerrow, Greg and earlier scholars, the greatest difference appearing in the attempt to define "edition," "issue" and "state" in terms of the history of their printing rather than in terms of observed physical differences. As the history of printing is largely deduced from physical evidence in the volumes known, this seems a slightly unnecessary piece of intellectual derring-do.

To those who feel the need for a single comprehensive manual of acceptable techniques of description, this volume will certainly be a welcome addition to the literature

of the field, but that it will supplant the older works or settle the long-standing arguments as to forms of description is hardly to be expected.

Of the variety of opinions expressed in these two volumes, those expressed by Dr. Wroth seem to the reviewers the most sane, penetrating and balanced. Not only has he made valid and important distinctions among the several types of Americana and the need for variation in standards of detail in bibliographic description, but also he has cogently insisted that bibliography is never an end in itself, that its practices and procedures must always be adjusted to the larger ends it serves.

Is it too much to hope that bibliographers will some day give up their lengthy arguments over definitions and techniques in favor of a critical appraisal of what they have achieved up to date? If descriptive bibliography can throw any light upon the processes of graphic communication in society, the techniques it has developed for the study of earlier centuries should be transferable to similar problems arising today in connection with new media of communication and new habits of publication. The problem which descriptive bibliographers have in common with all others working in the field of graphic communication is that of promoting the effective social utilization of the graphic record of society. If the knowledge so painfully wrung from a study of the errors of sixteenth-century printers can not supply us with techniques and insights applicable to the new bibliographic problems arising today, has it any virtue other than the dubious one of satisfying antiquarian curiosity?—*Margaret E. Egan and Jesse H. Shera, Graduate Library School, University of Chicago.*