

Words on numbers

BOOK NUMBERS: A HISTORICAL STUDY AND PRACTICAL GUIDE TO THEIR USE / John P. Comaromi. Littleton: Libraries Unlimited, Inc. 1981. 145pp. US\$28.00. ISBN 0 87287 251 3. Copy supplied by The James Bennett Group.

Remembering the formula 'classification number + book number = call number', you may be wondering how a whole book could come to be written about such a small subject.

The answer lies in the author's wide-ranging (or -straying) approach. This may be seen at once from the contents list. There are nine chapters: Principles and Purposes of Shelf-listing, Classification: Nature and Practice, Accession Catalogs and Shelflists, Early Book Numbers, Cutter and Author Numbers *vs.* Author Letters, Cutter-Sanborn Numbers as Applied to the DDC, Barden's Special Schemes and (the longest chapter) Library of Congress Shelf-listing Practice. There follow five Appendixes, mainly facsimiles of the instructions for Cutter and Cutter-Sanborn tables.

All the classic questions are discussed by the way: mixed notation, fixed *vs.* relative location, facets, 'classed catalogs' (described as 'no longer with us') and so on. As Comaromi says: 'Certain topics cannot be prevented from intruding upon the discussion of shelf-listing. Whatever these topics may be — whether classification, weeding, or machine developments — they will be treated briefly'. The result is chaotic and beyond the control of the neat table of contents and too small index — which has nothing, incidentally, under either weeding or machine developments.

Before opening the book I'd decided on three connected questions to put to it. The first was whether standardised formats for catalogue entries have any bearing on selection of particular book numbering methods. I was encouraged to pursue this question by the reference to 'machine developments' but was disappointed not to be able to find anything about them. If they're discussed at all it must be briefly indeed.

My next pre-question was: how justly are the options presented? Libraries are now trying to keep with the crowd because of standardisation and the sharing bait but book numbers, as distinct from cataloguing and classification, might represent a residual fastness of self-determination. This could be true in practice, as indicated by the 25 different call numbers listed on page 83, for a book on the poetry of Alexander Pope, that would be assigned according to the systems of 'some' of the large public libraries and processing centres using the DDC.

The author doesn't care for this evidence of independence, specially as several of the large libraries were found to bestow no book numbers at all and some used only the initial of the author's surname. Comaromi's own recommendation (pp.81-2) are for Cutter-Sanborn numbers with the full range of work letters, edition numbers, translation numbers, etc, but he would probably grant that the libraries already using something else are unlikely to change, being in his view victims of bad decisions that can't be undone.

My last question was how the book would deal with the system to which I'm accustomed in the State Library of New South Wales: simple running numbers allocated in the order in which the books are shelf-listed, used in conjunction with unelaborated Cutter-Sanborn numbers in some classes.

The answer is, in a word: unfairly. One

Library Roundabout

TAKING PART IN a pilot scheme, the Normanhurst Boys' High School library has been indexed on microfilm, the first State School in NSW to do so.

The students participated in the process, both in fundraising and in assisting librarian Mrs B. McLaren, who coded the material for the computer.

A resource-sharing network has been established by school and public libraries in the Liverpool region. It is known as the Library Liaison Project, and does not have a centralised shared collection, but operates on a formal inter-library loan system.

Its efficiency depends on following the methods for operation which are clearly outlined in the scheme's comprehensive policy booklet. At present the system is being tried out in a number of high schools in the region, and it is hoped that in time it may be adopted throughout the region.

Minto Public Library was officially opened on 16 April 1982, by the Hon R. Mullock. This ceremony was the culmination of more than ten years of planning. The library building is on several different levels, with areas set aside for storytelling, reading and

group discussion. It is staffed by four full-time librarians, one part-time librarian and three full-time library assistants.

Until recently library users in Hurstville had to negotiate several flights of stairs to reach the library, then accommodated in the old Civic Centre building. Access was impossible for disabled people, and daunting to many elderly people.

The Civic Centre has now been extended with an ambitious new complex in which library facilities have been a major consideration. Access is by covered pedestrian ramps, and the library area is far greater than in the old building.

As well as extensive reading and research facilities, a large area is devoted to the children's library, including a storytelling area large enough to accommodate an entire class and which can be closed off. It is expected that the number of visits made to the library in the coming year will be far in excess of the usual figure of just over 200,000.

Contributions to this column are welcome and should be addressed to the Editor, InCite, PO Box M371, Strawberry Hills, NSW 2012.



Part of the Area Studies reading room at the National Library in Canberra, which includes the Thai unit and caters for people seeking information about or doing research on South East Asian Countries.

National Library photograph by Loui Seselja.

doesn't find 'running numbers' in the index, but guesses rightly that 'Accession number method' might be it — a misnomer, of course, and a disservice to true accession numbers, but one that would come naturally to a writer who has only a few condescending words on the subject. (And the method appears to have been invented by Dewey himself!)

Comaromi admits (p.36) that it 'seemed to have worked well enough' but blames it for not achieving chronological order and 'failing to gather either an author's works or editions of or copies of the same edition of a work'. In fact the method can be adjusted to do some of these things; and, anyway, what has chronological order on the shelf to do with quick retrieval of a particular version? Is there a bias here in favour of the leisurely humanities?

Comaromi is clearly a man who likes elaboration for its own sake, and he also believes book numbers are a continuation of classification by other means: 'shelflisting is often used to introduce further classification'. No doubt he can be forgiven his obsession: he is, after all, closely identified with DDC. But it's

a pity he doesn't take into account the virtues of simplicity and brevity in a notation. He is persuasive enough in his care for having book numbers rather than not but he assumes too readily that users will necessarily want all versions of a work shelved together and he sometimes even seems to be pretending the catalogue entries aren't there already making the distinctions and collocations he wants book numbers to repeat.

This book delivers both more and less than it promises. It is generously illustrated with diagrams, tables, figures and facsimiles. A few libraries making a new start with AACR2, say, or new catalogues or classification sequences, might in some circumstances feel free to change the basis of part of their notation and could well be disposed to study what is presented here. (It could also turn a queuing library away from changing to the Library of Congress Classification.) But it is more likely to interest students and librarians wishing to understand how so many respectable libraries have come to be saddled with fussy book numbers. It isn't a must for every practising shelflister.

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