Library of Congress literary author numbers: and what to do about them when they're not there

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Summary

This article describes the evolution of the current approach to dealing with (predominantly) literary authors without an individual number assignation at the University of Liverpool Library, which evolved from leaving cutters blank for a future revision that never came, to a more practical and successful practice of attributing local cutters on a locally determined basis, applied during a few reclassification projects and now embedded in current practice.

Introduction - 3 important facts about LCC

1. The Library of Congress is one of the most popular classification systems after Dewey.
2. The Library of Congress system is constructed primarily for the Library of Congress by the Library of Congress.
3. If something is not covered by the Library of Congress Classification system for a library outside of the Library of Congress, you're pretty much on your own….

At least that's the way it seemed in 2005.

Background

The Library of Congress is the main classification system in the Library I've worked at for the last 14 years. It's fairly comprehensive, but clearly American centric, and is not the most adaptable system. As a result, we already had a number of local practices.

1) We did not use LCC cutters on a general basis. Instead, we used locally produced two number derivatives from the three number Cutter Sanborn tables for cutters in general, preferring authors to titles, and we didn't add the date (later we added edition numbers where relevant).

2) We used local tables for a large portion of country cutters, and added in entries for any subjects we were inclined to add in the relevant "subject A-Z" class areas.

3) We used a simplified, generalised, expansion table for single number literary authors.

4) Some areas remained in previous sections when LoC would revise a topic and move to a wholly new area. We didn't particularly make an effort to follow updates or revisions of sections. Although we had a number of local practices, we nonetheless used standard Library of Congress numbers for literary author cutters (and the majority of other numbers for persons as subjects, or where the main focus of each areas was to be focussed), and consequently had the problem other libraries must surely run into where LoC have not assigned particular numbers:

So, the question arose, what do you do when LoC have not classified an individual number for a literary author?

The general practice was to leave the number empty, with the expectation being that when time became available for projects, or when it was noticed that a number had been assigned by Library of Congress, the records would be updated and the class number added in on the book.

However, on enquiry it was obvious that this never occurred, so actually what we actually ended up with was a steadily increasing number of books at the beginning of each letter section with a random number of books by authors with numberless cutters starting with the same letters completely out of sequence.

Obviously, this was contrary to the whole plan of the classification, so at some point I suggested we should just add them in.

The first attempt at a solution

We checked out the online instructions about how to add numbers not found on Library of Congress, and were faintly baffled as to how it worked. I believe we tried to construct a few numbers, found they were out of sequence, and gave up.

The second attempt at a solution

We had a local rule that in absence of a Library of Congress number, we would use a number assigned by another library, assuming it fit into the sequence. Melvyl (the University of California catalogue) and Eureka (the union catalogue for the US RLG, now a subcollection of Worldcat) were favoured as sources of these numbers. However, in practice I found that the Melvyl class numbers also did not necessarily place authors in the correct alphabetical order as maintained by Library of Congress, and so I raised it during our Rule Interpretation Meetings, with the result that we decided to revisit the creation rules. The issue was primarily investigated by myself and long term local cataloguing guru Ken Linkman, and between us we found the explanation for the disparity by rereading the instructions more carefully. The explanation became quite clear in the initial paragraph (this is from the current version, so wording may be paraphrase of original):

> **Note: The final Cutter number is based on entries already found in the shelflist** (and in some cases entries reserved for other libraries for which LC does not have an item in its catalog).
> The letters in the table represent the letter that follows the initial letter of the author's surname (vowel, consonant, etc.). The number is that which should be used; however, **it may be necessary to add other numbers or to use judgement to allow for growth when providing numbers for extremely common names.**

This, as far as we could tell, was an understatement! We found very little example by which where the cutter creation tables seemed to have much value in terms of creating a number which actually matched the original Library of Congress numbers, with the result that we decided that we'd apply our own policy, which may well match what I suspect is actually the policy at Library of Congress.

Rather than use the rather counter intuitive and relatively complicated instructions as suggested, we would use our own slightly more user friendly tables, but if this put the number outside of the established range, we would just make a number up.

Broadly speaking, in cases where there was conflict between the 2 number cutters and LoC, the plan would be to look on either side of the numbers assigned by Library of Congress, and put the number for the new person approximately half way between which persons were already represented on the catalogue. So we didn't have a formula for creating at all – it was purely a practice of inserting. The caveat for creating according to judgement was retained however. So, the new rules were summarised in a set of instructions written by Ken:

ASSIGNING 'LIVERPOOL' CUTTER NUMBERS
In order to improve shelf arrangement, a number derived from our own Cutter tables will be used whenever an L of C (etc.) one is unavailable.

In most cases this will be a straightforward process. For example:
Spotsholas na ndaoine / by Muiris O'Bric will be classified at **PB1399.O11.S76**

PRESERVING ALPHABETICAL ARRANGEMENT
However, care must be taken to ensure that the use of a 'Liverpool' Cutter number does not upset the alphabetical sequence. This is likely to happen in parts of the schedules where 'official' L of C Cutter numbers have already been assigned to names with similar spellings to the one for which the 'Liverpool' Cutter tables are being used.

For example:
DA591.W5   Wilson, Harold (L of C Cutter number)
DA591.W58   Whitelaw, William   (Liverpool Cutter number)

In order to preserve the alphabetical sequence, a number will have to be chosen, at the cataloguer's discretion, which preserves the alphabetical arrangement. In the case of the above example, **W48** has, in practice, been selected to represent William Whitelaw.

This may result in, for example, the established Liverpool-assigned Cutter number for William Whitelaw, being used subsequently by L of C for another person!

Hopefully, these instances will be rare and would have to be resolved by the cataloguing team as and when they arise.

This practice was instigated in March 2005, and continues to be the general rule. A couple of months later, after further investigation of numbers assigned at other institutions, I compiled a preference table for which numbers were to be used, and when to assign our own.

List of preferences for Cutter number determination

Library of Congress schedules (books or Classweb)*
University of Liverpool Catalogue*
Library of Congress catalogue
Melvyl, Eureka catalogues
University of Liverpool local Cutter tables
Make up a number!

*these are the only sources which should be seen as AUTHORITIVE – all others should only be used if the numbers put the item into the correct place in the alphabetical sequence.

We continued using this practice during our normal classification practices for the rest of the year, but none of this solved the issue of what to do with the pre-existing problem.

The first great reclassification project – (2006)

We had no provision to allocate staff time to retrospective projects, but we did have the possibility of accepting placements from library school, and giving them projects. So I decided to offer a placement to attempt to rectify the problem we had with having a large number of remaining items with numberless cutters.

The remit was initially to focus on the task of tidying up name authorities to local standards for batches of e-resources. In practice, the placement actually revolved around the numberless cutter issue only! The proposal was summarised as follows:

Doing retrospective classifying of literary material

This refers to insertion of cutter numbers for authors who didn't have an official number available from the Library of Congress.

We use a localised variant of LCC at the university, and have changed our practice to allow us to insert authors in a straightforward alphabetical order where such has previously been unavailable.

This will involve cross-referencing of databases to coordinate a non-standard sequence that will work in a coherent fashion whilst accommodating a 'standard' sequence as far as possible.

The plan was to focus on the English Literature section. This section was one of the most important sections to feature a number of items with numberless cutters, and to also be of quite high importance. In some ways it may be surprising that this might be the case, considering English Literature being one of the literatures most likely to be well covered by Library of Congress as a result of shared language, however, considering the likelihood of the University of Liverpool (being a Research University) having large numbers of obscure literary authors and the US centric nature of LoC it becomes less surprising.

The successful candidate quickly gained an understanding of the general issue, but now that whole sections of the library were being considered, it was obvious that trying to insert cutters from our own (2 number, Cutter Sanborn derived) cutter tables was broadly speaking as ineffective as trying to use the table from Library of Congress, and over the course of the project it was decided to *ignore the cutter tables altogether, and simply insert the book in the relevant area "using cataloguer judgement"*.

The approach was a fairly simple one, in that the placement student would go to the PR shelves and simply collect all sections of numberless cutters. He'd put a "*section being reclassified*" sign there if the section was significantly large enough. As far as I can remember, the whole PR section was gone through, and probably little else, because there were such a number of items with unassigned authors.

User response was, as far as I can remember, non-existent, so you could argue it was an unnecessary task which no-one would significantly benefit from. Having studied literature at the University, I do remember appreciating the largely alphabetical order of the section, getting irritated where this wasn't the practice but also unlikely to complain, so I do hope others would feel the same way! (Or hopefully not, having the benefit of more effectively alphabetical sections).

The second great reclassification project (2010-11)

Having been pleased with this initial project, I went on to supervise another member of staff in the same way, who was relocated from shelving duties as a result of an injury. Having completed the literature section and being unsure of which other sections most required attention, I decided to run a list on our LMS (Innovatives Millennium).

I performed a simple search to find all class numbers with a space before the decimal point (e.g. to find based on the "O ." in "PR6037.O .M46 "). The only time we would have this would be in those cases where we had numberless cutters, a practice which enabled all numberless cutters to be determined very quickly.

This led to considerable progress across the language and literature sections, particularly in the early PRs (presumably I'd limited the original project to the later areas of the section to concentrate on the purely author based sections), and PQs (Spanish and French). Architecture also featured quite heavily, if I remember rightly. Selection was simply an issue of toggling the display of the created list (in Global update) to display class number order and picking sections with particularly large numbers of records.

And after this second great reclassification, that, essentially was that! Project work moved on, bibliographically to name authority tidying for large scale e-resource batches, and hence elsewhere. The practice of making up our own cutters in the absence of official LCC numbers remains, however, and, considering that I've never had a complaint about the resulting numbers causing confusion in the sequence of officially derived numbers, I believe it has been, and continues to be, a resounding success!

Bibliography:

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Guidelines for using the LC Online Shelflist and formulating a literary author number. http://loc.gov/aba/pcc/053/table.html

Classification and Shelflisting Manual instruction sheet G 63 https://www.loc.gov/aba/publications/FreeCSM/G063.pdf

Thanks to Ken Linkman for his efforts to remember the original project and permission to quote the original documentation