Looking back, looking forward: reflections from a career in cataloguing

Alison Felstead, Rare Books Cataloguer, Trinity College, Oxford (formerly Head of Resource Description, Bodleian Libraries)

Newcastle chronicle

To paraphrase John Miles, cataloguing was my first love, and it will be my last. I learned the craft of cataloguing from George Ibbs at Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic School of Librarianship and Information Studies back in the mid-1980s. *AACR2*, published a few years earlier in 1978, was our bible, and I have a clear memory of Mr Ibbs intoning "*1.1B1. Transcribe the title proper exactly as to wording, order, and spelling, but not necessarily as to punctuation and capitalization.*" Interestingly, I have a distinct memory of Mr Ibbs speculating on the future computerisation of cataloguing and how this would free up the time of cataloguing staff for other tasks – or simply for redundancy. The use of computers in libraries dates back to the mid 1960s, but over thirty years ago in Newcastle Poly the only computer with a VDU in the department was a BBC microcomputer; our "data processing" classes involved the use of computers which looked like electric typewriters; and Windows, the World Wide Web, the Internet, and Google were in the future.

Streets of London

After completing the Postgraduate Diploma course at Newcastle, I returned to London in 1986 to take up the first of a series of cataloguing or cataloguing-related posts in libraries including the BLPES (British Library of Political and Economic Science at the London School of Economics), the British Library (before the move of its cataloguing operations from Sheraton Street in Soho to Boston Spa), and the British Architectural Library at the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects). At BLPES, we made use of the MARC file on BLAISE (the British Library Automated Information Service) to copy and customise UKMARC records for the local catalogue. By the time I was working as a cataloguer at the British Architectural Library in the early 1990s I was cataloguing directly onto the character-based STATUS information retrieval system, but this was being replaced by Sirsi's Unicorn library management system around the time I left the RIBA at the start of 1996.

From the Smoke to the dreaming spires

Almost ten years after graduating from Newcastle, I moved from London to Oxford to take up a fixed-term academic-related post in the Cataloguing Division of the Bodleian Library, and I have worked in Oxford ever since. The position I held had been created to assist with the migration of OLIS (the Oxford Libraries Information System) from IBM's DOBIS-LIBIS to the Geac Advance library management system. I was part of a small team that tested the cataloguing software and assisted with its configuration, wrote documentation, and provided training for cataloguers in University, college and departmental libraries within the Oxford University system. Geac was one of the first system vendors to offer a Windows-based Z39.50-compliant GUI cataloguing module – GeoCat – and the Head of Catalogue Support in Oxford worked closely with the developers at Geac HQ in Canada to ensure that by the time it was implemented in Oxford on 2 April 1997 GeoCat was one of the most sophisticated and user-friendly cataloguing modules on the market. Oxford had already taken the sensible decision to adopt AACR2 and USMARC when automation began in 1986[1], so the migration of cataloguing data was comparatively straightforward. When the Geac system was implemented, we took the radical decision to load the entire Library of Congress Names and Subjects authority files into the local system, and worked closely with Geac developers to enhance the Advance authority loader to cope with this innovative albeit labour -intensive approach to in-house authority control[2].

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[1] Burnett, Peter P. (2000) Emerging from the bibliographic wilderness: catalogue automation in the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. *Cataloging & classification quarterly* 30(1): 51-72.

[2] More details of the migration to the Geac system can be found in: Burnett (2000, 60-65).

The OLIS database was created in 1988. (The public interface to this database was renamed SOLO – Search Oxford Libraries Online – when the Primo resource discovery layer from Ex Libris was implemented in 2008, but the OLIS acronym still survives on the staff side in the online OLIS Support Centre and the OLIS News blog.) Oxford University was by no means unique in going down the path of co-operative cataloguing into a union catalogue, but I believe that OLIS cataloguers receive a level of support which helps to ensure that the quality and consistency of the OLIS database is maintained. These cataloguers range from solo librarians in the smaller colleges to the 25-odd staff in the Bodleian Libraries' Resource Description section. The support they receive takes the form of initial training and documentation, refresher training on specific topics, and ongoing support by email or very occasionally over the 'phone. The ongoing support is particularly important for librarians in the many smaller libraries, for whom cataloguing is just one relatively minor aspect of their work.

The current population of Oxford cataloguers is fortunate to have excellent support from two dedicated members of Bodleian Libraries staff. General cataloguing support is provided by the Catalogue Support Librarian, and technical support by the Systems Support Librarian, who has exploited the configurability of the Aleph cataloguing module (implemented in summer 2011) to make the day-to-day work of OLIS cataloguers as easy as possible and to ameliorate the migration in 2013 from AACR2 to RDA[3]. In addition to the two staff mentioned above, the Bibliographic Maintenance and Authority Control (BMAC) team of four staff provides support for OLIS cataloguers in around 100 different libraries. The BMAC team also manages the authority loading and performs database-wide catalogue maintenance and authority control tasks. Of course, any system that numbers around 200 staff with the ability to input records into the shared database is going to face challenges of quality control, but these are mitigated as far as possible by the work of the support staff and BMAC.

Managing current cataloguing in the Bodleian

In November 2010 I was appointed to the position of Head of Resource Description (aka cataloguing) in the Collections and Resource Description (C&RD) department of the Bodleian Libraries. This involved managing around 25 staff in four teams involved in cataloguing the legal deposit intake, purchased books (English and European), serials, ebooks, ejournals and other resources, plus authority control, catalogue maintenance, and cataloguing documentation and training. I also held the *ex officio* roles of Chair of CatSIG, the OLIS Cataloguing Special Interest Group, and of the OLIS Cataloguers' Forum. The former brings together a small group of representatives from the different types of library and different subject areas in the Oxford University system and meets twice a term (once virtually) to discuss local cataloguing policies and review developments in the wider world of cataloguing. The latter is a forum for all staff that catalogue into the OLIS database and meets termly to learn about the latest developments in cataloguing – local, national, and international – and to ask questions and discuss their impact on cataloguing in Oxford.

I resigned from this post in February 2016 and left the Bodleian in May. At the time of writing, my understanding is that attempts to fill the post were not successful, and as a result the post of Head of Cataloguing in the Bodleian Libraries has been abolished as part of a mini-restructuring of technical services operations. I believe this means that for the first time since the early 1930s, when Strickland Gibson (1877-1958) fulfilled the role of "Superintendent of the catalogue of printed books" (among other duties)[4], the Bodleian does not have a dedicated Head of Cataloguing. Does this surprising development tell us anything about the future of cataloguing? Anecdotal evidence suggests that other libraries are also experiencing difficulties in filling cataloguing posts at all levels. Or is it simply a reflection of the very high cost of living in Oxford?

[3.] More details of the implementation of RDA in Oxford University can be found in: O'Reilly, Bernadette (2013) RDA at Oxford University. *Catalogue and index*, 173 (December 2013): 50-56.

[4.] Information gleaned from the Bodleian Library's *Staff manual* of 1933, with thanks to Robert Bruce for assistance with this research.

It's cataloguing, Jim, but not as we know it

The nature of the work of the English cataloguers in the Resource Description section is changing. Over the past few years there has been a noticeable shift away from creating records with book-in-hand to the checking of reports of batch-loaded records from the BNB database. The implementation of Non-Print Legal Deposit following the passing of the *Legal Deposit Libraries (non-print works) regulations* in 2013 has led to a reduction in the volume of printed monographs deposited with the Bodleian and the other Legal Deposit Libraries, and a corresponding reduction in the number of items requiring cataloguing. On the other hand, the increase in research outputs and research data managed for the University by the Bodleian Libraries in its institutional repository (ORA, the Oxford University Research Archive) means that staff with traditional skills are being encouraged to consider new roles, as indicated in a recent job description for a Metadata Assistant based in the Bodleian Digital Library Systems and Services (BDLSS) department. This post included among its responsibilities "*enhancing the metadata for [research outputs] and checking names to ensure that material is associated with the correct authors where more than one author shares the same name*." The advert continued "*This post provides a great opportunity to transfer the 'traditional' bibliographic skills of cataloguing and authority control to the newer and still-developing area of research output data management*." There have been some concerted efforts over the past few years by managers in C&RD and BDLSS to work more closely together to share expertise and staff resources for metadata work, and a handful of staff have moved from posts in one department to another or have worked on projects that extend their traditional cataloguing skills into using other metadata standards including Dublin Core and MODS. These sensible initiatives must surely continue, and cataloguers who currently work with MARC and AACR2 or RDA may future-proof their positions and improve their employability by seeking opportunities to gain knowledge and experience of newer and emerging metadata standards and systems.

On the topic of new standards, I don't think that anyone can predict at the present time when (or if) BIBFRAME will replace the MARC formats. A recent thought-provoking paper by an experienced cataloguer in the US contends that BIBFRAME will not be widely adopted[5]. I confess that I have not followed closely its development, and cannot comment on its merits or demerits. My only observation, speaking as a former cataloguing manager, is that its implementation is likely to be driven by the systems vendors. If and when BIBFRAME is integrated into next-generation resource management and discovery systems such as Ex Libris's Alma, cataloguers may find themselves with no option but to use it when the time comes to migrate to a new system.

Taking refuge in the past

One future for those who love cataloguing lies in the creation of records for rare or antiquarian books and other printed materials. Rare books cataloguing has in some libraries been regarded as the poor relation of modern cataloguing, with fewer resources being expended by libraries. After leaving the Bodleian last year, I was fortunate to find work in Trinity College, Oxford, cataloguing rare books. Each week I discover items for which no record exists in the OLIS database, in spite of a number of initiatives since the late 1980s to create online catalogue records for early printed books in Oxford college and departmental libraries, and in the Bodleian and faculty libraries. Extending the search to the RLUK (Research Libraries UK) database, the ESTC (English Short Title Catalogue) database, the HPB (Heritage of the Printed Book) database from CERL (Consortium of European Research Libraries), or OCLC's WorldCat does not always yield a result – or if a record is found, it will usually require significant enhancement to bring it in line with the current standard for rare books cataloguing in Oxford.

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[5] Edmunds, Jeff (2017) "BIBFRAME as empty vessel." https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1IKJYVwLwHyX1VnbIJFZ3EtS1U/view (visited 5 March 2017).

Copy-specific cataloguing, whereby the rare books cataloguer describes those aspects of a printed book which are unique to the copy in hand, is an area of rare books cataloguing where there is still much work to be done. Copy-specific information can include binding, bookplates, provenance, imperfections, manuscript additions and insertions, hand-coloured illustrations, previous shelfmarks, whether the item is bound with other distinct items, etc. Rare books cataloguers have been recording this information in the OLIS database for nearly thirty years, but there is still much work to be done to expose the richness of hidden collections for the benefit of scholars and other researchers. I find rare books cataloguing a very satisfying use of my skills, and feel very grateful to be able to focus on this specialised but important area of work when the future of cataloguing in general is uncertain. Ironically, the future of cataloguing – for this cataloguer at least – lies in the past.