Descriptive Bibliography: Its Definition and Function

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I AM BEGINNING WITH A TWIN-PART ASSUMPTION; NAMELY THAT THERE ARE two basic definitions which are now sufficiently widely accepted as not to be seriously challenged. These are two of Greg's definitions. First, that bibliography is the study of books as material objects¹ and, second, that books must be regarded as all those material means which have served from time to time by which literature is transmitted.² This being so, the briefest and probably most accurate definition of descriptive bibliography is that it is the study of the correct description of the bibliographical aspects of all those material means which have served for the transmission of the text.

I wish to make this point at the outset, because I think it is unfortunate that we frequently start on the problems of descriptive bibliography with a clearly implied limitation. We are usually thinking solely of the description of printed books and, although this is the study on which the majority of bibliographers are engaged, it is not a limitation inherent in the discipline. Moreover, it is unfortunate if we ignore the contribution which the study of the description of other physical forms can bring to benefit the whole of the work. I am thinking particularly of the problems in the description of manuscripts which are frequently completely ignored and yet which may help us in at least one aspect of the present study.

I should also express my personal opinion that the majority of the problems in descriptive bibliography are not really those of the description itself. We are much more affected by the problems of analytical bibliography than of descriptive. Descriptive work is fundamentally the recording in accurate, convenient, and understandable form of the results of analysis. There are not normally insurmountable difficulties ahead of us in description if we know precisely what it is we are trying to record. Many a time when a bibliographer is faced with the question: 'How can I most adequately describe this?' the answer lies in a full understanding of exactly what it is to be recorded. We have become much more conscious of this in recent years when studies in analytical bibliography have revealed more and more problems and an ever widening variety of different aspects of the books under discussion. When J.D. Cowley published his book Bibliographical Description and Cataloguing in
1939, he was concerned with nothing more than the forms and methods of setting down the description.\textsuperscript{3} Although there has been a great deal of refinement in this kind of methodology in the last forty years, it is due much more to advances in analytical bibliography and our knowledge of the complex nature of the material which we are studying than to any refinement in the entry itself. A comparison of Cowley's book with Bowers' \textit{Principles} of 1949 makes it clear that, although there is still concern with the matter and form of the entry, there is much more regard for the bibliographical problems which lie behind the description.\textsuperscript{4} This becomes even more evident when we consider the relationship between descriptive bibliography and the other areas of bibliographical work, namely, analytical and historical bibliography, and also the relationship between descriptive work and the application of bibliography to textual studies.

This does not, however, mean that, even though we are able to achieve a very simple definition of descriptive bibliography, there are no problems left. There are many problems and they are fundamental ones, but they are of a different nature from those which engaged bibliographers in the earlier days of descriptive work. The first of these is a very basic concern, namely, what is it that we are setting out to describe? This is the area where I regret that we so rarely discuss the description of manuscripts as a part of descriptive bibliography. We are always very conscious when talking of manuscripts that we are describing a unique item in each case. Therefore we approach that kind of description in a very particular way. We realise that we have to regard every bibliographical feature as important, because only through our description can there be any understanding of the manuscript by those who have no opportunity to consult the manuscript itself. When we are discussing printed books, we make the very obvious and correct statement about them, that they differ from manuscripts in that printing allowed the multiple publication of copies. We can say, almost without fear of contradiction, that no printed book was ever printed as a single copy. Yet even though we accept this basic cliché to be correct, we frequently proceed to describe a printed book as though it had the unique quality of a manuscript and ignore the fact that it was one of a group. In such circumstances we provide the bibliographical record of a single copy with no visible consideration of the fact that hundreds of other copies of the same printing existed at one time or another and, in all probability, a comparatively high percentage of those copies may still be extant. Yet frequently, without even identifying the copy which has been described, such a description is allowed to stand for all copies. I realise that this is an acknowledged problem which has been with us for a very long time and one which most of us would acknowledge. It is now nearly seventy years since Falconer Madan first made the statement, challenged at the time, that there is no such thing as a duplicate.\textsuperscript{5} In the years since then his, then gener-
ally regarded outlandish, statement has come to be accepted as a clear and
demonstrable truth, especially for books up to 1800. If we ever needed final
assurance, Charlton Hinman's survey of the First Folio removed any lingering
doubt forever.6

The basic problem in descriptive bibliography, therefore, is a simple one:
'What are we describing?' Are we describing the single copy? Are we compili-
ing a catalogue, even though it be a catalogue with descriptions of consider-
able range and detail? This is an eminently justifiable exercise, but it should
only be undertaken in the clear understanding of the distinction between a
catalogue and a bibliography. That there is still confusion on this score is
demonstrated by the issue of the Bulletin of our Society of May 1979 which
announced today's programme. On page eight it referred to a number of
'bibliographies' in process of which several were, in fact, catalogues and not
bibliographies at all. It is apparent that there is a general state of confusion
over this problem in that many self-styled bibliographies, which have based
their descriptions on single copies, do not even identify the copy in question
which has been described.

The alternative to this method is, of course, that which has been preached
at us for years by bibliography's grey eminence in Charlottesville. Many years
ago Fredson Bowers was urging us not to describe a work until we had collated
and compared at least five or six copies. At any rate, his score about twenty or
twenty-five years ago was five or six copies. Since then he has advanced this
number as time went by and required us to collate and compare ten copies,
then fifteen, then twenty, then thirty, before we can produce an acceptable
description. Now his attitude is best described as demanding the collation
and comparison of as many copies as can be located before a description is
made. Only then can there be sufficient information for the creation of the
description of the 'ideal copy' which alone can serve as the basis for compari-
son with other copies which may emerge from various fastnesses. It would be
unfair not to state that there have been those who have worried that this was
such a counsel of perfection as to make bibliographical work difficult almost
to the point of impossibility. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that one of the
root problems in descriptive work is the necessity for certainty as to whether
we are producing descriptions for a catalogue, and therefore of a single copy, or
for a bibliography, and therefore an ideal copy, based on an examination of
many copies and the resolution of all the problems raised by them.

The second major problem is the decision as to exactly what facts are to be
recorded, whether it be for a catalogue or for a bibliography. This matter is
complicated by two factors. First, much of the bibliographical descriptive
work on which so many later studies were based consisted of descriptions of
single copies. Much of the early work of the pioneers, such as Bradshaw and
Proctor, and most perfectly exemplified in the BM Catalogue of fifteenth-
century books, produced tools which are essentially catalogues of single works." This, in one sense, limits the range of information which it appears necessary to record because there is no basis of comparison with other copies. Second, bibliographical studies throughout this century, and in the last forty or fifty years in particular, have brought to us a clear understanding of the importance of certain bibliographical features of which the earlier bibliographers had not been aware. When the first attempts began towards a codification of bibliographical description, there was a tendency to move, perhaps too readily, into a required number of pre-determined parts of description. There were also attempts to set out very precisely the differences between short descriptions, short standard descriptions, and full standard descriptions, as though these were acknowledged stopping places along the descriptive route. For a generation or so, many bibliographers would have agreed that there were normally seven parts to a full bibliographical description, but these proved inadequate for recording some of the information laid bare by later bibliographical discoveries. By the time that Allan Stevenson wrote his memorable preface to the *Hunt Botanical Catalogue*, we moved from seven major parts to ten major parts. Although I think that his codification is the most useful which we have been given to date, it is as likely to show signs of inhospitality as the previous one had done. There is no doubt that had he lived he would have discovered that ten parts were not necessarily sufficient and should certainly not stand for all time. Some of his expansions of a bibliographical description are perfect examples of the currently accepted necessity for recording material which had hitherto not been regarded as of any particular significance.

When A.W. Pollard, one of the outstanding bibliographers of our time, wrote the preface to the first volume of the BM Catalogue of fifteenth-century books in 1908, he could say, without need for any apology, that very little use had been made of paper evidence and that 'other kinds of evidence are almost always preferable.' Now, due to one or two notable cases, and above all due to the work of Allan Stevenson, we know that paper evidence is frequently of prime importance and should never be forgotten in a bibliographical description. The second field on which Stevenson concentrated was that of press figures. When McKerrow wrote his *Introduction*, he regarded 'working with figures' as 'seldom of much bibliographical importance'. No one now could possibly echo that comment, any more than McKerrow could have made it had he lived on through the bibliographical investigations of the last thirty or forty years.

Yet both these areas, although no one would now dispute their bibliographical importance, still raise problems. Our researches into the bibliographical significance of paper and press marks are still insufficient to enable us to
know exactly how to describe such evidence when we see it before us. It is, therefore, necessary to accept that, at any stage in the development of bibliographical description, there will be some areas in which a very detailed record is essential even though it may not yet be possible to express it in a very carefully designed and codified form. This is particularly noticeable in the two instances already mentioned. Much of the bibliographical importance of paper lies, for example, in a detailed survey of watermarks. The percentage of watermarks which have been recorded and firmly attributed to mill and to date out of all those which have existed is still lamentably small. We have been crippled by the fact that it was by no means easy to record watermarks and thereby make them available for comparison. Only with the advent of the beta-radiographic method of recording watermarks do we have a method which can, if all goes well, be increasingly applied to this area of study. Unhappily, Allan Stevenson left few bibliographers behind him working in the field of paper evidence. Yet it is one of the most vitally important areas and our ability to describe paper accurately depends upon future research.

Similarly with press numbers, it is difficult to know exactly how they should be described, when we do not yet know exactly why and how they were used. There has been a significant increase in the amount of writing on press numbers during the post-War years and our present method of recording them seems to be in the right direction. It is of paramount importance that they should be recorded for any book in which they may be found and especially in the multiple copies which would be collated and compared prior to the description of an ideal copy. Only when there is a large number of books for which the press numbers have been recorded are we likely to achieve the next breakthrough in our understanding of the exact usage of these pieces of evidence.

Another interesting area which is often neglected in bibliographical description is the background of historical evidence. There has been a tendency in much thinking on bibliographical description to pay scant attention to historical evidence. Indeed, in many definitions of bibliography, historical bibliography has either been ignored or sometimes openly regarded as not making any real contribution to bibliographical studies. It is frequently the background historical setting of a book or a work which receives inadequate treatment in many descriptions and yet on which we rely for the solution of many problems. We suffer from a lack of detailed information relating to the figures of the book trade, whether they be printers, booksellers, stationers, publishers, artists, engravers, binders, and so forth. It is obvious that we shall never reconstruct the full history of the book trade itself as an essential background to much of our analytical work until these figures have been searched out and recorded. Some of this will come only through diligent
searching of historical records, but our knowledge of the book trade should also grow through descriptions which have analysed and recorded imprints, colophons, plates, binders’ tickets, etc.

Our descriptions should also recognise the fact that books were designed to be read and will, frequently, bear internal signs of ownership, which is at least a step towards reading. This can range from the motto, signature, and binding which proclaims a book to have come from the library of John Donne to the subscription lists which are being analysed at Newcastle. This latter project is likely, in due course, to provide some of the clearest factual information as to the reading tastes of a particular period. For example, some of the works published in England at the end of the eighteenth century on exploration in the Pacific Northwest area were issued not only by subscription but in part issues. It would be fascinating to be able to assess the readership in England of such works and to analyse it region by region, town by town, and possibly, in due course, build up a partial profile of an individual subscriber.

Unfortunately many of the books published by subscription since 1617 have never been described at all or have inadequate descriptions which do not record subscription lists. It is important that descriptive work should always have sufficient flexibility not to be tied to any arbitrary number of parts or layout of entry and also have a special regard for areas of contemporary research. If fully developed, it is, perhaps, the most satisfactory method of making widely available the fruits of research in analytical and historical bibliography.

The recording of the findings of analytical bibliography is, additionally, a pre-requisite to applying those results to textual studies. For this purpose, a fully developed *Stemma* is as much a requirement for printed texts as it has always been necessary for manuscripts. A family tree, thinking back to Bradshaw’s ‘natural history method,’ which relates not solely one printing to another but also one copy to another within a printing. There is a sentence of Charlton Hinman’s on the First Folio which reads, ‘These plays present many problems, many textual problems, which need examination in the light of full and accurate bibliographical information.” The provision of ‘full and accurate bibliographical information’ is the duty and the function of descriptive bibliography; a duty which has not yet been widely fulfilled.

Frequently when we are discussing bibliographical description, we think almost inevitably of the long-established, formal description with quasi-facsimile transcription, and so on. This has certainly been the method used throughout the past century. It has proved an invaluable tool, and yet at the same time one cannot but admit its imperfections and limitations. Let me take just one example. If one were discussing the usage of the fifteenth-century printer in employing the abbreviations of Et, Con, and Rum at the end of the signing alphabet, it would not be unreasonable to enquire, for
example, what percentage of Italian fifteenth-century books used such symbols. The only answer would be to suggest a steady reading through of the Italian entries in the BM Catalogue of fifteenth-century books and noting how many signing alphabets extended the range by these three contractions. It is not a highly satisfactory method for the easy retrieval of information, and that one example could obviously be multiplied a hundred times. Therefore our traditional method is excellent in order to record the information, but it is less satisfactory from the standpoint of retrieval. During the past five years or so at UBC, we have been experimenting to see whether it is possible to put an absolutely full and detailed bibliographical description into machine readable form; hoping, thereby, to make retrieval that much easier and more satisfactory. Whether this will ever emerge as a practical method it is too early to tell. We have now a fairly well established basic manual and we are hoping that, within this coming year, we can input our first entries in order to find what further problems lie ahead of us. I am not advancing this as some novel or necessarily important step in descriptive bibliography. It only underlies the point which I was making earlier, that we are still at a stage at which there should be every encouragement given to experimenting in forms of bibliographical description before we feel tempted to settle down to a final codification.

The final question is one frequently asked by students: 'How shall I know when I have completed my description?' My answer has not changed for thirty-three years: 'You have finished when you have recorded and explained every bibliographical feature within the book which might be of interest to any enquirer. Then you can rest from your labours.'

Notes

3. J.D. Cowley, Bibliographical Description and Cataloguing (1939).