Education for Descriptive Bibliography

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It is unfashionable today to call a descriptive bibliography merely a 'bibliography': titles like 'Notes towards a Preliminary Bibliographical Handlist' or 'An Excursion into Some Problems of the Bibliographical History...' are more acceptable and less dangerous. They are also in keeping with the problematical differences between bibliography and cataloguing pointed out by Professor Stokes. Thus the title of my paper today should perhaps be 'Some Thoughts, and a Few Suggestive Remarks on the Teaching of Bibliography,' and I will begin by telling you all the things I am not going to attempt in this 'preliminary excursion'.

I am not going to provide a list of courses in descriptive and analytical bibliography currently being offered by Canadian academic institutions (although some comments on what is taught at various universities might well emerge during discussion at the conclusion of my remarks). You will be relieved to hear that I am not going to rehearse for you the syllabus of the courses I teach myself, although I may draw on my experience for examples.

The best bibliographers, as most of you know very well, are self-taught. When attempting to learn something of the academic discipline we have divided into descriptive, analytical, textual, and historical bibliography, let alone teach it, one is immediately faced with the considerable problem of how to define a scientific art which embraces the study of medieval manuscripts, incunabula, Renaissance drama, eighteenth-century fiction, and modern first editions as regards form, as well as an infinite array of subjects. How does one deal with the historical background of bibliography and thus provide an intellectual context such that students will consider the subject worth studying at all? How does one provide practical experience of sufficient depth so that the complexities of printing and publishing techniques which affect the bibliographical description of books can be understood? And how does one compress all this and a multitude of special problems into a one or two-term course?

It is perhaps worth examining what one of the greatest of bibliographical practitioners and a consistent theoretician considered the ideal course in
bibliography. In 1912 Sir Walter Greg read a paper before the Bibliographical Society called 'What Is Bibliography?' and in it he enunciated his dream for a course of lectures in English bibliography. The instructor, a Gregian paragon, would begin with the general principles of textual transmission; pass on to describe the conditions under which manuscripts were written and copied, the kinds of mistakes scribes made, and the extent of textual corruption possible; and then deal with the problems of physical injury to manuscripts and how the vellum should be treated. He would then cover the principles of textual criticism (the grouping of manuscripts, the concept of copy-text, etc.) and illustrate his principles with a few well-chosen monuments of literature: *Piers Plowman* and its three texts, and the like. Greg was fond of writing sentences like 'Pari passu he will investigate the changes in the methods of book-making and the gradual changes in hand-writing.' Finally the lecturer will reach the introduction of printing and its significance in the change of the transmission of texts. He will deal with type and the development of styles with particular reference to its value for dating books. Again examples will be used and Greg suggests beginning with *Morte d'Arthur*. The extent to which the author exercised editorial supervision and what Greg refers to as 'the many small points' (corrections, cancels, etc.) will be covered before the lecturer passes on again to the relations between author, publisher, and printer; copyright; and the effect that all these had on literary production. Greg suggests that the history of Shakespeare's First Folio and the variants of *Paradise Lost* would make suitable examples. Nor will he forget manuscripts of a later date: the deciphering and dating of Tudor and Stuart hands and the editorial principles involved in printing such works will also be covered. Finally Greg says, with the full weight of understatement, 'It is no light task I have sketched.'

Well ... sixty-seven years after Greg's plea for bibliographical education, how close are we to realizing his ideal? Is there any one person now who could teach such a course? And, more importantly, would such a course be of any use to a modern student of general bibliographical interests?

It is obvious, of course, that Greg's principal concerns did not extend beyond the early seventeenth century, whereas eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century works have come to be regarded as of equal interest today. Since 1912 the standard works of McKerrow, Gaskell, and Bowers have appeared, and apart from whatever omissions and defects each might have as absolute reference works for the practice of descriptive and analytical bibliography, they at least provide guides for anyone attempting to teach or learn the subject.

McKerrow's *Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students*, in fact, grew out of his need to present to English literature students at King's College London bibliographical evidence that would enable them better to under-
stand the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His expertise was gained from his bibliographical and textual work on Nashe and other Elizabethan writers, but the primary purpose of his ‘help book’ (as he referred to it) was pedagogic. Gaskell’s New Introduction, often considered a sequel (and even a replacement) to McKerrow, differs in one of its fundamental aims: it attempts to be ‘an advanced manual of bibliography for students of librarianship’, a rather more amply expressed ambition. Gaskell, of course, deals at greater length with the peculiar bibliographical problems posed by eighteenth, nineteenth, and even, to a small extent, twentieth-century books, and one of its principal uses is the teaching of descriptive bibliography and textual criticism. Fredson Bowers has combined teaching with bibliographical and textual research for the whole of his career, and his monument of methodology, The Principles of Bibliographical Description, is also used as a standard reference source for the subject.

A review of the main ‘texts’ of the academic discipline of bibliography and textual criticism still brings one to the fundamental questions suggested earlier: What should a course in bibliography contain? Who should teach the subject? Who should be encouraged to take the courses?

I think a course must contain a history of the discipline for context, a clear and prolonged enunciation of the techniques of bibliography, and as much background information concerning printing, publishing, bookselling, and all the aspects of book production and distribution as can be conveniently fitted into the framework of the course. This is, of course, much easier to suggest than to perform, and perhaps those of you who have had experience of teaching bibliography will be able to elucidate more specific ways of actually presenting bibliography to students.

The other two questions are perhaps more easily answered. Obviously bibliography should be taught by experienced bibliographers, of wide-ranging experience, who are also gifted teachers. I wouldn’t care to predict how often this particular combination might occur in any individual, but I suspect more often than one might imagine in moments of pessimism. Ideally I suppose any literary or historical scholar ought to be exposed to descriptive bibliography and textual criticism as a normal part of his or her training. Practically one might imagine that faculties of library science and departments of English would be the natural centres of bibliographical instruction in an academic institution.

And so, not in conclusion, but in introduction one may say that descriptive bibliography and textual criticism is being studied and taught at many Canadian institutions now, that the potential for the future is high, and that this annual meeting of the Bibliographical Society of Canada has assembled in one room many of the people who can best discuss the means whereby the potential may be fully realized.