

A Tribute to Great Librarian : Charles Ammi Cutter

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Abstract

Present article is a tribute to Great Librarian Sir C.A. Cutter and also provides a brief sketch of cutter's memories, his contributions and social life.

Charles Ammi Cutter was born in Boston, Massachusetts on March 14, 1837. His early, Classical education prepared him for entry into the Unitarian clergy. He studied at Harvard College from 1851 to 1855, and then spent a year tutoring applicants for college entrance exams (W. Cutter 6). Subsequently, he entered the Harvard Divinity school in Autumn, 1856 (Immroth 380). Even before his graduation, in 1858, Cutter was appointed assistant librarian of the school and he unwittingly began what would become his life's work (Foster 697). His first job was to prepare a new catalog of the Divinity School library in response to a major accession that doubled the size of the collection (W. Cutter 8).

Shortly after his graduation from Harvard in 1860, Cutter chose not to be ordained and, instead, become assistant librarian of Harvard College and worked on the development of a new library catalog. Unlike most library catalogs of the time. It used index cards rather than being presented in the form of a published volume. It consisted of an author file and an alphabetical "classed catalog". This provided a primitive form of subject access and his "work with this type of catalog prepared Cutter for his later work with the dictionary catalog" (W. Cutter 11; Immroth 381).

In December of 1868, Cutter was chosen as librarian of the Boston Athenaeum and he began the arduous task of preparing a published catalog of the holdings. This appeared in five volumes, published in stages between 1874 and

1882 (Immroth 381). Writing in 1931, Cutter's nephew and biographer William Parker Cutter notes that "It has been the model for many other dictionary catalogs; and even now is in frequent usage by catalogers in search of full names, and similar information" (20). This massive project established Cutter's reputation in the library world.]

A direct outgrowth of the Athenaeum catalog was his 1874 manual: Rules for a Dictionary Catalog. While various other sets of cataloguing rules existed, Charles Cutter himself notes that

"But for a dictionary-catalog as a whole, and for most of its parts, there is no manual whatever. Nor have any of the above-mentioned works attempted to set forth the rules in a systematic way or to investigate what might be called the first principles of cataloging (3)."

Because of the pragmatic approach taken-one of the stated goals was to make the catalog easy for the public to use- "it to be used at a number of libraries throughout the country" (Hufford 31). Rules for Dictionary Catalog eventually went through four editions, the last (1904) being published after Cutter's death. It was "recognized immediately as the treatise on cataloguing, and remains classic" (Tauber and Wise 108).

In 1876, the American Library Association was established. Charles Cutter was one of the approximately one hundred founding members. He served as president in 1888 and 1889 and he then served on the ALA council from 1889 until 1902 (Foster 699). It is reported that at the time of his death, he had attended more annual meetings than any other member. Cutter was also active on various ALA committees and with the Massachusetts Library Club (W. Cutter 31). He also attended "both of the International Library Conferences, in London, respectively in 1877 and 1897, serving as honorary vice-president of the latter" (Foster 699). Finally, from 1881 until 1893, Cutter served as General Editor of the ALA publication Library Journal (Foster 700; W. Cutter 48).

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Another of Charles Cutter's significant contributions to the world of library science was his Expansive Classification system. The name comes from "the fact that it is developed in seven stages: the first, being very simple, for the smallest library, and, finally, the seventh, designed for the largest library" (W. Cutter 43). Each level was of increasing complexity.

Cutter's aim was very ambitious. His stated goal was "to prepare a scheme applicable to collections of every size, from the village library in its earliest stages to the national library with a million volumes" (qtd. in Tauber and Wise 109). As the library grew in size, each section of the classification would be further sub-divided and increased in specificity.

Cutter's system was never widely adopted for several reasons. Most significant is the fact that the seventh (and final) level of classification was never completed. It was in progress at the time of Cutter's death in 1903. Several sections were published posthumously, but significant elements, especially the technology classes, were never completed (W. Cutter 44; Immroth 382). Henry Bliss has argued that the Seventh classification had become unworkably complex and unbalanced. Too many categories were allocated to obscure scientific topics but other areas, such as Sociology, Social Psychology, and Business were allocated much too little space (234-5).

While Cutter's Expansive Classification was not successful, it later formed the basis for the widely adopted Library of Congress classification system. It was "used to develop the first class of the Library of Congress classification. Class Z: Bibliography and Library Science'. And was a basis for a general outline of all the classes" (Immroth 382).

One aspect of Charles Cutter's work remains with us today. As part of his work on Expansive Classification, he developed a system of alphabetic tables used to abbreviate the names of authors. (W. Cutter 46). He first developed and

published the two-figure tables between 1891 and 93. As these tables were put into regular use, cutter "began adding a third figure in exceptional instances as the need arose (in such cases as fiction or biography)" (Foster 699). Three-figure tables were systematically worked out and published from 1899 to 1901 (Immroth 382).

Charles Ammi Cutter died on September 6, 1903 at Walpole, New Hampshire. He was survived by his wife as two adult sons. (Immroth 384).

Ironically, cutter's most significant contribution to the field of Library and information Studies was his system of Expansive Classification. Despite the fact that it was never widely adopted, it strongly influenced the development of the Library of Congress classification system. Also, the system of author numbers he devised continues in wide use and still bears his name.

References

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