

LIBRARY ADMINISTRATION

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Library administration by John Macfarlane

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JOHN MACFARLANE

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The Library Series

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BY

JOHN MACFARLANE

OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM LIBRARY



LONDON
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1898

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“Laudo (ut ingenue fatear) eam librorum thecam, quæ non spectabili tantum ædificio, non librorum tum copia tum splendore refulcet, quæve solum præclaram ostendit suppellectilem, et incomparabilem thesaurum, sed quæ eundem communicabilem exhibet, reddidit accommodam dispensationi, docet methodum, ac ordinem locandorum, inquirendorum, inveniendorum librorum.”

Florianus Trefferus: *Methodus exhibens per varios indices, et classes subinde, quorumlibet librorum, cuiuslibet bibliothecæ, breuem, facilem, imitabilem ordinationem, &c.* Augustæ [1560]. 8vo.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE subject of library administration, treated by Mr. MACFARLANE in the following pages, is one upon which, from one point of view, it is difficult to say too much, and upon which, from another, it is difficult to say anything. So far as the description of existing systems and the exposition of important details are concerned, the extent of the subject, had more space been available, would have justified a treatment yet fuller than it has here received, but the scope for positive precept is very limited. So dissimilar are the extent, the characteristics, and the needs of libraries, that few rules of universal application can be given, and the attempt to deduce such from the practice of exceptional libraries can only end in disappointment. In fact, any particular system, such, for instance, as the card-catalogue, which may suit any given library perfectly well at certain stages of its development, may diminish in efficiency in proportion to its growth, and eventually become impracticable. The Museum manuscript-catalogue on movable slips affords a striking instance. Nothing could have been more convenient

and practical at the time of its introduction, but it grew more and more cumbrous year by year, and at last broke down under its own weight. There are features in the Museum catalogue of the highest value to men of letters, such, for example, as the grouping of academical transactions and periodical literature under the headings "Academies" and "Periodical Publications," but which it would be inexpedient to reproduce in the catalogues of libraries not largely resorted to by students and scholars, or where such books did not constitute a considerable proportion of the collection. It is therefore difficult to lay down many precepts universally applicable for library management which are not sufficiently discoverable by the light of nature. Beyond this, however, there is a wide debatable region which may be explored with advantage, it being always borne in mind that the question is not so much that of the abstract fitness of principles, as of their applicability to the needs of individual libraries. Some few principles may be taken as axiomatic. It may be regarded as established, for instance, that the alphabetical arrangement of entries in a catalogue is the best that can be adopted; and no less so that the alphabetical catalogue gains enormously in value by the addition of a good index of subjects. If, however, advancing a step further, we inquire into the best form of subject-index, we find ourselves involved in controversy, which may continue long, inasmuch

as so extensive and heterogeneous a subject is not capable of reduction to precise rules. Experience alone will suffice to bring about a general consensus, or something approaching to it, upon this and other points still controverted among librarians. It may be added that this desideratum will be achieved in proportion to the elevation of the status of the profession itself, and the development of that freedom of discussion and interchange of opinion which the Library Associations of Great Britain and America, and the periodicals connected with them, have of late years done so much to promote.

Although, nevertheless, but a small proportion of Mr. MACFARLANE'S Manual can claim to rank as a code, the whole of it will be found to possess much value as a disseminator of information, and as a stimulus to reflection. It is fortunate that the execution of a work on library administration should have fallen into the hands of one familiar with the organisation of the largest, or almost the largest, library in the world, the one where questions of library management have probably been more actively canvassed than anywhere else, where discussions have been most fully recorded, and where the results of reform and innovation are visible upon the largest scale. Mr. MACFARLANE'S constant reference to the British Museum imparts a kind of historical unity to his volume, and is a practical as well as a literary gain if two essential cautions are