

**ON THE DIFFICULTY OF
CORRECT DESCRIPTION
OF BOOKS**

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CHICAGO
MCMII

Originally printed in *Companion to the Almanac; or, Year-book of general information for 1853*, London, p. 5-19; now reissued for the first time in a limited edition of 300 copies for the BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF CHICAGO, and printed at the Blue Sky Press, 4732 Kenwood Avenue, Chicago.

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WE have often had occasion, in articles contributed to this work, to notice error and difficulty arising out of incorrect or insufficient description of books. The study of *bibliography*, that is, of books as books, in all matters which are requisite to avoid the errors and difficulties just alluded to, has been left to librarians and to *bibliomaniacs*, as they have been called. Recent events, however, have brought bibliography into collision with the want of it, in a remarkable way.

The year 1850 turned the attention of literary men to the subject, both in England and France; but in very different ways in the two countries. In England, the report of the Royal Commission appointed to examine the state of the British Museum became public, and with it the evidence on which it was founded. This report and evidence contained the details of a severe contest between bibliographers on the one hand, and literary men opposed to bibliography on the other hand, as to the mode in which book-catalogues should be made. The report of the Commission, the comments of the leading reviews, and the subsequent silence of the journals which had for years attacked the librarians of the Museum, gave the victory to the advocates of detail sufficient for accuracy, as one side called it, or of unnecessary minuteness leading to confusion, as the other side called it. And the great extent to which both the antagonist philosophies taught by examples, makes this report, with its evidence, an excellent collection of exercises, and a manual, so far as that term can be applied to a blue-book, of practice for the young bibliographer.

The corresponding display made in France was not altogether so creditable to the literary aspirations

of the nation. In the year 1850, appeared the *act of accusation* against M. Libri, (1) an eminent mathematician and bibliographer, and a member of the Institute, charged with robbing the public libraries to the value of many thousand pounds; on which, by default of appearance, he was condemned. The amount of incapacity which either belong to the framers of this indictment, or was presumed by them to belong to the courts and the literary public before which it was to come, far exceeds all that was exhibited by the ignorers of bibliography in England. None of these last ever thought, or wished to make others think, that the stamp (2) of a convent *library*, imprinted on the front of an old book, is evidence of an intention, on the part of the stamper, to pass the book off as *printed* in the town where the convent is.

Except, however, to express our belief that these recent events in France and England will be of some effect in widening the circle within which bibliography is studied, we have nothing to do with them here, though we may cite them as among our encouragements for presenting an article on the subject. Our intention is to show, by instances, to how great an extent inaccurate bibliography prevails, both in the descriptions which are given of books, and in those which they give of themselves. We began, in pursuance of this intention, and that we might produce a new case (3) or two, by taking the first four old books that we happened to lay our hands on, the selection being dictated by the mere accidental proximity of the volumes on our shelves. If no one of these four volumes had given us either error produced, or difficulty likely to produce it in time to come, our associations would have been rudely invaded; for we have been accustomed to consider it almost impossible to take two old books at hazard without encountering one

The numbers in () refer to the notes at the end; those in [] indicate the original pagination.

or the other. It happened that *all* the four gave us what we wanted to illustrate.

The first book was a collection of four geometrical and two astronomical treatises by John Werner of Nuremberg, quarto, 1522, beginning "In hoc opere haec continentur. Libellus Joannis Veneri Nurembergen. Super vigintiduobus elementis coticis . . ." [7] It is said that this book was so rare in the time of Tycho Brahe, that he could not find it in all Germany, though he secured a copy at last in Italy. The two last treatises being astronomical, we turn to Lalande's 'Bibliographie Astronomique,' and we find at the right year, 1522, that this book consists of the two astronomical treatises, followed by an epistle of Regiomontanus to Cardinal Bessarion on the meteoroscope [instead of preceded by four geometrical treatises of Werner himself]. The authority is Weidler, who, says Lalande, adds two other tracts as contained in this work, of which Scheibel observes that they have never been printed at all. Here is a heap of confusion, in which three noted writers of mathematical history are concerned. Looking at Weidler (at the page cited), we find reason to think the case stands as follows. Weidler, after hinting that Werner printed the works of others as well as his own, gives a list as extant, in which he takes no care to distinguish between what Werner only printed, and what he both wrote and printed. In the middle of this list comes the letter to the cardinal. The last five of the list are five of the treatises which really are in the work before us, the sixth being omitted. Then, says Weidler, these last five works appeared at Nuremberg in 1522. From this it would appear as if Lalande had selected two astronomical works of Werner, the letter of Regiomontanus, and two others which he does not name because Scheibel said they were never printed.

We had turned to Weidler's History, because La-

lande cites it (p. 334). We then turned to Weidler's Bibliography, and here we really find that the Nuremberg quarto of 1522 is said to contain five treatises, the three given by Lalande, with two others by Werner, not any of those yet named. And Weidler refers to p. 334 of his own book, in which, as already seen, he gives a very different and more correct account. So that the confusion is as follows. Weidler describes the book in his *History* with nothing but an omission. In his *Bibliography* he gives a totally wrong description, for which he refers to his own more correct *History*. Lalande adopts the account given in the *Bibliography*, and joins to it the reference to the *History*, without stating that his reference to the *History* is only a copy from the *Bibliography*. No one, without the book before him, could have unravelled this skein of mistakes. We took the word of Lalande because it is decidedly the best piece of scientific bibliography which, at its appearance, had ever been in existence, and therefore gave the best chance of a correct description. But, like other descriptive works which make a commencement of correctness upon books which the authors had examined for themselves, it relies in a great degree upon works prior to the introduction of any effort at minute description.

In the last instance, it happens that the mistake can be traced to its source in a manner which leaves no doubt that it is a mistake. But the unpracticed reader must not come to such a conclusion too rapidly. If Lalande had not named his authority, as often happens with him, we should have had three alternatives to consider. 1. A mere mistake. 2. The circumstance of his having happened [8] to fall in with a book in which someone had bound together some astronomical tracts of Werner with a copy of Regiomontanus's epistle. 3. The possibility that Werner made two distinct publications at Nuremberg in 1522, one

containing his own *six* tracts, the other joining the last *two*, which are astronomical, with the astronomical epistle in question. Either of the first two hypotheses is credible enough. The third looks very unlikely. But it must be remembered that it is utterly impossible to enumerate the number of odd things which occurred in the first century of printing, before authors and publishers had fallen into a common understanding upon their modes of proceeding. Any thing imaginable may have taken place in one or more instances; and it happens sometimes that the unlikely thing, stated by a writer who is frequently inaccurate, turns out to be the truth, in spite of the more probable account of a generally more accurate writer. And a strange assertion, which appears to be an obvious distortion of one which is known to be true, may nevertheless be one separate truth, with or without some admixture of the matter of the other. For instance, a poor authority on books, Granger, says that Roger Palmer, afterwards the notorious Earl of Castlemaine, husband to one mistress of Charles II., and ambassador to the Pope of James II., invented and wrote on a "horizontal globe." Now since John Palmer, in 1658, did certainly write on the 'Catholique Planisphær,' and since the phrase *horizontal globe* looks very much like an awkward rendering of the word *planisphere*, we at one time took the liberty of thinking that Granger or another had confused the two Palmers; and we were not without our suspicion that the *Catholic* planisphere had perhaps assisted in the transfer of the book to a *Catholic* author. Nevertheless, we afterwards found (4) that Lord Castlemaine published in 1679, a work on what he called the 'English Globe.' Again, the rule of three, in middle Latin, is *regula detri*, so that, seeing *Detri* mentioned among arithmetical authors, we took it to be pretty certain that, as has sometimes happened, the name of a subject of a book has been substituted for