

*from*

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# Introduction

## THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF BIBLIOGRAPHY

To students of literature and history, bibliography means primarily the study of books as material objects. To this Sir Walter Greg appended a further definition, calling bibliography the science of the transmission of literary documents; and by transmission he meant not only the genealogy and relationship of variant texts, but also the evolution of particular texts in the processes of their production and reproduction.<sup>1</sup>

This implies, as Greg himself insisted, that the chief purpose of bibliography is to serve the production and distribution of accurate texts. Book lists can be useful, the study of early book production is a contribution to history, but bibliography's overriding responsibility must be to determine a text in its most accurate form.

There is no reason to confine bibliography to literary documents. All documents, manuscript and printed, are the bibliographer's province; and it may be added that the aims and procedures of bibliography apply not only to written and printed books but also to any document, disc, tape, or film where reproduction is involved and variant versions may result.

Here we shall be chiefly concerned with the transmission of documents as printed books. Bibliography can help us to identify printed books and to describe them; to judge the relationship between variant texts and to assess their relative authority; and, where the text is defective, to guess at what the author meant us to read. Plainly it is a basic tool for editors, whose aim is to provide modern readers with accurate and comprehensible versions of what their authors wrote. But librarians, too, aim to hand on texts, by caring for the books in their keeping and making them available; and to do this effectively—to know what they have got—they too must use the techniques of bibliography.

Bibliographers, like other scholars, have to be able to think logically, to judge critically, and to persevere in tediously repetitive tasks; but in addition they must understand the history of book production. The study of printed books as material objects and the right interpretation of the printed documents of the past will be based primarily on a knowledge of how authors' manuscripts were transcribed in type, printed, distributed, and sold; and it is with the history of book production that the greater part of this manual is concerned.

<sup>1</sup> Greg, W. W., *Collected papers*, Oxford 1966, pp. 75-88, 207-25, 239-66.

The historical account is arranged in two main parts, dealing with book production before and after 1800 respectively; and within these parts are sections concerning particular aspects of printing technology and procedure, arranged so that subdivisions of the subject may be referred to separately. There is then a third main part which explains how an understanding of the history of book production may be used in approaching problems of identification, description, and the establishment of the text.

#### THE MAIN PERIODS OF BOOK PRODUCTION

Broadly speaking the history of printing technology may be divided into two periods, the hand-press period and the machine-press period, separated by developments which took place soon after the beginning of the nineteenth century. Throughout both these main periods printing was based on the technique of pressing sheets of paper on to movable metal types which had been inked, and the chief differences between them derived from the fact that the productivity of powered printing machinery, and later of powered composing machinery, was vastly greater than that of the earlier hand processes.

It is likely that for some years after the invention of printing in the mid fifteenth century the techniques of the new craft underwent experiment and at least minor change. Little is known, however, about the methods of Gutenberg and his immediate successors, and we cannot be sure when their techniques settled into the forms that were to be maintained with remarkably little change for the rest of the hand-press period. Nevertheless it is clear that experiment was over by the year 1500, and it will be convenient to take the hand-press period as referring here to the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, a time of such technical stability in European printing that it may be described all together. The machine-press period can then be said to encompass the whole of the nineteenth century, and the first half of the twentieth up to about 1950, since when Gutenberg's central invention, movable alphabetic metal type, has begun to be superseded by new methods which dispense with metal altogether.

For the whole of both periods, from 1500 to 1950, the process of printing has consisted essentially of assembling metal types of letters of the alphabet into words, lines, and pages; arranging groups of pages of type into patterns and fixing them into portable metal frames; inking the surface of the type pages (or sometimes, in the later hand-press and in the machine-press period, of replicas of the type pages); pressing sheets of paper on to them, one group of pages for each side of the sheet; and finally ordering the printed sheets ready for folding and sewing into books.