BIBLIOTHÈQUES ET DOCUMENTATION

Nos lecteurs seront heureux de prendre connaissance de quelques extraits du rapport annuel du Président de la FIAB lu à la séance inaugurale de la session du Conseil à Scheveningen le 12 septembre 1966. Nous remercions **Sir Frank Francis** *Directeur du British Museum, d'en avoir autorisé la publication dans les Nouvelles.* Réd.

Were I to try to pick out the one or two decisive events in the library field this last twelve months, I should mention three: the completion of the publications of the British Museum Catalogue and the plans for the publication of its first ten-year supplement; the practical proposals for shared cataloguing on a truly international scale, which have emanated from the Library of Congress; and the application, in a number of different places, of mechanised procedures to library catalogues and bibliographical lists. Each of these events is in one way or another connected with the theme of this meeting, Libraries and Documentation, and illustrates in some degree the way in which professional library thought is changing. To take the British Museum Catalogue first — not out of vanity or personal pride, but because its 263 volumes represent the culmination of a task which was started some ten years ago. Those responsible for the administration of the British Museum Library at the time had serious misgivings about this work when it was first planned, because it was thought to be a very imperfect production — too imperfect, too unscholarly, and containing too many inconsistencies to be submitted to the World as a publications of the British Museum. The reason why these misgivings and this reluctance to publish were overcome was because the catalogue for all its imperfections was sorely needed as an information tool by students in all parts of the World, and not only that; it was in fact the catalogue which was in daily use in the British Museum Reading Room. In the event not only has it been welcomed as an invaluable source of information and its publication hailed as a triumph of organisation, but its method of production has served as the model for other similar ventures, the Union List of Serials, the projected National Union Catalogue in the Library of Congress, the Catalogue of Maps in the British Museum and the projected Cumulative Index to all the Catalogues of Manuscripts of the British Museum. Its publication has shown that information in hand, however imperfectly presented, is more important to the user than the promise of an ideally compiled work which may never be completed. In other words it suggests that our elaborate professional theories must be applied with judgement and discrimination and not allowed to impede the rapid availability of information. The elaborate machinery of librarianship has been created to ensure the safe and speedy passage of information from the source to the user. At the risk of being misunderstood, I will venture to say that we have been in danger of allowing the machinery to control us instead of our controlling it.

When I first discussed wtih the Librarian of Congress and his colleagues just about twelve months ago, their proposals for adopting a system of shared cataloguing to enable them to meet the new assignments laid on them by the United States Congress, I was electrified by the prospect which this new development opened up. I felt we were at last on the edge of the most important break-

through in the realm of information since the elaboration of rules for cataloguing made clear the basis on which cataloguing procedures should work.

But perhaps I had better pause for a moment and explain exactly what I am talking about. The Higher Education Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1965 provides that the Library of Congress acquire on a World wide basis all currently published library materials which are of value to scholarship, and should supply cataloguing information for these materials as promptly as possible after their receipt in the Library. In order to carry out this exacting assignment our colleagues in the Library of Congress conceived the brilliant idea of seeking the collaboration of other national libraries and of using as cataloguing aids the entries in national bibliographies from countries in which the book trade is sufficiently well organised for such bibliographies to exist. Thus it would be possible to make up a composite catalogue by using for example entries from the *Deutsche Bibliographie*, the *Bibliographie de la France*, the *British National Bibliography*, and so on.

By way of experiment, entries from a number of national bibliographies were assembled and placed together, side by side, to see how far they were compatible and could be used together to form part of one general catalogue. The first experiment was a brillant justification of this highly practical approach. The acceptance and the implementation of this proposal for shared cataloguing on an international scale would result in speedier bibliographical control of the materials flowing even faster into our libraries, would reduce cataloguing costs and would release the energies of our cataloguing forces, which are at present engaged in duplicating each others efforts a countless number of times in different libraries not only in all parts of the World, but in almost every country under the sun.

I hope that over the next three to five years it will be possible to get this collaboration fully worked out and made into a going concern. It is not only desirable that this should be done, it is necessary, otherwise the great libraries will cease to play their proper part in the intellectual life of their countries because of the sheer impossibility of meeting all the demands which are made upon them. If the task of cataloguing can be rationalised in this way, it will mean that the enormous intellectual resources which are now put into cataloguing can be profitably utilised for the thousand and one tasks of information transference from source to user which we all know need to be undertaken. It will mean that the arrears of cataloguing from which all libraries suffer, can be overtaken and information about new books made available to students and to workers much more quickly and, in all likelihood, in the form in which it is needed.

It will also mean that practicality is taking a hand in our affaires at last and that the dream of collaboration which has foundered so often in the past on the rocks of formalism can at last become a reality.

Now that this initiative has been taken, we just cannot afford to neglect this chance of mobilising our strenght. We must see to it that the interests of the users of librairies are given their proper place in our plans, instead of being as they have so often in the past subordinated to supposed professional requirements. Let me repeat; our library techniques and **procedures are means to an end: and an end in themselves.**

The benefits now potentially available to us all by sharing the task of cataloguing can be multiplied many times over if we can bring into the service of our libraries the electronic computer machines which are used for so many purposes in modern life. It is becoming urgently necessary not only to bring these machines into our service, but to organise their use in such a way that the information which is programmed into them and stored by them can be used internationally and made internationally available.

The situation is really urgent. We have all of us in our libraries large masses of information urgently needed by society. The methods we employ to extract this information are largely old-fashioned and really quite ridiculously inadequate. It would I am sure be true to say that in general the use made of the contents of our librairies — particularly the big, older libraries — is quite disproportionately small compared with what it might be. Here is where the computer can come to our aid. Provided the entries are satisfactorily programmed (on the basis of a skilled analysis) it is possible to produce separate lists of books according to any one — or a combination — of a number of categories: subjects, date, period, title, language and so on, by pressing the appropriate buttons. It is true that what comes out of the machine is what has been put into it, but the fact is that what is put in can be sorted out *without further human effort* into a wide variety of different forms. Thus the essential development of the library service which it is impossible to contemplate by present methods becomes entirely possible by using mechanised methods. A conference of librarians and computer experts from Britain and the United States of America recently held at Oxford under my chairmanship showed very clearly that it is quite practicable for cataloguing records however elaborate to be put into machine readable form and for them to be printed out automatically, if required in a variety of different forms according to the needs of the particular user or users. In this way, through automation, the service provided by the big libraries can be transformed.

It is highly desirable that librarians should co-operate in developing conventions for machines and their use and programming, and in creating a language for computer programming for libraries. It is also possible that the principle of random access which is made possible by computers may provide a break through in the problem of cataloguing collections of books — particularly old books which have hitherto escaped the attentions of cataloguers and which might never be catalogued if we were dependent on accepted and traditional methods.

The librarian remains in Marcel Godet's memorable words the preserver of the intellectual riches of the past of which the book is the vehicle. But he must find the means of releasing himself as far as possible from the routine procedures through new systems of information so as to remain or become a bookman, who can interpret the riches under his care to those who seek the inspiration of books.