

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 758

IR 055 929

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TITLE Bliss: The Man and the Classification.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 15p.
DESCRIPTORS Historical Materials (060) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cataloging; *Classification; Foreign Countries; History; *Innovation; *Inventions; Library Technical Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Bliss (Henry); *Lexical Collocation; United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the career of Henry Evelyn Bliss, founder of the Bibliographic Classification, which is currently being revised. Dissatisfied with the current classification systems, Bliss devised his own, which was based on a main class order that provided for collocation of related classes. Although not currently used in the United States, the Bibliographic Classification continues to be utilized by approximately 50 libraries in the United Kingdom. Advantages and criticisms are presented for Bliss's system, which is often praised in library science textbooks, yet seldom used as the trend in libraries has been to either the Dewey Decimal or the Library of Congress classification systems. (Contains 24 references.)
(Author)

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Bliss: The Man

and

The Classification

by

John A. Drobnicki

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the career of Henry Evelyn Bliss, founder of the Bibliographic Classification, which is currently being revised. Dissatisfied with the current classification systems, Bliss devised his own, which was based on a main class order that provided for collocation of related classes. Although not currently used in the United States, the Bibliographic Classification continues to be utilized by approximately fifty libraries in the United Kingdom. Advantages and criticisms are presented for Bliss' system, which is often praised in library science textbooks, yet seldom used, as the trend in libraries has been to either the Dewey Decimal or the Library of Congress classification systems.

As the title states, this paper will examine both Bliss the man and Bliss the classification scheme. It will point out the benefits and disadvantages that have been publicized in the library literature, for both the original Bliss Bibliographic Classification (BC) and also the second edition (BC2), which is being published under the editorship of Jack Mills.

Henry E. Bliss was born in New York City in 1870. Most of his early education took place at home, but he did spend the years 1885-1888 enrolled in the College of the City of New York. Bliss left the school without graduating in order to go into business, but he returned to CCNY in 1891 as Deputy Librarian. He spent nearly fifty years at the college, holding successively the positions of Head of Departmental Libraries and then Associate Librarian. Although almost impossible to believe, the only formal library science training that Bliss ever received was one Summer course in classification in 1903.¹

Working in the City College library, Bliss became disenchanted with its classification system. At first thinking of revising the Expansive Classification, he visited Cutter and discussed this with him in 1903.² Bliss, however, decided to devise his own classification system, and when CCNY moved to Convent Avenue during 1905-08, he had the opportunity to implement his ideas and reclassify its library.³ He publicized the broad outline of his Biblio-

¹D. J. Campbell, "A Short Biography of Henry Evelyn Bliss," in *Bliss Bibliographic Classification, Second Edition, Introduction and Auxiliary Schedules*, by J. Mills and Vanda Broughton (Boston: Butterworths, 1977), 1-3; "Bliss, Henry E(velyn)," in *Current Biography . . . 1953 Yearbook* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1954), 75-76.

²Henry E. Bliss, "A Modern Classification for Libraries," *Library Journal* 35 (1910): 353; Arthur Maltby and Lindy Gill, *The Case for Bliss* (New York: K. G. Saur, 1979), 12.

³*Current Biography . . . 1953 Yearbook*, 76.

graphic Classification for the first time in *Library Journal* in August 1910, and refined and expanded it over the next forty-five years. Bliss wrote, in 1910, that "I will not call it a labor of love, for it is not lovely work, not a pleasant occupation, for it has displaced more congenial avocations; but I will say that it has been carried forward with somewhat of a sense of duty and an ideal of higher service."⁴

Bliss the man died in 1955. In an obituary, Ranganathan wrote that "Bliss in expressed embodied thought will continue to live in library literature and be a source of inspiration to successive generations of classificationists and students of science and arts of classification."⁵ Eugene Garfield has described Henry Bliss as "a true scholar. His goals and aspirations were different from those of Melvil Dewey, whom he certainly surpassed in intellectual ability, but by whom he was dwarfed in organizational ability and drive."⁶

As explained by Jack Mills,⁷ there are essentially five major principles of the original Bibliographic Classification: collocation, consensus, gradation, adaptability, and notation.

Bliss wrote, the "convenient collocation of kindred subjects and studies, systematically arranged upon a fundamental order of the sciences, is the special problem in classification for libraries."⁸ Thus, he spent years organizing a main class order which he felt brought together

⁴Bliss, "A Modern Classification for Libraries," 353.

⁵Quoted in S. R. Gunjal, "Henry Evelyn Bliss," *Herald of Library Science* 8 (1969): 310.

⁶Eugene Garfield, "The 'Other' Immortal," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 49 (1974): 291.

⁷Jack Mills, "Bibliographic Classification," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, ed. Allen Kent et al., vol. 2 (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1969), 368-380.

⁸Bliss, "A Modern Classification for Libraries," 351.

related classes the best way. It should be noted that, although BC2 is in some ways very different from the original BC, the second edition is founded on essentially the same main class order, which is a tribute to the great time, care, and thought that Bliss took in laying out the system.

Part of that care and thought was based on what Bliss referred to as the scientific and educational consensus. Topics should be collocated and placed in classes not according to the whim of the person who devises the classification system, but according to the standards set by scientists and educators. Using the example of mythology and folklore, which the scientific consensus had come to believe was a branch of Anthropology, Bliss wrote:

The librarian who would continue to classify them as appendages of theological literature, in accordance with two leading American systems, will lose the respect of the student who scans his arrangement on the shelves. Not only should librarianship apprehend the movement of science, but our libraries should embody it, so far as is feasible, in the classification of books for the convenience and edification of readers.⁹

These scientifically arrived at classes are graded; i.e., the orders subordinate the specific to the general.

For the collocation purposes of individual libraries, the BC contains numerous provisions for alternative locations. Whole classes may be moved, or, within classes, the citation order may be altered. Some examples provided by Mills include moving Constitutional Law from Political Science to Law, or dividing Literature by Period and then Form or vice versa.¹⁰ This is an aspect of the BC that has particularly appealed to small and special libraries, who can tailor the system.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Mills, "Bibliographic Classification," 374.

within limits, to suit their special needs. Aside from alternative locations, BC2 also provides for alternative treatments, where users may alter the preferred syntax to meet the needs of their particular library. For example, as Alan Thomas has explained, "in Class J, Education, the recommended syntax is Person taught subdivided by the Curriculum, but if desired in a particular collection the arrangement could be Curriculum subdivided by Person taught."¹¹

Henry Bliss had strong feelings regarding notation; at one point he argued that automobile license plates should begin with, and contain more, letters since letters are easier to see and remember.¹² Thus, it is no surprise that the BC has essentially an alphabetic notation, which Bliss felt should be kept brief. Because he went into great detail in his schedules and took great care with the entire arrangement, Bliss believed that the average BC classmark should not need more than three letters.¹³

In his notation, Bliss also attempted to work in, when it did not interfere with collocation, mnemonic devices; for example, HH for human hygiene, PEP for happiness and pleasures, and PET for passions (!).¹⁴ Bliss also included some unorthodox and, in the words of Mills, "ungainly symbols" in his notation, including lower-case letters, the ampersand (&), the

¹¹Alan R. Thomas, "Bliss Bibliographic Classification 2nd Edition: Principal Features and Applications," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1992): 15.

¹²Henry Evelyn Bliss, *The Organization of Knowledge in Libraries*, 2nd ed. (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1939), 53.

¹³Bliss, "A Modern Classification for Libraries," 352.

¹⁴Elton E. Shell, "The Use of Henry E. Bliss' Bibliographic Classification at the Southern California School of Theology," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 5 (1961): 293.

apostrophe (‘), and the percent sign (%).¹⁵ Bliss himself never explained how these symbols should be filed.

It seems that one either hates or loves the BC--it has been subject to both praise and ridicule. It has been pointed out that the BC schedules favor America and “give some emphasis to United States viewpoints or systems.”¹⁶ A. C. Foskett has shown that Bliss’ desire for brief notation has at times interfered with collocation: “General works on the history of the Caroline period (1625-1649) will be separated from individual authors of the period . . . ; between Shakespeare and his contemporaries there is a great gulf fixed. . . .”¹⁷ Of course, that can also be said of both the Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress classification systems.

Other criticisms of the BC, aside from the aforementioned “ungainly symbols,” include the “lack of provision for many topics . . . uneven provision . . . incomplete or inconsistent analysis . . . inconsistent provision for synthesis . . . and a poor general index.”¹⁸ Since Bliss’ science schedules were created in 1940, they clearly became dated.¹⁹ While many consider the BC’s alternative locations to be a great advantage, it has been observed that this might encourage some librarians to make *any* changes they want, thereby destroying any possibility of having a

¹⁵Mills, “Bibliographic Classification,” 374.

¹⁶Maltby and Gill, 27.

¹⁷A. C. Foskett, *The Subject Approach to Information*, 4th ed. (Hamden, CT: Linnet Books, 1982), 376-377.

¹⁸Anthony G. Curwen. “Revision of Classification Schemes,” *Journal of Librarianship* 10 (1978): 29-30.

¹⁹Maltby and Gill, 35.

standard bibliographic classification system.²⁰

In the words of Jack Mills, the most serious weakness of the BC is its "failure to observe strictly the fundamental rule of classification, which is to apply one principle of division only at a time and to exhaust it before applying another"--in other words, its lack of use of facet analysis.²¹ Nevertheless, Mills wrote that "the BC is without a doubt the best general classification we have."²² Aside from its flexibility, brief classmarks, and main class order, Elton Shell observed in 1961 that, unlike Dewey, an advantage of the BC is that "it is not slanted toward any particular religion or socio-economic group."²³

Henry Bliss' death in 1955 did not put an end to the BC. In 1967, the School Library Association published the *Abridged Bliss Classification* (ABC), and BC2, under the guiding hand of Jack Mills, began being published in 1977. Altogether, the most reliable estimates indicate that over fifty U.K. libraries use, or have used, the BC; forty U.K. schools have used or use BC or ABC; and thirty institutions outside Britain have used or use some version of BC.²⁴ It is not presently used in the United States.²⁵ Some prominent British users of the Bibliographic Classification are the Department of Health and Social Security; the Office of Population and

²⁰Ibid., 26.

²¹Mills, "Bibliographic Classification," 377.

²²Ibid., 379.

²³Shell, 296.

²⁴Maltby and Gill, 121.

²⁵Alan R. Thomas, "Bliss Classification Update," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 19, no. 3/4 (1995): 115.

Census; the Tavistock Joint Library; Kings College, Cambridge; and Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge.²⁶ BC2's schedules "are often consulted in respect of vocabulary and structure by compilers of other classifications and thesauri."²⁷

Unlike the first edition, BC2 has adopted S. R. Ranganathan's principle of facet analysis, and can thus provide even more detailed classification; within each facet, terms are grouped into subsets called arrays.²⁸ "The detail and precision which can be achieved, taken overall, go far beyond anything in DDC or LCC--somewhere between the medium and full levels of UCD, perhaps."²⁹ While BC2 has kept most of Bliss' main order and the alternative provisions, Mills has discarded the lower-case letters and "ungainly symbols." BC2 has also reorganized the Anterior Numeral Classes, providing a place for, among other things, the usually problematic interdisciplinary works.³⁰

The use of facet analysis for precise classification, however, has lengthened the classmarks. An example is for the book *Directory of whole-time hospital chaplains . . . in Great Britain*: the DDC number is 362.10425; the BC2 classmark, taken to its fullest extreme, is QER EMB XPS E3F DQ3J.³¹ It is no surprise, therefore, that Mills recommends using a shorter

²⁶Jack Mills, "Attention Please, for BC2!" *International Classification* 10 (1983): 25.

²⁷Thomas, "Bliss Classification Update," 115.

²⁸Thomas, "Bliss Bibliographic Classification 2nd Edition," 8.

²⁹Curwen, 35.

³⁰Maltby and Gill, 64-65; Foskett, 383; Mills, "Attention Please," 24; "ZNR JB on 025.434 or, A Blissful View of Those Damned Decimals," *Library Association Record* 85 (1983): 109.

³¹Curwen. 36.

classmark for shelving purposes and the full classmarks for classified catalogs and bibliographies.³²

Like its predecessor, BC2 has received both high praise and criticism. In reviewing the first four volumes, Norman Roberts hailed it as:

[A] major bibliographic classification, soundly based on literary warrant and reflecting modern classificatory principles and practices to an extent which renders it technically superior, at all levels, to its main competitors, the Dewey and Library of Congress schemes and, probably, in most respects, to the Universal Decimal Classification.³³

The fact that it is being published in parts, as they are completed, will allow for fairly easy revision--individual classes could be revised without having to republish the entire system. Mills believes, however, that little revision will have to be done:

The incorporation of new concepts will in the great majority of cases be a question of recognising the existing facet and array to which it belongs, and this process is considerably eased by the fact that in every class the facets and arrays are clearly and explicitly articulated.³⁴

Nevertheless, BC2 has been criticized for being published in parts, its long classmarks, its general layout, including small type, cheap paper, and typos, and for the use of intercalators because of insufficient notation to cover all the facets and auxiliary schedules.³⁵ Until the entire classification is completed, libraries will be hesitant to switch to BC2. As Alan Thomas has pointed out, "Publication of the entire set of volumes will enable general libraries to evaluate the

³²Ibid., 35.

³³Norman Roberts, review of *Bliss Bibliographic Classification, Second Edition . . .*, in *Catalogue & Index*, no. 46 (1977): 5.

³⁴J. Mills and Vanda Broughton, *Bliss Bibliographic Classification, Second Edition, Introduction and Auxiliary Schedules*, 14.

³⁵Ross Trotter, "Correspondence," *Catalogue & Index*, no. 47 (1977): 7-8.

system in the light of their requirements."³⁶

The general trend during the past two decades has been to LCC or DDC, either through libraries reclassifying on their own or being absorbed by other libraries. The preponderance of cooperative library systems calls for uniformity. Several libraries have abandoned Bliss, including the University of Otago (New Zealand), which had adopted the BC in 1936, the Ibadan University Library (Nigeria), and even CCNY, which switched to LCC in 1968.³⁷

An important factor which has hampered the spread of the Bibliographic Classification, and which has caused many libraries to give it up, is that BC classmarks are not included in LC or British Library MARC records. The British Library at one time considered it, but economic constraints prevented it; LC has likewise refused.³⁸ Thus, in an age when most cataloging is copied from bibliographic utilities, the price to be paid for Bliss' precise classification would be original cataloging of every single item. The large amount of money needed to reclassify a library also has hindered the adoption of the BC: "Dubious marginal benefits set against the certainty of heavy costs are enough to convince most librarians of the unwisdom, if not impossibility, of change."³⁹

What then is one to make of the Bibliographic Classification of Henry Bliss and Jack

³⁶Alan R. Thomas, "Bliss Regained: The Second Edition of the Bliss Bibliographic Classification," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 67 (Mar. 1993): 57.

³⁷Maltby and Gill, 131; K. G. B. Bakewell, *Classification and Indexing Practice* (Hamden, CT: Linnet Books, 1978), 91.

³⁸Foskett, 387; Garfield, 291; Maltby and Gill, 131; Bakewell, 86, 91.

³⁹Roberts, 6. Roberts refers to the movement from Dewey to LCC as "the belief that one bad classification is better than another bad classification" (ibid.).

Mills? Paradoxically, it has been highly praised, yet seldom used, "a classification scheme more honoured in textbooks and theory than in libraries."⁴⁰ Many who have used it, including school and special libraries, have sworn by it. Although economics and the overwhelming acceptance of (or complacency with?) Dewey and LCC will prevent the acceptance of Bliss, in the words of A. C. Foskett, "One thing does seem certain: many library schools will use it as an example of what a good general classification ought to look like!"⁴¹

Due to the overwhelming use of DDC and LCC, one can only wonder what the answer to Henry Bliss' question, asked rhetorically in 1910, is,

whether the librarian in America has dignified his profession properly in the eyes of the learned to whom he is beholden, whether the custodian and distributor of books has reared those living monuments into as stately an edifice of Thought as the architect has erected from the inert elements assigned to his disposal.⁴²

Many would answer, "No," yet the complacency continues. As Foskett has commented regarding BC2, "There is no doubt that the scheme *deserves* to succeed, but we live in a harsh world, where success tends to go to the successful rather than to the deserving. . . ."⁴³

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Foskett, 388.

⁴²Bliss, "A Modern Classification for Libraries," 351.

⁴³Foskett, 387.

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