Mansell Revisited

Now forgotten, the ambitious National Union Catalog was once hailed as the greatest bibliographic feat in history

by Danelle Hall

It cost more to publish than it did to build the Metropolitan Toronto Public Library. It took almost as long to complete as it did to build the Brooklyn Bridge 100 years earlier. Described at its inception as the greatest bibliographic feat in history, the 20th anniversary of its completion went unnoticed in 1981; at that time, Art Plotnik lamented in the September 1981 American Libraries, “Can it be the biggest library news in 15 years is falling between the cracks?” And recently, when I suggested to a young librarian that he check Mansell for an older elusive title, he responded, “What’s Mansell?” Without doubt our profession is changing; but have we moved so far toward the future that we are losing track of major resources from the past?

Several years ago, someone forwarded to me via e-mail a description of a wonderful new device. “Major Technological Breakthrough,” the e-mail announced. “Introducing the new Bio-Optic Organized Knowledge device, trade-named BOOK. BOOK is a revolutionary breakthrough in technology: no wires, no electric circuits, no batteries, nothing to be connected or switched on.”

The description continued for several paragraphs, including comments on OPT (Opaque Paper Technology) and praise of two very useful accessories, the Portable Erasable Nib Cryptic Intercommunication Language Stylus (PENCILS) and BOOKmark.

To me, that wry and humorous description of BOOK in computerese captures the ambivalent feelings our profession is grappling with as we incorporate our changing professional landscape into our knowledge of how things worked in the past. Is it important that everyone know about Mansell? Not really. Is it essential that library education put our future librarians in contact with the important sources from the past? Without a doubt. Even more important, our future librarians need to know that once upon a time our profession dreamed a grand dream and made it happen.

So just what, exactly, is Mansell?

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Millions of catalog cards were photographed for The National Union Catalog, Pre-1956 Imprints.

The complete title of this bibliographic wonder describes its purpose and scope: The National Union Catalog, Pre-1956 Imprints: A Cumulative Author List Representing Library of Congress Printed Cards and Titles Reported by Other American Libraries, Compiled and Edited with the Cooperation of the Library of Congress and the National Union Catalog Subcommittee of the Resources Committee of the Resources and Technical Services Division, American Library Association.

No wonder common usage has shortened the name to the Mansell Catalog, or simply Mansell, after its publisher, Mansell Information/Publishing Ltd.

The chronology of Mansell’s conception and execution began with the acceptance in the late 1880s of uniform catalog cards as a norm for libraries across the United States. Its gestation continued as our own professional history unfolded. Its birth was possible when a company in Great Britain developed an automated camera for filming the catalog of the British Museum.

□ In 1901, the Library of Congress began its union catalog project by obtaining copies of the catalogs of major libraries, including New York Public Library, the Boston Library, Harvard University Library, and the John Crerar Library. These records were added to its own catalog and arrangements made to receive updates.
□ By 1926, the file contained over 2 million cards.
□ From 1926 to 1932, “Project B,” funded by a grant...
from John D. Rockefeller Jr., added over 6 million records to the growing union reference catalog in an attempt to locate at least one copy of every important book in American libraries and register its location.

- From 1932 to 1943, the Library of Congress added an additional 3 million records.
- LC placed depository sets of these union catalog cards in selected research libraries, but this was labor-intensive and expensive. Researchers still had to travel to a site that had the card sets.
- In 1946 the first book catalog of these records was published. Book catalogs—a format that has since been abandoned by American libraries—were within the budgets of many libraries and were widely distributed.
- In the mid-1960s, the American Library Association decided to cumulate the pre-1956 imprints into a single alphabet to assist and simplify research.
- Two requests for bids were sent out before ALA and LC received a proposal that they felt met the needs of the library community to create this cumulation. Great Britain's Mansell Information/Publishing Ltd., the company that had created the British Museum catalog, received the contract in 1967.

It took Mansell 14 years to publish the 754 volumes of the Mansell Catalog. When completed, the project cost over $34 million and contained 528,000 pages of text. The complete set consumes around 130 linear feet of shelving space. Approximately five volumes of 600 to 700 pages per volume were published each month for each of those 14 years.

A cargo of cards
In order to meet Mansell's very ambitious publishing schedule, 20 to 30 LC cataloger/editors—first under the leadership of Johannes Dewton until his retirement in 1975 and then under David Alan Smith—edited, proofed, and massaged 20,000 library cards each week. Every Friday afternoon the mailroom staff raced to the airport to catch Pan Am Flight 106 from Washington to London and send 20,000 proofed, corrected, and edited library cards winging across the Atlantic. This operation was performed 603 times throughout the project. Deputy Librarian of Congress William J. Welsh, writing in the September 1981 American Libraries, said, "Not only was this shipping cycle carried out over 600 times, but not a card was lost."

The editing of the project was quite complex since the bibliographic entries represented the work of so many libraries. These libraries had created their catalogs over a period of more than 100 years—a span that saw changes in librarians, changes in internal procedures, and changes in cataloging rules.

The February 23, 1967, Library of Congress Information Bulletin described the steps that the editors had to perform to clean up the bibliographic records, 20,000 times a week for 603 weeks: "Editing will consist of the combination of multiple reports for the same title into a single uniform entry, the revision of incorrect or ambiguous entries, the preparation of necessary cross-references and added entries, the retyping of cards not reproducible by photographic techniques, the addition of location symbols in a standardized format, the assignment of a unique identification number for each book, and several proofreading steps."

In a process characterized in Welsh's 1981 article as "From Mess to Miracle," the editors not only had to go through the alphabet once creating the original 685 volumes; they then had to repeat the process to create...
the 69-volume supplement that listed all of the additional titles found and identified over the course of the project.

Frances Kennedy, my own library director at Oklahoma City University at the beginning of the Mansell project, was one of 1,350 directors in the United States and abroad who believed in the value of the effort so much that they made great financial sacrifices to continue purchasing the volumes as they came out over the 14-year period. It took most of the book budget of our medium-sized private-university library every year from 1968 to 1981 in order to purchase our set.

Like any dyed-in-the-wool librarian, Kennedy kept a file of brochures, correspondence, invoices, and other ephemera relating to the Mansell project. These bits and pieces of daily work have now become a history that gives a glimpse of what it must have been like to see this incredible project come to fruition.

From her file, an advertising brochure from Mansell (3 Bloomsbury Place, London WC1A 2QA, England) proclaims, "What can one say about ... the bibliographic wonder of the world? Words such as monumental and invaluable cannot be used lightly; but if any publication merits their use, The National Union Catalog, Pre-1956 Imprints undoubtedly does." A small footnote at the bottom of the brochure suggests that Mansell borrowed these wonderfully extravagant words of praise from a review by J. R. Lowe in the June 1969 Australian Library Journal.

Mansell correspondence from March 1968, on thin onionskin paper and individually typewritten, offers the first set of 60 volumes at $873, a cost of $13.30 per volume plus $75 shipping and handling. The next 60 volumes would cost $23 apiece.

**Mansell's burden**

Kennedy’s file contains letters expressing with grave British reserve regret at being forced to increase the per-volume cost, which the company had to do from time to time. The firm’s initial cost estimates had been much too low for them to break even, much less realize a profit. The full cost of the project was borne by Mansell. The company even paid the salaries of the LC card editors on the other side of the Atlantic. In a transcription of a tape from a London meeting that was later published in the January 1970 Catalogue and Index, Mansell Chair John Commander discussed the financial side of the massive—and in his words, nightmarish—project: “Neither the Library of Congress, nor any branch of the U.S. Federal Government, has been prepared to finance any part of this project, from the initial accumulation of the National Union Catalog to its present phase of publication. Although LC is carrying out the editorial work and have recruited the staff to do it, it is we who are paying their salaries, and the whole project is financed by us.”

The Mansell Company was hard hit by the energy crisis of the mid-1970s. In one of their newsletters that Kennedy kept, the company speaks of having electricity only three days out of the week. Their work on the other days had to occur during hours when natural light was available and the temperature in the building was not too extreme. In 1974, the company proudly announced the publication of volumes 300–304, probably thinking that they had reached the halfway mark in the project.

**Dust-gathering dinosaur**

Oklahoma City University and, I am sure, many other libraries across the United States now have all 754 volumes of “the greatest single instrument of bibliographical control in existence” (to quote from a sales brochure). It is a dinosaur, both in its size and its obsolescence. Even as the project progressed, the profession recognized that this “greatest single instrument” would be the last great bibliographic effort in a paper format. Library Literature has not used the heading “National Union Catalog” since 1994. Our set gathers dust in the library’s technical services area.

At the time of Mansell’s completion in 1981, it was estimated that 80% of its entries were not duplicated by the online network catalogs. Time, of course, has moved on and online resources now are far more extensive than 23 years ago. An admittedly very limited spot check of some Mansell entries in WorldCat revealed that every title I searched for was available in electronic format. It would seem that the primary value of this grand publishing venture may now be the history it provides of an bygone era.

Progress has swept us on toward better research solutions, but the Mansell Catalog, created by dedicated people on two sides of an ocean and at great cost in effort, money, and time, bears testimony to our profession’s stubborn reverence for BOOK, that device “constructed of sequentially numbered sheets of paper, (recyclable), each capable of holding thousands of bits of information.”

We can only hope that the new librarians, the future of our profession, will not be too quick to leave BOOK behind, but will remember that “BOOK may be taken up at any time and used merely by opening it. BOOK never crashes or requires rebooting, though like other display devices it can become unusable if dropped overboard.”

It would seem that the primary value of this grand publishing venture may now be primarily in the history it provides of a bygone era.