Last of the Monumental Book Catalogs
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Last of the MONUMENTAL book catalogs

by William J. Welsh
Deputy Librarian of Congress

A n estimated 610 volumes to be published over 10 years! "The most massive venture in catalog publication!" "All research libraries will need this monumental bibliographic tool!"

This kind of excitement issued from the library and scholarly communities in 1967, when publication of the pre-1956 portion of the National Union (card) Catalog was announced. Now, 14 years later, we are finally celebrating the completion of this remarkable endeavor, and to see more than 750 completed volumes in all their acid-free, permanent durable, green buckram glory is an exciting moment, indeed.

Celebrations are rare in our world of bibliography, probably because our ambitions are so high and our projects so costly. The completion of this particular project achieves a dream—and a price tag—without parallel. But because technology has changed faster than any of us had thought possible, our celebration has a certain ambivalence; for NUC, Pre-1956 is probably the last mammoth-scale, non-automated bibliographic project that will be undertaken.

This landmark event, then, provides us with an excellent opportunity to examine where we have come from, where we are, and where we are headed in bibliographic control of the nation’s library holdings.

Those were the days!
The spectacular cooperative endeavor we celebrate is rooted in the development of standardized cataloging rules and a uniform-size catalog card in the last decade of the 19th...
In December, the final volume of the National Union Catalog, Pre-1956 Imprints will mark the end of an epic adventure—and of massive printed bibliographies.

In 1948 the union catalog was designated the National Union Catalog, officially blessing what Herbert Putnam had declared in 1901. Publication of the national union catalog in book form was already an idea whose time had come, even if the means were not yet available. But the vigorous flow of incoming cards and the swelling of the catalog accommodating them were causing no little concern.

In the early 1950s, ALA gave LC a major boost in its catalog planning when it established a new subcommittee on the National Union Catalog headed by Frederick H. Wagman. A great deal of hard work and publishing activity ensued. One result was the division of the national union catalog empire into two parts, with the year 1956 the dividing line. Works published in 1955 or earlier constituted one part. The portion representing 1956 and later imprints was now to be edited for publication by the LC’s Catalog Publication Division. Known as the National Union Catalog, this portion has been appearing on a regular basis: monthly or quarterly issues with various annual and quinquennial accumulations.

With the 1956 and later imprints provided for, the pre-1956 portion, called the “retrospective NUC,” was maintained and added to as before, but its publication was still on a distant horizon.

We librarians are a persistent lot, however. The breakthroughs in the 1950s in cataloging and bibliographical control of current acquisitions, along with the demonstrated value of the post-1956 NUC in book form, made the need to edit and publish the pre-1956 portion increasingly evident. Librarians throughout the country agreed (imagine!) that an effective bibliographical apparatus was essential for older as well as for current titles.

In 1959 the ALA subcommittee on the National Union...
Amazing, incredible, astounding facts and figures

Theft-proof! One set consists of 754 volumes totaling almost three tons. A thief sneaking out one volume every day would need two years and 24 days to complete the job, by which time he would suffer excruciating back pain and be well known by his grimace.

The volumes have been published at an average rate of about 4.8 per month from Oct. 1968 to date. Come Dec. 1981, the total gestation period will have been 13 years and 2 months, a span during which 7½ elephants or 2,054 rabbits can be born to the same busy elephant or rabbit mother.

The peak number of editors working together on the catalog at the Library of Congress equals the total of all the starters, head coaches, and governors of the Atlantic Division, National Basketball Association, or 35.

Given a large enough set of scales, with all 1,131,000 volumes on one tray, it would take 45 full-grown blue whales, 100 tons each, to tip the balance.

The 754 volumes of one set take up 125 linear feet of shelving. Thrown from the first volume toward the last, the world-record shot-put would reach only to volume 423.

The number of author entries exceeds 11 million—more than the OCLC, RLIN, and WLN databases combined (discounting duplicated network records). Only one city in the world, Shanghai, has about as many people as the NUC, Pre-1956 has entries.

Catalog decided to sponsor a pilot project to edit for publication all cards with imprint dates of 1952–55, inclusive. They succeeded in obtaining the necessary funds, and the project, with Johannes L. Dewton as supervisor and editor, was completed in 1961. The result was a 30-volume catalog and clear indication that the entire pre-1956 segment could be published. From then on, the affair got serious; the flirting was over and the engagement announced.

**ALA, LC, and Mansell get rolling**

In 1963 the ALA subcommittee agreed to work toward the publication of the entire older portion of the national union catalog. For starters, ALA and LC signed a formal agreement in June 1964. ALA would procure funds to enable LC to edit the catalog for publication. In December 1964, subcommittee chair Gordon Williams of the Center for Research Libraries reported that several publishers were interested in bidding for the right to publish the pre-1956 portion in book form and were prepared to advance the editorial and printing costs.

For the next two years the committee continued to discuss methods of publication, concluding that a book catalog was desirable even if the data was eventually to become available in machine-readable form as well. Invitations to bid went out, and after due consideration the subcommittee chose the bid of Mansell Information/Publishing Ltd. as the one providing the lowest selling price and the most satisfactory format. Mansell agreed to pay all costs and expenses of publication and to underwrite, through ALA, the editorial work at the Library of Congress.

And how did this British firm get caught in “an American web of words” three thousand miles west of Oxford? John Cronin, in helping to launch the third edition of the Union List of Serials, had become acquainted in London with Mansell Publishing and in particular with one John Commander. Mansell had experience in this field, having published among many works of interest to the library world the British Museum Catalogue of 1956. A Mansell-related company, working in optics during World War II, had developed certain camera techniques relevant to catalog publishing, techniques found useful for solving many of the problems posed by our massive work. The heart of the system involved the sensing of each card, best described as a shorthand instruction to the camera to film only portions of the card, not the entire card. Without the need for someone to handle each card individually, the filming could go very rapidly. In short, a workable system—not computer-based, but rapid and efficient—helped Mansell win the bidding.

So the bargain was struck, and ALA assumed the responsibility of overseeing all phases of the project through its subcommittee on the national union catalog.¹ The Library of Congress, not a direct party to the contract, was designated the editing agent. And after only one more major delay—to sort out various problems involving copyright, work was ready to begin.

¹Presently the ad hoc National Union Catalog Committee of the ALA Resources and Technical Services Division—and still chaired by Gordon Williams.
The total cost of the NUC, Pre-1956 project, excluding financing expenses, is some $34 million, more than it cost to build the five-story, 364,000-square-foot Metropolitan Toronto Library, one of the most splendid public library structures in North America. The publishers of NUC, Pre-1956 have now grossed as much as the movie Star Trek and more than Godfather II, but are barely breaking even. Sale of the remaining sets would bring in about $5 million, partly profits.

One 754-volume set contains some 528,000 pages. American Libraries, at its present rate of page output and with 50,000 pages in the bank, will need 679 years to catch up.

Of the approximately 1,356 sets subscribed to late, U.S. purchases account for some 913, or 67 percent. The Federal Republic of Germany has 80 subscribers, four more than does Canada. The German Democratic Republic, along with Iceland, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Fiji, China, and 15 other nations, has a single subscription.

Laid end to end, the total number of volumes manufactured by Mansell—1,131,000—would stretch 243 miles.

Early in 1967 a staff headed by Johannes Dewton, working under Cronin’s direction, began editing cards at LC.

Great expectations

The Library of Congress was to ship Mansell enough edited cards so that the publisher could crank out five volumes a month, each with 698 pages, a total of 610 volumes in 10 years. It is, when one thinks about it, remarkably fortunate that we started when we did. The darkening economic picture since 1967 would surely have diminished enthusiasm for such a venture—indeed it has made the completion of that venture problematic and excessively difficult for all parties.

Mansell Publishing was a relatively small part of a very large British concern known as the Bemrose Corporation, a venerable firm whose publishing interests date back to the days of the earliest British railroad timetables and whose other printing specialties include calendars and printed checks. The support provided by Bemrose throughout the project has been of major importance, since the catalog itself has yet to show a profit.

Mansell has borne an extraordinary financial burden. Here is but one example. In 1966, when cost projections were being made on both sides of the Atlantic, planners estimated a 10 percent increase in editors’ salaries over the entire 10-year span of the project, or about one percent a year. We all know the naiveté of that projection. The editorial costs associated exclusively with the work at the Library of Congress have thus far exceeded $12 million. The original $15-per-volume cost (some three times that now) seems as remote as the days of the penny postcard. That the overwhelming majority of the approximately 1,350 subscribers have continued to find funds as the costs have risen is a testimony to the catalog’s value.

But the late 1960s were, in hindsight, golden days, and we started with high hopes. The amazing thing—in retrospect—is how close the project held to the planned pattern, despite the difficulties, mostly unforeseen, that arose on practically every front.

From mess to miracle

Johannes Dewton headed the project until his retirement in 1975, when David A. Smith assumed the helm. And what did editing the catalog entail? A remarkable sifting through about 20 million cards that made up a catalog best described as overweight, unsightly, uncoordinated, and sluggish. It was an accumulation built around changing catalog codes and idiosyncratic schemes. Its entries varied tremendously in degree of completion and accuracy. Within the constraints of the money at hand and time available, the staff was to raise its level to that of a “well-edited catalog.”

The story, as David Smith has described it, is one of compromise, simplification, negotiation, and increasing flexibility. Once fully underway, the editorial process involved some
25 to 30 professional editors who systematically examined each card in trays of approximately 1,400 cards. Every editor felt the pressure of the project’s unyielding demand: that almost 20,000 finished cards be forwarded to Mansell every single week over an unbroken 14-year period. Only at this rate could the publisher honor its own commitment, to provide five printed volumes each month to each subscriber. The clock dominated the editorial process. Rarely was there a cushion of finished work. The real race against time was to make each Friday’s flight to London. Not only was this shipping cycle carried out over 600 times, but not a card was lost.

The editors, believe it or not, have twice marched through the alphabet. Editing on “main sequence” entries was finished in June 1979. Still to go were the three-and-one-quarter million cards that had accumulated since work began in 1967. The next and final leg of the journey was the production of a supplement to integrate these entries with those of the 685-volume main sequence. Following a plan designed by the project’s assistant head, Maria Laqueur, project editors began anew at Alpha during the last year of main sequence editing. The 69 volumes of the supplement will include newly received reports from contributing libraries, a multitude of added entries and references, and a register of added locations, designed specifically to augment the number of locations of the less widely held items in the main sequence. The project’s senior editors completed the last part of the supplement on Monday, Jan. 12, once again in time for Pan Am 106 to London.3

The frustrations of bibliographic work are like no other frustrations. Despite the obstacles I have mentioned (and others I would just as soon not mention!), the quality of work in the pre-1956 imprints catalog is high, and the publication has already proved to be even more useful than the planners had envisioned. The reason, and a great source of pride for each of us associated with this undertaking, is the project’s staff. They were a group of highly motivated men and women who somehow successfully contended with a unique set of trials, tribulations, and trays. We owe them our thanks.

Identify crises

The uses of the pre-1956 catalog are many and are still being discovered. For that matter, we know that its very existence is still being discovered. There is an educational task ahead. Like the “post-1956” portion of the NUC, the earlier portion greatly assists librarians in acquisitions, cataloging, bibliography, interlibrary loan, reference, and research. But its uses, present and potential, go far beyond the walls of any single institution, whether it be library, university, bookstore, or think-tank. As Gordon Williams commented in 1968 when the first volumes appeared, the publication of the retrospective volumes of the national union catalog vastly increases the historical and scholarly resources available for research in this country and around the world. Its publication enables “every library, wherever it is, to locate promptly and to provide its patrons with access to the millions of volumes it could never afford to acquire and house in its own collection.”

Although entries for pre-1956 imprints continue to flow in to LC, it is unlikely that any single, traditional publication will carry forward these imprints as a separate division of the bibliographical empire. Since late 1977, when the project stopped incorporating newly received reports into its pipeline, all such cards have been stored in a separately maintained file in LC’s Catalog Publication Division. No decisions have yet been made on how and where to publish the pre-1956 cards—that is, whether to mix them with the earlier entries, to maintain them as a separate section within each issue of the current NUC, or to publish them in some other recurring sequence under the current NUC umbrella.

The people who planned the catalog we celebrate had assumed that by now, 26 years after the 1955 cutoff date, the flow of pre-1956 cards would have ceased. How could they have estimated the catalog’s own role in stimulating further cataloging of backlogged pre-1956 material by participating libraries? How could they have known that the automation of cataloging would result in libraries submitting yet another generation of cards for a vast number of items already reported? Traffic in pre-1956 reports is still heavy; a large number of new titles still surface. So let the word go out: we need the help of librarians and scholars around the world to discover efficient ways to make this information available.

What shall follow “the last”?

If we agree that the pre-1956 imprint catalog represents the last of the monumental, traditional book catalogs, we must agree that many opportunities for cooperative efforts lie ahead. Future catalogs of this size, if there are any, will surely be issued either in microform only—as is likely for this catalog once the publisher’s remaining sets are subscribed—or in a register/index format. The Library of Congress, in fact, will turn to the register/index format for publication of the ongoing National Union Catalog. This will help us unify our publishing program, make efficient use of automation, and expand the coverage of the NUC to include many of the Library’s other existing book-catalog programs. For the all-encompassing plan, once adopted, will require the cooperation of many libraries as well as the bibliographic utilities. Given the fiscal restraint and limited resources of our times, we must continue to work together to make the National Union Catalog, in all its forms, a useful and an affordable product for all its users.

3 All the editors have now been transferred to new positions in the Library of Congress.