From *Légère Teinture* to Central Place: A Revaluation of Book and Library History Within Library and Information Science Programmes¹

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The author demonstrates that book and library history deserves a central place in library and information science programmes, but also that in order to obtain or keep this central place it needs to orient itself in a direction that is closer to the heart of what library and information science is about – the organization of knowledge and information-seeking behaviour. Book and library history can illustrate these processes and explain how they have developed in the past. Early phenomena of knowledge organization have to be studied in their broader contexts, and these contexts to a large extent cover the production, dissemination and consumption of books in the past. The main return that book history will get out of this process is that it will be more strongly integrated into academic teaching and research.

During a couple of beautiful September days in 2006, I paid a visit to the School of Library and Information Science in Lyon, the *École nationale supérieure des sciences de l'information et des bibliothèques* (ENSSIB). After an intense conversation with the director of the institute, Anne-Marie Bertrand, and with some of her staff members, we had lunch together in a little outdoor café. I continued to fire away questions about their vision and their way of working. One of my questions was how they justified the presence of courses about book and library history within their study programme. At that moment, they put down their knives and forks in amazement. When I explained that within the library and information science (LIS) curriculum in my own habitat, the University of Antwerp, the course on 'Evolution of books and libraries' was not exactly thought of as being a core subject, I was told by my hostess that courses about book history are an integral part of the ENSSIB curriculum. Lyon has always been an important centre for book publishing; it has its own *Musée de l'imprimerie*; the ENSSIB very actively takes part in the lectures organized by the *École de l'Institut d'Histoire du Livre*; and the *Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon*, that has been directed for years by the godfather of French book history, Henri-Jean Martin, is a treasury of book historical source materials.

It would be foolish, then, to avoid programming a book history course in the Lyon curriculum.² These arguments greatly satisfied me, and indeed the Lyon assets could easily be applied to Antwerp, with its significant role in the history of printing, its Plantin-Moretus Museum and its important city and university libraries. But the feeling remained that these arguments could only win over those people already convinced of the ‘good cause’.

The dangers of a self-evident character

In a lot of academic LIS programmes in Europe, book and library history is part of the curriculum in one form or another. This is excellent. People who hold management positions in libraries can be expected to know Gutenberg’s forty-two-line Bible and must have heard about the Index of prohibited books. The history of the book is part of the basic knowledge of all librarians, who will always be confronted at one time or another with questions about (old) books. But courses with book history as their subject matter are often conceived as merely giving an obligatory summary of ‘the traditions of information provision’, of which every information professional should have, as Voltaire would have put it, *une légère teinture*, a general overview. This is pernicious both for the field of book history *and* for library programmes. First of all, the danger exists that book history will become an isolated subject within the LIS programme. The lecturer will find that he has little in common with the teaching and research activities of his colleagues, who are involved with completely different things.³ What is more, he will be faced with difficulties to have his book history research considered as a representative part of his academic research unit; it will be out of the question that LIS students perform fundamental book history research within the framework of a Master’s thesis. By giving up the connection between teaching and research, book history courses will turn into dead matter, and will disappear entirely in the long run.

It is also important to consider the various ways in which LIS students react to a historical approach. Students who have a ‘traditional’ library career in mind — and who often have a previous degree in the humanities — will be inclined to appreciate a history course because of its narrative nature or its reassuring features, especially compared to course contents that seem less accessible to them, e.g., ICT-related material. On the other hand, students who already have a degree in (natural) sciences might find the completely different approach to the course material problematic, and it is not unlikely that they will question the relevance of the history course because it is so different from their way of thinking and studying.

Finally, now that library and information work gradually shifts away from the concept of physical books and ‘paper’ libraries, wrong conclusions can — and will — easily be drawn: why do we need book history when books are merely historical remains of a past technology and when library work is much more about reference to digital information than about actual holdings of printed collections? In the end, the ‘natural’, self-evident character of book and library history within LIS programmes might cause its demise in the future. In other words, if book and library history wants to keep its place within an LIS curriculum, it needs to be revalued.

In the following pages, I will go more deeply into the close link that book history has always had with the practice of librarianship, and point to the contribution that a background in book history can make to the heritage policy of libraries. I especially want to show that book history can be a structural part of an LIS programme, and that it can contribute to a better understanding of the core of 'library and information science'. These considerations can serve to justify in a more convincing way the presence of book historical subject matter in an LIS programme, and they can also assist in letting a lecturer decide which topics to emphasize in his book history course.

Librarians and book history

Book history has largely been brought to life by librarians. The daily, often passionate contact with old books raised questions about their provenance, about the origin of book printing, and the history of publishing houses and libraries. Admittedly, the current flourishing of book history is mainly to be attributed to developments that have taken place outside the realm of libraries, such as the emergence of new trends within the field of cultural history. Many of the first book historians, however, were professionally active in the library field. In a certain sense, the daily contact with the most important source material (the books themselves) vouched for the quality of their research. Apart from the question as to whether librarians should apply themselves to book history nowadays, it is clear that they are the guardians of its primary source material and therefore should be informed about the different movements and traditions that dominate current book historical research. They have to know, for instance, that every provenance mark is useful for those researching the history of reading, and that a damaged duplicate of an old book might be worth keeping because it still contains different traces of use, which could possibly tell something more about the way the book was used in the past.⁴

Only very few libraries contain nothing but early printed collections. Most of them are also — and often predominantly — research or public libraries. In those types of libraries, attention is mainly paid to current books or to scientific journals, to new information carriers and to granting access to external information sources. However, only a few of these libraries do not hold special collections. Therefore, if an academic LIS curriculum aims at training professionals at a management and policy-making level, it also has to provide them with the necessary instruments to make the right decisions in a special collections context. A good understanding of book history can have implications for collection building, cataloguing, public relations, and of course for preservation and conservation matters. It provides resources to face a series of questions related to library management: what is the core collection of our library? How can we expand this core collection and how much are we prepared to pay for it? Which collections should be given priority during a cataloguing project, and how in-depth should we catalogue? What is really unique or rare in our collection? What items can we show off in an exhibition without losing our credibility with the experts? What parts of the collection are given priority when we trace out our security and conservation plan? Why are our nineteenth-century books more threatened in their existence than our post-incunabula? In order to be able to find adequate answers to these and other

policy questions, a good understanding of the multifaceted history of the book is a *conditio sine qua non*.

Book history and information science

What is the core of the discipline that is commonly described as Library and Information Science? For an answer to this question, I gladly refer to Leif Lørring, the former rector of the Royal School of Library and Information Science in Copenhagen. In his article on the construction of a curriculum for library and information studies, Lørring argues in favour of a binding concept that connects all courses offered within the programme. This agent can be useful to give the multidisciplinary programme a clear image, and to explain to future students what they can expect when they enrol in the programme. On top of that, it causes the lecturers and researchers working in different fields to relate more to each other's work. But the main benefit of this approach lies in the fact that basic theories within the LIS curriculum are visited repeatedly and in different forms, in which the acquired knowledge is transmitted to related ideas and phenomena. From this point of view, the basic concepts forming the thread of the curriculum are not only useful for marketing library and information studies or for the encouragement of regular contacts between the staff involved in teaching and research: they also provide a considerable didactical added value.⁵

According to Lørring, the concept of 'knowledge organization' constitutes the basis of Library and Information Science, and more specifically 'the user-oriented organization of knowledge and the close connection of the field to information seeking behaviour and retrieval'. Libraries and related institutions basically do the following: structure the information that is registered in documents with the purpose of preserving it in a more functional way; make it retrievable; put the information at the disposal of those looking for it; and, derived from all this, develop efficient strategies for the retrieval of information. In view of the above, much can definitely be learned from earlier methods of knowledge organization. An insight into older systems of information control helps to understand current systems and the reasons why they were developed. In this sense, a historical approach to the concept of 'knowledge organization' is complementary to mathematical, social, juridical, and technological approaches.

The examples of early systems of information control are countless. We talk about bibliographies (universal or thematic, current or retrospective, enumerative or critical), library catalogues, and library interiors,⁶ and we can even extend the scope to specific types of publication that focused strongly on structured knowledge preservation and transmission, such as encyclopaedias, bibliographies, dictionaries, and other early reference works. It is in those historical phenomena that early systems of knowledge organization have taken shape.

A correct assessment of these phenomena goes much further than the individualized study of it. Behind every publication and institution, a historical context is always hidden, and this context coincides to a large extent with the wide field of book history as it has been portrayed in Darnton's well-known communications circuit. An explicit emphasis on the information-scientific aspects of book and library history therefore does not exclude that one simultaneously discusses the

production, dissemination and consumption of the book in the past. A few examples can clarify this.

National bibliography

Assembling a national bibliography is traditionally considered to be one of the main tasks of national libraries, and usually goes hand in hand with a form of national legal deposit: the obligatory deposit of one or more copies of a publication in the national library leads to its description in the national bibliography. In order to understand this practice and to judge its value (the concept of a 'national' bibliography is occasionally up for discussion in our globalized world), a good understanding of the history of national libraries is a basic requirement. How did national libraries come into being? Which considerations motivated mandatory legal deposit? How did censorship relate to the concept of legal deposit? When we want to answer the questions that touch upon the essence of the phenomenon of '(universal) bibliographical control', one cannot ideally do without a thorough introduction to the history of books and libraries.

Auction catalogues

It is generally known that book auction catalogues are an important source for the study of private libraries. For a long time, the most prestigious auction catalogues have served as sources of inspiration for the development of smaller private libraries, as a means of becoming acquainted with the second-hand book market, and as heuristic instruments. Studying this type of publications also clarifies how systems of formal structuring and content structuring came into being and developed gradually through the expertise of famous booksellers such as Gabriel Martin, Prosper Marchand and Guillaume-François de Bure into the so-called 'système des libraires de Paris'.⁷ It reached its peak with the nineteenth-century system by Jacques-Charles Brunet, who described it in his *Manuel du libraire et de l'amateur de livres*. The latter system is said to have laid the groundwork for Dewey's decimal classification system. If we want to understand the early bibliographic systems that were adopted in book auction catalogues, it is very important to pay attention to the historical context. Auction catalogues were primarily commercial documents. Initially, their basic classifications were designed to get a handle on the large number of books offered for sale, to let the auction take place in an orderly fashion, and to gather people who were interested in a specific part of the auctioned library at one and the same moment in time, so that they could outbid one another. In other words, a good understanding of early systems of knowledge organization presupposes an insight into the book historical context — in this case the 'long life of the book' in early modern Europe and the consequent success of the second-hand book trade.⁸

Library interiors

Similar systems of content structuring are not only to be found in library catalogues. Often, they have also left traces in the decoration of library interiors. One of the

many examples is the interior of the library of Leiden University at the beginning of the seventeenth century, as it is depicted in a well-known engraving by Willem van Swanenburgh after Jan Cornelisz. van 't Woudt (*ca.* 1610).⁹ On top of every bookcase, inscriptions indicate under which bibliographic category the books in that case are classified. To fully grasp the meaning of this picture, one has to be familiar with the rules that governed the oldest institutional libraries. The most striking feature for present-day library users is that the books were chained to the lecterns because they had to be consulted on the spot. Discussing similar pictures can also be a good occasion to familiarize students with the widespread practice of private persons bequeathing their books and entire collections to institutional libraries. Up until the nineteenth century, most European institutional libraries relied on bequests from the deceased to expand their collections, and were only very rarely capable of conducting an active acquisition policy. This in turn explains why scholars were practically forced to build their own private collections if they wanted to keep a close track on the recent scientific developments of their time.

Typography

Up until now, we have only discussed some systems invented in the past to control a large supply of printed documents. We can go even further and discuss the actual books stacked so neatly in private or public libraries. A (printed) book can be considered as, among other things, a system in which a text is structured by means of typographic tools. Chapters and paragraphs — recognizable by ornamental initials, typographical ornaments, indents, or a white line — install a hierarchy in the entire book. The use of different letter varieties gives the text a rhythm, draws attention to specific text fragments, can point to different languages or to another text category. Marginal notes, set in a smaller size than the main text, refer to other texts in the same volume or in other books. Running heads and pagination are the most current means to guide the reader through the book. Illustrations clarify the content and illuminate the book. The title page and the colophon enable the reader to identify the author and the printer or publisher, and also to refer unambiguously to that particular book. The table of contents and the index guide the reader through the book corpus as well.¹⁰

One could point out that the structuring of the book is, strictly speaking, unrelated to the techniques that printers have had at their disposal in the past. But all those who have ever stood in front of the printer's drawer in the Antwerp Plantin-Moretus Museum, and then saw the very complicated structure of a page in Christopher Plantin's so-called Polyglot Bible (8 volumes, 1568–1573) displayed a couple of rooms further on, cannot but admire the artisans who managed to create such a clear typography with so little means; they will also understand what limitations typesetters were confronted with in the past. The way in which books were structured was not only a result of the skills of the person creating the design, but also of the technical means that were at the disposal of the printer at a certain moment in time. To fully understand how content was organized in an early printed book, an insight into the history of typography is a prerequisite. From which time onwards did one succeed in combining text and illustrations without trouble? Why did one start using sidenotes or footnotes at a certain moment in time? What did it

mean to use different typefaces in a book? How did the printer succeed — time and again — in placing the running heads at the same distance from the textblock, so that every reader would understand perfectly that this line of text was not to be read again and again, but only served the purpose of orientation? If it is true that ‘the typographic page is a map of the mind’,¹¹ then it is definitely recommendable — in the context of LIS programmes — to research how this ‘cartographical’ task was carried out in the past.

The examples above show that an LIS approach of book and library history does not necessarily have to lead to one-sidedness or to a narrowing of its scope. By determining a couple of well-chosen angles, it is possible to give additional information about the historical background against which every case took place. It is possible to do this, and one *has* to do this. If not, book and library history will remain an isolated study area in the overall LIS programme.

Information science and book history

If LIS programmes can benefit from book and library history, vice versa there are many ways in which book history can profit, too, from an LIS approach. Let me try to illustrate this by a single example, one that has recently been developed by a student of our LIS department in Antwerp.¹² At the basis of her research lies the idea that early printed bio-bibliographies should be considered as ‘machines à savoir’, arranging and organizing knowledge about the literary and scientific past in a more or less user-friendly way, and enabling the readers to navigate more or less easily and efficiently through the hundreds of pages. As her research object she chose the *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire littéraire des dix-sept provinces des Pays-Bas, de la principauté de Liège, et de quelques contrées voisines* by Jean-Noël Paquot, published by Leuven University Press in the years 1765–1770. Paquot (1722–1803) was a theologian, historian and bibliographer, professor of Hebrew philology at Leuven university and university librarian from 1768 to 1772. His *Mémoires* were published both in a folio-edition in three volumes and in an octavo-edition in eighteen volumes. It is an erudite bio-bibliography containing information on 2446 authors of the Low Countries. Today, it is still used as a major bibliographic resource that has not yet been surpassed by digital equivalents.¹³

However, the valuable information that it contains is not easily searchable. The entries are not even arranged alphabetically, and there is only one index, the author index (*Table générale des auteurs*). The present-day researcher, who is accustomed to browse bibliographic databases in a variety of ways (author, title, title word, place and year of publication, printer, fingerprint or library and shelfmark) feels discouraged when looking for specific information, and is inclined to leave aside this magnificent corpus of knowledge. The idea, then, is to digitize the *Mémoires*, to make the work available online, and to add a number of features so as to make it more appropriate for present-day information-seeking behaviour — and to make the retrieval process more successful. To start this undertaking, the student chose the typographic features of the *Mémoires* as a starting point. She discovered that the eighteenth-century typesetters of Leuven University Press were very careful and consistent in applying a typographic outline. Inspired by Paul Luna’s work on the typography of early English dictionaries,¹⁴ she analyzed the typographic

(macro- and micro-) structure of each item in the *Mémoires*. She found, for instance, that each entry is separated from the following one by a double line, that each lemma title (the author name) is printed in italics, that the first letter of each lemma is set as a capital filling two lines of type, followed by an ordinary capital and then by small capitals; and that the arrangement of the biographical and bibliographical data follows a standard pattern: first the biography, and then a list of the works, with a clear distinction between the printed works and the texts that remained unpublished. This distinction is made clear by the use of Arabic numerals for the printed works, and the Greek alphabet for the unpublished texts. This typographic analysis proved to be a useful basis for the subsequent process of digitization – which has been undertaken for an experimental set of ten items.

Another important feature of this student's paper is that she subsequently created a wiki, an interactive website that allowed her to put all the digitized material online at everyone's disposal, and to create the possibility of amending Paquot's data or to add new information to the corpus. During the short period that the wiki has been online, people have added comments, links to similar projects, etc. The original information of Paquot's *Mémoires* remains available, both as a digital image and as text (after an OCR process), but it is now searchable in a variety of ways, available worldwide and at any given time, and the information provided at the end of the eighteenth century can finally be updated. In my view, this Master's thesis is a clear and convincing proof that LIS students can carry out research that is both at the heart of library and information science and can generate interesting new tools that are useful for book historians.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to demonstrate that book and library history definitely deserves a central place in library and information science programmes, but also that, in order to obtain or keep this central place, it needs to orient itself in a direction that is closer to the heart of what library and information science is about. If library and information science is mainly about the organization of knowledge and about information-seeking behaviour, then there are plenty of subjects within book and library history that can illustrate these processes and explain how they have developed in the past. These early phenomena of knowledge organization have to be studied in their broader contexts — contexts which to a large extent cover the production, dissemination, and consumption of books in the past. The return that book history will get out of this process is not limited to the fact that it will be more strongly integrated into academic teaching and research. The example of the wiki on Paquot's *Mémoires* illustrates that LIS students (and *a fortiori* LIS researchers and teachers) can develop new products that are useful and powerful tools for book historians, securing that the academic discipline of book and library history benefits fully from the advance in other domains of library and information science. By making more explicit the connections between book and library history on the one hand and library and information science on the other hand, we can strengthen both disciplines and provide our students, our researchers, and our teaching staff with a programme that is more satisfying, self-confident and, consequently, more competitive.

Notes

- ¹ An earlier version of this text was translated from Dutch into English by Caroline Van de Velde. I am also grateful to Raf Guns and Egbert de Smet for their useful comments.
- ² On the homepage of the ENSSIB website (www.enssib.fr), book history is even presented as one of the main research objectives: 'L'ENSSIB a pour mission de former les cadres des bibliothèques et de l'information (conservateurs, bibliothécaires, masters) et de développer la recherche en sciences de l'information, bibliothéconomie et histoire du livre'.
- ³ At the end of their account of the situation in Britain and Ireland, A. Black and J. Crawford conclude: 'It is a paradox that [...] LIH [*Library and Information History*] is increasing in quality yet at the same time finds itself marginalized in its once fertile seed-bed, namely education for library and information work. [...] Within LIS generally the subject's identity is viewed negatively, as lacking relevance and not persuasive in its purpose'. See A. Black and J. Crawford, The identity of library and information history: an audit of library and information history teaching and research in departments and schools of library and information studies in Britain and Ireland, *Library History* 17:2 (July 2001) 127–131.
- ⁴ A useful guide in this respect is D. Pearson, *Provenance research in book history: a handbook* (London: British Library, 1994).
- ⁵ L. Lørring, Behind the curriculum of library and information studies. Models for didactical curriculum reflections, *World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council 22–27 August 2004 Buenos Aires, Argentina* (<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/papers/o64e-Lorring.pdf>).
- ⁶ Interesting insights are to be found in L. Balsamo, *Bibliography. History of a tradition*, trans. by W. A. Pettas (Berkeley: Bernard M. Rosenthal Inc., 1990).
- ⁷ C. Berkvens-Stevelinck, L'apport de Prosper Marchand au système des libraires de Paris, *De Gulden Passer* 56 (1978) 21–63; L. Balsamo, *Bibliography*, passim.
- ⁸ B. van Selm, *Een menigtre treffelijcke Boecken. Nederlandse boekhandelscatalogi in het begin van de zeventiende eeuw* (Utrecht: HES, 1987); H. van Goinga, The long life of the book: public book auctions in Leiden 1725–1805 and the second-hand book trade, *Quaerendo* 24 (1994) 243–274; A. Charon and E. Parinet (ed), *Les ventes de livres et leurs catalogues, 17e–20e siècle: actes des journées d'étude organisées par l'École nationale des chartes* (Paris, 15 janvier 1998) et par l'École nationale supérieure des sciences de l'information et des bibliothèques (Villeurbanne, 22 janvier 1998) (Paris: École des chartes, 2000) esp. 99–116; Y. Sordet, Source bibliographique et modèle bibliophilique. Le recours au catalogue de vente de Gabriel Martin à Seymour de Ricci.
- ⁹ C. Berkvens-Stevelinck, *Magna commoditas: a history of Leiden University Library 1575–2005* (Leiden: Primavera, 2004).
- ¹⁰ On these topics, cf. K. A. E. Enenkel and W. Neuber (ed), *Cognition and the book: typologies of formal organisation of knowledge in the printed book of the early modern period* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).
- ¹¹ R. Bringham, *The elements of typographic style* (version 3.1, Point Roberts and Vancouver: Hartley and Marks, 2005) 22.
- ¹² The results of her research have been published: K. Janssens, Een digitale toekomst voor de *Mémoires* van Jean-Noël Paquot. Een wiki voor historisch-bibliografische naslagwerken, *De Gulden Passer* 85 (2007) 145–166. The Master's thesis was supervised by Prof. Richard Philips, Antwerp University.
- ¹³ J. Roegiers, De academische drukkerij van de oude universiteit Leuven (1759–1797), *Documentatieblad Werkgroep Achttiende Eeuw* 53–54 (1982) 143–161; P.-M. Gason, Savants experts, hérétiques pervers; les liaisons dangereuses de Jean-Noël Paquot, *Bulletin de la Société des bibliophiles liégeois* 25 (2005) 149–183.
- ¹⁴ P. Luna, Clearly defined: Continuity and innovation in the typography of English dictionaries, *Typography Papers* 4 (2000) 5–56.

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