

Classifications in time: the rise of the shelfmark on the failure of provenance

- Provenance. 1. the place of origin or earliest known history of something.
2. a record of ownership of a work of art or an antique. (Concise Oxford Dictionary)

The subject of the provenance of books in any library, especially one of such antiquity as New College, can be a source of much confusion and contention. Ideally, a benefactor/owner would inscribe their donation/possession with the full details of its history, from the precise time, date and location of purchase or acquisition, to the cause of every mark or blot with which it is blighted (within the realms of decency of course).

Possession of a complete record of the history of a book, including full details of ownership, allows that history to be traced, if possible to its origin, adding to the authenticity of the item. It may add to knowledge about the individual owners themselves, their background, careers and interests, or about the aims and purposes of the institutions which purchased the items, or to which they were donated.

This article is not about that.

Rather it is about what happens years, centuries even, after a purchase or donation when provenance, complete or otherwise, has *not* been recorded, and the hapless library staff are posed with a conundrum – where exactly did this thing come from, and when? The practical upshot of this predicament is often that one lucky soul gets to don the mantle of archaeologist and adventurer Indiana Jones (whip optional) and blaze a trail back through time in an attempt to arrive at, or at least as close as possible to, the original point of deposit or purchase.

Faced with the absence of an entry in the library benefaction book, or a bookseller's receipt or bill conveniently deposited in the archives (at which point the smug observer may gleefully deploy the evergreen favourite: 'That would be too easy!'), the fearless researcher will need to resort to subtler (possibly even devious) means to achieve his goal.

Shelfmarks are the popular, indeed favoured, method of recording the location of an item within a library. These letters and/or numbers, arranged in a specific sequence, indicate in which area of the library a book may be found, as well as its position on the shelf within that area. While such complex subtleties can often be lost on the average undergraduate, it is a system that can usually be depended on to work—though some in use in New College Library around seventeen years ago were so convoluted they were more akin to some sort of nightmarish memory game. From time to time, a reorganization of the physical space within the library will be undertaken which involves moving subject areas around, and new shelfmarks will be assigned to the stock. These changes of character and digit will be applied (or so it is hoped) both to the item itself and any relevant catalogue of the contents of the library.

For the time-travelling explorer, on the desperate trail of that all-important date, this is where things can get exciting (no, seriously).

The advantage of shelfmarks, and more especially the recording of them, is that they are traceable. It should be acknowledged at this point that, as in many areas of life, luck can play an important part. If good fortune is on one's side and the relevant contemporary catalogue survives, it is possible to see which shelfmark was assigned to an item at a particular point in the library's history. If luck continues to smile and that catalogue is dated, the chapters of a book's own story can start to fall into place. If the shelfmark recorded in the catalogue also appears on the book itself,

need to be employed to provide confirmation. A very keen, near Kryptonian,¹ eye is required—the C marks can just be seen on the books but are almost entirely obscured by the application of later bookplates. It may be *surmised* that the original volume 2 and the supplements were given the new C classification at the same time, in or after 1754.

Not included in the catalogue entry, however, seems to be the replacement volume 1 of Cyclopaedia. Logically, it would have the shelfmark C.29.4—which is not recorded . . . There is a *possibility* that a bold letter ‘C’ lies hidden under the ‘Upper Library’ bookplate. Short of an act of shameless vandalism, however, definitive proof will have to remain tantalizingly beyond our reach. It must be obvious now that a degree of determination on the part of the investigator bordering on the obsessive, if not downright fanatical, can manifest itself in this type of search.

Further recorded shelfmarks (P.5.2 and P.5.4) suggest another renumbering of the first three volumes but, frustratingly, these are nowhere to be seen (genuinely this time) *on the books*.

Reclassification of *all four* volumes to P.12.2-5, the marks of which are all visible to varying degrees (enough said) on the books themselves, occurred after 1754. By this stage it can at least be confirmed that the replacement volume 1 was in library stock. However, luck would now appear to have performed a sharp ‘volte face’ (it clearly did not enjoy the drink) because these shelfmarks cannot remotely be dated as they are not recorded *in the catalogue*.

A consolatory degree of success may be welcomed by the fact, revealed in another old New College catalogue, that all four books no longer bore ‘C’ shelfmarks by the year 1822 (these had been reallocated elsewhere). It can at least be concluded, then, that they were reclassified as ‘P’ a while after 1754 but some time before 1822, a still vague but somewhat narrower timeframe than could have been estimated before. Yet another change is recorded on both the books themselves and the catalogue, to PP.7.4-7. This can positively be dated to the 1840s as the handwriting is demonstrably that of librarian James Edwards Sewell. While not wanting to apportion blame, he is nevertheless responsible for obscuring the early shelfmarks as his numbers are on the ‘Upper Library’ bookplates which do just that!

Final changes, to NN and ultimately NB, bring the search back to the present day. At journey’s end, what conclusions may be drawn or, perhaps, lessons learned? All that was known at the start of this quest were publication dates and the fact the books were actually sitting on the shelf in the first place. Using the shelfmarks present (or not, as the case may be) on the books in conjunction with those recorded (or not, as the case may be) in old library catalogues, it has been possible to create a rough timeline of acquisition, classification and reclassification for these items. Few of the dates, sadly, are positively identified but a starting point of 1728/29 (the publication of the first edition of Cyclopaedia) is secure. It seems that volume 1 of these original items had disappeared by 1754, necessitating the acquisition of a replacement (from the 1741 fifth edition), which appears to have occurred *after* the purchase of the two 1753 supplement volumes, in or some time after 1754.² Events become vague at this point (!) but a renumbering or two, from letter C to P, seems to have taken in the replacement volume 1 of Cyclopaedia and this clearly occurred before 1822.

In the complete absence of any provenance, the pursuit of the shelfmark through time can clearly prove useful as a research tool. Admittedly the story in this case is far from complete and the limitations of this type of search must be acknowledged—it only allows for tracing the history of an

¹ Kryptonian—of, or deriving from, the planet Krypton. Natives of this world are imbued with superhuman powers on Earth, amongst them x-ray vision.

² By 1751, Cyclopaedia had actually reached its seventh edition. It can be speculated, then, that New College managed to pick up a lone copy of the fifth edition of volume 1 on the cheap somewhere, rather than splashing out on the most recent version.

item within a particular ownership or institution, for example. However it cannot be denied that some of the gaps in the story of these items have been filled and, in other cases, a fuller picture may well be achievable.

What lessons may be learned from this exercise? To start with, the importance of having luck on one's side can never be underestimated (just ply it with alcohol and *never* upset it). Most importantly, while engaging on a, shall one say, 'dedicated' search of this nature, always maintain some sort of perspective of the *truly* important things in life—for, to misquote a wise and venerable Jedi Master, once you start down the nerdy path, forever will it dominate your destiny!

Jason Morgan
Assistant Librarian
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