Lecture on Manuscript Cataloguing[1]
Neil Ripley Ker

Some years ago I was asked by SCONUL to make a catalogue of hitherto uncatalogued medieval manuscripts , excluding manuscripts in private hands.[2] This I agreed to do so, perhaps rashly; I certainly did not realise how much work would be involved. At first my progress was very slow, but lately I have been able to do rather more cataloguing and I feel now that I am at least fairly launched on this project. When you kindly asked me to speak—for about 35 minutes—on the theme of Bibliography in the Service of the Scholar, I thought I could fairly say something about the cataloguing of medieval manuscripts for two reasons, because this kind of work will be a bibliography and because one is in cataloguing greatly indebted to bibliographies; in fact, one could not do much of value without them, and whether one really understands what one is cataloguing may depend on whether or not there is a bibliography to assist one. What I have to say is therefore said with bibliography especially in mind.

Work of this kinds is not all books. It is places and people also. The medievalist who works on manuscripts in book form has his familiar and I hope well-loved tracks within the British Isles. He will have cause to know perhaps best of all the way between one or other of the London stations and the British Museum;[3] he shall try and find work which will take him across the river to Lambeth Palace, bringing a breath of sea air. The visitor to Oxford has a dull start from the Station, but Radcliffe Square will make up for that. The visitor to Cambridge has one of the very best tracks to follow from the Senate House down Garrett Hostel Lane to the University Library: I used to like it particularly on a bicycle: the narrow space and right angle turns and swinging up and down over the bridge. For holidays there are the cathedrals—Lincoln, Salisbury, Worcester, Hereford, Durham—especially for every reason Durham, the John Rylands Library, Glasgow, Edinburgh, perhaps even Aberdeen. In Edinburgh I think the National Library is finely placed for the scholar, who comes to it from Waverley station, or perhaps even better goes from it to Waverley station at all speed down the steps between the tall houses, to catch the five o'clock train through to Glasgow with the promise of tea on the train. But for me in the present all this is in the past or not as often, as visits to London have not been so much to the British Museum as to St. Paul's and Sion College, the British and Foreign Bible Society, Lincoln's Inn, the Middle

[1] These notes for a lecture are dated to 1958 and headed by 'The Willows, Oakland Road' and '*Traditio*' circled just above the opening words. This is contained in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 20510, Box 69/7.1. The lecture was transcribed by Creagh Factor and edited by Elaine Treharne.

[2] SCONUL is the Society of College, National and University Libraries.

[3] Partially ruled through is 'For the Oxford man Paddington to the British Museum will be one of the most familiar and for the Cambridge man, I suppose, King's Cross to the British Museum.'

Temple, the Royal Meteorological Society and the Law Society. And my cathedral towns have been not the familiar five, but Blackburn, Bristol, Gloucester, Leicester, Peterborough, Rochester, Sheffield and Cardiff, if one may give Cardiff what to all intents and purposes, it has—a cathedral. It has been not the least of the pleasures of cataloguing to get to know new towns and within them new eating places and sleeping places and new libraries. I would like to say something about the eating places and sleeping places, but I will not do so. About the libraries I *shall* say how much I enjoy entering every one of them and how kind is the welcome that one gets from their custodians.

Not only the places have been new to me but also the books. The cataloguer of the small collections may find himself concerned with anything from astronomical tables to a book of devotions in Dutch, and if he has been accustomed to dealing mainly with books earlier than 1200, he will come across very little that is familiar to him. But the small collections are far from being all on a pattern. They have the most diverse histories. At one extreme come two little collections, at All Saints Church, Bristol, and at Wyggeston Hospital, Leicester—but now deposited in the Leicester Museum, which seem to be caches of books formed by and for the use of priests shortly before the reformation in England. They consist partly of manuscripts and partly of printed books and date probably as collections from those decades, the first two or three of the sixteenth century, when printed books were common but had not yet altogether taken the place of manuscripts in public estimation, when in fact a man who owned books would probably own some in manuscript and some in print. (The books are much what one would expect to find: at Leicester, copies of *Oculus Sacerdotis* of William de Pagula, of *Gesta Romanorum*, the sermons of Guillaume Perraud.) At the other extreme are the modern collections, the gift of a single benefactor, as at Blackburn, Dunfermline, and Leicester University, or bought with library funds as at Cardiff: these are collections in which continental service books tend to be numerous. Between these extremes are collections which are more or less old in whole or in part, but seldom older than the eighteenth century; all the gift of a single collector, as at Bristol Baptist College, where the donor was Dr. Andrew Gifford in 1784, or obtained over the course of centuries like the manuscripts at Glasgow University, some of which have been in the library since the time of Principal Dunlop in the last decade of the seventeenth century. And there are also the parochial libraries which contain one of more manuscripts, like Boston, Langley Marish, Oakham, Wimborne, Bridgenorth, Reigate and Swaffham and Tiverton; and the churches which have no library, but single manuscripts, usually church service books or Books of Hours, as at Appleby Magna, Romsey, Buckingham, Ranworth and Wollaton.

I have found by experience that when I catalogue a manuscript, I have to do it in three stages. First, there is the actual making of a description *in situ*; secondly, the

writing up of this necessarily unconsidered description into one which is more or less tidy and I hope intelligible: and thirdly a return visit to the manuscript to find out my mistakes or some of them A first stage description I find hard work, but work is enjoyable, as long as one does not do too much of it at a time. For it is hard work. Finding out one's mistakes is not enjoyable, although there is a certain satisfaction in it. The best of cataloguing is the writing up—the second stage—when one gets a feeling of creating something, of producing a view of a manuscript which was not there before. In this stage, away from the manuscript itself and preferably within reach of a great library, one will make what use one can of Bibliographical aids.

I will say something here about the aids to the description of the two kinds of manuscripts most commonly found in the small collections, the Bibles and the Books of Hours. (I am, I think, at my forty-second Bible. I spent two hours on it yesterday afternoon in the library of Southampton Grammar School.) Thousands of medieval Bibles still exist and most of them are small and more or less excellent[?] books dating from the thirteenth century. Their production in this format is very remarkable, one of the most remarkable achievements of scribes at any time. One must try to classify them in order to understand them. The most hopeful way of classifying these Bibles is probably by their prologues. It has been just possible to do this since the publication of Berger's *Les Prefaces de la Bible* in 1902, but a good deal more possible since the publication of Stegmüller's *Repertorium Biblicum* in 1940.[4] Stegmüller's book makes the rounds with me and the Stegmüller prologue numbers go down on my first stage descriptions.

His great merit over Berger is that he gives the last words of prologues as well as the first words, which is essential for purposes of distinguishing, when, as often, two prologues are run into one. According to Berger if I understand him right, the thirteenth-century Bible is in marked contrast to the earlier Bibles by presenting a uniform text, based on a revision made at the University of Paris early in the thirteenth century. The Bibles in England or at least the forty of them or so which have come my way hitherto do not by any means show this expected uniformity. Three quarters of them show great variety in their prologues and between them turn up quite a number of prologues which I have to set down as 'not in Stegmüller'. One quarter really are uniform having the same set of 64 prologues and evidently a particular type of text. This, I take it, is Berger's Paris text. It seems to me that perhaps the most important

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[4] Ker is referring here to Samuel Berger, 'Les préfaces jointes aux livres de la Bible dans les manuscrits de la Vulgate', Mémoires présentés par divers savants a L'Académie (1904): 1-78; Friedrich Stegmüller, *Repertorium Biblicum Medii Aevi*, Volume 1 (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 1931).

point that can be made in the description of a thirteenth-century manuscript Bible is to say whether or not it conforms exactly or almost to the set 64-prologue type, and this can only be said with the help of Stegmüller's list.

Books of Hours are books of which I was thoroughly alarmed a few years ago. Now I have learned how attractive they are, and also that with help from books they are not too difficult to describe. At that time, I had never looked attentively at them. My fears were possibly because for some reason not usually apparent on the face of the book itself, a Book of Hours is classified as being of such and such a Use. This question of Use still perplexes me, but it perplexed me more before I found the classification by Falconer Madan in the *Bodleian Quarterly Record* for 1920 of Book of Hours according to the antiphon and capitulum at Prime and None.[5] It seems that all that the cataloguer can in fact do at first is to follow Madan here, and to wish that someone would explain why and to what extent what he says is true. Leroquais promised to do this in his great *Livres d'Heures des bibliothéques publiques de la France*, but for lack of space—so it's said—his exposition was never printed.

I mentioned the generous *incipits* and *explicits* of Stegmüller's list of prologues. To give the opening words of the text one is describing is quite the most important thing a cataloguer can do, and it is only less important to give the closing words, and not, I think, only of texts which are anonymous or rare, but also of common texts, and even perhaps of the commonest. It gives the reader something solid to bite on, and makes him feel independent of the bare word of the cataloguer. The great use of giving *incipits* and *explicits* is, however, to provide evidence by means of which an anonymous text or text ascribed to a wrong author can be identified and placed[?]. By turning to an index of *incipits* one may perhaps find one's way to other copies of the same work. Indexes of *incipits* are nothing new—you will find one in Wanley's *Thesaurus* of 1705—but they have not got to that state of perfection one would wish for. A partial index can be a waste of time, even an index to as large a collection as that in the Royal Library. The medievalist gets to know where to look, or he gets librarians like Dr. Hunt to tell him. Librarians make collections of *incipits* on cards—there is a completed one for Cambridge in the Cambridge University Library, and a growing one for Oxford in the Bodleian. But the biggest thing in indexes of *incipits* is still Haureau's and that is still in manuscript. It was available only in Paris, but it can now be seen in a photostat copy in the Students' Room of the British Museum and in microfilm in the Bodleian. Some of my otherwise completed descriptions of manuscripts have the word 'Haureau' written on them as a reminder that sometime I must take the description to London and see if I

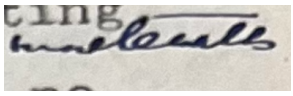
[5] Here, Ker is referring to Falconer Madan, 'Documents and Record: A Hours of the Virgin Mary (Tests for Localization)', *Bodleian Quarterly Record* Vol 3, No. 26, 2nd Quarter (1920): 40-44 (available online in full at Hathi Trust: https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b2940859&seq=54&q1=Madan).

can find the opening words of some unidentified text in the photostat of this great index.

I have tried to show by these examples and indexes of *incipits*, plus the Use of Books of Hours, how a cataloguer of manuscripts relies on bibliographical tools. But a catalogue is itself one bibliographical tool. How can the cataloguer best serve the scholar? I am aware uneasily that the answer here is in the last instance just five words, 'by being a wise man'. A good cataloguer need not be a modern scholar with all the resources of modern scholarship at his disposal. He is to keep within England Langbaine in the seventeenth century and Wanley at the turn of the seventeenth century, and Thomas Rud at Durham a little later, and W. H. Blank about 1840, all doing admirable work long before M. R. James in Cambridge, and Macray and Madan in Oxford, and Maude Thompson and Sir George Warner in London had brought cataloguing to its present level. The non-wise man can perhaps take consolation from the fact that, some like himself of have made useful catalogues by following in the footsteps of the great.

It is in the description of the contents of a manuscript that the wise men of old may well still be better than the moderns: Rud's Durham is still the best of the cathedral catalogues. In the physical description of manuscripts Rud and all cataloguers before James now seem inadequate. In 1883, when Macray published his admirable catalogue of an extremely difficult collection, the Digbeian in the Bodleian, the words 'Parchment 8vo 72 leaves 12th century' were still a sufficient description of a manuscript of, in fact, the famous *Chanson de Roland*, MS. Digby 23.

Certainly, even the best cataloguer kept their count of the physical characteristics of manuscripts to a bare minimum. Maude Thompson (1880, Salisbury) gave the exact size of the leaf. Palaeographical information of this sort is slowly accumulating but there is still an enormous amount to do because until these are of the ***?[6] So far as I know no cataloguer before M. R. James gave the exact sizes of manuscripts, or the number of lines or in what way the quires were made up, These details are not to be found, for example, in the otherwise admirable catalogue of the Digby manuscripts by W. D. Macray published in 1883. 'Parchment 8vo 72 leaves 12th century': that is all we learn from Macray about the manuscript of the *Chanson de Roland*. James gave the exact collations from the first: his earliest catalogues were published in 1895, and his example has been slowly followed. I think James in many ways the ideal cataloguer. Take for example this of St. John College Cambridge 225, a thirteenth-century copy of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard: 67/8 x 4 3/4 inches, 125 leaves, double columns of 59 lines—we can already see the minute script—'beautifully written after the fashion of

[6] This word is indeterminate: 

the small Bibles of the period'. Then he gives the collation 1-5^{16} 6^{12} 7-8^{16} 9^{2} 2 cancelled, which shows that this copy of the *Sentences* was not only in format and script, but also in size of quires, modelled on the small bibles of the period. For in no book other than Bibles do we, so far as I know, find quires habitually larger than 12. The few lines of description here are […]ter and give the whole feel and aspect of the book.

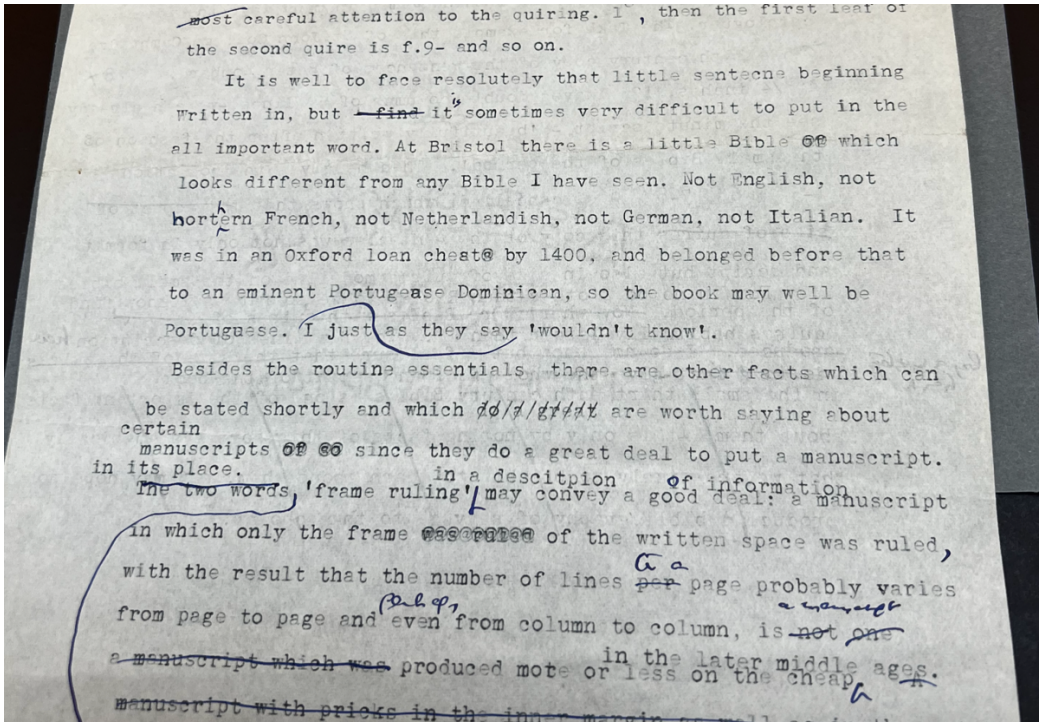
My own assignment is to make a summary catalogue, by which I suppose is meant that I should not go into details; for example, details about the lives of authors or the ramifications of texts, and that I should be keeping in mind that what I ought to put down is the minimum amount of information necessary for the attentive reader to know what the manuscript contains and to visualize what it looks like, as far as possible; that is to say the number of leaves—a point that may take a long time to find out—the material, whether parchment or paper, or a mixture of parchment and paper, the size in millimetres both of the leaf and of the written space, the number of lines to the page, and whether the page is in two columns or long lines, and above all to give a collation, showing how the leaves are made up into quires and what irregularities or deficiencies there are within the quires. And then, coming to what is written on the page, to state the date of the writing, kind of scrip,t a matter of difficulty sometimes, and the manner of decoration. Finally the date and appearance of the binding, and an indication which may be of use in identifying the manuscript in a medieval catalogue or in a will, the opening words of the second leaf, the 'secundo folio'. Finally, whatever there is to be said about the origin and history of the manuscript, and to be by no means summary cataloguing. This may sound a lot, but I do not think it is less than what is essential about a manuscript and particularly a manuscript in one of the collections which medievalists do not normally visit. Many of these facts do not take long to set down and do not take up much space. A summary account of the illumination is to me the most difficult and a description of the script perhaps the least satisfactory, because of the lack of accepted and acceptable names for script. What takes longest, the finding out how many leaves there are and how they are divided into quires, is also most essential. These processes are closely linked together, for I find that the only way to avoid mistakes in counting leaves is to pay careful attention to the quiring. 1^{8}, then the first leaf of the second quire is f. 9—and so on.

It is well to face resolutely that little sentence beginning 'Written in', but it is sometimes very difficult to put in the all-important word. At Bristol there is a little Bible which looks different from any Bible I have seen. Not English, not northern French, not Netherlandish, not German, not Italian. It was in an Oxford loan cheat by 1400, and belonged before that to an eminent Portuguese Dominican, so that the book may well be Portuguese. As they say, I just 'wouldn't know'.

Besides the routine essentials, there are other facts which can be stated shortly and which are worth saying about certain manuscripts since they do a great deal to put

a manuscript in its place. I am thinking particularly of methods of ruling the lines. To take one example of this, the two words, frame ruling', in a description may convey a good deal of information: a manuscript in which only the frame of the written space was ruled, with the result that the number of lines to a page probably varies from page to page and perhaps even from column to column, is a manuscript produced more or less on the cheap in the later middle ages.

Before ending, I must say something of the most difficult problem which faces a summary cataloguer: how to catalogue a manuscript which does not admit of summary treatment. Probably a cataloguer's first duty is to inform his readers about the contents of the manuscripts he is describing, but it may not be possible to do so without going into a good deal of detail. Probably each manuscript needs to be taken on its own merits, and a long description should be allowed if it is important to give one. Thus a volume of Lives of Saints must be set out at length, unless it is some recognized collection like *Legenda Aurea*. On the other hand, the prayers which form a floating part of many Books of Hours can perhaps be simply called prayers without any further description. I don't like leaving things out; there are limits and there are dreadful warning of cataloguers who have let manuscripts get the better of them, whose descriptions extend to such a length that in fact they have been able to describe very few manuscripts.



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