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# The Bodleian classification of manuscripts

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*In 1887 E. W. B. Nicholson devised a simple classification scheme for the manuscripts in the Bodleian Library. His system, which is still employed, is described and compared with the British Museum's practice. The suggestion is made that this scheme, and particularly the use of size-division in notation, might, with modifications, be suitable for other libraries.*

The classification of books has always been a popular field of study for librarians, but the classification of manuscripts has hardly been touched upon. In a recent article relating to the British Library, a Bodleian manuscript was referred to several times as "MS lat. liturg. fol. 2".<sup>1</sup> The correct pressmark is "MS Lat. liturg. f. 2", and this small misprint highlights an interesting divergence in practice between the Bodleian and comparable British libraries, particularly the British Library itself.

The majority of libraries with large manuscript collections place new accessions into a series of "Additional" manuscripts. At Cambridge University Library there are less than 8000 Additional manuscripts (excluding certain named collections), but there is the possibility of confusion while searching the indexes for manuscripts, since some "manuscripts" contain upwards of 10 000 individual items: thus, a single letter might be indexed as (to take a hypothetical instance) MS Add. 7986 (6897). At the National Library of Scotland, current accessions are allotted a consecutive number, while manuscripts in the National Library of Wales are referred to by the names of their collections—but the latter library's manuscripts are also given a running number in the published catalogues of its holdings.

In the British Library there are now almost 60 000 "Add. MSS" (excluding charters and the Egerton series), but as any regular user of the Department of Manuscripts knows, the art of juggling so many combinations of numerals in the mind is not always straightforward; hardly surprisingly, pressmarks are easily

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transposed by readers and staff alike. Current accessions are not fully indexed in the Reading Room catalogue, which successfully reduces both the bulk of the catalogue and ease of access to the collections. Instead, detailed cataloguing is left for the published quinquennial catalogues, of which the volume comprising accessions for the years 1946–1950 is now in the press; unfortunately, succeeding volumes are unlikely to appear for many more years. Short descriptions, but not indexes, of more recent acquisitions (up to 1975) have been issued by the List and Index Society.<sup>2</sup> The card-index to current accessions (kept in the Manuscripts Reading Room) is regarded as a temporary expedient, and indexing, from the present readers' point of view, is on a more abbreviated scale than at Cambridge or the Bodleian.

A different approach to pressmarks was adopted in the Bodleian Library during the nineteenth century. Important collections of manuscripts were, and still are, referenced with the name of their former owner or donor, a much more satisfactory method than allotting impersonal digits. From about 1761 until the time of H. O. Coxe (Bodley's Librarian, 1860–1881), miscellaneous accessions were usually entered in a series known as MSS Bodley, the Bodleian equivalent of the British Museum's "Add. MSS". Coxe introduced the pressmark "Addit. Bodl." but subsequently changed the whole series to the form MSS (Bodley) Add. A–D, the final letters representing size.<sup>3</sup>

When E. W. B. Nicholson became Librarian in 1882, he added a further division, MSS (Bodley) Add. E; greater changes were to follow. Nicholson believed in close classification, and for the Bodleian's printed books he developed a scheme which contained over 6000 subdivisions (according to Richard Garnett, the British Museum's scheme had little more than 500 divisions).<sup>4</sup> Nicholson planned to re-arrange the whole Library into subject departments, but the sheer size of the task and mature reflection soon convinced him that he would be unwise to do so. He continued his minute classification and devised a scheme for the manuscripts.

After several experiments he arranged the topographical manuscripts into "MSS Top.", subdivided according to county, with separate sections for "Ireland", "Islands", "general", and "ecclesiastical". Then he put a letter representing size (a = over 20"; b = 15"–20"; c = 12"–15"; d = 9"–12"; e = 7"–9"; f = 5"–7"; g = under 5"), and a running number within each subdivision. A typical example is: MS Top. Oxon. d. 10. The use of letters to represent size successfully reduces the length of the running number, and the form "Top. Oxon." is much easier to remember than a combination of numerals. The size of letters can occasionally cause problems, as "c" can be mistaken for "e", and *vice versa*; capital letters might have been preferable. (The same size letters are used in the classification scheme for printed books.)

In 1887 Nicholson extended his classification to other subjects. His initial

aim was to make the subject the prime factor of the pressmark (e.g. MSS Bibl[e] Gr[reek]), but he eventually preferred language, viz.:

MSS Eng. bib[le], liturg[ical], th[eological], hist[orical], poet[ry], and  
misc[ellaneous];

MSS Gr. bib., liturg., th., class[ics], and misc.;

MSS. Lat. bib., liturg., th., class., and misc.

Only English, Latin, and Greek manuscripts were subdivided into subjects; all other languages were merely divided according to size (i.e. all French manuscripts were referenced as "MSS Fr.", followed by a size letter and running number).

On 6 April 1887 Nicholson showed his new scheme to Edward Maunde Thompson, then Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum. Thompson disapproved of subdivision by both language and subject, though Nicholson afterwards thought that Thompson's arguments merely showed how clumsy and weak was the British Museum's arrangement of manuscripts. Thompson later explained that the British Museum's manuscripts were not classified, except that Oriental manuscripts were arranged by language and bound into distinctive colours (black for Hebrew, red for Syriac, etc.); however, the most frequently requested classes (such as topography and genealogy) were kept close at hand.

Nicholson's scheme had some weaknesses: e.g. MSS Eng. hist. were not necessarily documents on English history, but historical documents in the English language. "Theological" and "liturgical" manuscripts were occasionally confused. Nicholson's most constant critic was the Junior Sublibrarian, Falconer Madan, who considered the first draft of Nicholson's scheme to be "too absurd for criticism". Nicholson never sought Madan's advice, explaining that there was no point in consulting those who would disagree with him. (Indeed, they disagreed so much that Madan, who prepared the early volumes of the *Summary catalogue of Western manuscripts in the Bodleian Library*, would not allow Nicholson to see his proofs but returned them directly to the Clarendon Press. The latter would then send the final revise to Nicholson, who would add his own notes and corrections, within square brackets, on manuscripts already described by Madan.)

Madan reluctantly approved the final draft, but he himself drew up a scheme with ten divisions based on the four ancient faculties, viz.:

"Theology" manuscripts would be divided into bibl., lit., and eccl[esiastical];

"Jurisprudence" would be known as Jur., or Law;

"Medicine" would be referred to as "Med.;"

"Arts", comprising the Trivium, Quadrivium, and the various branches of history, philosophy, and language, would be divided into: *belles lettres*, hist., sci. (i.e. natural science and mathematics), phil[osophy], and misc. In the notation, these divisions would follow the abbreviation for each language, but, according to

Madan, only Latin and English manuscripts need be divided with such detail.<sup>5</sup>

However, Nicholson's scheme was adopted. Extra subdivisions were provided as necessary: Nicholson had already catered for MSS Mus[ic] and Num[ismatics], and he subsequently added MSS Maps, Autogr[aphs], and Eng. lang.; MSS Lat. hist. and Eng. lett[ers] were later additions. Oriental manuscripts were arranged alphabetically according to language, i.e. MSS Æthiopic, Arabic, Armenian, etc. Nicholson complicated the working of his system by an unfortunate tendency to re-reference manuscripts. His aim was partly to "restore" manuscripts to old collections, and partly to arrange miscellaneous manuscripts according to their subject.<sup>6</sup> Madan frequently criticized the time and labour spent by Nicholson in providing manuscripts with new pressmarks—or, as Madan preferred to call them, "E.W.B.N.'s hoofmarks".

The *Summary catalogue of Western manuscripts in the Bodleian Library* added a complication by the use of running numbers, independent of the pressmarks; this was inevitable, since the *Summary catalogue* was made available as it was compiled, and was intended as a retrospective chronological index of accessions. Incidentally, it should be emphasized that *Summary catalogue* running numbers are not pressmarks, and manuscripts can only be ordered in the Bodleian by quoting the *pressmark*. In future volumes, the running number will be purely an indexing device.

On the whole, the Bodleian system is a simple and effective way of classifying manuscripts according to language and broad subject area, and, with modifications, could easily be adopted elsewhere—the use of size-division could certainly prove useful. The British Museum, of course, employed size-notation for printed books a long time ago: "I set them the example," wrote Nicholson in 1897 to Francis Jenkinson, the Cambridge University Librarian, who replied: "As to size-notation, I did not mean that the Br. Mus. preceded you, but that it used to be hopelessly bad, & is now very careful."<sup>7</sup> Its adoption for manuscripts might be worth serious consideration, and would avoid the practice of manuscripts being given both a running ("Add.") number and a shelf-mark, as happens in the British Library.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Turner, D. H. The Wyndham Payne crucifixion. *British Libr. J.*, 2 (1) Spring 1976, 8-26. I am assured that the incorrectly printed pressmark was a printer's error.
- 2 'Rough register' of acquisitions of the Department of Manuscripts, British Library, 1961-1965. List and Index Society: Special series, vol. 7, 1974. Subsequent volumes issued by the same Society list acquisitions for 1966-1970 (Special series, vol. 8, 1975) and for 1971-1975 (Special series, vol. 10, 1977).

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