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Classification in Australian Libraries*

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The history of classification in Australia, and the pattern of use of general classification schemes, are briefly surveyed. The problems inherent in the use of imported classification schemes are considered, and illustrated, and the history of the relationship between Australia and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) is described. The effectiveness of this liaison is attributed to the responsive policies of DDC and of its editor. (Author)

1. Introduction

Australia is a large, dry and sparsely populated continent, located far from the great centres of civilization, both in the East and in the West. So far there have been two cultures in Australia – one aboriginal and the other European. The indigenous people, separated eventually from outside cultural influences, developed a unique lifestyle in harmony with this strange land. Following the arrival of European colonizers in the latter part of the eighteenth century, a Western society was imposed on the continent. These new settlers, in turn, developed a modern, urban, industrial state, with a unique set of organizations, values, and, inevitably, history.

As a result of its history, Australia has a federal system of government which is mirrored in the organization of its library services. There is a national library, six state libraries, 19 autonomous universities and over 80 colleges of advanced education. The colleges are usually linked by state co-ordinating bodies, but both colleges and universities are federally funded. School libraries and public libraries are available to the majority of Australians, and are generally the responsibility, respectively, of state and local governments. There is no federal library agency, no state agency covering all types of libraries, and in only three states is there a unified state/public library system. There are two national organizations concerned with library services, the Library Association of Australia (LAA) which is the professional body and the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services (AACOBS), which is a representative body of the various types of institutions. In spite of this diversity and complexity, Australia has developed a remarkably uniform pattern of library services and policies.

Just as Australia drew its population from many parts of the world, so it drew its library traditions from various sources. Visitors to Australia from the United Kingdom, Europe or North America would find much in common with their own countries, and much that differs. The explosion of progress in cataloguing in the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century permanently affected Australian attitudes. The Australian approach has been essentially American in style, in forms of catalogues, and in choice of cataloguing codes, filing rules and classification schemes. There have been many important contributions to cataloguing by Australian librarians, but these are essentially contributions to the American tradition.

2. Survey of the use of classification schemes

Melvil Dewey was amongst the most successful colonizers of Australia. The Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) has the longest history and the most widespread use of any classification scheme in Australia. It has been used in public and university libraries in Australia since the 1890s, and its merits were eagerly discussed at Australian library conferences just before the turn of the century, and at almost every library conference held by the successive national library associations ever since. It is currently used, in one or other of its versions or adaptations, in one or more of its editions, and with varying local modifications, by almost all state, public and school libraries, by most university and college libraries, and by many special and other libraries. It is also used by the National Library of Australia for its own collections and as the primary means of arrangement in the *Australian national bibliography.* In view of this pervasiveness, I shall say more on its use later.

The Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) has a much more scattered incidence of use. It is used, not unexpectedly, in many special libraries, and sections of it, particularly those relating to technology, have been used at various times in university and college libraries in conjunction with some other general classification scheme. It also was used, initially, by one of the new colleges established in the 1960s, but it was subsequently abandoned. As this library was using the abridged English edition of UDC for shelf arrangement, it was in effect using a very out of date edition of DDC. It subsequently changed to a more current and hence fuller version of DDC. There is, hence, almost no use of UDC in Australia as a general classification scheme. Aside from the general questions of currency and fullness with UDC, its absence may be related to the fact that most Australian libraries have dictionary catalogues using some form of subject headings, and so UDC's elaborate synthetic devices have no value for subject analysis and positive disadvantages for shelf arrangement.

In 1947 one university library adopted the *Bibliographic Classification* (BBC) of Henry Bliss; soon after another moved from DDC to BBC. The reasons for this were partly practical, partly theoretical. The move occurred at the time of the debacle with the fifteenth edition of DDC, when the viability and even the future of DDC were seriously in doubt. The BBC scheme, then and now, had a strong intellectual appeal, both in its structuring of the universe of knowledge and in its approach to notation and synthesis. There was a vigorous debate in the pages of the *Australian Library Journal* on the merits of BBC and its adoption, which was without doubt the most extended debate on classification ever to take place in Australia. This debate was inconclusive but the fate of BBC was not. As BBC grew more and more out of date, and as the high rate of acquisi-

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tions by libraries in the 1960s forced reconsideration of the economics of technical processes, no more libraries followed the lead of the two pioneers and these two set about reclassifying once again, this time to the *Library of Congress Classification* (LCC). There has been very little interest in Australia in the new edition of BBC, except on a purely academic level, and there is no prospect that any library will consider using it when it is complete.

LCC was virtually unknown, and certainly unused, in Australia before the 1960s. There were two factors which led to its eventual introduction. Firstly, those libraries referred to above which had been using BBC needed assistance in changing to a more viable scheme and this was most readily available in the form of ready made LCC class-marks on Library of Congress cataloguing copy. Indeed, this was and is the only classification scheme for which a total ready made package is available. LC cataloguing copy is also extremely useful, and moderately comprehensive in coverage, where reclassification is undertaken in conjunction with recataloguing. The second factor was that many of the librarians who were coming into positions of seniority in the 1960s had either worked or studied in the United States or Canada, where a thorough grounding in LCC was the norm as it had not been for librarians in Australia. Even though only a few of the new wave of university and college libraries in the 1960s and 1970s actually adopted LCC, all were obliged to consider it as an option. Those libraries which are using LCC seem to have been satisfied by the results of their decision, but they have not actively proselytized and they have found few followers. There was no debate in Australia on DDC versus LCC as there had been on DDC versus BBC, and there was no large-scale transfer of allegiance from DDC to LCC amongst academic libraries as occurred in the United States. Those libraries which were dissatisfied with DDC either lacked the ability or the will to change, or, more positively, waited for DDC to regain its sanity. Their patience, as we know, was soon rewarded.

Outside of the spectrum of the four major classification schemes there is very little to report. There are next to no home-made classification schemes, or at least no comprehensive ones. The older established libraries moved from fixed location and closed access directly to DDC. For newer libraries the choice was from amongst the established classification schemes. There are, however, a number of special classification schemes which are used in special libraries, or in special sections of libraries, or for special types of materials. Three which perhaps should be mentioned are the Boggs and Lewis classification scheme for maps, in particular the extension of it by the Mitchell Library in Sydney; the National Library of Medicine classification scheme for medical materials; and the law classification schemes by Elizabeth Moys. There are, in addition, the various extensions, additions and "improvements" to the established classification schemes devised by individual libraries which are, by and large, best forgotten. But these exceptions are genuinely that, blemishes on an overall picture of uniformity and standardization.

3. Overview of the classification schemes

Australia, then, has been primarily a receiver of classification schemes, and the received schemes have not always suited the needs of Australian librarians. The weaknesses have been on two levels, the general and the specific. The general problems are the philosophical and intellectual stands of the schemes while the specific are the provision within the schemes for Australia and things Australian. The former problems are not uniquely Australian, but there are some uniquely Australian perspectives. The latter problems are specifically Australian, but they have relevance for the viability and integrity of the schemes elsewhere in the world. These discussions will lead to a more detailed consideration of DDC.

DDC and LCC are the products of nineteenth century America. They make assumptions about the organization of knowledge which are no longer relevant. It is not that this perspective is particularly un-Australian, but that it is simply untrue and unhelpful. BBC belonged to a generation nearer our own, but not too near. It is more liberal, more humanistic, but no more capable than any other fixed and finite structure of coping with the restructuring of the concept of knowledge and its interrelationships which is now occurring.

Further, DDC and LCC, and to a lesser extent BBC, adopted a stance which might be loosely described as white, anglo-saxon, and protestant. This, in its way, might have been unexceptional in its time, as probably up until the 1940s the majority of those who used and ran libraries in Australia were also white, anglo-saxon and protestant, but a massive shift was to occur later. More importantly, the perspective was American, and the American view of the world did not necessarily accord with that of anyone else, least of all Australians, any more than the Australian view of the world would have met with the sympathy of others. In recent years the perspective of DDC has been modified considerably, while that of LCC has not, nor need it be, as it has been devised as an in-house classification scheme. UDC continues to occupy a limbo world of international consensus, being more concerned with detail than with perspective, while BBC, the newest of the schemes, was formed in an age long before the concept of the global village.

Whatever the point of departure of a general classification scheme, it is imperative that it adequately covers the universe of knowledge as represented in printed literature. The early makers of classification schemes showed a remarkable lack of knowledge of some parts of the world, some human ideas, and some subjects. Indeed, they might be said to have shown an active disinterest, if not antipathy, toward parts of the human mosaic. Although the comments which follow refer specifically to Australia, I do not imply that Australia was uniquely afflicted.

The matters on which a classification scheme can be expected to provide for can be categorized as two types. Firstly, there is a need to be able to classify material on the social, political, educational and cultural life and structures of a country. The problem lies not so much in providing for the specific details but for the schemes to be sufficiently flexible so as to accommodate the infinite variety of human invention and aspiration. Secondly, there is a need to adequately provide for those things which are unique to an area, such as its geography, history, literature and peoples. Here it is simply facts,

not perspective, which matter, and it is particularly here that the major classification schemes have been found wanting.

It is very difficult for any classification scheme to be infinitely hospitable in terms of patterns of society. A good example of the problem was the recent search for a classification of musical instruments which was culturally neutral for the proposed new schedule in DDC. As it happened there was such a scheme available which was acceptable to musicologists and which was used with success. Classificationists are not always so fortunate, and it is unwise for them to invent encompassing theories where none exist. Nothing dates a classification scheme more than an original contribution to the structure of knowledge. Nevertheless there is a problem, particularly in the social sciences, with matching Australian social structures to any classification scheme based on other premises. I do not wish to dwell on this point because I think that the problems are, for the present, insoluble, in spite of an increase in the availability in the countries where classification schemes are created of literature on and information about Australia and in spite of the best intentions of the makers of the classification schemes.

This excuse does not apply to the treatment of matters which are uniquely Australian. It is interesting and instructive to look at what we can find out about Australia from DDC, LCC and BBC. It was not only Abel Tasman who had trouble finding Australia, or James Cook who encountered trouble in exploring it. Classificationists generally have decided to lump Australia with the various other places that did not seem to belong anywhere else either. DDC, LCC and BBC all place Australia in, or in close relation to Oceania, and typically separate it from Asia. The near neighbours usually are New Zealand and New Guinea. This, at least, is understandable.

Each scheme also gives a geographical breakdown of Australia into states, territories and other areas. Until recently, no major classification scheme managed to achieve this division without error or ambiguity, an extraordinary instance of ineptness with the facts of geography. The most fascinating example occurs in LCC where, in the history schedules and elsewhere in tables of countries, New Zealand is treated as part of Australia, an error unlikely to increase the popularity of LCC in either Australia or New Zealand.

The treatment of history and literature has similarly been inadequate, misleading or non-existent, due no doubt to the paucity of holdings of Australian materials in these areas, at least until more recently. The Australian Aborigines have been treated by the classificationists no better and no worse than other native races, with the recent changes following the changes in the nature of the published literature which in turn reflects changing community attitudes throughout the western world towards indigenous peoples.

4. Australian initiatives

There appears to be little point in trying to influence LCC. DDC has, however, from time to time, been amenable to influence, and the attempts to change those parts of it which were considered unacceptable began in Australia in 1938, when the national professional association of the time, the Australian Institute of Librarians, established a Committee on the Classification of Australiana. There was no need for this committee to include in its name any reference to DDC simply because, in 1938, classification in Australia was synonymous with DDC.

This Committee, under the excellent chairmanship of L. F. Fitzhardinge, at that time a librarian but better known later as a historian, produced over a two year period a detailed expansion for the DDC area table for Australia and for the Australian history schedule, as well as making recommendations on the treatment of Australian literature and Australian Aborigines. The outline of these suggestions, lacking some of the detail, was incorporated into the fourteenth edition of DDC. As the fuller detail was needed by Australian libraries, if by no-one else, the entire Fitzhardinge scheme was widely circulated to libraries and used by them, and it continued to exist as an increasingly fugitive document for the next thirty years.

The long gap between the fourteenth and sixteenth editions of DDC involved not only the misguided fifteenth edition, which broke the DDC hegemony over Australia, but also a break in communication between Australia and DDC. The result was that the new edition moved away from the Fitzhardinge proposals. This suggested the need for a new committee, and new initiatives. These initiatives came first from AACOBS, as a result of a conference in 1966 to discuss central cataloguing services in Australia. The conference resolved, among many other matters, that the national central cataloguing agency which it proposed should adopt "the latest edition of the Dewey Decimal Classification as a standard for classification", and set up a committee to consider the DDC numbers for Australia and neighbouring areas.

This committee was not, by and large, very successful, facing as it did the problems of the *fait accompli* of changes in the sixteenth edition, which could not really be reversed, and parallel and pending decisions for the seventeenth edition. Its work was absorbed by a more general and continuing AACOBS committee, which, while not managing to undo the previous decisions, did at least oversee a major achievement, the conversion of the Fitzhardinge area tables for Australia into a more substantial form.

The expanded schedule, *Australia: DC expansion*, was prepared by the National Library of Australia, and subsequently used by it in the *Australian National Bibliography* and its associated cataloguing products. The expansion is in fundamental agreement with the Fitzhardinge plan, as subsequently and perhaps inadvertently modified by DDC. It is, as a totality, with the schedules, annotations, maps and detailed index, an excellent piece of work, the final realization of the objectives of Fitzhardinge's Committee on the Classification of Australiana.

The 1970s were a new era for relations between DDC and Australia. As the AACOBS committee which had re-established liaison with DDC declined towards extinction, the responsibility was transferred, after interminable discussions, to the newly formed Cataloguers' Section of the LAA. The terms of reference of the new Liaison Committee were wider than those of any pre-

vious group. Modelled on those of the equivalent [British] Library Association's DDC Sub-Committee, the objectives were to encourage discussion and comment on DDC in Australia, to act as a channel of communication between the United States and Australia on all aspects of DDC theory and practice, to receive and co-ordinate comments from Australian librarians for despatch to DDC, to formulate criticism of topics of Australian interest in the schedules, to gather information on inconsistencies in the operation of the schedules, and to advise DDC on matters of general policy insofar as they reflect Australian attitudes in the study of classification.

This is a fuller role than has been attempted by any previous committee, and it indicated a growing maturity of approach and an acknowledgement that the ground work had been completed. It was part of the realization of the ideal of international co-operation towards which DDC and Benjamin Custer, the former editor of DDC, had worked. As a complement to the work of the new Committee, the National Library of Australia, as the national central cataloguing agency, has developed mutually beneficial links with DDC on a continuing basis, arising from its application of DDC in the *Australian National Bibliography*. This relationship was strengthened by a period of secondment of the former Principal Librarian in charge of cataloguing to the Library of Congress. There is no other classification scheme with which such a close relationship is possible.

5. Successes and prospects

At a meeting of the IFLA Classification Round Table in 1979, Benjamin Custer gave his "view from the Editor's chair". He spoke of his 25 years in the chair in terms of five trends: cosmopolitanization, modernization, frustration, satisfaction, and "the light side". I can personally confirm the value and vitality of these trends. Australian librarians have benefitted from the cosmopolitan policies of a cosmopolitan man, and we have welcomed the modernization that has gone with this. We are also very aware of the frustrations of lack of communication, or of faulty communication. But these recent years, particularly the years of the preparation of the nineteenth edition of DDC, have been satisfying ones. DDC has, more than at any time in the past, been willing to listen to Australian views, not just on matters Australian, but on DDC policy and practice in general. As a result there were very definite Australian gains in the new edition. The history schedule was expanded, the provision for material on Australian Aborigines was improved, and most importantly of all, the full text of the Australian area expansion was incorporated into DDC for the first time. Benjamin Custer was able to produce not only a modern, stable, classification scheme out of the ashes of the fifteenth edition, but a responsive one as well. It is unlikely that these policies will change with the new editor, because it is quite clear that these policies have been eminently successful. DDC is no longer under threat in Australia. Rather, it has gained ground, and its future as the principal classification scheme in Australia is assured.

Theorists have been telling us for many years that the large general classification schemes such as DDC or LCC will decline and disappear in the age of machine-based information retrieval systems. There is absolutely no evidence that this is happening, and the new and sophisticated information systems have concentrated largely, if not exclusively, on verbal approaches to information. For most libraries and for most library users, information still means books, with those books arranged on shelves in a more or less logical fashion. This pattern is likely to remain the norm for many years to come, thus ensuring a healthy future for the general classification schemes. Australian librarians over several generations have worked hard to shape at least one of these schemes a little nearer to their heart's desire. No doubt they shall continue to do so. From the point of view of one who has been involved, it has been a rich experience.