
Book Reviews

Eric de Grolier's "Big Book" on Classification.

That Eric de Grolier is a notable summarizer of conferences, readers will already know from Pauline Cochrane's article in the Festschrift issue of *International Classification*. He performed this task also in 1957 at the Dorking International Study Conference on Classification for Information Retrieval. During his survey, he mentioned that he had recently completed a "big book" on classification, written over a period of 20 years.

In 1958 I had the great pleasure of reviewing this book for the *Journal of Documentation*. It was entitled "Théorie et pratique des classifications documentaires", published by the Union Française des Organismes de Documentation, Paris 1956. Duplicated from typewriter script, it runs to 400 pages, with over 800 bibliographical footnotes, many containing a string of references. It still occupies an honoured place on my bookshelf.

In the 1950's (and even since then) the name of Eric de Grolier was rarely encountered in English or American texts on classification, although he had been writing on documentation since 1931. Yet at the time of its publication, his book was the most comprehensive study of documentary classification that had yet appeared. Its three divisions covered: (a) general characteristics of classification (p.1-96); (b) the evolution of systems of classification (p.97-259); and (c) possibilities for the future coordination and standardization of classifications (p.260-368); plus appendixes and index.

The historical study runs from antiquity to modern times, drawing in much new material that was not to be found in the standard histories, and it offers the reader a wealth of factual material and references. It is a great pity that the book did not receive wide distribution, for its historical content can be of much value to subsequent students of the subject.

Despite his deep knowledge of this aspect of classification, de Grolier did not write his book as an antiquary. His main interest in classification was in its future. He studied the past in order to understand the present, and to guide further development of the subject. He was as familiar with the current research on every aspect of information retrieval as with the works of Comte or Ampère. The last third of his book is devoted to a detailed analysis of current practical questions: how can documentary classification schemes be coordinated and standardized? is a rational encyclopaedic classification desirable and possible? can special classification schemes be coordinated? what symbolic representations will best serve documentary needs? what organizational methods and structures can tackle such problems? These questions are with us still, and de Grolier's opinions are

still worth examination.

The "big book" is a work of great erudition, and it has another merit: it is no dry compendium. De Grolier then (as now) has a vigorous, critical mind: he is never content to describe, he must evaluate, praise, or attack. As well as having rich factual content, his book is very readable, because it is so well organized, and because Eric is ready to argue with anyone about anything - about sociology, philosophy, logic, linguistics, notational symbols, information theory, or whatever. No narrow specialist, his knowledge of modern culture is as well integrated as it is wide. It is, in fact, classified.

At the Dorking conference, Eric said of his book: "I now have the disagreeable impression that twelve months have elapsed, and that it would better be put in the waste paper basket and an entirely new study written". A false judgement, to discard such riches - stemming only from his unceasing urge to move ahead in his thinking. (The fruits of further explorations into new methods of retrieval were incorporated into his "Study of general categories applicable to classification and coding in documentation", published by UNESCO in 1960.)

Yet it is easy to understand how the feeling of dissatisfaction had arisen. Mechanical aids to information retrieval were starting to appear (using punched and peephole cards), and de Grolier devoted a few pages of his book to selection using these tools. Computer-aided retrieval did not appear until 1957 (at first using magnetic tape storage), but discussions of the possibilities of the computer in retrieval had begun some years earlier. Change was in the air, and for some enthusiasts of the new, the old techniques of document and information management such as classification, seemed to have had their day. Of course, de Grolier did not agree with this, but perhaps he felt some loss of the certainty he had previously enjoyed, that classification was central to documentation.

Today, thirty or so years on, issues relating to the structure and representation of knowledge are again seen as central - not only to information retrieval, but to all aspects of information and language processing. How topically reads the title of section 243 of the big book: Can there be a synthesis of classification and language?

Eric concluded his conference survey at Dorking with a toast: "I lift my cup to the future classificationist who will be master of the world!" Let us lift our cups to him, to honour the contributions he has made to the organization of knowledge!

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Krishan KUMAR: *Theory of Classification*. 4th rev.ed. New Delhi: Vikas Publ.House 1988 (1991 reprint). IX, 560p. ISBN 0-7069-54415-7 (Pbk)

Apparently under the influence of S.R.Ranganathan, theory and practice of library classification form the core