CHARLES AMMI CUTTER: NINETEENTH-CENTURY
SYSTEMATIZER OF LIBRARIES
VOLUME I

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE LIBRARY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
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I finished this dissertation thirty-four years ago, and though I had considered attempting to put it into formal publishable form more than once, I have never gotten around to doing so. Two reasons come to mind for my failure to follow through with the task, besides, that is, procrastination in the face of the sheer amount of work involved. First, the dissertation actually attempts to account for two different things, one, a biography of Cutter, the other a description of his principal innovations in library cataloging and classification. My original, perhaps naïve, hope for the dissertation was that I would be able to interweave the two one unified work. Unfortunately, they never really quite meshed as well as I had hoped. The narrative of Charles Cutter’s life and work essentially occupies chapters I to IV and VIII and IX, and the description of his library cataloging and classification innovations occupies chapters V to VII, each of these two parts containing at least some information pertinent to the other. Early on I concluded that to rewrite the whole would necessitate writing two different works, for it seemed to me that keeping these two approaches separate was important, not simply because of their basic differences, but also because the second part needed to be changed from mere description to substantive analysis of Cutter’s innovations.

Second, new information related to American social reform history (an important aspect of the beginning of the modern library movement) and the Scottish philosophy that had been an essential part of Cutter’s education and intellectual milieu began coming to
my attention and increasingly to occupy my thinking beginning almost immediately after completing the dissertation. These new sources eventually made it obvious to me that rewriting each of the two parts would require more than simply editing them. They both merited being recast conceptually.

I eventually published much of my new findings, but not by reformulating the dissertation. I included the new themes in American social reform history in a comparatively brief biographical sketch of Cutter (along with an updated bibliography of his writings) that I placed in my edited collection of a selection of his works entitled *Charles Ammi Cutter: Library Systematizer* (1977). And I eventually incorporated my conclusions on the place of Scottish philosophy in Cutter’s work in *The Subject in the Dictionary Catalog from Cutter to the Present* (1983). The latter is focused on subject cataloging as it attained maturity over a century and, thus, Cutter is not the only person discussed in it. But, nearly the entire first half of it is devoted to him and goes well beyond what I had written on the topic in chapter 4 of the dissertation (“The Boston Athenaeum Catalog and Subject Cataloging”). To put the matter in a nutshell, I ended up surpassing what I had originally written in the dissertation in such a thoroughgoing way that to try to rewrite the dissertation would have been to recreate it, not simply to edit it in a superficial way for publication.

Having said the foregoing, I hasten to add that the dissertation still has much value particularly in providing what amounts to a detailed narrative of his professional life. This is important because as I mentioned in my original preface to the dissertation, previous work on Cutter was not only brief but had passed over all critical issues and conflicts in his life, and I attempted to include such matters in what I wrote. I also
conclude forthrightly that certain important matters related to his life and his major
innovations merit much more attention than I have given them. The dissertation, while
long and filled with the kind of detail that only Ph.D. students consider important, stands
in effect not as the final word on Cutter, but rather only as a beginning point.

Some of the matters needing substantial work are as follows. With respect to the
narrative of Cutter’s life, a modest number of few new sources have come to light that
should be incorporated into the whole, including autobiographical comments he made
about his early experiences of libraries and of the Harvard College Library and a limited
amount of previously unknown correspondence. But what have always been missing
have been sources that would help to vivify the man himself. The biographical part of
my work focused on his professional work and outside of his early life has almost
nothing of his personal life. In the professional arena he was the ultimate scholarly
gentleman who worked among America’s educated elite for much of his career. Though
he engaged in critical thinking about a great many things and wrote strong critical
reviews of scholarly works of others, he rarely raised a personal complaint about
anything, at least not in print or in the correspondence that I uncovered. He was generous
towards others nearly to a fault even when he was treated poorly by them. He
energetically worked at his professional tasks throughout his career, and he expended
enormous amounts of time and effort to his special innovations in cataloging and
classification, but one can find only a very rare hint that any of his activities were done in
anything approaching a competitive spirit. In some respects, he was too good to be true.

The reason that this picture of him is all that I was able to present is in many respects
a function of the sources I had available. As I mentioned in the 1974 original preface,
Charles Cutter’s grandson, the Honorable Richard Ammi Cutter of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, related to me that in his memory his grandfather’s personal papers were thrown out in the 1930s shortly after the death of Sarah Fayerweather (Appleton) Cutter, Charles Cutter’s wife. Moreover, Judge Cutter discounted their importance to my work anyway because he thought it best for me to limit my work to his grandfather’s professional career and not be concerned about his personal life. While I have found it hard to believe that all such personal materials would have disappeared, given Judge Cutter’s pronouncement on the matter and his role for me as a gateway to the family, I did not feel comfortable probing further. With the passing of Judge Cutter in 1993, however, perhaps new pathways could be opened and more information could be found on aspects of Cutter’s personality and life that would enlighten us at least about his reflections on and his passions for his own work. Of special importance would be personal letters that may have passed between Cutter and his wife and family, if any are extant. Also of importance might be letters that may have passed between Cutter’s wife, Sarah, and members of her own family (she was an Appleton), and especially those that might have survived between her and her brother Charles who spent most of his life in France, eventually becoming a member of the Law faculty at the University of Lyon. It strikes me that Cutter’s wife may have discussed with her family and with her brother with whom she was apparently close at least once in a while some of the key crises in the Cutter’s life together, for example, when Cutter struggled early on in his relationship with Melvil Dewey, when he eventually resigned from the Boston Athenaeum, and when he saw his efforts to help found the Rudolph Indexer Company fail because of machinations of the Library Bureau and Melvil Dewey.
Work also remains to be done on basic features and ideas related to Cutter’s major innovations in cataloging and classification. No one has yet conducted a critical investigation of his classification systems. He created two such systems, one for the Boston Athenaeum between the late 1870s and late 1880s, and a second during the 1890s, his better known system called the Expansive Classification which remained incomplete at his death in 1903. Chapter VII in the dissertation describes those two systems, but when I wrote it I had at best only a very minimal understanding of what classification really entailed. It remains a useful introduction to those systems, but at best only that. To properly deal with Charles Cutter’s classificatory thought would require more than simply a description of them. It would require showing not only how his work related to the larger realm of library classification as it had developed up to that point (including the cast of various classifiers who attempted to make useful universal classification systems), but also how it intersected with other important movements that affected the organization of knowledge—for example, the rise of indexing, the rise of documentation, the creation of a new technique for classification schemes called faceting, and perhaps most important the rise of interest in providing access to scientific literature. Putting Cutter’s work in a critical classificatory context might also necessitate attempting to answer one intriguing question that has yet to be broached in any serious way for library classification systems—for whom were such systems created? During the 20th century most people who have written about the value of such systems (apart from classified catalogs) focus on how they enable library users to browse a library’s collections physically in a systematic way. But, when Cutter and others first devised such systems, libraries did not have open shelving arrangements, and if that was the case, the rationale for such systems
could not have been their physical browsing value to library users. If this was the case, however, for whom were they creating such systems, and why?

Likewise, no one has done a thorough investigation of Cutter’s work on library cataloging, including the general idea of a catalog, the art of cataloging and, especially, descriptive cataloging, and how it relates to library cataloging that followed it. It has long been assumed that there is an unhindered direct connection between his work and what succeeded him, but my own work has demonstrated at least in the realm of subject cataloging that this is simply not the case. His work stands at the beginning of similar work that succeeded him, but also for various reasons stands notably apart from later work.

Some of the more critical issues that could be examined with great benefit include 1) What was the effect and significance (if any) of Cutter approaching the dictionary catalog not as a single structure of different kinds of entries, but rather the merging of four separate kinds of catalogs, each with their own needs and objectives? 2) How was his conception of the catalog affected by his use of a principal rather than a unit record entry system? 3) How did his approach to descriptive cataloging fit into what over his own lifetime as well as since has been a persistent evolution of ideals as to how one could appropriately represent and make documents accessible? 4) How did Cutter’s approach to the matter of the page display of data (a parallel to the modern idea of interface design) affect his conceptualization of a catalog? 5) How did Cutter’s view of users actually intersect with his approach to document representation and catalog objectives? The latter is particularly important because of the strong habit of modern writers to refer to Cutter’s views about users chiefly in terms of only one or two sentences regarding users found in
his subject cataloging rules and in terms of a perfunctory reciting of his catalog “objects.”

Any careful reading of the corpus of his works will reveal, however, that his views of
users went far beyond those two passages and in many respects appears not only to have
been strongly influenced by his understanding of human faculty psychology as
formulated in Scottish common sense realism, but also by his personal interest in helping
library users of all kinds.

I have pointed out various directions that further work could go chiefly because it
will take a new generation of scholars to do so. I not only encourage others to consider
such investigations, but am strongly convinced that it remains important to do so.

Charles A. Cutter remains perhaps the most original of all of the pioneers of the modern
library movement. He participated in all of the various activities of that movement for all
of his adult life, but he went beyond such activities to propound library catalog and
classification systems of notable thoughtfulness and complexity. It might seem that he
lived too long ago to merit close attention, but in reality his work still affects the library
realm. He expressed late 19th century concerns consummately in his work, but he also
affected the next century of work to follow, and in this sense further investigation of his
accomplishments is more than merited.

F. Miksa (January 2008)
PREFACE

This study of the contributions of Charles Ammi Cutter to librarianship arose out of the observation that very little of a substantial nature had been written about him. A long memorial sketch by William E. Foster, based on information from Cutter's widow, has provided the primary outline of his various activities and particularly of his early years. A short biography published in 1931 by his nephew, William Parker Cutter, supplemented Foster's work, but treated Cutter too briefly to adequately encompass his wide-ranging interests. It also left undeveloped several points concerning Cutter's personal involvements with other members of the American Library Association. Three Master's theses have also been written, but all of these lacked original manuscript materials.

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1 William E. Foster, "Charles Ammi Cutter; a Memorial Sketch," LJ, XXVIII (October, 1903), 697-703.
2 William P. Cutter, Charles Ammi Cutter, American Library Pioneers, no. 3 (Chicago: American Library Association, 1931).
studies in cataloging and classification have referred to Cutter's ideas in these areas, notably, the work of E. J. Coates, S. Lubetzky, and P. Dunkin. Studies of other library leaders, especially those by Holley and Williamson, have made passing mention of Cutter as he happened to affect the lives of their subjects. The characterization of Cutter that one finds in the latter studies suggests that Cutter was a shy, inward man whose primary contribution towards library development was solely in intellectual matters and most specifically in cataloging. In all of the works noted, the importance of Cutter's position in professional library organization, the fact of his wide experience, and the pervasive influence of his personal character have been only hinted at, and have suffered from a lack of detail. A natural question, therefore, is, what is the nature of Cutter's life and work and was it as pervasive as the hints have suggested?


The effort to find materials that would provide greater detail for a study of Cutter's life and work brought both pleasure and disappointment. The results of that search have dictated the nature of the result. The extent of Cutter's writing is much broader than appears on the surface. Many of Cutter's contributions to the Nation and to the Library Journal were anonymous. A great number of these have been identified. Even more pleasing has been the great number of comments recorded in the meetings of the American Library Association and many short editorial notes in the Library Journal that allow one to sense the breadth of his interests. Added to these are the manuscript reports he wrote as librarian of the Boston Athenaeum.

Disappointment was encountered, on the other hand, in searching for manuscript letters and other communications that might have revealed much of the inner emotional character of the man. Soon after beginning the search, R. Ammi Cutter of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Cutter's grandson, revealed that in his recollection, the personal papers of his grandfather had been destroyed at the death of Cutter's wife in 1933. As a result, the search was aimed at finding any manuscript letters and communications that might have been preserved among the papers of Cutter's correspondents. Fortunately, enough of these were found, especially among the papers of Melvil Dewey at Columbia University, to fill in important details of his activity.
and thought and to suggest a way to interpret Cutter, the man. But their nature is for the most part strictly about library business and only lend themselves to a revelation of Cutter's inner self by dwelling on the circumstances of various trying occasions. It may be, of course, that few such personal letters ever existed, given the propensity of nineteenth century persons such as Cutter to keep personal matters to themselves. Whatever the case, the resulting study can not be considered a biography in the true sense of the word. Until such materials are located, Cutter, the man, will remain only partially revealed. The study has, therefore, had to content itself with recounting Cutter's activities, especially where these have not previously been known, and to surveying his thinking on those areas of librarianship that seemed to be most important to him. An attempt has been made to picture the conditions of his early life and schooling, the library positions he held, and the dimensions of his professional career. In order to tie the picture together, attention has centered on two consuming themes that moulded his library service and his intellectual contributions. The first concerns Cutter's desire to systematize library organization in a library movement where there was as yet little systematization. The second concerns Cutter's training at Harvard College and his exposure to a Boston-Cambridge intellectual milieu, and how that background shaped the purpose for which his systematizing efforts were made. The two themes
have also provided a framework for understanding his relationships and activities in the American Library Association. Finally, in order to round out the study, special attention has been given to a more detailed analysis of his work on classification and cataloging.

It is hoped that the final result will be found to be a viable interpretation of Cutter's work and thought. Admittedly, in the absence of the kinds of biographical materials that would have been more helpful, the interpretations of attitudes and intentions on the part of Cutter and others must be considered tentative to the extent that supporting materials only hint at them. The author, therefore, wishes to claim full responsibility for them, hoping that perhaps at a future time, further materials might be found that would either substantiate them more fully, or show them to need revision.

The materials for this study have come from a wide range of sources and have involved some technical difficulties necessary to an understanding of the resources used. Spelling reform interests were rife during the early years of the American Library Association, especially as a result of Melvil Dewey's efforts. Spelling reform was not consistently followed by its adherents, however, and sometimes variant forms of words occur even within single documents. Consequently, the spelling contained in original materials has been retained. The spelling of one word, catalog/catalogue, merits particular attention.
Cutter made a conscious attempt beginning in 1879 to use the shortened form of the word in his A.L.A. writing. In other places, notably in the Nation and in the publications and reports of the Boston Athenaeum, Cutter retained the old spelling. Consequently, both forms occur in quotations. Outside of quotations, the short form is used.

Another problem that has arisen concerns the anonymity of Cutter's published writings. Almost all of his Nation items as well as many of his Library Journal items not only have no author noted, but often have no official titles. To conserve space, citations involving such writings are given without brackets around Cutter's name. A discussion of Cutter's authorship responsibility for those various items is given preceding the bibliography of his writings.

Many depositories were consulted in the search for materials. The following list gives the institutions and the collections used.

District of Columbia

Illinois
Chicago Public Library. Librarians' Letter Copybooks (William F. Poole).
Newberry Library (Chicago)
William F. Poole Papers
William S. Merrill/Charles A. Cutter Correspondence.
University of Chicago. Special Collections. President W. R. Harper's Papers.
University of Illinois.
Archives.
Katharine L. Sharp Papers.
University of Illinois School of Library Science. Directors' Letterbooks.

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The author wishes to acknowledge the help and encouragement of several persons without whom the study would not have been possible. First among these has been Howard W. Winger who has given abundantly of both his time and patience in his role as doctoral advisor. Ruth F. Carnovsky, Professor Emeritus, Ralph W. Franklin, and Lester Asheim, members of the faculty of the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago, and Arthur
Mann, Sterling Morton Distinguished Service Professor of American History in the University of Chicago, have also offered criticism of both content and methodology and have offered their encouragement when the spirit lagged.

Special acknowledgement is also due to a large number of persons associated with libraries and other institutions for help in the use of their resources. Among these are Walter M. Whitehill and the staff of the Boston Athenaeum, the staffs of the Columbia University Library, Department of Special Collections, the Forbes Library, Northampton, Massachusetts, and the Harvard University Archives. Last, the author wishes to express his indebtedness to The Honorable Richard Ammi Cutter of Cambridge, Massachusetts for various materials, for encouragement to investigate the essential intellectual contributions of his grandfather, and especially for his thoughtful and kind criticism of the manuscript.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A.L.A. American Library Association
BA Boston Athenaeum
BPL Boston Public Library
CUL Columbia University Library
HHL Harvard University, Houghton Library
HUA Harvard University, Archives
LJ Library Journal
NYPL New York Public Library
U.S.N.A. United States National Archives
ABSTRACT

This study of the life and work of Charles Ammi Cutter (1837-1903) began with the assumption that Cutter was a commanding figure in nineteenth century American librarianship. The assumption was itself based on a common assessment both of his contemporaries and of persons since his time. Details of his achievements have been lacking, however, for knowledge of his life has been limited and his biographers have for the most part dwelled only briefly on his accomplishments.

The sources for this study have provided a more complete picture of his life and a more detailed investigation of his major ideas. These sources are in both manuscript and published form. Among the manuscripts are the records preserved at Harvard University that have provided insight into his early life and his years at the Harvard College Library (1860-1868). Reports from the Boston Athenaeum, especially several annual reports of Cutter's, have given insight into the development of his administration there and into the conflict that brought about his resignation in 1893. They have also provided the background for his production of the Boston Athenaeum printed catalog and his cataloging rules.
Correspondence between Cutter and others has been found in a variety of depositories, most notably those containing the papers of Melvil Dewey and R. R. Bowker. These letters have provided a major source for understanding Cutter's role among his contemporaries.

Cutter's published writings have provided an even richer storehouse of his ideas in librarianship. He wrote continuously, although for the most part anonymously, for the Nation from 1868 to 1903. He contributed numerous articles, comments, and bibliographical columns to the Library Journal from its beginning in 1876, and served as its editor from 1881 to 1893.

The results of the investigation of the above sources have been striking. Cutter was greatly influenced by his early education in the Boston-Cambridge intellectual community. He incorporated the moral and philosophical views of that training into his philosophy of librarianship and into his idea of the purpose of the library. His ideas showed some evolution in his last decade, however, as he developed his concept of library service at the Forbes Library in Northampton, Massachusetts. His early training also influenced the way he conceived the purpose of the professional library organization. He was instrumental in the formulation of the American Library Association. He served as both participant and mediator in the struggles for leadership during the 1880's. The struggle also, however, led to his withdrawal by 1893 from an active
role in the leadership of the organization. Afterwards, he participated mainly in only local library organizations.

Cutter's greatest accomplishments were in the realm of systematizing libraries and the tools of access to recorded knowledge. His work illustrates his concepts and innovations in library management. The printed catalog that he produced and his Rules for a Dictionary Catalog provided the modern dictionary catalog concept. The Rules, especially, provided the impetus for the discussion of cataloging principles in the library world in his own day. Most notably, Cutter produced the first systematic subject catalog system, although upon close examination, one can also see the practices and ambiguities that he included in it that undercut its own goals.

Cutter's work in shelf classification was also notable. Inspired by Dewey's Amherst scheme, he developed a much more detailed system for the Athenaeum which he also offered to the library world at large. When criticism mounted about his notation for the scheme, he began again and produced his Expansive Classification.

The picture of Cutter that has resulted in this study shows a remarkably productive and erudite scholar with broad-ranging interests. His achievements have never been fully appreciated nor has his grasp of librarianship been fully portrayed. The following study attempts to do both.