

BOWERS'S PRINCIPLES OF BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION

WHEN IN MID-1966 I BOARDED the plane in Auckland, on the way to taking up residence in Canada, I carried under my arm one book: Fredson Bowers's *Principles of Bibliographical Description*. I don't claim to have read it in flight; rather I was taking advantage of the standard provision among airlines for a 'reasonable' amount of reading matter to be taken on board free — this was one way of transporting a fairly heavy volume *franco porto*. Nor do I claim that it was the only book that I took to Canada: others were to follow by sea. In fact the immediate reason for carrying this particular volume with me was quite utilitarian: in taking up the de facto rare books librarianship at McMaster I considered it likely that I would need the bibliographical refresher course which only Bowers's *Principles* could — in my mind — provide. Nonetheless I like to think that my action was also symbolic, in that I have always regarded the *Principles* as my professional 'bible' and myself as a 'Bowersite'. In those early years I used to read my bible through every two or three years. But I have not done so for some years, having come to view the *Principles* more as a 'Gideonite', as a volume to be consulted in time of need. My only regret has been that my copy is the Russell & Russell issue of 1962, in dark-blue buckram and brown-paper wrapper, the latter now grown tatty and discarded but leaving traces of its former presence in the discoloured endpapers. 'Regret' because the original issue, published by Princeton University Press in 1949, is such a handsome volume, with its simple but striking two-coloured title page — indeed Princeton has been a consistent producer of handsome volumes. But by the time that I embarked on my bibliographical apprenticeship under Bill Cameron in 1960 the *Principles* was out of print.

The fact that the *Principles* has recently been re-issued once again — this time by St. Paul's — may be interpreted variously: perhaps there is nothing to be added, even after forty years; perhaps there is no-one now active who could undertake the necessary revision. Both views are subject to qualification: since 1949 bibliographers have explored regions which were then remote, and the names of several experienced bibliographers come to mind as possible contenders in any invitation stakes. Yet there is something about the work itself (not the subject matter) which suggests that revision is unlikely, that Bowers probably awaits his Gaskell in vain. Were Bowers to have himself revised the *Principles* twenty or thirty years on, he would no doubt have had rather more to say about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century books, reflecting his own shift in editorial endeavour from the late-sixteenth and seventeenth. And — as foreshadowed in the *Principles* itself — he would certainly have explored the ramifications for descriptive bibliography of press figures. For 1949 was also the year of Knotts's 'Press Numbers as a Bibliographical Tool' and Todd's Chicago dissertation, later to be the basis of a series of influential articles; all that Bowers was able to do at such a late stage was to provide a footnote to Knotts and half-page addendum on Todd, concluding that 'the significance which now attaches to these figures as bibliographical evidence requires that they be minutely recorded in a shorthand manner for every forme and sheet of a book in an

eighteenth-century bibliography which has any pretensions towards being definitive in its descriptions.'

Why I suggest that revision is unlikely is that the *Principles* is an intimidating book: not only is it long (with, it must be said, an inadequate index), it is often complex in its argument and therefore dense in its exposition — it is a book which some, I suspect, have found it easy to be repelled by. Ironically perhaps, its complexity and density have alienated potentially its largest user-group, senior students, while at the same time there is no substitute for it: McKerrow, Gaskell, Cowley, Esdaile/Stokes, Dunkin, Padwick and the various examination-guide distillations are all in one way or another inadequate. It is intimidating, too, in the range of examples used: how could one being (and at such a relatively early age) have marshalled such an array of evidence, much of it first-hand? In sum, the *Principles* is a paradoxical book: monumental, but influential perhaps more as a source-book for teachers than as a text for students; generally so persuasive in its recommendations, but — being so difficult to absorb — having been by-passed in the last twenty years in favour of Gaskell's perfunctorily argued, sometimes misguided but much more approachable outline in the *New Introduction*, the lasting reputation of which will depend on sections one and (particularly) two — the historical sections — not on the descriptive and textual (the latter now replaced by *From Writer to Reader*).

The *Principles* is not an 'original' work: as Bowers himself made clear in his foreword, his own work could be seen simply as a consideration and codification of practices which had originated and evolved in the previous half-century or so and whose own origins went back to Capell in the eighteenth century and the incunabulists in the seventeenth. To deny the *Principles* originality (in the sense of novelty) is not to diminish its stature: this kind of originality was not called for. What Bowers did — with such signal success — was to consider the varying practices of his predecessors and contemporaries in a set of recommendations (not prescriptions) so cogently reasoned that the *Principles* has had bestowed on it the status of a *code* for bibliographical description. This said, however, it must not be forgotten that the code allows for considerable latitude on the part of the individual bibliographer. The acceptability of any code rests on its reasonableness as a guide to conduct or practice. In the case of codes of library cataloguing or bibliographical description, their essence must be a series of principles commonly accepted by practitioners and users, thus enabling communication among them. To this extent the *Principles* has fixed the lingua franca of bibliographical description, even if — as in any language — there may be at present mutually intelligible dialects, subject, however, to the gradual levelling of the received standard. The *Principles* therefore is to be seen as, in effect, 'the last word', the culmination of the collective example and theorising of, in particular, such giants as Pollard, McKerrow and Greg (to whom the work is dedicated).

Having previously suggested that the *Principles* is unlikely ever to be revised I now venture to suggest areas which any such revision might be concerned with! As I have already implied, the present work is rendered difficult of access by an inadequate index; in any revision an analytical index should be seen as vital, as an

integral part of the work (here Gaskell offers an excellent example). There is a sprinkling of errors, both typographic and of substance (e.g. illustrative examples which are manifestly wrong — like records of pagination which don't tally with the total number of pages — or are at least ambiguous), needing to be corrected. Also there are situations which even Bowers appears not to have met, though the principles enunciated enable one to cope with them descriptively — e.g. he appears not to have encountered the situation where the last leaf of one gathering and the first of the next have been cancelled in favour of a conjugate pair (the solution derived from the general principles is, in the collation formula, presumably to regard one of the leaves as being simply removed, the other as being replaced by the pair, e.g. $A^8(-A8) B^8(-B1, +1.2)$ or $A^8(-A8, +1.2) B^8(-B1)$). And of course there are the phenomena which have emerged as subjects of study since 1949, notably press figures but also paper-quality marks, while an extension into the nineteenth century would presumably involve consideration of a number of phenomena peculiar to machine technology, like plating, or devised for organizational purposes, like sheet numbers. Others will have their own pet topics to add to the list of additions.

But these are all matters insignificant in the larger scheme of things. How has the *Principles* fared as a statement of principles? Are there any principles which should be reconsidered, where Bowers arrived at a conclusion which is *not* persuasive and where consequently a reviser might need to look again at the arguments? One way of answering these questions is by looking at theoretical arguments published since 1949. By far the most significant contributor to the discussion of the practice of bibliographical description has been Tanselle, but it is not to deprecate his magisterial contributions to say that by and large they have been additions (like the description of the colour of book cloths, a concern obviously peculiar to the nineteenth century — and here one might wonder aloud whether it really *is* possible to comprehend both hand- and machine-produced books within one set of principles) or refinements or extensions (like the minute description of paper). A number of the separately published articles have been gathered together in Jones's *Readings in Descriptive Bibliography* (1974), one of the declared aims of which was to serve as a selective supplement to the *Principles*. However worthy the individual contributions (and they include Stevenson on 'Paper as Bibliographical Evidence', Todd on 'Bibliography and the Editorial Problem in the Eighteenth Century' and Bowers himself on 'Purposes of Descriptive Bibliography, with Some Remarks on Methods') it is difficult to view them in this light — indeed, despite Jones's claim, they do not contain a great deal of theorising that could be considered relevant to the concerns of the *Principles*. From this line of evidence one would have to conclude, I think, that as a statement of principles the *Principles* has stood up extremely well, that the need for revision is not pressing, as Jones himself acknowledges: 'Here is a book which, in the main, has never been supplanted or even significantly emended in those areas of study and methodology which are avowedly or tacitly its primary concerns.' Another seventeen years on, one would not wish to vary that judgment.

Nonetheless, I do believe that there *are* instances where Bowers's recommendations are open to question. I suggest three for consideration by the potential reviser:

1. *Simultaneous issues*. In effect Bowers restricts the use of 'issue' in the hand-press period to instances of *re-issue*, essentially 'Cancellation of title, with or without addition, deletion, or substitution of new matter, to bring old sheets up to date or in connection with improvement or correction, or with alteration of any variety of the conditions of sale or ownership'. He denies the possibility of *simultaneous* issue to all variant 'forms' of a publication put on sale at much the same time except where there is a difference in content, e.g. 'Special impressions on fine or large paper distinguished from ordinary copies by added, deleted, or substituted material not consonant with an ideal copy of the ordinary issue'.

I believe that such a view is unduly restrictive, that it reflects a concern with the *printer's methods* of effecting the changes rather than their purpose — and, *pace* Bowers, it does not require the bibliographer to be a literary critic to establish that purpose, because the purpose is manifest from objective evidence. The principle that I believe should be invoked in discriminating between groups of copies not varying in content is the 'consciously planned printed unit' (or perhaps, to amplify Bowers's phrase, the 'consciously planned printed/published unit', or, more simply, the 'planned unit'). True: changing the imprint to accommodate an arrangement whereby two or more booksellers responsible for a publication had their own sets of sheets was effected in the same way that a *correction* (conferring 'state') was effected; but the aim was palpably different — to create two or more 'planned units', which I would regard as *simultaneous issues*. Again, in *publishing* terms, the effect of printing groups of copies on discrete papers — larger or finer than the general run — is, I suggest, to produce *issues*, not *states*. (The objective evidence would be any of these: paper-quality marks, prices printed on title pages, watermarks, gutter measurements or simply dimensions, including bulk.) In this context I believe that Bowers is inconsistent in granting the status of issues to forms of a publication where the same typesetting has been used, re-imposed, to produce copies in different formats, a practice familiar to bibliographers through the example of the Foulis Press in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Might a reviewer therefore consider the matter of 'issue' from the standpoint of the publisher, thereby opening up the possibility of accepting a much wider range of simultaneous issues?

2. *Double sheets and format*. Particularly in the late eighteenth century individual volumes are found printed on laid paper in which the chain lines run the 'wrong' way (e.g. horizontally instead of vertically in an octavo), when other evidence suggests that they were printed in a conventional manner (in the case of the octavo, being printed 'eight-up'). (One of my current encounters is with volumes printed at the University Press, Oxford, in the 1780s which are printed on unwatermarked laid paper with chain lines running horizontally in the leaf; since in some volumes some gatherings have vertical chain lines and since some of the volumes with gatherings

with horizontal chain lines are press-figured twice per gathering I conclude that they were all printed 'eight-up'.)

The explanation for the 'wrong' chain lines is that paper was sometimes made from a mould double the size of one designed to produce one of the standard sizes of paper, a process by which output in the paper mill could be doubled with very little extra effort. Since, for structural reasons, the ribs (and hence the chain lines in the paper produced from it) always ran parallel to the shorter side of the mould, the effect of doubling its size — by, as it were, joining two standard moulds at one of their longer sides — was to reverse the direction of the chain lines, so that when the double sheets were cut in two ready for printing (an essential stage) the chain lines were parallel with the longer side of the 'half-double' sheet. (All the paper produced in this manner that I have encountered lacks a watermark, but if one were placed in the conventional place on the double mould — in the middle of one half — it would then appear in the centre of the 'half-double' sheet.)

Since bibliographical format is an expression of the relationship between the leaf and the sheet of which it once formed a part, printing on half-sheets of double-sized paper presents certain difficulties. Bowers invokes the principle that the whole sheet (in this case the double sheet) is the unit and that as a cut is equivalent to a fold (as in the standard way of imposing twelvemos with a 'cut-off' of four leaves), so that a volume made up of gatherings in eight on paper with horizontal chain lines is a sixteenmo, not an octavo, two gatherings of eight leaves being derived from one sheet. In order to indicate the peculiar circumstances Bowers advocates — following Greg — the notation '(8° form) 16°' for such volumes. I believe that this is an unduly 'legalistic' way of dealing with the phenomenon, but there are various practical considerations which also suggest that the solution is not the happiest. In the first place the recognition of double sheets will generally be confined to laid paper (and perhaps to wove paper with a watermark). And then how is one to express the format of a volume made up of gatherings some from conventional single sheets, others from 'half-double' sheets?

Might a reviser consider whether in these special instances not the *papermaker's* unit but the *printer's* should form the basis for determining format? (I can't see that printing on halves, or other fractions, of conventional sheets clouds the issue.) If — by skeleton analysis, press-figure evidence, analogy or whatever — it is demonstrable or likely that the 'half-double' sheets were printed in the same way as if they had been conventional whole sheets I would suggest that there is a good case — as indeed Hazen recognised as long ago as 1935 — for treating them as whole sheets and relegating the direction of the chain lines to a note.

3. *Treatment of insertions in the collation formula.* To me the most difficult part of the *Principles* to comprehend is the section on insertions, specifically their designation in the collation formula, and especially when associated with the simultaneous removal of leaves. As Bowers himself notes: 'Numerous problems about the notation of inserted leaves arise according to their signing or lack of signing in conjunction with their position in the gathering, and according to whether they are simple additions or else substitutions.' When should one quote,

when infer, when employ χ , and when disregard the signing completely? At different points in his discussion and in reference to different situations, Bowers advocates all four courses of action; despite his argument one is struck by the odd inconsistency or ambiguity and — more significantly — by the apparent arbitrariness of the recommendations. Might there be a *general principle* which would allow all insertions to be treated in the same manner, without the need to have recourse to nice distinctions? The answer is 'yes'. Tanselle — in what I accept as an utterly convincing argument — suggests that in Bowers's consideration of the problem there is a fundamental confusion of purpose, in that no comment is made in the collation formula about the method, or even the fact, of signing the leaves constituting the basic gatherings, whereas the actual signing of inserts (including cancellantia) is accommodated and inferences are made about signing of unsigned inserts.

Since the case is made so cogently by Tanselle (in *Studies in Bibliography* 38 (1985)) it need not be rehearsed in detail here (don't ignore the footnotes when reading the article). Suffice it to say that it rests on the fundamentally simple principles that (i) the collation formula is structural; (ii) the actual signing of leaves is the business of a separate statement on signing; (iii) and therefore, in terms of their signing, in the collation formula inserts are to be treated in the same manner as 'normal' leaves. The argument is so persuasive and overcomes the uncertainty inherent in Bowers's recommendations so comprehensively that I for one have adopted Tanselle's approach and recommend it to students.

What the reviser would need to do is to subject Tanselle's simplification to scrutiny, in order to determine whether it is capable of representing as wide a range of instances as Bowers's version and of being equally adaptable for purposes of reference. It seems to me that it *should*. The only difficulty I can see is one which Bowers doesn't cover either: how to treat an insertion consisting of an odd number of leaves where the one disjunct leaf is found in the middle — would '1.2.3.4.5' satisfactorily represent an insertion of five leaves where the first and fifth and the second and fourth are conjugate?

As an addendum: the reviser might well accept Tanselle's recommendation, made in the same article, on the use of '\$'. As presently employed, \$ may denote (i) 'the specified leaf or page in every gathering' (e.g. 'the press figures appear regularly on \$7' and '\$8'), or (ii) in the statement of signing, 'in every gathering, all leaves to and including the designated leaf' (e.g. '\$4 signed'). In other words, the signification will vary according to context, which in itself is perhaps not an ideal principle. Tanselle sensibly suggests that for the latter purpose '\$1-4' would be both more certainly unambiguous and also consistent with the other usage. Again, it is a practice which I have readily adopted and recommended. Indeed, there is a general principle here which might be proposed more forcefully than Bowers did: always be specific; leave nothing to inference; never rely on presumptions about supposed norms in printing houses at particular periods (and what about periods of transition?). Thus, for example, conventionally unsigned or unnumbered pages should perhaps always be specifically noted as lacking signature or pagination rather than the fact being left to inference; lengthier statements of signing and pagination are a small price to pay for the added precision.

To suggest that there *are* areas where revision might be considered is not to contradict my previously stated position: that the *Principles* is fundamentally solid, that any reviser — should anyone feel the need to incorporate changes derived from the practice and theorizing of the past forty years — would be limited to refinements and extensions. The *Principles of Bibliographical Description* is a lasting monument to its author.

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