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Biographical Sketch Charles A. Cutter

LIS 610

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## **Introduction**

If one works or spends time in a library long enough they may hear the term “Cutter number.” A “Cutter number” is an alpha-numeric device used in cataloguing. It is named after the librarian who devised it, Charles Ammi Cutter. While not as well known as his contemporary Melvil Dewey, Charles A. Cutter created lasting contributions to the field of cataloguing and to librarianship in general. In a memorial sketch of Cutter written a month after his death William Foster wrote that Cutter contributed three major works to the history of cataloguing. The first is the catalog of the Boston Athenaeum, the second is Cutter’s *Rules for a Dictionary Catalogue* and the third is his Expansive Classification (EC). (Foster 1380-1381)

## **Early Life and Student Career**

Cutter was born to Caleb and Hannah (Bigelow) Cutter in Boston, Massachusetts on March 14, 1837. Cutter’s mother died while he was still a child. When his father remarried he was sent to live with his grandfather and maiden aunts. (Stromgren) Cutter was exposed to libraries at an early age as one of his aunts, Charlotte, was a librarian at the Cambridge town library. (Miksa 1993, 240) He was raised in a Unitarian religious environment and after graduating from Harvard College third in his class he continued his studies at the Harvard Divinity School. (Immroth 762) While a student at the Harvard

Divinity College he worked in the school library where he rearranged and reclassified the library's holdings. (Immroth 762) While doing so he came into contact with the College Library cataloguer, Ezra Abbott. He graduated in July of 1859 and a year later decided not to be ordained as a minister but instead accepted an assistant librarian position at the college library, an appointment secured for him through his association and relationship with Abbott. (Miksa 1993, 240). He continued to work as a librarian until his death.

### **Early Professional Career**

As an assistant librarian at the Harvard Library, together with Ezra Abbott, he created a new cataloguing system for the library's collection. What was different about this catalogue was that Cutter and Abbott used index cards. (Stromgren) Previously, library catalogues were published in book form thus creating a situation where the catalogues were often not accurate as new acquisitions and removed items weren't added or deleted until the next catalogue was published. By using index cards, changes to the catalogue could be made in an easy and timely manner.

### **Boston Athenaeum**

In 1868 Cutter was elected librarian of the Boston Athenaeum. During his career at the Boston Athenaeum, which spanned 25 years, he created all three of what Foster regards as his lasting contributions to the field of library science.

As mentioned earlier the first was the catalogue of the Boston Athenaeum. The catalogue of over 87,000 holdings was published in 1874 and according to Foster "stood almost alone among American bibliographical undertakings so far as magnitude and

thoroughness were concerned.” (Foster 1381) Subsequent volumes of the catalogue were published in 1876, 1878, 1880, and the last was in 1882.

A set of rules for cataloguing grew from Cutter’s arduous efforts of compiling the catalogue of the Boston Athenaeum. The *Rules for a Dictionary Catalogue* first appeared in print in 1876 in the United States Bureau of Education publication *Public Libraries in the United States of America: Their History, Condition, and Management*. (Winke 122) Later editions were published in 1889, 1891 and 1904. Called “Cutter’s rules” still today the *Rules for a Dictionary Catalogue* has been a major influence on today’s cataloguing rules and acted as a basis from which the Library of Congress Subject Headings was developed. (Immroth 763)

### **Cutter’s Expansive Classification**

Cutter’s third major contribution to library science according to Foster is his Expansive Classification. Started while Cutter was still with the Boston Athenaeum he published six schemes of the EC between 1891 and 1893. (Winke 123) The first scheme was developed for a small library. As a library grew in size it could switch to the next level scheme. The next level scheme included the prior scheme(s) with the subdivisions expanded to accommodate a larger collection. According to Stromgren in the article “Library systematizer extraordinaire” Cutter’s goal was to “prepare a scheme applicable to collections of every size, from the village library in its earliest stages to the national library with a million volumes.” (Stromgren) Cutter died in 1903 while still working on the seventh scheme, leaving it unfinished.

While not used as extensively as the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) the EC according to Winke in the article “The Contracting World of Cutter’s Expansive Classification” “was commonly regarded as superior to DDC”. (Winke 127) The EC was a model for the Library of Congress Classification and Bliss’s Bibliographic Classification. It was adopted by a relatively small number of libraries most of which were located in New England. During the last century the majority of those libraries have abandoned the classification system. (Winke 124) It is still in use today at the Forbes Library where Cutter was a librarian during the last decade of his life.

### **Forbes Library**

Cutter worked as the librarian of the Forbes library from 1894 until his death in 1903. Cutter was a skilled and educated collection developer and over the nine years he spent at the Forbes Library he increased the collection to over 90,000 materials. (Miksa 1993, 242) His other accomplishments while at the Forbes Library include building a circulating music and art collection, a medical collection for local physicians, a children’s room, a traveling book service (similar to modern day bookmobile), and the opening of a branch library. (Miksa 1993, 242)

### **ALA**

In addition to Cutter’s numerous accomplishments in cataloguing he was also influential in the organization and rise of librarianship as a field. Cutter, with Melvil Dewey and others, was an original founder of the American Library Association in 1876. (Immroth, 763) He served as president of the organization from 1887 to 1889 and was the

editor of the ALA's publication *Library Journal* from 1881 to 1893. (Miksa 1993, 241)  
At the time of his death Cutter attended more ALA conferences than any other member.  
(Foster, 1382)

## **Conclusion**

Cutter's influence and name continues to live on in the world of libraries. He was an imaginative catalogue and classification developer who shaped the rules of cataloguing as they stand today. Like others during his era he viewed the library as a means to educate and uplift society. (Miksa 1974, 852) He held true to this conviction and dedicated his life to the field of librarianship. He is a worthy model for today's librarians because of his dedication and tireless work.

## **Bibliographical Note**

Due to the fact that Charles A. Cutter is such an important person in library science history I had no trouble finding information about him and his life. Particularly valuable sources were the two written by Francis L. Miksa. Miksa wrote his dissertation on Cutter and seems to have researched and examined Cutter's life thoroughly. All the materials I used were found online. I am limited in the resources available to me as I am located on Maui and the college library is closed. Google Books especially was helpful in finding material.

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