

The "Other" Immortal: A Memorable Day  
With Henry E. Bliss<sup>1</sup>

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Sometime ago, I referred to the work of H.E. Bliss.<sup>2</sup> Recently I wrote the following biographical vignette for the *Wilson Library Bulletin*, with whose permission it is reprinted here. As I hope the article makes clear, and as I hope it helps to accomplish, Mr. Bliss and his work deserve wider appreciation than they've been accorded.

*The "Other" Immortal:*

## A Memorable Day With Henry E. Bliss

by Eugene Garfield

*Ed. note: In the popular mind and for most practicing librarians, Melvil Dewey stands alone as the immortal giant of library classification, and certainly the success of his classification system is without parallel. Yet, there are not a few informationalists throughout the world who consider the quieter and more cerebral Henry Evelyn Bliss (1870-1955) to be the true genius in this field, and an enormously influential one. Strangely, little appears about Mr. Bliss in library literature. But that he is well and warmly remembered may be seen—and enjoyed—in this article.*

It was a day in late spring. I think it was raining. Dorli Ruchti, the library assistant at the Columbia University SLS library, was at the charge desk. She looked toward an elderly man on the far right of the desk and asked if I knew who he was. To my pleasant surprise it was Henry Bliss, about whom I had heard and whose system of classification I had scarcely examined (but which I suspected was probably more significant than Dewey or LC), and was intuitively interested in, since it did not limit its scope from the outset to book classification. I could see his hearing aid and learned from Miss Ruchti that it was not easy to talk with him. I decided not to miss my opportunity. When I heard Mr. Bliss talking to the other library assistant, I realized the degree of his deafness, so I waited until he returned to the reading room and wrote a note asking if he would do me the honor of having a cup of coffee with me

when he was finished. When he read the note he immediately shook hands, and in a very loud voice, which startled everyone in the room, said that he would be finished soon, and although he had an appointment shortly before six, he would be glad to spend a few minutes with me.

A little while later I found myself drinking tea with Mr. Bliss in the Lions Den, trying to make conversation over the voices of students and a loud jukebox. I must confess that we spent most of the time talking about me. Mr. Bliss was curious to know why I had introduced myself. However, as soon as he learned some of my previous professional work, we quickly got into a discussion of problems of mutual interest. We seemed to complement each other in our ignorance—he wanted to know more about machines and how one could employ classification to advantage in machine systems; I was interested in systems of classification that would make machines more useful for information retrieval.

I don't recall much more about our first meeting. I offered to drive Mr. Bliss downtown to his dinner engagement; he accepted, and on the way we were able to talk with less noise in the background. Mr. Bliss continued to pump me about my interests, though I did find out something of the work he was doing on his classification and his autobiography. He took my address and said he would let me know when he was coming into New York again—he was living in Plainfield, New Jersey. He was planning to visit his publisher, The H. W. Wilson Company, very shortly.

31st, May, 1954.

Dear Mr. Garfield:

I plan to be in New York next Thursday, in the Editorial offices on the 4th floor of the Wilson Company's building at 950 University avenue, from 11 to 11-30 a.m. . . . If you are free then from your final work in the Columbia School, perhaps you would feel like joining me again for a get-together. . . . We may talk about Documentation, the electronic sorting machines, and Ranganathan's proposals for denoting unlimited subject-analysis, his devices for systematic extension and ramification.

You need not reply to this invitation. If you cannot come, I will understand, and I would then write you again when next opportunity avails. My interest in you is undiminished.

Sincerely,  
HENRY E. BLISS

6th, July, 1954

Dear Eugene Garfield:

I said I would write you in two or three weeks, when I would be in New York again. Thursday of this week I will be at the Wilson Company's offices from 11:15 to 11:45, or noon. If you get this in time and if you are free that midday, you may, if you are still interested, come as before to the 4th floor of the Wilson offices. . . . I have made no important engagements later that day, and, if agreeable to you, we can consider what to do together for a while. . . . I would like to meet your friend again too.

Yours sincerely,  
HENRY E. BLISS

October 1, 1954

Dear friend Bliss:

Perhaps you were thinking that I had forgotten about you. . . .

I have been extremely busy these past few months, but always hoping I could visit you.

As you know, I am now working as a Documentation Consultant. My present assignment . . . is a very pleasant one and permits me to take occasional outside assignments. Recently I was retained by . . . the Montclair

Public Library and expect to be in Montclair from time to time. I was thinking that on one of these occasions it would be nice if we could get together again for a chat.

I am wondering what your chief activity is these days—your autobiography perhaps.

One day I should like to spend a few hours with you classifying some books according to Bliss. This will afford me the insight that is impossible to obtain by intuition, which I must confess is the present state of my knowledge in that area. I am still keen on the idea of a re-classification table that would enable many librarians to jump the psychological hurdle in making the decision to change from LC to Bliss or from Dewey to Bliss. A fellow librarian friend I know in Washington is also interested in this scheme.

With best wishes for your good health, I am,  
Sincerely,  
EUGENE GARFIELD

14th, October, 1954

Dear Eugene:

I was glad to hear documentally from you that you are well placed with documentalists, and I would like to talk with you again about documentation and other things. Does documentation extend into laboratories, and do laboratories search into documentation? And do they use the I.B.M. machines for the purpose? I do not know enough about documentation. Neither do the encyclopedias, I suspect from the inadequate space they have so far assigned to the subject as such.

So you [will] come to Montclair. . . . I should be glad to see you. . . . I have been so busy for the past two weeks editing and preparing for publication the second *Bulletin of the Bliss Classification*. This partly replies to your question as to my recent activity. It was not the autobiography; I will probably take that up again next week to try to finish it for the last period, since 1945.

Regarding the method or process of reclassification, broached in the last part of your letter here, it might indeed profit to consider it together.

Sincerely yours,  
HENRY E. BLISS

When I deposited Mr. Bliss at the door, I was somewhat relieved, because I had been literally shouting for two hours. As I drove home I began to sense the thrill of having met not only one of the great living figures of the library world, but actually someone from out of the past like Gulliver in Glubbdubdrib—for in spite of his keen interest in new developments, Mr. Bliss at 84 was in demeanor and temperament out of the nineteenth century and thus all the more fabulous when you consider how contemporary his thinking is.

#### *A conversation in the sun*

About a week later, I received a short typewritten letter from Mr. Bliss saying that he was coming to see John Jamieson at the Wilson Company, that if I would meet him, we could go to the Wilson Company together, and as soon as he was through, we could spend the rest of the day together. I had been looking forward to meeting Mr. Jamieson because he was a former colleague of my friend, Samuel Lazerow. What a fabulous day it was. I can't recall where we met, but we did go to Wilson together. While Mr. Bliss talked business, I had a chance to see something of the company.

Having been raised not more than ten blocks from Wilson, I was quite familiar with the neighborhood and suggested that we sit in a park under Highbridge. There in the warm sun we talked until we were both hungry. It was during this particular hour or so that I learned more about Mr. Bliss than at any other time.

After a short while the conversation turned philosophical, and I asked Mr. Bliss if he had ever gotten over the frustration the curious mind feels in recognizing the impossibility of mastering all of human knowledge. Mr. Bliss had experienced this frustration in his younger days. It ultimately brought him from mathematics to the library. He stated succinctly that the answer was in perceiving the relationships between things—and the key to these relationships was classification. Of course, knowledge for its own sake could not be abandoned (Mr. Bliss had systematically read one or more of the basic works in every field of science), but one must find how different knowledge was related. This reply was particularly interesting to me because the previous November I had given a talk stating that plans for universal classification, world bibliographic control, and many other dreams of the documentalists were expressions of what Spengler called the Faustian personality. If we could not master all of human knowledge

—as had Faust, a typical Renaissance scholar—then at least we should be satisfied with the ability to recall any portion of that vast knowledge when we were ready to grapple with it.

#### *LC, Dewey, and Bliss*

Mr. Bliss was a true scholar. His goals and aspirations were different from those of Melvil Dewey, whom he certainly surpassed in intellectual ability, but by whom he was dwarfed in organizational ability and drive. Dewey was a businessman, but he was in no sense as profound in his accomplishments. It is true that Dewey's classification filled a terrible void. As Mr. Bliss said, if it had come a few years later the entire course of classification history might have been changed. Many years later, when the Library of Congress was acutely aware of the terrible shortcomings of Dewey for the research scholar, Mr. Bliss was on the scene; but here again he lacked what Dewey possessed, and failed to press the issue of his own system.

According to Mr. Bliss, he had a conversation with Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam a few years after the LC scheme was started, and Putnam confessed that he had not known of the Bliss system. He felt he had probably overlooked a good thing because a comprehensive system of classification based on an encyclopedic knowledge of science would have been useful. It would make LC aware of its lacks, in contrast to the LC scheme which merely reflected its holdings, and so would aid in collection building.

It is difficult to estimate the validity of these conclusions, but certainly the wide acceptance of the Bliss Classification outside the United States, in libraries that have essentially started from scratch, is a good indication that there was more than a grain of truth in Mr. Bliss's idea. One also wonders how many libraries would adopt LC if it were not for the obvious advantage of having the LC card service at their disposal. Mr. Bliss mentioned that he had tried rather feebly to get LC to include Bliss class numbers on newly catalogued books, but nothing ever came of it. He felt that this factor was one of the strongest working against the adoption of new classification systems.

It was for this reason, also, that Mr. Bliss was very interested in an idea I hoped to pursue one day: the construction of a complete reclassification table covering all the principal systems of classification in use. I first became aware of the uses for such a table in my research work at the Johns Hopkins Indexing Project, where I had achieved—for the first time to my knowledge—

mechanical classifying. (Such classifying is in contrast with mechanical classification. The former is the assignment of the proper number of an existing classification schedule. The latter concerns the intellectual decision as to what is contained in a book; indeed, the equivalent of providing analytics.) Mr. Bliss and I agreed that as soon as feasible we ought to get to work on the construction of such a reclassification table, since it might be an incentive to librarians fearful of changing an existing system because of the great amount of work involved in reclassifying. A little later I discussed this project with computer expert Saul Herner, who said he would one day like to work on it. Neither of us has had the time.

#### *Upstart Ranganathan*

Bliss was particularly interested in machines because his system of classification could be applied to collections of materials other than books. Bliss actually was the first to use the device of coordination. He criticized Ranganathan<sup>3</sup> as an upstart because he had never given Bliss credit for what he had obviously learned from him. Colon classification does use some of the devices found in Bliss; coordination is one of them. Coordination or coordinate indexing is implicit in most, if not all, machine systems of information retrieval. Through the device of coordination, Bliss was able to apply his system not only to books, but to periodical articles as well. From the point of view of machine applications, it is also worthy of exploration because it employs the briefest notations of all existing systems of classification.

#### *Eggs and Madame Recamier*

Mr. Bliss and I ate lunch together at Bickford's, in upper Manhattan. I remember that he ate eggs because he usually did not trust the food he found in restaurants. After lunch, we went to Riverside Park and talked for the rest of the afternoon. We then met a linguist friend of mine, and while they discussed Mr. Bliss's French ancestry, I drove to my mother's home in the Bronx. Mr. Bliss was quite at ease, and

spent the next few hours telling my friend, Casimir Borkowski, about the intellectual circles run by Madame Recamier, of early New York history, and of the many learned people he had encountered in his forty years as librarian at City College of New York. About nine o'clock we had to make a dash for the Port Authority bus terminal, where Mr. Bliss just caught the next bus back to Plainfield.

That was the last time I saw Mr. Bliss. I moved to Philadelphia shortly thereafter, had a letter or two from him, and then one day read that Mr. Bliss had quietly passed away. I could not help but think of the projects Mr. Bliss was involved in to the last. They remain unfinished, and even if ostensibly completed, will lack the guiding hand of the last of the library Mohicans. I don't think we will again encounter so profound a library theorist as Mr. Bliss, because in the span of his own lifetime it had already become impossible for anyone to attempt what he had accomplished. Science now is like day, compared to the night of seventy or eighty years ago. One may master today the philosophy of the sciences; however, there is a growing awareness that science is a unity, and with the increased specialization of subject areas, there is a corresponding increase in the overlap of subject disciplines. One may construct new systems of classification, both hierarchical as well as non-Aristotelian, but no one will attempt to master even the essentials of all the disciplines. Few can master even one. Perhaps this apparent unity will provide the key that Bliss and so many others sought. Hopefully, our generation will provide more persons like Bliss, who saw classification and its pursuit not only a means to an end, but a personal salvation. He was very impatient with the shopkeeper kind of librarian we so frequently encounter. He claimed to be among the first to discard the accessions book.

Individuals live on in the works they leave behind. Bliss's work deserves to be continued and its potentialities fully explored. Since we can no longer depend on Bliss himself, I hope others will be stimulated to carry on his work. Henry Bliss is dead. Long live Bliss. ☐

1. Garfield, E. The "other" immortal: a memorable day with Henry E. Bliss. *Wilson Library Bulletin* 49(4): 288-92, 1974. Reprinted with permission of H.W. Wilson Co. in: *Current Contents*® (CC®) No. 15, 14 April 1975, p.

2. ————. Education by steeping, nibbling, or classification. CC No. 12, 25 March

1970, p. 5.

3. In time, I am sure, Mr. Bliss would have been less sharp in his views of Ranganathan. The two, though of quite different cultures, were much alike in some ways. Like Bliss, Ranganathan too is not as greatly nor as widely appreciated as he should be.