

The other Wheatley

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An examination of the work of Benjamin Robert Wheatley, indexer and librarian, elder brother and teacher of Henry Benjamin Wheatley. They both laid the foundations of modern indexing.

It is a curiosity for indexers that the (to them) famous Henry Benjamin Wheatley did not appear in the *Dictionary of national biography*, whilst his lesser-known brother Benjamin Robert Wheatley did.¹ Both were sons of Benjamin Wheatley, well-known auctioneer of 191 Piccadilly, London. The *New dictionary of national biography*, published this year by Oxford University Press, rectifies that omission. But it is to the less famous Benjamin Robert Wheatley that I want to turn in this article. Quite probably, the entry for him in the *New DNB* has been revised, but I have no knowledge of it and this article is based on finding so much Benjamin Robert material in the search for his brother.

First, a few facts: in the 1881 census, BRW, as I'll call him, said that he was born on 29 September 1819, in St Martin's Westminster. He died at his home and workplace, the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society (now Royal Society of Medicine), then at 53 Berners Street, London (off Oxford Street). He is said to have been educated at the King's College School, but did not attend university and was perhaps always set to follow his father as a book auctioneer. His father, the oldest Benjamin, was a former employee of Sotheby's, and handled prints as well as books, and even, at times, property.² He died in 1837 and his eldest son (aged about 17) set to and catalogued the last part of the famous Richard Heber sale catalogue,³ of which his father had already sold two parts in his Piccadilly auction room. There is nothing remarkable about BRW's editing of his part of the Heber catalogues; but the library was an exceptionally fine one, built up by a scholar-collector, with an intellectually wide range of material in a variety of languages. It was the Dutch material which BRW worked on, but the contents of the library were not noticeably Dutch in language.

From this teenage beginning, BRW continued as a bookseller at 42 Maiden Lane, Covent Garden, and 44 Bedford Street, Strand. Some of his catalogues from that period in the 1840s still remain, and are prepared in a clear, concise way, without much puffing or annotation. At what stage BRW was bitten by an absorbing interest in books, one does not know, but he must always have been surrounded by such material. His obituarists thought so. *DNB* (E.I.C., i.e. Edward Irving Carlyle, is the author) categorizes BRW as a 'bibliographer' and that is a fair description, one shared with his brother, although Henry was also a first-class editor. Benjamin worked for nearly 50 years. He never married. His sister, who was about four years younger, did not marry either, and was his housekeeper. The pair of them had a small charge to look after, namely Henry, who was born in

1838, and whose mother died at his birth. At the age of 19, BRW was in effect Henry's father, and an affectionate relationship it was.

BRW worked with booksellers T. Fletcher from 1837 and Charles James Stewart afterwards. *DNB* praises BRW for the sheer amount of his bibliographical work, and for its high quality. He was a typically energetic 19th century worker as an antiquarian second-hand book-dealer who would obtain new books if required. But BRW was to turn away from the book dealing business within a few years. His catalogues⁴ indicate the direction in which he was to travel: 'Libraries catalogued, arranged and valued, and parcels of books purchased' says his 1840 catalogue, and in his catalogue 30 of about 1851, he states 'Public and private libraries arranged and catalogued on systematic principles. Specimens may be inspected, and reference given to the nobility and gentry, and the principal societies, institutions and clubs of London'. By this time BRW had quite a stack of library catalogues to his credit.

I doubt if BRW continued buying and selling books in the 1850s; the lure of private libraries had caught him. He had a particular connection in the northwest of England, around Manchester, and was said to be part of James Crossley's circle. In 1846 he did a very good catalogue of the library of John Byrom,⁵ the poet, controversialist and shorthand teacher at Kersal Cell, Manchester. Other private libraries on which BRW worked include, according to Henry B. Wheatley's obituary article 'A bibliographical career' those of Charles Shaw Lefevre (Viscount Eversley), at Heckfield, Hants, 1844; Thomas Johnes at Hafod, 1845; Charles Richard Fox at Kensington, 1846; James Crossley (apparently a huge fan of BRW) at Manchester; John Archer Houblon, Hallingbury Place, Essex; the Marquess of Lansdowne at Bowood (Wilts) and Lansdowne House, Berkeley Square, 1848; Mountstuart Elphinstone, 1847; Augustus Gostling, Whitton, 1849; Lord Bolton, Hackwood Park, 1849; Abel Smith, Woodhall, 1850; Lady Charlotte Guest (later Schreiber) at Canford Manor; Lord Lilford; Revd Dr Edward Moore; the Earl of Romney; and Lord Vernon. I have not attempted to trace all of these, and suspect some were never published. It was BRW's habit to make rough notes and tidy them up at home onto good paper in a copperplate hand, presumably making up those smallish files with very stiff covers which one finds sometimes in older libraries, and which are still legible and usable. An article by BRW (1878) gives his views on private library work. Most of the article is concerned with getting a good-looking and sensible arrangement, juggling the shelves

around a bit. This is not a subject much written about, and the article is interesting. Only in its latter part does the author turn to cataloguing the library. He has a nice appreciation of the importance of the owner.

Work on these private libraries was done in parallel with work on libraries in organizations. The earliest of these jobs would seem to be the one he took up at the Geological Society of London in 1845⁶ but he had also worked on the Athenaeum Club library catalogue under the guidance of Charles James Stewart, the bookseller with whom he was associated, in 1843. He did a fine subject index for the Athenaeum⁷ in 1850–51, which really was a pioneer in the field. The Geological Society catalogues are a little different from some, in that although they are basically author catalogues, there is a general broad subject classification, such as L–Chemistry, M–Geography above it. BRW also did some work on Lincoln's Inn library, the Ordnance Office, and the Privy Council Office.

It was the club connection that was the most important one, and it was once said of him that he could 'look up the whole length of Pall Mall and say that there was scarcely a club-house whose library he had not catalogued or which he did not keep in order' (anon [H. B. Wheatley], 1884). In these pre-public library days, the middle classes were well served by BRW. The Alfred Club (in 1847); the Army and Navy Club; the Oxford and Cambridge Club (1852); the United Service Club (1853); the Junior United Service Club; and the Travellers' Club (1852), were amongst those to which BRW gave his services, presumably for a fee. Not all of these produced printed catalogues, and it would not be surprising to hear that manuscript catalogues still exist in some of these clubs. Brother Henry was also well known as an essential clubman.

One of the bodies which used his services from 1841 (when BRW was only 22) was the (later Royal) Medical and Chirurgical Society (RMCS). This had been founded in 1805, and had always had a library of some sort.⁸ He accepted the post of Resident Librarian in 1855, keeping this post for almost 30 years until his death in 1884. BRW's work at the Society was appreciated, as these tributes show: 'We may some of us remember the genial courtesy of our late librarian, Mr Wheatley, who spent the best years of his life at our former house in Berners Street' (Royal Society of Medicine, 1914: 41); 'He from all accounts appears to have been a real bibliophile, having been born and brought up in an atmosphere of books. His work for the Society was evidently inspired by a genuine sense of vocation, and contributed no little to the usefulness and reputation of the library which he served' (Davidson, 1955: 120). He produced two printed catalogues, in 1856 and 1869, and two subject indexes in 1860 and 1879. The latter is called 'a useful guide to medical literature' by *DNB*. There were over 30,000 books in the RMCS library at the time when he died, which he did whilst producing the next supplement to the catalogue. The medical side seems to have absorbed BRW; he did a good catalogue for the Royal College of Physicians, another for the College of Surgeons in 1848, and made comments on changing medical terminology in the 1879 RMCS catalogue. It is interesting to note that BRW is an early exponent of that current important specialist sphere of

indexing, medical indexing. The Resident Librarian of the Royal Society of Medicine immediately after Wheatley was (later Sir) John Young Walker MacAlister, who relinquished the library side for general administration of the society. His too was an honoured name in the history of the Library Association, of which more later.

BRW liked to produce clear author catalogues. Those which I have seen are all in a decent type size and are well cross-referenced. He had certain personal idiosyncrasies, like a preference for a section of Tracts, which is particularly remarkable in the case of the Athenaeum's *Supplement to the catalogue...with a classified index of subjects* of 1851. He had clearly had tussles with large numbers of offprints and other pamphlets, and was not going to give them full cataloguing treatment. He therefore tended to list them in a section Tracts, by their subject keyword. This was one method of saving time that BRW employed; he had a liking for useful economy. Another sensible quirk was not to give the full names of his authors; using this method, his own name would have appeared as 'Wheatley, Benjamin R.' He disapproved of giving full titles of works, provided distinction between them could be kept, and wrote an article on this theme (B.R. Wheatley, 1880). The influence of booksellers and their catalogues shows here, particularly bearing in mind the sort of items which BRW had been dealing with in the Heber library and his own lists.

Most of BRW's library catalogues do not have location references. Sometimes size is given; in some cases size is the paramount listing, where octavos, quartos, folios etc. are separated. I find this lack of locations puzzling, for the libraries were not small, but it may be borne in mind that some issues of the catalogues would be cut up and mounted, like the old British Museum Library guard books, or interleaved copies made, both with locations added neatly in ink. And of course in these libraries, one would expect a librarian to be on duty and locate whatever was needed. BRW would expect libraries of decent size to provide supplementary lists from time to time, and nearly all the catalogues have an addenda section in them. At the Royal Medical lists would be produced annually if possible, and BRW was said to be working on the proofs for the latest in 1883, when he died of a heart attack in 1884.

He was also very keen on subject indexes, and would work on old author catalogues retrospectively. These subject indexes might be in the same volume as the author list. More rarely the catalogue might be a 'dictionary catalogue' with interfiled authors and subjects.⁹ BRW was familiar with the work of Charles Ammi Cutter (Cutter, 1876), the American expert on dictionary cataloguing.

Like his brother, BRW combined an interest in libraries with an interest in indexing. It is by no means a certainty that an interest in library cataloguing will coincide with an interest in the more analytical subject of indexing, but both Wheatleys had an interest in both subjects. They were concerned with the formation of the Library Association in 1876 (now CILIP, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals). BRW was on its first Council, and acted as Vice-President from time to time (Munford, 1976). BRW contributed a number of articles to journals on librarianship subjects (1877a&b, 1880, 1881, 1882), rather

than the literary work his brother espoused; they are solid pieces of work which cannot be said to be dull, for he enlivened his work with a certain amount of humour – ‘a needle may be hidden in a bottle of straw’ I remember as one of his curious metaphors, and he had a love of obscure latinisms. He also contributed to the lively discussions of librarianship that took place in those days. I am most impressed by his claim in one of his articles (1877b) that he had only lost six books from the RMCS library in 25 years. One battle that he seems to have lost was on standard sizing of books – folio, quarto and the like, for which he prepared a special ruler.

As for indexing in the narrowest sense, the detailed revelation of the contents of material, in this case books and journals, BRW is as worthy of commemoration as his more famous brother. BRW was a member of his brother’s organization, the Index Society.¹⁰ Again, he worked mainly in the field of medicine, which would of course have aided his own work at the RMCS library. Among the indexes to journals which he prepared were *A general index to volumes XVI–XXV of the transactions of the Pathological Society of 1875*, the first twelve volumes of the *Transactions of the Clinical Society of 1880*. His main work, however, is the RMCS’s *General index to the first 53 volumes of the Medico-Chirurgical Transactions of 1871* published by Longmans, a journal which incidentally had referees for its articles by 1864. Those who have indexed a run of journals will have some sympathy with and admiration for a man who could carry out a programme of this sort, and it is well printed and easy to use, as are all BRW’s catalogues.¹¹ It would seem that BRW also had some interest in economics, for he did the index to the *Statistical Society journal* from 1839–54 quite early, in 1854. One of the indexes to books which he prepared was that to Thomas Tooke’s *History of prices* (Tooke, 1838–1857),¹² also published by Longmans. If this sounds trivial compared with the large amount of transactions he crunched through, suffice it to say that this was a highly respected standard work in six volumes, which received much praise from its own authors.¹³ Although his author catalogues tend to be concise, BRW did not like to be too short on the subject side, and this can be seen in Tooke’s book. Indexes were things which might be read, not just used.

In retrospect, BRW’s work does not seem as wide-ranging as that of his brother, whose main personal expertise was in history and literature. There is a high concentration on getting the most out of the medical literature, with catalogues and indexes to journals. But he did have some more general interests, as contributions to *Academy* show – he had an interest in parodies of the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy, and he loved the humour of false books placed in private libraries, digging out a large selection of these done by Thomas Hood (B. R. Wheatley, 1882). He did do a catalogue of the RMCS’s collection of engraved portraits – medical libraries mostly seem to have collected pictures of their famous people. He is also credited by the British Library with the preparation of *A catalogue of the very beautiful collection of the etchings by Rembrandt*, 1835, when he was 16, though I see no reason for this ascription, particularly as his father signs the catalogue of 391 items. And of

course he was a poet and artist. I did quote the one clearly personal poem in my *Indexer* article on his brother (Lee, 2002), to whom it refers, but there is also an anonymous collection, *Buds of poesy* of 1838, which contains elegiac poems, particularly on love, like ‘Guido and Leonora’; many examples worse than Wheatley’s can be found in 19th century literature. Other poems were published here and there, but I’m not sure that even brother Henry knew quite where. There is not much which can be construed as personal, except perhaps:

Unheeded, lonely and unknown,
He tilled this humble spot;
At rising Sun, his work began,
Nor pined he at his lot.

which sounds a bit like his work of indexing and listing! It would seem that BRW sketched a bit, as at one time his drawings of a journey he took to Hafod to catalogue the Johnes library existed, he being struck by the beauty of the Welsh landscape.

The obituaries of Benjamin Robert Wheatley¹⁴ all give some idea of the man, which is always pleasing to a biographer. Words which occur are ‘helpful’, ‘genial kindly nature’, ‘one of the kindest of men’, and then they all refer to his hard-working qualities, ‘continuous modest labour’, and his accuracy, ‘patient, care and unwearied industry’. He would have been pleased with those. The vast mass of literature which he handled through his life show what ability he had in languages, ancient and modern. The best obituary, upon which the writer in the *Dictionary of national biography* relied, is that by his brother Henry Benjamin (anon, H. B. Wheatley, 1884): ‘He had no master, and he planned out for himself the rules¹⁵ upon which he worked’. Henry had been brought up very much in the tradition of his brother’s and their father’s bibliographical ethic, and in their ethic of sheer hard work which we can only try to emulate now through use of the computer.

It has seemed to me that the Library Association and Society of Indexers missed a trick when they named the Wheatley Medal for the best index after Henry Benjamin Wheatley alone. Benjamin Robert was an equally hard-working and original tiller in this field, as I hope this article shows. I would like him, ‘one of the most learned among librarians’ (anon [H.B. Wheatley] 1884), not to be forgotten.

Notes

- 1 Both men are in J.F. Kirk (1891).
- 2 Munby (1954) gives a useful short account of Benjamin Wheatley’s career.
- 3 *Bibliotheca Heberiana*, 13 parts 1834–37. Published by various auction houses over the years.
- 4 BRW catalogues have titles like *Catalogue of scarce and interesting second-hand books*, 1841, and there are several in the British Library at the shelf number R.B. 23.b.3680, up to 1851, the last being numbered XXX.
- 5 Wheatley, B.R. (1848) *A catalogue of the library of the late John Byrom*, privately published. According to an obituary, BRW was writing an article on this library at the time of his death, 1884.
- 6 He produced *Catalogue of the books and maps in the library for the Geological Society of London* in 1846 and *Supplemental catalogue of the books, maps, sections and drawings in the library* in 1856.

- 7 *Supplement to the catalogue... with a classified index of subjects*, 1851. This is very brief, with references to authors in both the 1845 catalogue and the supplement. Further supplements came out throughout the century.
- 8 The first catalogue was done in 1816; others followed in 1819 and 1844. For the history of the organization, see Davidson, M. (1955) and Royal Society of Medicine (1914).
- 9 As in the case of the index to the Pathological Society transactions, on which see below.
- 10 For more on the Index Society, see Beare, G. 'What is an Index?' in this issue, pp. 5-7 and its references.
- 11 Another of his conventions was the use of the asterisk to indicate authors of tracts, and he was very concerned with the correct use of the dash in printed catalogues. All BRW's works, even the booksellers' catalogues, are well-printed, even elegant.
- 12 Published in six volumes. The combined index to all the volumes appears in volume 6, published in 1857.
- 13 'For the elaborate index to the whole work... I am indebted to the skill and experience of Mr Wheatley, the librarian of the Royal Medical Institution in Berners Street' wrote the author. Wheatley's index is 104 pages long and is an excellent book index, with many cross-references.
- 14 Obituaries occur in *Athenaeum*, 19 January 1884, p. 88; *Library Journal*, 9 February 1884, p. 24; *The Bibliographer*, 5, 1884, pp. 97-100; *Academy*, 19 January 1884, p. 44; *Medical Times*, 1884, p. 79.
- 15 For more on these rules, see Wheatley, B. R. (1878).

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Wheatley Medal 2003



Jan Ross (left) – commended and Liza Virgo – winner.