



Julia Pettee Matters: A Librarian Worth Classifying

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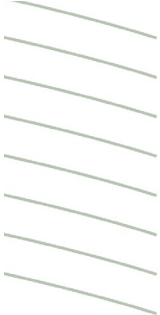
This talk about Julia Pettee was originally envisioned as a suffragette-like defence of the Union Classification System with some side remarks about the woman who created it.

I was planning to make the non-Pettee users amongst you feel as if you had missed out on our classification utopia. But after numerous drafts and late nights of internal debate (even an analogy about union versus league supporters), I decided that rather than defending a system which is less and less used, I would rather be positive, and tell you about a woman who should be more and more celebrated.

In this brief outline of a remarkable Librarian, I hope to provide you with a glimpse of her thinking, her humour, her life. I found parallels with her life and mine, and was not surprised to realise that my day to day work of classification and cataloguing has been insidiously influenced by her through a now tatty green volume of her schedule and by the thinking behind it.

A brief summary would probably be most helpful to the novice. Lennart Pearson wrote a biography of her in 1970. I quote the blurb,

“Best known for her design of the Union Theological Seminary Classification System, Julia Pettee was a master librarian. Her ideas about the organisation of knowledge were philosophically grounded in a conviction about the unity of knowledge, growing out of her experience as a cataloguer at Vassar College and Rochester Theological Seminary. Drawing on an article by psychologist Hugo Munsterberg in the Atlantic Monthly, she ingeniously structured the Union Classification System of 1911 to reflect his ideas about how exhibits should be arranged at the International Congress of Arts and Sciences held in St Louis in 1904. During her thirty year career as Head Cataloguer at Union Theological seminary in New York, she presided over the reclassification of 165,000 books. The system she designed came to be used in the libraries of more than fifty theological seminaries during the first half of the



twentieth century. Through many articles and books, her influence was widely felt in professional circles of the American Library Association.”

Pearson’s biography is descriptive and also relies, as will this talk, on the pearls that Miss Pettee herself articulated.

Some gems of her life I will cover briefly:

Her Mother died when Julia was three months old and she was baptised on her coffin.

She was an Episcopalian.

She suffered from, and apparently occasionally rejoiced in deafness, turning off her hearing aids to escape distraction. “The small talk of the cataloguers and typists working near her faded out like so much static.”

She was one of the first generation of professionally trained librarians despite, at times, a lack of funds. One uncle refused to help her financially because he did not wish her to ruin her life by acquiring so much learning.

Though a spinster, she adopted a little girl called Mary Ellen.

She retired to a farm in Connecticut but still researched, lectured, and wrote into her 90s.

Her quotes are humorous, high-minded, and philosophical, championing libraries, especially theological libraries.

In her article “The rise and fall of Union Classification”, Rebecca Butler quotes the seminal article by Christopher Walker and Anne Copeland “The eye prophetic: Julia Pettee”.

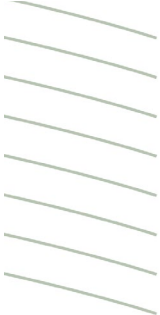
They write: “She was not a notable success in her cataloguing coursework” but “she knew enough about cataloguing that she would never again be happy subordinating her own professional judgment and skills to someone else’s system”.

Apart from her mind as a classifier, she also was mindful that cataloguing was not simply a matter of “data input” (as one seminary student once crudely described my work). She appreciated good style, humour, and charm, and this quote I liked immensely: “In some libraries, the “efficiency” and “output” spirit has created something approaching a military machine or a manufacturing plant. Now proper organization is essential ... but ... if [these] are allowed to be an end in themselves, [they] can crush out all initiative and create an atmosphere and spirit that is fatal to all creative pleasure in one’s work.”

Some of you may be familiar with the Librarian action figure, Nancy Pearl with her amazing push-button shushing action, but Julia was not designed to quieten – she was designed to awaken.

Walker and Copeland quote her observation on some unusual arrangements on her arrival at Union.

“There was a remarkable section in the stacks which we discovered. It bore the label: “Minor morals.” Men have never known what to do with women. These theologians had an idea. They considered women a moral problem. And, as women, were not of great consequence anyway, they fitted very well under the caption “Minor morals”. And actually on the shelves here at Union under “Minor Morals” were these



topics, in this order: first came Profanity; then came Drunkenness; Drunkenness was followed by Lotteries; Lotteries was followed by Women, and after Women came Duelling. The whole series of Minor morals was climaxed by: War.”

Pettee determined that what was needed was not another general classification scheme or a classification for theology only but a hybrid scheme to look at the whole world of knowledge from the perspective of the theologian and the student of theology.

She wrote: “In my opinion, a special library is better served by a special classification than by a general classification system. A general classification views the whole field of knowledge, and each portion has equal value with every other portion. But a specialist views the field of knowledge from his own particular angle and selects from this field of knowledge the portions that are useful to him and develops these portions. So I wanted a single, integrated classification scheme adapted to the purposes of theologians.”

The scheme required flexibility so that it could accommodate new divisions of thought. As Pettee repeatedly pointed out, knowledge is not static, and consequently, “there is nothing static about a classification scheme. The way we sort our ideas is constantly changing.”

The work on her scheme took many years and she borrowed from many sources. Miss Pettee explains “The theological sections are quite original but in the sections outside theology for the most part I simply abstracted from the L. C. classification and incorporated these abstracts in my schedule. If you make an entirely new scheme, which I wouldn’t advise, ... borrow all you can.”

She also said : “The Dewey scheme wears like a lovely shoe, but it pinches so much the scheme itself fairly hobbles.” Though she was member of the Dewey Decimal Committee at one stage, she questioned why he even needed a committee as he himself was “the whole show”.

I suspect that there was not much love lost there. As a modern romance writer might explain the misalliance, they had much in common, but they had conflicting schedules.

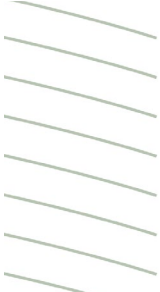
This is not to say that she was wedded to her own scheme. Even in her early days as a student she had remarked “A perfect classification is a dream as futile of that of the philosopher’s stone.”

Elsewhere she says, “The classifier must be a prophet. In assigning a place for each new topic we consider its origin and make a bold guess as to how the topic is likely to develop ... the classification of knowledge is a living growing thing.”

Miss Pettee understood from experience. She was progressive. She had the “eye prophetic” and created a classification system which richly identified the past, embraced her present, and acknowledged and prepared for the future.

Her system, like a well-planned wardrobe, allows for growth, expansion, and adjustment of the rails on which she hung the garments of her twentieth century world, but it also left spaces for hooks on which to hang subjects such as post-modernism and post-colonialism, technology, and same-sex marriage.

As classifiers, we are given room to classify freely and independently. I am sure that those of us in ANZTLA libraries who still use her system, occasionally look sideways at each other and mutter, “That’s



not where I would have hung it,” but we are blessed to be custodians of a system that is organic, relevant, friendly, and inspired. Our system is Union, but like Australia, we are in different states, geographically, theologically, and philosophically, and we are able to adapt her system to our own local needs, interests, and emphases.

A Vanderbilt Divinity Librarian wrote of Julia Pettee, as I myself think of her. “Although all I know of Julia Pettee are her words on a page, I think of her as my mentor. How would she have handled the changes we face in this new century? The answer comes to [the Librarian] without hesitation: undaunted, with an intrepid spirit and a wry sense of humour.”

Thus I will conclude. I hope you have gained some respect and affection for a truly remarkable librarian, Julia Pettee.

A woman of class with nothing petty about her.

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