

## **IFLA RBSC 2016: A Common International Standard for Rare Materials Cataloguing? Why? How?**

**Paper Title:** The Rare Books Catalogue as the Foundation of the Scholarly Database  
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### **Abstract**

This paper builds on a presentation at the Cataloguing and Indexing Group Conference 2014 (Welsh, 2014) and a short communication in *Catalogue and Index* (Welsh, 2015) to assert the potential power of the catalogue as the foundation of the scholarly research database. It draws on original research into the working library of Walter de la Mare (Welsh, 2016), including a literature review of the current activities exploiting the catalogues of writers' libraries, which are *de facto* catalogues of rare materials.

In doing so, this paper explores the uses to which catalogue data can be put by researchers involved in digital scholarship (*cf.* Tomm, 2012) and by libraries themselves in evaluating their collections (*cf.* OCLC, 2016). Quantitative Digital Humanities tools offer possibilities for further exploration of library holdings and for catalogue information to be utilized as Big Data. On the more usual scale encountered in the rare books reading room, catalogue records that can be downloaded easily by researchers afford the possibility of these records being the foundation of the scholarly research database that forms the core of research projects today – often beginning life as a simple computer spreadsheet, since such software programmes are ubiquitous and simple to use.

Internationally, records for rare materials vary in format and in the ease with which they can be extracted from the library catalogue. Projects to explore the capabilities of Linked Data, such as those carried out by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (2015) and the British National Bibliography (British Library, 2016a) and the presence of Digital Scholarship fellowships (*cf.* Library of Congress, 2015) and teams (*cf.* British Library, 2016b) conducting outreach have greatly improved the uptake of library metadata by tech-savvy researchers. Some of the resulting project outputs are highlighted in this paper.

However, the focus here is really on the work that is typically conducted in rare books rooms by their users, and specifically users that are not advanced programmers or aficionados of TEI (Text Encoding Initiative). How are existing records, into whose creation much scholarship has already been invested by library staff, being used for more than the four generic user tasks (IFLA Study Group on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, 1998), which are, of course, focused on finding and accessing materials - and how might this use be extended both in scope and to other library users? Might common international standards assist in this task?

In essence, this paper explores how, for rare materials, we might move beyond what Wilson (1968) termed the “descriptive power” of bibliographic control at which we excel, into its more impactful “exploitative power”. In doing so, it argues that the rare books catalogue can truly become foundational to the bibliographic scholarship of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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