Editorial

Darwin, Hooker and the documentation of Victorian science

Anniversaries abound in this early part of 2009. In the UK, the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin on 12th February is being marked by a variety of 'Darwin200' events, and focusing minds on his contributions to science and, it may not be too much to say, to the intellectual basis of our culture. Darwin's 'dangerous idea' has triumphed, and the concept of evolution has permeated virtually all disciplines, not least the sciences of information and knowledge. As examples, we can cite Bates (2005), Madden (2004), Stonier (1997) and Plotkin (1994), not to say perhaps the best known exponent of the evolutionary nature of knowledge, Karl Popper (1979).

Other anniversaries look fifty years further back. 1759, a year heralded as marking the *de facto* beginning of the British Empire (McLynn 2004) marks the foundation of the British Musuem, and, not quite so clear cut, the beginnings of the transformation of the grounds of a palace to the west of London into a scientifically arranged garden, later to be developed into the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. The significance of the British Museum for documentation need hardly be stressed, since, as well as its role as one of the world's major collections of documented artefacts, its library was arguably the first true national library, as well as spawning the recognisable cataloguing code. Kew also has a significant place in documentation, through its leadership in the documentation of botanical collections, together with development of the scientific taxonomies necessary for this.

Intriguingly, all of these themes are brought together in an admirable study of the work of Joseph Hooker (Endersby 2008). Hooker, who succeeded his father as Director of Kew Gardens, was a friend of Darwin, and a significant promoter of his ideas. Shown by his biographer to encapsulate within himself many of the features of Victorian natural science, Hooker was engaged in many aspects of documentation, though it is not likely that he would have recognised the term. He was an enthusiastic taxonomist, believing fervently in the role of central institutions like Kew in devising and publicising botanical classifications, to help understanding of the great range of new species being discovered, not least throughout the reaches of Victoria's ever-increasing empire. His relations with Darwin are believed to have helped shape the latter's ideas of classification, with significant impact on the development of his central theory. Hooker also promoted the standardisation of terminology, and the way in which botanical specimens were recorded and labelled, and was a perpetual enthusiast for the value of the fully documented and classified collection, whether of living plants, of herbarium specimens, or of written records and images. He was a leader in botanical publishing, particularly well known for his novel botanical maps.

We tend sometimes to forget, in the age of Facebook and Twitter, how much of our documentation practice has been rooted in the need to organise and record scientific knowledge (Bowker 2005). Reflecting on Joseph Hooker, at the centre of the documentation of nineteenth century natural science, reminds us where we have come from, and perhaps something of what we have lost.

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References

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