Na and the Missing Library Books

by Joyce Flynn
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One June, about 25 years ago, I was doing a one-month work-study gig describing records and tapes in Celtic languages for Harvard’s audio-visual collection and language lab, which was tucked away in the basement of Boylston Hall. I came across goofy mistakes in some main entries in Scottish Gaelic and in Modern Irish. Titles and artists that were plural nouns had been catalogued with Na (the equivalent of English “The”) as the first word of the titles or of the performing group’s name. Because no one but staff was allowed in the stacks (the area where the records and tapes themselves were kept), this meant no library user would be able to find them by cruising the shelves.

In Search of Whodunnit

I tried to track how the same mistake could have happened so frequently. A staff member referred me to a one-page set of instructions about cataloguing Celtic materials. The guideline had been drawn up in Widener Library -- the university’s main library -- for cataloguing books.

The Widener instructions correctly gave the singular definite article An as a word to be disregarded in cataloguing (i.e., go to the next word in the title for purposes of alphabetizing). But the instructions didn’t mention the plural article Na.

It turned out that a staff cutback had eliminated the Widener cataloguer familiar with the languages. The library had assigned cataloguing in Celtic to someone else. As a result, book titles beginning with Na, for something like Na Fir (The Men), had been catalogued under Na (“The”) as the first word in the title. Many items catalogued under “N” belonged elsewhere.

I pursued this problem with the-then head cataloguer -- a Mr. Fitzgerald -- giving him a copy of the cataloguing guidelines hand-corrected by me. I prepared those annotations in consultation with my fellow Celtic scholar Philip O’Leary, to make sure whoever was doing the catalogue copy could easily do it accurately.

The issue goes beyond just Harvard’s Widener Library. Because Widener is often the first North American library to acquire and catalogue an obscure foreign language title, Widener’s cataloguing data frequently becomes the standard for libraries that acquire the book later.

Na: The 21st Century Sequel

Looking back after so many years made me curious about the state of Celtic cataloguing today. I’d always assumed that having the accurate info at hand would solve the problem, at least for cataloguing titles acquired from that summer forward.

I did some preliminary checking of the library’s computer-based catalog system. It is now the only way the public can access titles in the Harvard College Library collections. For books stored in the Harvard Depository Library in Southboro, a town about twenty miles distant, the situation is even starker. For many of those books there is no way for a researcher to seek them on physical, three-dimensional shelves. If the title is miscatalogued so that it doesn’t appear in a computer search, and that title is stored outside the main library buildings in Cambridge, it’s GONE.

I did a “title beginning with” search for Na followed by a space, and got lots of entries, in a variety of languages. Before I was through the Na B---- list, I’d found two Widener titles that were incorrectly catalogued -- and which had (discouragingly) been miscatalogued long after I corrected the guidelines that Mr. Fitzgerald and the Catalogue Department had been using in the late 1970s:

NA BANNAN GRÁIDH (published 1987)
NA BLIANTA CORRACHA (published 2003?)

Both titles can be accessed with a search that gives Na as the title’s first word. But they cannot be accessed if you give Bannan or Blianta as the first word. Dipping deeper, into
the Na C---- title listings, I found

**NACRUACHA: SCÉALTAAGUS SEANCHAS**
(printed 1985)

**NA CRUITEACHÁIN** (published 1941)

‘Na Cruacha can be retrieved using Cruacha or Na as the first word of the title, but ‘Na Cruiteacháin only comes up if you type in “Na” as the start of the title. The book is, effectively, half-lost.

**The Detection Begins Anew**

Dismayed at finding that many of the library’s books cannot be found, I contacted all Celtic teaching faculty. Associate Professor Barbara Hillers, who specializes in Modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic, in turn alerted Widener research librarian Elizabeth McKeigue. McKeigue is now looking into just how bad the problem is and what can be done about it. This time around, the spreading Na will (I expect) be put in its place. The list of titles alphabetized under “N” should soon display a dramatic reduction in numbers. But I intend to check again after another quarter-century!

**The Looming Larger Question**

The whole affair has made me wonder how many books written in obscure languages are mis-filed and languishing in shadowy library storage buildings. For how many languages is this happening, in how many libraries around the world?

Imagine a death row of titles written in non-global languages, waiting to be checked out for the first time -- but invisible to scholars seeking them. Imagine a future in which they no longer wait for Professor Godot to borrow them because they have been discarded by libraries - - because their circulation statistics show that they were never requested by readers.

**EDITOR’S NOTE: What of the world’s other libraries? We would enjoy hearing reports from librarians who can help us make a good estimate of the scale of the problem.**

**The The Research Review**

*by Alice Shirell Kaswell, Improbable Research staff*

**Children Vote Against The**

“What Is a Word? Experimental Study of Children’s Ideas on Grammar,” Ioanna Papandropoulou and Hermione Sinclair, *Human Development*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1974, pp. 241-53. (Thanks to Jean Berko Gleason for bringing this to our attention.) The authors, at the University of Geneva, explain that up through about age 7, many children will insist that “the” is not a word.

![Image](http://www.improbable.com)

**Healy and The The Errors (1)**


In four experiments, subjects read 100-word passages and circled instances of the letter t. Subjects missed a disproportionate number of ts in the word the.

**Healy and The The Errors (2)**


**The and T**


In a letter-detection task, participants make more errors detecting the letter t in the word the than in other words.... Three experiments were conducted...