Selection of government publications is always a tricky job. This is more so because they are not usually covered in ordinary bibliographies. This article mentions the guides and reference tools available for selection of British government publications. Also gives an account of the accessibility of government publications in Great Britain.

INTRODUCTION

In any democracy, it is opinion that controls the policy of the nation. Interpreting Government policy in a way that is intelligible to all and creating an informed public opinion is therefore an important task. In many cases the most effective means of achieving this is by the issue of publications. Unlike, commercial publications, those produced by Government receive limited publicity and are, therefore, less known to the public. Since Her Majesty's Stationery Office, the centralised publishing agency of the British Government is one of the largest publishers in the Commonwealth with an annual turnover of more than 5,000 titles, the magnitude of this job of publicity can be realised. However, librarians everywhere are often asked questions about government publications and these can be surveyed under the five headings:

1. Existing guides;
2. Their major virtues and deficiencies;
3. Scope and range of government publishing;
4. Accessibility of government publications; and
5. Government libraries and the assistance given by them to scholars.

EXISTING GUIDES

Existing Guides can be clearly separated into two classes, Retrospective and Current. Retrospective guides go as far back as the 17th century and provide a very complete and reliable source particularly from the 19th century onwards. To mention a few of these, there are:

1. Hansard's 'Catalogue and breviary of parliamentary papers, 1696-1834' (reprinted by Blackwell, 1953);
2. Hansard's 'Catalogue of papers, 1731-1800' (reprinted by Blackwell, 1954); and
3. P. S. King's 'Catalogue of parliamentary papers, 1801-1900' with its two supplements up to the year 1920.

Two well-known publications by the Ford Brothers are:
1 A select list of British Parliamentary papers, 1833-1899 (Blackwell, 1953); and

The Ford Brothers have also published 'A descriptive guide to parliamentary papers' (Blackwell, 1956). Two comprehensive lists published by the H M S O are:

1 Government publications: Official indexes, lists, guides and catalogues (1956); and
2 General index to the Bills, Reports and papers printed by order of the House of Commons and the reports presented by Command 1900-1949 (1960).

12 Current

The current lists range from the daily lists consisting of one or two pages to the five-year cumulated indexes. The monthly and annual lists give the publications under three headings:

1 Parliamentary publications — classified list under which all periodicals, and publications are grouped by the sponsoring government departments. Each monthly list also carries an inset- a Select List - which draws the attention of the user of the catalogues to the more important publications of the month;

2 Apart from these, each ministry and the departments also bring out from time to time Sectional Lists of their publications which are in print. These now number 54 and some departments, such as the Public Records Department and the Medical Research Council list all their published work whether in print or not for their historical or scientific value. These lists are frequently revised. Used with the monthly and annual catalogues and the quinquennial index these provide adequate information on any government publication; and

3 As a further aid, a start has been made in the production of subject lists which will not follow the departmental arrangement but will have classified DC headings. Since publications on any topic - say Housing - can originate from various sources such as the Ministry of Works, Education, Housing and Local Government and D S I R, such a classification of material involves a great deal of work.

13 Bibliography of Current Guides

Information on these guides can be found in SH Horrock's 'The state and the publisher' (Library Association, 1952), R. Staveley's 'Government information and the research worker' (Library Association, 1952) and the latest survey on the subject by the Unesco 'A study of the current bibliographies of national official publications, 1958'. The London gazette, and the British national bibliography bring to the attention of librarians and others interested in them the latest publications of government departments. The Statesman's year book also focuses attention on the most important government publications of the Commonwealth countries.

2 EVALUATION

21 Virtues

In Britain almost all government publishing is undertaken by Her Majesty's Stationery Office. The few exceptions being the Admiralty, Ordnance Department and Patent Office. In view of the volume of publishing the speed with which the daily and monthly lists appear is indeed remarkable. Since 1921 a great deal of improvement in indexing and provision of bibliographical details has been made. The indexes give besides the names of authors and subjects also the names of the chairmen of reports. There has also been considerable improvement in the format and government publications are no longer the dull buff-covered publications they were. Command papers have a further advantage of running in numbered series with a prefix C, Cd, Cmd and the current ones appearing under the prefix Cmmd. This helps the ordering of any required publication without having to furnish further details. Since sectional lists weed out all publications which are no longer in print the time of the user is saved. The subject lists will be a further aid to specialists and research
workers. The H M S O also began a card index catalogue service, offering at a modest price a 5" x 3½", card for each publication. The service which resembles the BNB catalogue card scheme is no doubt a great help to librarians.

22 Deficiencies

Then there is the other side of the picture. Most bibliographies do not include government publications and it is therefore difficult for the librarians to keep themselves informed of what is being currently published. The British National Bibliography enters only a selection of titles. Another drawback is the lack of an exhaustive list of items given away or sold direct by the issuing departments. The H M S O catalogues are confined to those titles which it publishes and publications of international organisations for which it acts as a sales agent. Bibliographical details, such as, pagination and details of collation are omitted. Some of these details are however provided in the card indexes and select lists which appear with the monthly catalogues. The titles of government publications are sometimes too long or uninformative and the indexes of the annual catalogues and the 5-year indexes have proved inadequate for retrospective searching. Although authors, departments, key words and title entries are, as a rule included there are some omissions. 'An archaeological survey of the river gravels of England', prepared by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), does not find an entry under the specific subject river gravels. Such details are of course more the concern of a library or bibliographical centre than a publishing agency.

3 RANGE OF PUBLICATIONS

Unlike any other publisher the H M S O has no control over the type of material that it publishes. It cannot initiate what is to be published although it enjoys a good deal of independence in the presentation and sale of its publications. The only characteristic feature of every government publication is that "it starts from some real or demonstrable administrative or public need". It can therefore be seen that the material lends itself to great range in authors, subjects, size and purpose. They vary from a single sheet to a work running to several volumes such as the 82 volume Official history of the second world war; from a booklet on growing strawberries to a volume of meteorology for mariners. The annual reports of such ministries as education contain a vast amount of information and statistics which may not be available elsewhere. A great deal of research financed by the government has resulted in the publication of several highly specialised monographs, research reports and articles in scholarly periodicals. Having initiated research the government also takes upon itself the duty of making available to the public the results of this research in the form of manuals of practical information. The bulletins and leaflets produced by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Services textbook of radio (in 7 volumes) are well known examples. Purely 'information' publications such as Economic Surveys, the Ministry of Education 'pamphlets' and 'Britain: An official handbook' which is one of the most widely used reference works in all the countries of the Commonwealth are also published.

4 ACCESSIBILITY

A special rate of fifty per cent of the price is allowed to all public and university libraries (though the concession to university libraries is likely to be withdrawn). In Great Britain there are 7 depository libraries which receive all government publications and some of them also receive the non-confidential reports of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority. There are 8 government book shops and several recognised book-sellers in Britain who are agents for government publications. Every opportunity that offers itself is made use of to bring the wide range of publications to the attention of the public by means of exhibitions. Through a national scheme of co-operation government publications available in any library can be made available to a reader in any other part of the country.

5 GOVERNMENT LIBRARIES AND PUBLICITY

In London there are about 35 national libraries and libraries of government depart-
ments. Each of these has a vast collection. Where information is sought from the relevant department every effort is made to provide a detailed answer. New entrants to government service are introduced to the library and its resources as part of their departmental training. A series of lectures on the work and library facilities of government departments by the Departmental heads, arranged by the London University School of Librarianship, as far back as 1951, is a recognition of the fact that in the maximum exploitation of government publications librarians have an important role to play.

The problems of communication between the government departments and general public and the various means adopted for the dissemination of the information available from official government sources are both interesting and complex. And it is the effectiveness of the system of communication which ensures a better understanding and happier co-operation between the government and the people.