
Microfilm: A History-Preview

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Microfilm: A History, 1839–1900. By Frederic Luther. (Annapolis, Md.: The National Microfilm Association, 1959. Pp. 195. Illustrations, index. For members of the National Microfilm Association, \$4.50; for non-members, \$7.50.)

The historian is constantly indebted to microfilm files in which have been preserved the perishable records of the past, but seldom has he thought of how this research tool was developed. Frederic Luther presents the first half of this story in his very readable and informative non-technical history. Under the auspices of the National Microfilm Association, the author has gathered together the highly fragmented and scattered material about nineteenth-century microfilm as part of the association's "Centennial of Microfilm Progress 1859–1959."

The main story revolves around the lives of John Benjamin Dancer (1812–1887), the English scientist who made the first known microcopy of a document in 1839, and Rene Prudent Dagron (1819–1900), the French photographer who was granted the first microfilm patent in 1859. Dancer receives only passing treatment, and Dagron, the colorful practical businessman, commands most of the remainder of the study. Great emphasis is placed on the siege of Paris in 1870 and Dagron's part in the birth of microfilm air mail. The author becomes so engrossed in the romance of this period that he digresses from his main theme into the story of balloons and carrier pigeons. The total effect of the first part of the book, therefore, is that of a series of essays on life in France in the 1870's with the history of microfilm superimposed upon it.

The remaining half of the book contains technical materials which support and supplement the preceding section. These include a chronology of microfilm developments and biographical notes connected with nineteenth-century microfilming, an outline of three of the important microfilm processes of this period, and selected bibliographical material on Dagron and Dancer, including a list of the existing Dancer microfilms and their locations. Of interest in this section are the author's translations of two of Dagron's pamphlets, *Traite de Photographie Microscopique* and *La Piste Par Pigeons Voyageurs*. Even the earlier digressions are supported with a chapter on "Balloon Services during the Siege of Paris" and another on "The Homing Pigeon Service, 1870–71."

In keeping with the author's devotion to microfilm, this volume has been issued in a limited printed edition, but its permanency in print has been assured "through the issuance simultaneously of copies in microfilm and microprint formats" (p. 4). A more complete annotated bibliography is contained in the microformat editions than in the printed one.

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