PREFACE

IN 1893, Princeton installed a display at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Marking the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America, the Exposition was designed to show the world America's progress in directions prized by society—economic, industrial, intellectual, and social. For its display, the College (not officially a University until a few years later) exhibited its collection of portraits of colonial worthies as well as books and artifacts from early years of the nation. The paintings were arrayed to the left and right of the seven-foot-tall portrait of George Washington at the Battle of Princeton by Charles Willson Peale. So that the point of the giant centerpiece would not be missed, the patriotic painting was draped in the American flag.

At first glance it may seem strange that colonial-era objects were deemed relevant to an exposition trumpeting progress. What did these old things have to do with the modern era? Was this some strange, atavistic message that somehow bypassed the Exposition's theme?

Closer inspection reveals that the message Princeton sought to convey was that these objects proved the College's role in several stories of progress important to the time. In the years after the Civil War, when discourse about forming a "more perfect union" was replaced by vigorous discussion about "the nation," Princeton sought to show its primary role in the story of the

nation's founding. In this respect, Princeton was joining a number of institutions, especially those situated in the northern states, that were shaping the post-Civil-War story of the American nation by means of historical collecting, publishing, and lectures. At the same time, Princeton sought to show its role in the even larger story of increasing liberty in the world, first started when it was founded in the years of the rational, political, and religious Enlightenment. It is no accident that within a few years after the Exposition, the College announced its motto to be "Princeton in the Nation's Service."

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Today, in 2009, more than one hundred years after Princeton's display in Chicago, we come to another display of colonial-era objects. These were gathered not by Princeton but rather by one of its sons, who on this occasion is making them a gift to his *alma mater*. Then, as now, these books are part of a continuing story.

It is one thing to collect books that chronicle the story of increasing liberty, it is something altogether different to attempt to present them in an exhibition catalogue so that the reader senses the particulars embodied in each book. How does one gain such a sense of the past? Not only by experiencing books as physical objects, seeing them as readers of that day saw, felt, and handled them, but—through the extensive quotations from the books themselves found in this catalogue—by making them speak as well. The range of voices in this exhibition are wide and varied, young and old, male and female, learned and self-taught. Yet, through them all, during the more than 150 years spanned by this exhibition, one may hear these voices returning to constant themes.

One theme is what abolitionist James Ramsay in his 1774 letter to historian Catharine Macaulay called "the sun of liberty"—a state of being warmed by a sense that through just actions all unjust suffering would perish and rightful, self-responsible, morally-aware living would arrive. The rays cast by this "sun of liberty" also enable one to be a member of a new community, one not controlled by the few overcome with self interest, but rather by co-operating individuals guided by reason, a sense of fairness, and an openness to the natural order. Running through all these voices, the reader encounters speakers who, on the one hand, appear to be commenting on a particular political crisis of a particular day, but, on the other hand, and deeper down, they are all talking philosophically about the nature of man, the characteristics of a sustainable society, or respect for the equality of other, fellow human beings.

An exhibition such as this one can give only a fleeting glimpse of these broad themes. It can only give snatches of the many voices speaking. It is hoped that once heard, even briefly, each voice will compel the listener to return at an-

other time and seek out a speaker's voice in full. Further time spent with these books will be unequivocally rewarding, because in them are words that define what it means to be a citizen of a republic.

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The books in this exhibition are divided into four sections, each sub-arranged, in general, chronologically by date of publication. The sections and subsections are designed not only to demonstrate the scope of Sid Lapidus's collecting but also to put into some sort of logical structure the inter-related themes of the subject overall: Liberty and the American Revolution. These four sections by no means exhaustively analyze or demonstrate the overall subject, but they do signal two important points, one intellectual and the other practical. The sections provide a necessary topical structure to the intellectual themes at large, and, at the same time, they are indicative of the books obtainable in the Anglo-American antiquarian book market during the final decades of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first centuries (it should be remembered that the books listed are first editions unless otherwise noted). That they were obtainable at all says as much about the social importance of these books as it does about their intellectual content. The decision to extend the physical survival of a book is based not only on the ideas they contain but on the practical choice to treasure the form into which those ideas were put, that is, giving physical sustenance to the book indicates a valuation that requires an expenditure of money, of resources, and of space.

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An exhibition is a narrative told episodically. The reader is asked to follow the story scene by scene, with each book serving several functions. First, each is an object with a story of its own. Second, it is an object fitting into a series and each series, in turn, has a story of its own to tell. Third, each series can be reframed so as to be regarded as part of an even larger one.

In the following exhibition, we ask the reader to view each book through at least three frames. First—always bearing in mind the largest frame—the story of expanding liberty in the Atlantic world during the period from the seventeenth century down to the beginning of the nineteenth. Liberty is an abstract idea but it is rooted in real concerns of real people trying to answer such questions as: "What can my future be?" and "Who and what circumstances determine my ability to provide for myself?" Secondly, we ask the reader to look at the book through a narrower frame embedded within this largest. The character of the narrower frame varies; sometimes it focuses on a very specific series of events, such as the abolition of the slave trade in a particular nation;

sometimes its focus is more general, such as the topic of political discourse during the second half of the seventeenth century in England. Thirdly, we ask the reader to look at the book through a narrower frame still, to see the book itself as a physical object produced at a unique time and place in the past—to read an excerpt from the text, to hear again the author's own words. Our choice of his or her words is designed to point to the larger frames already mentioned.

It is impossible for an exhibition to supply the reader with a full, continuous, and smooth narrative free of all gaps. An exhibition such as this, which is drawn from just one man's collection, is limited to what is in the collection at the moment of the show. Time, money, what is physically surviving at a point in time—all these limit what can be placed on view today.

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—Stephen Ferguson
Curator of Rare Books

Liberty & the American Revolution

Selections from the Collection of Sid Lapidus, Class of 1959

AN EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

WITH A PREFACE BY STEPHEN FERGUSON

A FOREWORD BY SID LAPIDUS

AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Sean Wilentz

Princeton, New Jersey:

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

MM · IX