

Rare Books in University Libraries

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Introduction

IT HAS BEEN THIRTY YEARS since *Library Trends* devoted an entire issue to rare book librarianship. During those years much change has indeed occurred. This article on rare books in universities is the sequel to the article under the same title written by Cecil Byrd of Indiana University and published in the April 1957 *Library Trends*. In the article, Byrd summarized the results of the nineteen questionnaires that were returned to him from various libraries. It appears from the text that these libraries were Brown, California, UCLA, Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, Duke, Harvard, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Johns Hopkins, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio State, Princeton, Texas, Virginia, and Yale, as well as some others such as the Clements Library and the John Carter Brown Library. The article is chiefly a "group portrait," giving a "slice through time" or stop-action view of operations, acquisitions, and policies for use of these various units in 1956-57. Unlike Byrd, this author's intention is not to present the reader with a composite picture of these libraries thirty years later but rather to focus on rare book librarianship at universities in the 1980s. Many functions of rare book libraries are indeed classic and will remain so as long as the idea of the university is maintained. Such classic functions are well spelled out in the April 1957 issue of *Library Trends* (see pages 418 and 419). This author's attention will not be so much on such matters as changes in acquisition policies or the particulars of

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budgeting and expenditures. Mainly, it is hoped that the focus will be on the ideas and social forces shaping these libraries. As well, this author is interested in how people have responded to and used these ideas and forces.

Trends in Rare Book Librarianship

The following is a summary of ideas that will be covered in more detail. First, the classic functions of rare books in university libraries have been supported on a continuous basis. This is in contrast to rare book collections in public libraries or in independent research libraries which are suffering today because of lack of resources.

Second, over the past thirty years, university libraries in general have taken on the traditional concerns of rare book and special collections. The reasons in brief are: converging similarities in physical characteristics of materials; need and urgency for security of materials; need and urgency to supply specialized services for restricted materials; and regulated use as a means of providing service. One major development signaling this trend is that nowadays knowledge, concern, and action for the preservation and conservation of library materials are no longer the exclusive province of special collections librarians. A special interest has now become a general interest just as concern for the ecology of the earth is no longer confined to "nature lovers."

Third, another convergence is in the area of orchestrating the specialized and diverse forces useful for the interests of the rare book and special collection. Rare book librarians today are more than ever aware of the utility of teamwork within the library and the need to utilize specialists outside the library.

Fourth, there has been a change in the leadership of rare book units. Compared to the situation described in *Library Trends* by T.R. Adams in 1957, the leadership is now coming from within the profession, not from outside it.

Fifth, despite evidence of convergences at hand, there are equally strong cross-currents pitting the interests of special collections librarians against those of general, academic librarians. It is a difference of point of view and assumptions about library materials and services. This author characterizes this conflict as "Amory's paradox,"¹ namely a world in which there is "more and more information and less and less evidence."

Support of Classic Functions

Since the university is in essence an idea which can only be known through its physical expression, schools have long sought to appropriate surroundings expressive of the ideology of education, namely, that education is to be carried out in an enclave where knowledge and truth can be pursued without interference. Universities seek to be a place apart from the hurly-burly of everyday life; a place for reflection and self-improvement not unlike the Church. Examples of such physical appropriations can easily be listed. Most noticeable is the imitation Gothic architecture embraced by North American colleges and universities from the 1850s to the 1940s, at a time when it was not the dominant style of building form. Similarly, in the course of pursuing its goal of physical separation from the rest of the world, one of the uses made of special collections by a university is to house such collections in exalted quarters. Over the past thirty years, a number of universities have set up new or renovated facilities for special collections all in compliance with this ideal. Yale built the Beinecke Library; Indiana, the Lilly; Texas, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center; Toronto, the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, and so on. All are grand and bibliothecal. In the year 1985 alone, renovations were carried out at the following facilities:

At Northwestern University, special collections was fitted with a comprehensive environmental control system for the stacks of the unit. The work involved six months of planning and six months of refurbishment with renovations covered by a \$750,000 foundation grant. Rutgers opened a new exhibition gallery—Gallery '50—in June of 1985 with funds given by the Class of 1950 and the National Endowment for the Humanities. At the University of Texas, Austin, the exhibition gallery for special collections in the Academic Library was renovated during 1985. Princeton University added the Milberg Gallery for the Graphic Arts to its special collections facilities in Firestone Library. Columbia University Libraries opened a new rare book and manuscript facility on the sixth floor of Butler Library built at a cost of over \$3 million. Officially opened on December 6, 1984, the facility included a new exhibition gallery, unified areas for readers of rare books and manuscripts, climate controlled stack space, and other needed facilities. At Yale, major renovations to fire detection and suppression systems were made at the Beinecke. At Stanford, the former Bender Room, which once housed Special Collections, was refurbished for University Archives.²

In addition to buildings, collections have been built as well; details of these events are well covered by Gordon Ray and William Matheson.

In three influential papers written over a period of almost 20 years, Gordon Ray summarized the principal characteristics of the rare book world in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In his first article in the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* (Second Quarter, 1965), Ray found that institutional libraries were the dominant purchasers of rare books and manuscripts, setting the pace for the market. By the time Ray published "The World of Rare Books Re-examined" in the *Yale University Library Gazette* (July, 1974), the affluence of the 1960s had gone and institutional involvement in the rare book world had markedly diminished....In a 1982 address to the Fellows of the Pierpont Morgan Library, *The Rare Book World Today* (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1982), Ray found that rare book collections that were part of university libraries were in a particularly poor position....As will become clear, I got responses that documented the picture of hard times, especially in staffing...[but] I also received a good many other letters painting a much rosier picture....A good number of other libraries described institutional support that has permitted purchasing to move ahead energetically.³

Convergences

Research libraries are becoming more and more restrictive regarding the conditions for use of their collections. The reasons for this action are many. First, the cost of ordinary books and journals has gone up considerably in the 1970s and 1980s, hence, more and more money is being put into keeping the collections at the levels of strength to which the library is accustomed. Second, costs of books and journals are not respecters of persons, so individuals are suffering the same difficulties and in some cases relieve such by permanently borrowing the library's copy because they cannot afford their own. The library must replace the copy at a higher cost than that of the original copy. Thus more money invested in the daily growth of the collections gives rise to more vigilance over their safeguard. Simultaneously, the library's established collections, those dating from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both deteriorate because of acidic paper and become more and more difficult to replace as the second-hand book market which might supply replacement copies becomes exhausted. These factors plus several others have caused libraries to take on features of the noncirculating rare book library. Access is restricted; stacks are closed; materials once in the open stacks are transferred to nonpublic areas. One of the results of this trend is pressure on rare book librarians to take on security officer duties regarding such now "endangered" books. Because of the tradi-

tional role of the rare book librarian as custodian, he or she is looked to immediately as the one to care for these new classes of books at risk. One result of such pressure is the crowding out of time for curatorial and scholarly service. Noting this misuse of staff and time, some libraries, such as the Library of Congress, have established a "medium rare collection," which presumably protects the book from ordinary conditions of use but does not move them to a facility where more elaborate security and services are provided such as the rare book reading room.

Moreover, this trend toward restriction is not likely to go away, as two experts have pointed out. Richard DeGennaro says that in the future users will still go to libraries in order to find materials that are not available elsewhere or that they cannot afford,⁴ while Michael Buckland maintains that libraries are virtually the only place where one can find old books.⁵

So the amount of material now scheduled for restriction is growing and will continue to grow. Because restricting access and controlling the conditions of use of books is difficult, time-consuming, and costly, new interest in the preservation of materials has arisen in recent years. Such knowledge was once almost the exclusive province of rare book librarians. Nowadays it is part of the mainstream of research library administration. Examples of this change are easily brought to hand; one need only look at the Fall 1981 issue of *Library Trends*, "Conservation of Library Materials," for evidence.

Teamwork and Specialists

Another area of change in rare book curatorship over the past thirty years has been an increased understanding of "team work." Passing into oblivion is the image of the "Lone Ranger" curator sitting in his office handling each volume once daily and absorbing mystically all manner of knowledge about booklore, important and trivial. Collections have grown in size and complexity to the point that the curator is usually not the only one serving them; he or she must have assistants and, usually, curatorial colleagues in the library as well. Consequently, time once devoted to intensive study of the objects must be turned toward working with other people. The reasons for this are several, in addition to the one stated earlier. Today there is more emphasis on teamwork in organizations. It is simply the lifestyle of the time. In many fields, leaders are no longer simply leaders but "change masters." The metaphor of leadership has shifted from the image of the individual at the head of the group to that of the operator controlling the system. By the same token,

the image of "followership" has changed. The follower now participates in the leadership (hence "teamwork") rather than being subordinate to it.

In educational circles, a similar change in the image of leadership seems to have occurred. In a former day, excellence was considered in terms of each person finding the truth by his or her own light. Under such an assumption the institution was encumbered to provide separate arrangements for each individual's pursuit of excellence. Thus each faculty got its own building, its own seminar rooms, its own libraries, and so on. As Buckland observed: "[The] extreme of this can be seen in some Austrian and West German universities in the allocation of resources for library services to separate 'libraries' for each institute, with each professor (i.e. 'ordinarius' and 'full' professor) having his or her own institute."⁶

But such particularity today is simply too costly; society no longer seems to have the resources for separate arrangements. Today the model for excellence in education is provided by the group—the scientific research team being the paradigm example. It is for these needs that the institution arranges its resources today.

This mood now permeates libraries in universities, of course, and has dramatically changed the character of the curator's work. There are committees to attend, memoranda to read and to write, telephone calls to make and to return, and the like. Many times the teamwork creates mutual understanding between staff. But on the other hand it is sometimes ineffective. So much so that one special collections department head said recently, in reference to his relations with other departmental heads in the library: "There can never be enough communication or education."

In addition to the teamwork with colleagues now necessary in the university library, the curator today is enlisting the services of specialists outside the library in order to accomplish the tasks at hand. These people include:

- Book and paper conservators
- Computer professionals
- Printing and publishing experts
- Exhibit preparation experts
- Granting agency personnel
- Professional fund raisers (both within and outside the university)
- Public relations specialists (e.g., Princeton's Communications Office)

Rare Books in University Libraries

- Facilities experts, such as architects, security system vendors, engineers
- Library school educators
- Lawyers
- Better educated, more professionalized rare book sellers
- Photographers
- Police agents specializing in art and book thefts
- Bank officers
- Library network personnel

Some members of this list have skills that were unavailable thirty years ago.

Leadership

In the April 1957 issue of *Library Trends*, T.R. Adams noted:

[At some] university libraries....the faculty, which exerts a substantial influence in the selection of the librarians, still feels that the library profession is not a dependable source of men to hold their top library posts. Of the six university libraries of over two million volumes, three are headed by men with no library science degrees and two of these came to their jobs with no previous library experience. Indeed, of the five men appointed since July 1, 1955, to head libraries included [among the larger academic libraries], four are without library degrees and three without previous experience.⁷

Adams notes a similar situation among leaders of rare book libraries and special collections.

The professional background of the men and women who have been put at the head of these new [rare book] operations is also significant. Two-thirds have a professional library background including a library degree, although a number have some kind of scholarly or antiquarian book training in addition. It should be noted, however, that major eastern institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, and Virginia, and one west of the Alleghenies, Indiana, have heads who came to rare book librarianship from backgrounds of research, bibliography, or the antiquarian book trade.⁸

Adams attributes this leadership situation to the fact that there is a "dichotomy between librarians and scholars...[in] American librarianship."⁹ Many times in the past, the scholars found that the librarians hampered their work and, since the scholars were in a position to influence governance of the library, they wanted someone with their

own interest at heart to be in charge. Take, for example, these findings summarized by Barbara B. Moran:

Library directors now are chosen primarily for their demonstrated managerial competence and leadership. A recent study compared ARL directors in 1981 to the directors of the same libraries in 1966 and found some interesting differences between the two groups. In 1966, 15 percent of the directors lacked library degrees, but by 1982, every ARL director had an earned graduate library degree. . . . "The genteel, scholarly, even dilettantish directors of the past are yielding to career-minded managers, administrators, and technicians."¹⁰

And in the area of special collections leadership, the trend has been reversed as well. The bookman at the head of the rare book unit is a vanishing species. The book expert is now a staff position. Today's leader is chosen from national ranks, usually, and the choice is commonly made on the basis of two considerations: academic credentials and experience in libraries, including their ability to obtain grants. A review of Adams's six institutions today reveals a different pattern. The backgrounds of the heads include archival administration, library computer networking, and rare book librarianship.

Today the choice among administrators is not between scholars and librarians. It focuses on the person's ability to administer the whole, that is the entire conglomerate making up special collections, as opposed to the part, namely, a subsection of the unit. The candidates for the top positions must be able to demonstrate that they can do more than a particular special activity. Moreover, the selectors usually cannot decide which specialty is adequate preparation for the lead job. Consequently, the library directors of the major academic libraries in the United States were usually directors somewhere else before arriving at their present job. The same pattern is beginning to emerge among special collections administrators.

There is speculation about the cause of this trend. There is still in universities the idea that the library is one agency with one head agent. (In point of fact, this notion is debatable; it can be easily argued that it is many agencies and consequently should have many head agents.) Nonetheless, the notion of the unity of the library lives on and, because of that, central university administrations require a head librarian to be at the front. This requirement in turn necessitates that the means of control remain within the reach of one person. Concurrent with this habit of administration are the ever increasing scope, power, and complexities of the facilities and staff in the library. The two forces (the administrator and those administered) live in tension as the former tries to contain the latter. To resolve the tension, the administrator has

several choices—more resources for control, improved use of current resources, or laissez-faire. Because of several factors, the administrator does not usually get more resources, and laissez-faire is not acceptable. As a result, the only choice is to improve use of present resources and that is done through changing regulation of current resources. Library economy today means consolidation of facilities and networking, thus ending separate arrangements for various collections or forms of materials. Reading rooms are being combined; automation of cataloging makes interconnections easier. The trend is toward integration of the various particular special collections rather than decentralization. Only one who can oversee and manage the whole can do this.

Cross Currents

In this era of emphasis on team work, the specialized nature of special collections work seems to become more and more separated from the mainstream of library work. Because curators deal mainly with objects as opposed to information, it makes it harder for them to relate to the theory that binds together their other library colleagues many of whom think of themselves as "information professionals." As the head librarian of Columbia University said recently: "Librarians don't organize books, they organize knowledge and ways to gain access to that knowledge."¹¹

To many academic librarians, the form of the information is irrelevant to its apprehension and use by the individual. For them, what they are dealing with is as abstract as the concept of "money." Information can be measured out in shelf feet, film rolls, or pages, just as money can be dealt with in cents, yen, or "Eurodollars."

Hence, for "information professionals," preservation of library materials becomes a matter of saving "the intellectual content." This latter concept is usually taken to be something everyone takes for granted, namely, the words on the page.

Intellectual content is not a self-evident concept; it is a judgment made by a human being. The notion of intellectual content is obviously derived from the commonsense distinction between form and substance. Moreover, this distinction is one that democratic society generally accepts and the librarian, as a member of such a society, accepts it as well. In other words, consider society to be a group of people acting out a script which they hope will sustain their lives together. Obviously each person has a proper role to play, a role dictated by an agreed upon "script." One presumption of the script is that the librarian is to serve as a societal memory and to create, store, and recover vital facts as needed

by society as it plays out the script. Moreover, the librarian should work in balance with other players so that their life together is "fair" and the relationships are "just." The pressures to play the role strictly and without "ad-libbing" are strong. Conformity to the role is vital to the interests of all.

In this context then the librarian today considers the immediate tasks at hand. Since nature is as always at war with human artifacts, a decision must be made about how and what materials one can preserve for society. So, in reaching the larger decision, the written record is viewed in all its aspects, but only one aspect is viewed to be useful—that is, useful to the democratic society, useful to the largest number of people, useful in the most immediate ways. That usefulness is called "intellectual content" and when it is preserved the book is sometimes destroyed.

On the other hand, one of the chief changes of recent years is that rare book librarians have come to recognize an intellectual framework for their endeavors that crosses the physical boundaries of the library and crosses academic disciplines as well. Rare book librarians have all recognized that they play a role in the larger pursuits of bibliography—that is, bibliography in the old-fashioned, fundamental sense as a discipline concerned primarily with the transmission of texts. Because of new thinking about the nature of human intellection and its artifacts, such as books, rare book librarians have now come to see that there is an expanded meaning to bibliographic work—one having to do with the transmission of the ideas in society. This author is referring to what is nowadays called the history of the book. It is a field that is still developing but destined to stand on its own in the near future as an established field along with art history and the history of science.¹² Lawrence Wroth developed this point as well:

The fact that a not too important book is found in a gorgeous and truly notable binding may mean little, but it may mean a good deal to a reader who encounters a note concerning it. The circumstance that a Venetian book of 1504 with an important American reference is found in a contemporary German binding tells the reflective scholar something about the dissemination of information in Europe of that period and thus becomes a small element in the history of ideas. A seventeenth-century European book attacking witchcraft inscribed by its author to an American opponent of the great delusion may in that very copy have been an element in the advance of man from darkness to light.¹³

Hand in hand with this new understanding of the book—as an agent in the transfer of ideas and in the development of the mentalities of various peoples—is the understanding of the book as an artifact. As such, it

plays a role in the material culture of a society. Jules Prown of Yale has developed this concept well in an article published in the 1982 *Winterthur Portfolio*. Material culture is "the study of culture through artifacts ...[and] is based [on] the obvious fact that the existence of a man-made object is concrete evidence of the presence of a human intelligence operating at the time of fabrication [and use]." ¹⁴ He develops his exposition of material culture in great detail and, among other points, observes that "the most obvious cultural belief associated with material objects has to do with value." ¹⁵ Such a statement immediately brings to mind the studies of two scholars focusing on this very point regarding books especially Bertrand Harris Bronson's "Printing as an Index of Taste." ¹⁶

Equally germane to considerations of value is the following. If one did not know books directly, if one only knew them through the intermediary of Xerox, photostat, microfilm, videodisk, and the like, how could one fully understand the joyfulness and pleasure that past generations had when they held and read a book in their hands? Or, how could one fully appreciate this famous epitaph without ever handling an original book?

The Body/ of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, Printer,/ (Like the cover of
an old book,/ Its contents torn out And stript of its lettering and
gilding,)/ Lies food for worms:/ Yet the work itself shall not be lost,/
for it will (as he believed) appear once more,/ In a new/ And more
beautiful edition,/ Corrected and amended/ by/ The Author.

One cannot intuit another reader's response to the book without handling the original. Moreover, when one sees and uses a reproduction, the only response one knows is one's own response. ¹⁷ Wroth concludes: "Only when these and similar investigations have been made and their results recorded can the librarian put the book in its place upon the shelves with the feeling that to the best of his ability and knowledge his library is prepared to say that it is carrying out its function of giving its clientele information, enlightenment, and delight." ¹⁸

Clearly, a thorough understanding of the objectives and methods of two disciplines—the history of the book and the study of material culture—have given rare book librarians theoretical underpinnings for their day to day handling of rare books.

Over against the attitudes of the "information professional" are those of the curator, one who must care for the object as such. From his or her point of view, "intellectual content" is the object itself and not some replication of the object. To the curator, preservation consequently means conservation—that is, keeping the object as itself for as long as possible. All this leads to what this author calls "Amory's

dilemma." In a review and letter ably proclaiming the importance of the book as a material object, Harvard's chief rare book cataloger Hugh Amory states: "We advance toward these dazzling heights [of "the information age"] like doomed heroes, more and more information and less and less evidence."¹⁹

What is common ground for the points of view of the "information professional" and the curator? As in the past, it is hoped that it will continue to be within the enclave of the university.

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15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
16. Bronson, Bertrand Harris. *Facets of the Enlightenment: Studies in English Literature and Its Contexts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968. See also Gaskell, Philip. "Printing the Classics in the Eighteenth Century." *The Book Collector* 1(Summer 1952). Gaskell details the lavish typography spent upon editions of Virgil, Horace, and other classical authors during the eighteenth century.
17. Another example of the deprivation induced by handling only reproductions is shown in the following example. It is told recently that a college student, so accustomed to school texts, upon seeing a copy of the first Shakespeare folio, said: "Where are the footnotes?"

Rare Books in University Libraries

18. Wroth, "A Negation and Some Affirmations," p. 424.

19. Amory, [Letter replying to C. Dierdre Phelps], p. 111. See also his review essay, "Physical Bibliography, Cultural History, and the Disappearance of the Book." *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 78(no. 3, 1984):341-47.