

# The Place of Rare Books in a College or University Library

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THE PLACE for rare books in a college or university library is the rare book room.<sup>1</sup> If an institution does not possess and adequately maintain a rare book room, its trustees should consider the advisability of arranging to dispose of its rare books, by gift, barter, or sale to some other institution that does make provision for them.

Elsewhere I have expressed the view that, in general, the college or university library, rather than a local public library, is the place for rare books. Of course such a generalization needs qualification, as in the cases of great institutions like the Public Library of Boston, the New York Public Library, or the Free Library of Philadelphia, where impressive gifts have been supplemented by generous endowments, and where splendid traditions have become firmly fixed. Equally there can be no question of placing rare books

in the well-established historical societies, or separate libraries founded expressly for the purpose of caring for rare books. My point is simply this: if, in a given locality, there is a public library and also a well-run college or university library, other things being equal, there is reason to believe that the latter is a better repository.<sup>2</sup>

There are too many examples of where this is already being done for us to ignore them. The job of the public library is to serve the public. The job of the college or university library is to serve a selected group. It requires no great feat of imagination to decide which of these two groups is more likely to be concerned with rare books, and in consequence, which kind of library is the more appropriate to care for rare books.

## *Rare Book Rooms*

That this has already been decided is attested by the numerous modern libraries at colleges and universities which are already lifting from the local public libraries the responsibility for the care of rare books. Many of these were built during the flush times of the twenties, such as the Candler Library at Wesleyan College, Macon, Georgia. Others were built with carefully conserved funds which went much farther in the low-building-costs

<sup>1</sup> The inaugural issue of this magazine contained some slightly contrasting views on the whole subject by Lawrence C. Powell, of the University of California at Los Angeles Library, and Warren L. Perry, librarian of the College of Puget Sound. Both those articles should be re-read in connection with this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Adams, R. G. *Address at the Dedication of the Stockwell Memorial Library, Albion, Michigan, 1938.*

period of the thirties, such as the Stockwell Library at Albion College, Michigan. Yet others, which have passed their century marks, have already begun to devote time, money, and curatorship to specially and appropriately designed rare book rooms, as exemplified by that in the Allegheny College Library, Meadville, Pennsylvania. Large libraries for large universities are still being built, as is shown by the dedication in 1940 of the Gorgas Memorial Library at the University of Alabama with adequate space for rare books. But the older universities were already on the next lap of the race, for in the very year in which Alabama made Uncle Sam pay for the destruction wrought by his army in the Civil War, the Friends of the Harvard Library were apprised of the fact that Harvard wants a separate building for its rare books. Brown University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Southern California at Los Angeles already have such separate buildings for certain of their rare books. Modern buildings, adequate equipment, and, more important than these, curators who have the zeal and enthusiasm of real collectors continue to increase. If the exquisite rare book room in the Baker Library at Dartmouth College contains unique rarities, so does the Wren Collection at the University of Texas.

#### *Decentralization Desirable*

Rare books are, in fact, going into these college and university libraries faster than they can be reported to the union catalog at the Library of Congress. We need centralization of information about America's bibliographic resources, but we are not going to have any centralization of America's bibliographic riches.

In these days of totalitarian war, the concentration of the nation's book resources, particularly in metropolitan areas, is not to be urged. But the concentration of books is after all merely the delusion of some, who, as the Librarian of Congress has aptly said "torture themselves with thoughts of an impossible and imaginary 'completeness' which no library ever has attained or ever will."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, books in great metropolitan areas are too easily accessible to unselected readers.

In these days of microcopying we do not need any such concentration, for microcopies will satisfy those readers who want merely factual and textual content.

In these days of national library associations which meet and discuss at length problems of library efficiency and economy in terms of more books for more people in less time and at less cost, we need libraries like those of colleges and universities, which are apt to provide a greater degree of protection against unselected readers, and against the type of over-zealous librarian who makes a fetish of service.

In these days of ever greater demands for centralized control in politics and economics, it is a good idea to have decentralization in the matter of things of the mind and spirit. If I had an important Rembrandt and were inclined to give it away, I should present it to the Nelson Gallery in Kansas City rather than to any art gallery in New York City.

In these days when it is apparent that the majority of the people of the United States live west of the Appalachian Mountains, why should such a disproportionately large share of its bibliographic treasures be concentrated east of those mountains?

<sup>3</sup> MacLeish, Archibald. *Remarks . . . on the Occasion of the Laying of the Cornerstone of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library*, Washington, 1939.

### *Institutions Scattered*

There is one thing about the colleges and universities of America—they are well scattered. If, at any of these institutions of higher learning, the responsible governing body deliberately elects to make itself a local center of culture (or does so in a fit of absence of mind) it ought to be encouraged to recognize its obligations and face the future fairly and squarely. If those authorities do not want to assume any such responsibility, they ought to read Mr. Perry's article cited above, and they should eschew any connection with rare books.

Many an American collector is giving the work of a lifetime to a favorite institution. An interestingly large proportion of these are college and university libraries. The selection of the institution may be rationalized as having been carefully thought out, but in fact it is more apt to be the result of sentiment, loyalty, and emotion. It is no longer a question of *whether* college and university libraries shall become responsible for rare books, but *which* colleges and universities. A small college like Knox, at Galesburg, Illinois (600 students), has made its decision by accepting the Finley Collection, just as Williams College made up its mind when it accepted the Chapin Collection. Similarly a huge university like the University of California at Los Angeles (27,000 students) made its choice when it accepted the Clarke and Cowan libraries.

To say that I am in favor of certain college and university libraries collecting rare books would be like the lady's remark—that she accepted the universe—to Dr. Johnson. Such college and university libraries are going to do it anyway. But I am equally in favor of certain college and university libraries refraining from the

collecting of rare books. To these I have only to say, "Please make up your minds; either get in or stay out, and stop muddying up the water."

In one small library of rare books in one American university I like to explain our function by saying that our job is to help the University of Michigan overcome the handicap of having been born four hundred years too late. Printing was invented in western Europe, and America was discovered, in the fifteenth century, but the University of Michigan did not come along until the nineteenth century. By the same computations Harvard was born two hundred years too late, and the University of California at Los Angeles almost five hundred years too late. But none of these institutions is discouraged by mere chronology—and certainly the growth of rare book collections on the Pacific coast is something with which to reckon.

### *Dominant Interests Reflected*

The place of (as contrasted with *for*) rare books in a college library depends entirely upon the institution. If the institution has elected to collect, then it must have professors and librarians who do not always think of the word "bibliography" as a list of titles on a given subject attached to a term paper or thesis.

The place of rare books in a college or university library actually depends upon the taste, discrimination, and feeling of its teachers (including the library staff), as well as upon their intellectual training and erudition. In a college where the teachers are mere scholars, the place of rare books will be relatively low; in an institution where the teachers are men and women of fine feeling, sentiment, and appreciation, as well as scholars, the place

of rare books will be higher. Nothing that we can say by way of opinion, be it expert opinion or mere prejudice, will affect the situation one way or the other. As a military post so often reflects the dominant interest of the commanding officer, so a college or university library is apt to reflect the interests of its president or its librarian. If the higher authorities see no sense in the collecting and preservation of rare books—the library probably will not have a chance to do so. Secretly I rejoice when I hear a librarian of a college or university library proclaim that he is interested in readers and that rare books are of minor concern. I simply grin to myself and cross that institution off the list of possible competitors when something really good comes along.

#### *What Is a Rare Book?*

The actual definition of a rare book is almost as flexible as the other principles discussed here. If we take the criterion of replaceability, there must be different rules at different colleges and universities. A great tidewater eastern university can lose a one-hundred dollar book and easily replace it, because it has the hundred dollars. But that might be a serious loss in a small freshwater college. The question of association interest is equally relative. A great western institution may have dozens of books from the library of a certain man who actually founded a certain eastern university. The tidewater institution would place a higher value on those books. The question of the number of copies originally issued is sometimes used as the criterion for rarity. Some librarians say books issued in an edition of 100 copies, others say 200 or even 500 copies. Again this is relative to the institution and its interests. (We are all

apt to agree that the publishing racket of issuing "limited" editions of 1000, so prevalent in the 1920's, is now a bit ludicrous.) We can all agree that incunabula are rare—but I have heard librarians question even this in the case of what they regard as an unimportant book. On occasions like that I have a suppressed desire to look for a book thief and give him the name of that library. More and more we are coming to think that all English books printed before 1640, or all American books printed before 1800, are worthy of being considered rare books.

#### *Regional Warehouses*

Today a movement is under way to make great warehouses for "little-used books" in given regional areas. [Harvard, the Boston Public Library, the American Antiquarian Society, and the various surrounding tidewater institutions are actually thinking in these terms. President Hutchins of the University of Chicago is speaking out for such a warehouse in his area.] The theory is that libraries will pool their "little-used books" but retain title thereto. Aside from the question of the definition of the "little-used book," I am reminded of an afternoon at the Pueblo Bonito, in Chaco Cañon, New Mexico. The Department of the Interior maintained a pleasant young ranger there. I soon found he was a product of the University of New Mexico, with graduate work in archæology to his credit. We were standing atop of a kitchen midden which must have been eight hundred feet long and thirty feet high. We could not move without uncovering artifacts. The ranger remarked that it would be fun if the numerous expeditions which had gathered specimens in the last ten years could be induced to

pool their artifacts, match fragments and shards, and learn something. He said he had attended a convention in Santa Fe of the representatives of more than a score of archæological museums in America. All had specimens from the Pueblo Bonito; they discussed pooling their artifacts. Then he laughed. When I enquired the reason for his merriment, he replied, "Oh, they could not decide which institution was to have charge of the pool."

The warehouse theory may be sound, but any college or university that is worth its salt, will, as the years go on, be constantly drawing back books which it has learned are rare. Any college or university library in this country which has passed its one-hundredth birthday has merely by virtue of that fact many "little-used" books which are now rare books. As members of the staff learn that certain treasures have been shipped off simply because they were "little-used" there will be all kinds of fireworks. The expression "little-used" is like the expression "special collection"—it may betray a misapprehension of and lack of appreciation of rare books. Who wants rare books "much used?" "Special collection" implies the rigid adherence to subject classification—when, as a civilization matures, the first principle of classification is more apt to be rarity than subject matter.

#### *A Good Problem*

Colleges and universities are places where, presumably, men and women are taught greater discrimination, how to make distinctions, what to regard as evidence, and how to evaluate it; in short, how to tell a counterfeit from the real thing. It has occurred to me that a good problem to set for a student would be to give him several editions of the same book:

a first edition; a first revised edition; the last edition published during the author's lifetime; the first effort at a critical edition; a popular modern edition; and the latest critical edition. I should then suggest that the student be required to do his problem or write his paper on the differences and points he discovers. The interesting thing about such a problem is that it is conceivable that the student might not have to read the book at all. He might get more training than he would if he actually did read it. Without rare books, this, and similar training, can never be given.

#### *Terminology*

The place of rare books in the college or university library will be determined by people who seldom use the expressions "special collection" or "research library." The first presumes the fundamental principle of subject classification. In the Morgan Library books are classed together because they were printed by Caxton, or because they were bound for Grolier. In the American Antiquarian Society books are classed together because they were owned by Cotton or Increase Mather, as in the Library of Congress books owned by Thomas Jefferson have a separate stack. In the Clements Library books illustrated by DeBry over a period of forty years are classed together because of the illustrator, and books by many Jesuit missionaries of different names are classed together. The term "special collection" need not, but too often does, imply a concern with specialized subject matter.

"Research library" is equally unsatisfactory because it views a library from the standpoint of use. Use is not of cardinal importance in a rare book library. Then,

as to the word "research," we cannot get away from the cynical remark that he who copies from one book is guilty of plagiarism, while he who copies from three is engaged in research. We cannot forget the cartoon in a literary periodical depicting a shabby individual, armed with a pointed stick, who was picking scraps of torn paper from the ground. The caption suggested that he was a professor of education doing research. Likewise there is a distinction between "research" and "research" which curators of rare books have to draw.

#### *The Curator of Rare Books*

It is my own opinion that rare books in college and university libraries should be treated as such—and that means that every library which has any regard for

them should have, if possible, a separate curator of rare books. It is to be urged that this curator shall not be a person of inferior training, salary, or personality. A prospective benefactor will infer much from the kind of person a librarian puts in charge of the rare books. The curator must be able to meet people. Increasingly librarians will wish to refer the more important bibliographical enquiries to such a curator—hence training and experience in that field are more important for such a position than training in a library school. Often we are inclined to think that experience in antiquarian bookselling is the best kind of training for such a position. In any case, a rule-of-thumb assistant, fresh from college, is not ideally equipped, in fact, may not be equipped at all, for such a position.

## Libraries and Research

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There is a further question, of course, concerning the responsibility of librarians for the existence of such a situation. It may be that our research libraries but mirror the confusion and meaninglessness that characterize much of research itself. If, as the Librarian of Congress has charged, our scholars are irresponsible, bored with meanings, and indifferent to values, the libraries which serve such scholars and are responsive to their demands must share this description. However, this paper is not concerned with the allocation of blame or responsibility. We must first recognize the situation as it is; we must realize that the boast of completeness disguises a frightful waste of money

for the purchasing, cataloging, and housing of trash; we must realize that "rarity" is usually an indication of the lack of intrinsic value; and, in general, we must realize that a research library must develop standards of value and importance, similar to those exercised by a museum in selecting its exhibits or by a symphony orchestra in selecting its repertoire. Catholicity of interests does not excuse the lack or obviate the need for such standards. Without them our research libraries tend to become mausoleums in which a small percentage of worth-while books are buried beneath accumulations of trivialities.