

The Rare Book Librarian

Marjorie G. Wynne

Editor's Note: This is the last in a series of articles on the academic library profession. Marjorie G. Wynne is research librarian, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

In 1943 when Professor Chauncey B. Tinker, the keeper of rare books in the Yale University Library, invited me to transfer from the Serial Department to the Rare Book Room, I accepted his invitation against the advice of my elders who suggested that it would lead me nowhere. Instead, it led into an environment that I recognized at once as paradisaical and that has remained so for me during all the succeeding years.

Rare book librarians collect, preserve, and make available the earliest records on all subjects in all periods. Some do this in highly specialized public or private libraries, some in large university libraries, but all have essentially the same objective, depending on the character of their collections. Cuneiform tablets, papyri, illuminated manuscripts, incunabula, maps, manuscripts, books, broadsides, pamphlets—these are the kinds of records that must be found, studied, and stored. Incidentally, it would be well if we could find other names for rare book rooms and treasure rooms, for even today these labels give off an aura of preciousity that is sometimes daunting to the uninitiated.

The first duty of the rare book librarian is to keep the collection alive with new acquisitions. This means checking bibliographies, reading catalogs, maintaining lists of desiderata, exchanging visits with booksellers, making friends with collectors, and looking at every dusty parcel brought in by people who think that they have found a fortune in the attic. It also means soliciting funds for endowment, as well as increasing the budget with contributions from an official friends group and with the sale of duplicates (a thorny problem, this, and one not easily resolved).

In buying and in accepting gifts one must know when to build on strength and when to attempt new directions with their accompanying demands. At Yale, we are constantly adding to our collection of pre-1800 British pamphlets, and because these pamphlets are arranged by date and are thus easily accessible, a history professor has built a course around his students' use of this material in investigating specific lustrums or decades. In a new direction, we recently accepted the gift of an internationally famous collection of playing cards and by so doing accepted also the responsibility for preparing a multivolume catalog and for adding stellar items when circumstances permit.

The rare book librarian must know how paper and books are made and how best to preserve them with temperature and humidity controls, acid-free folders and cases, and restrained restoration. The librarian must also monitor the relentless requests for photoduplication, deciding what may be photocopied and what may be microfilmed. The rarest, the most fragile, and the most frequently used material should be filmed automatically as part of the preservation program, and the films should be used instead of the originals whenever possible.

The rare book librarian must see that books are adequately described on catalog cards and that various special files, such as provenance, imprint, and chronology, are established and maintained; manuscripts should be controlled by cards for single items and registers for large collections. Actually, rare book librarians must do much more than this: they must prepare themselves to participate in the development of machine-readable data bases as these affect rare books and manuscripts. As more and more rare books are described in ever greater detail, computers will eventually be able to provide a sophisticated access to this information from participating collections throughout the world.

Quarters for using rare books and manuscripts should be comfortable and attractive, with admittance as easy as security will allow. Exhibitions help to inform the scholar of what the library has and to instruct and entertain the general public, but they are of the greatest use to the librarian who, in the course of preparing them, learns enough about a new subject to recognize lacunae and to attempt to fill them.

Card catalogs, registers, and guides are essential tools for introducing readers to a collection, but some readers will still need to consult the librarian about specific problems. These consultations, for me at least, are the most interesting and valuable part of the day's work. I learn, for example, about work in progress, about the discovery of important material (sometimes for sale), or about corrections and additions to our cataloging information. In return, I can describe new acquisitions, point to manuscripts that ought to be published, or suggest the location of pertinent material in other libraries.

The librarian must also carry on a voluminous correspondence with readers and colleagues at home and abroad: answering specific bibliographical queries, sending lists of holdings, authorizing publication, discussing loans to exhibitions, and in general interpreting the collection and regulating its use.

Not all requests for the use of rare material are equally conventional, and the librarian should

welcome the unusual whenever possible. Several years ago a midwestern insurance company asked for slides of a dozen or so scenes of the Christmas story from some of our most beautifully illuminated manuscripts. The request was granted, and in the evenings between Christmas and New Year's the slides were flashed on the side of the company's building, while an attractive pamphlet identifying the scenes and the manuscripts was handed out to the hundreds of people who came on foot or in cars to see this special display.

Rare book librarians, it seems to me, enjoy a life of infinite variety built around the collecting

of early, important, and useful records. The late Wilmarth S. Lewis, that great collector and chronicler of Horace Walpole, once said of collectors that they "appear to noncollectors as selfish, rapacious, and half-mad, which is what collectors frequently are, but they may also be enlightened, generous, and benefactors of society, which is the way they like to see themselves. Mad or sane, they salvage civilization." For me, and I am sure for many other rare book librarians, it is a source of unending pleasure and satisfaction to think that we are joined with private collectors in a continuous effort to salvage civilization. ■■

Letters

Louis Round Wilson

To the Editor:

I should like to mention that in addition to the other relevant facts of Louis Round Wilson's illustrious life and career (p.71 *C&RL News*, March 1980), the death of this Melvil Dewey medal recipient on December 10, 1979, came on the anniversary of Dewey's birthday.—*Christopher Albertson, director, Orange Public Library, Orange, Texas.*

Closing the Catalog

To the Editor:

The cover article, "Close the Card Catalog?" in the February issue is by far the most informative

thing I have found on the impact of AACR 2.

Like other librarians, I have serious reservations about this business of "closing" the card catalog.—*Robert Underbrink, head librarian, Blackburn College, Carlinville, Illinois.*

"The Reference Librarian"

To the Editor:

Ann T. Hinckley's article "The Reference Librarian" in the March 1980 *College & Research Libraries News* really catches the flavor of the work of reference librarians. Indeed, her article expresses the very reasons why I became a reference librarian.—*Judith B. Quinlan, reference librarian, Perkins Library, Duke University.* ■■

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