Carolyn Fawcett (1945-1999)

Carolyn Fawcett, General English-Language Book Selector, died unexpectedly on November 10, 1999. On December 9, a memorial service was held in the Widener Rotunda. After opening remarks by Nancy Cline, Roy E. Larsen Librarian of the Harvard College Library, friends of Carolyn from within Harvard’s libraries and beyond stood to offer their reminiscences. Those who attended the service also received a booklet in which Ray Lum and Charles Fineman had compiled the tributes of still more friends and colleagues touched by Carolyn professionally and personally. The spoken tributes are printed below, followed by the text of the booklet. —Editor.

Nancy Cline, Roy E. Larsen Librarian of the Harvard College Library:
Today is a special time for Carolin’s friends, co-workers, colleagues from many parts of her life to pause and reflect on what she has given to each of us, and upon the legacy that she quietly bestowed upon Harvard in the exceptional collections that grew from her expertise. . . .

Carolyn was in many ways a very private person—but she was also a giving person. Her relationships with people throughout Harvard—and beyond Harvard—were richly faceted. Carolyn’s death leaves a great void. For those whom, she taught, those whom she guided as apprentices, those for whom she opened doors into the special realms of bibliography, book selection, and acquisition, vendor relationships, and the like—there are now new expectations that you will carry forward without her. For the many to whom she provided service— in terms of acquiring that was needed, or “sleuthing” to identify an elusive item for your research—we must all, suddenly, adjust to the loss of her knowledge, her special insight, her way of cutting through to the heart of a problem and solving it. . . .

I invite you to think of the contributions that Carolyn made—many of which are intangible but are evident in personal development and in the impact she has had with faculty and students—but others that are tangible: imagine, the next time you walk through Widener’s stacks, that each book that Carolyn acquired for us would somehow be evident, would carry some evidence of her selection. We would see, laced throughout the literature, history, philosophy,
social sciences, religion, through nearly all the subjects, hundreds and thou-
sands of those selections that she has made in the past thirty years.

In the decades, perhaps even the centuries that lie ahead, there will be many
people who will discover these materials . . . there will be many more whose
lives will be touched by her work.

Raymond Lum, Asian Bibliographer in the College Library:
When I came to Widener as Asian Bibliographer in 1976, I came armed with a
library degree, a couple of degrees in Asian studies, and four years' experience
using Widener as a graduate student. But I hadn't a clue how to do my job. I
didn't know how the library ordered books; I didn't know which funds to use;
we had no catalogs, no vendors, few contacts. On my first day, I was finished
by 9:15. My second day was twice as good: I dragged it out until 9:30.
Then, someone said to me, “Go ask Carolyn.” So I asked Carolyn. And the
next day, I asked Carolyn more questions. And I spent the next two-and-a-half
decades asking Carolyn. In the process, I gave her ample opportunity to throw
up her hands in despair and say, “What a dope!” But as far as I know, she never
did. That would not have been Carolyn. By answering my endless questions,
Carolyn taught me how to do my job. By the way she did hers, she taught me
what it means to be a professional.

She taught many of us. She touched many of us.
I cannot say that I knew Carolyn well. She was a very private person. But
that is not to say that Carolyn was cold and distant. Not at all. Some years ago,
when my beloved father died in Chicago and I was feeling very much alone, I
received from Carolyn a long letter that brought me much comfort. Carolyn
gave and gave. That was Carolyn.

Often in the past weeks I have jumped out of my chair to go ask Carolyn,
stopping on the stairs when I realized that she isn’t here. It is a tremendous loss.
In large measure, Collection Development revolved around Carolyn. We have
lost our pivot.

God bless you, Carolyn.

Michael McCormick, Professor of History, Harvard University:
Carolyn Fawcett’s life centered on this place, on Widener Library, even more
so than all of our lives center on this place. Carolyn has been snatched away
from it, from us, in her prime, without warning. But this place will never be
snatched away from Carolyn. We exist but briefly here, in Widener, on the
face of the earth. When we are confronted with the ultimate mystery, we, or
at least I cannot explain or understand. But if it is true that we continue to live
on in what we have done, for good or ill, then Carolyn continues to live, and
will continue to live and shape our lives, our students’ lives, and our students’
students’ lives. That is one of the quiet pleasures of the scholarly life, to con-
tribute to a human community of ideas and thoughts that stretches far back-
ward into time, and forward into the indefinite future. Carolyn has conquered
a place in that community by her enduring work in building its very basis.

All of us who work here in Widener Library know what a privilege it is. We
sometimes groan under it, but we appreciate it nonetheless. It is a privilege
because of its preeminence: the number, range, and plain excellence of the selection of materials, print and otherwise. Deans and benefactors procure the wherewithal, students and professors use the results, but the people who make excellence a reality are the learned librarians of this University. The reason Widener is excellent is Carolyn Fawcett; the reason Widener is excellent is the Carolyn Fawcett in each of us: that quiet, unrelenting and determined drive to excell, to make this great house of learning greater still.

Carolyn Fawcett’s achievement will last a very long time. In that sense we have not lost her at all. The memory of my lectures and books will fade. The achievement that is this Library, and its British holdings in particular, will endure as long as this University, and this great and unique Library, endure, as long as there are lovers of learning. In this Library’s late 20th century holdings, astute scholars in generations to come will see, immediately, that a special intelligence, a special drive, a special force built the British collection. The name of that special force is, and always will be Carolyn Fawcett. My friends, learned librarians and lovers of this Library, I thank Carolyn Fawcett. I will thank her and bless her name every time I open a book acquired in her brilliant, astounding, untiring tenure. Thank you Carolyn. And thank you, my friends, for the Carolyn Fawcett in each of you.

_June Rutkowski, Team Leader, Serials Records, Widener Library:_

So, this is something I never thought I would be doing: standing here, in a place that Carolyn loved, a place to which she gave so much of herself, talking about her in the past tense. I wish we were gathered to celebrate her retirement, instead of to mourn her death.

Not many people here today can say that they knew Carolyn very well or that they were close to her personally. Many of you had the opportunity to work with her at some point during her 29 years here. And most of us know that she touched our lives in some special way. I’m speaking to you today as one of the lucky ones. I had the good fortune to work for Carolyn for 9 years, as one of her bibliographic assistants. It was my first job in a library. I remember that I was struck by three things during the job interview: Carolyn’s beautiful collection of art postcards, her stated belief in self-empowerment for her staff, and her love of Widener Library. Several times during the brief interview she said, “This is a wonderful library!”

She was right, of course. Widener is a wonderful library, in large part because of the intelligence, commitment, focus, care and integrity that Carolyn brought to her work here. I can’t cite any statistics to support the claim that her contribution to the Library’s collections was magnificent, that she put tremendous effort into building and maintaining the collections; but I know from watching her work that these statements are true.

As my supervisor, Carolyn was the greatest. She treated me and all of her assistants with respect and trust. She allowed us the flexibility to attend classes, participate in musical groups, train for athletic events, accept internships; to travel, to do research and to write. In a four-year period, with her support and encouragement, three of her assistants earned a total of four advanced degrees.

Carolyn appreciated our contributions to her section and to the Library. She thanked us regularly: with lovely gifts at Christmas time, cakes on our birthdays,
and a random “Thank-you” for a job well-done. Frequently, a co-worker and I would thank our lucky stars and say to each other, that of all the supervisors in Widener, Carolyn was the best.

In these few weeks since her death, I have been moved by the stories colleagues have told about how Carolyn touched their lives. She often asked about your daughter or son, your first grand-child or your grand-son who was ill. She ran out and bought gifts for your newborn twin nephews, and for their mother. She came to hear you sing in a concert, and bought a copy of the CD you recorded in your spare time. “How is your new job going?” “How is your new house?” “Do you like your new apartment?” she asked.

She gladly ordered a book that you suggested for the collection. She listened to your family troubles and advised you on how to deal with problems at work. You had similar tastes in art or music. She rushed to the Harvard Book Store to fulfill a patron’s request for a book the library did not have. She wrote a glowing recommendation for you for graduate school. You shared a love for England, or Italy, or fine handmade sweaters. You feel a spiritual and moral void, now that she is gone. You never talked with her, but she always smiled and nodded when you passed each other in the hallway. You worked together for 29 years.

Carolyn made us feel that she respected us and cared about us as people. What could be more simple, pure and wonderful than that? Our memories of her are priceless. I encourage you to give yours the care they deserve. I certainly will.

Harvard and the College Library are richer for the years Carolyn spent here; but we, her colleagues and co-workers, are blessed that she gave so much of herself, in so many small ways, to us.

Robert S. Cohen, Professor of Physics and Philosophy, Boston University:
I met Carolyn in Moscow in 1971, not in Boston or Cambridge. There was a major international meeting on the history of science, Carolyn’s first subject responsibility at the Widener system and an intellectual hobby of mine at the Boston University Center for Philosophy and History of Science. But mainly, still in Cold War time, there was Moscow to explore, and later Leningrad.
Friendship with Carolyn, trust and curiosity and intelligence, was so easy, as all who knew her will recognize. For me, the meeting sessions were fascinating, the corridor and café discussions, too, the city and the museums and the Russian scholars and all the others from the Soviet Union and the world beyond, and for Carolyn too. Her education was superb, and she had absorbed so much from her time after Radcliffe in the years at Oxford and Florence.

We collaborated for years, each apart from regular tasks. She was a superb stylist, and she was a splendid translator with impeccable attention to content and a devotion to not improving the original in the English translation: faithful to ambiguity, I told her, admiring it.

Her now classic translation of the great work in the history of medicine by Georges Canguilhem, On the Normal and the Pathological (1978), with a preface by Professor Everett Mendelsohn and a very special introduction by Michel Foucault, was later republished by Zone Books (via MIT Press). I will hint at how she helped me with languages in the series entitled Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science by a few examples. Italian Studies in
Philosophy of Science, one of her fluent contributions; our joint revision of the
Polish Studies volumes, one on the natural sciences, another on social sciences;
herself skillfully edited revision of a poor draft of a translation of Karel Berha's
book Measurement from the Czech.

She translated as well two wonderful Russian works. The first was Nobel
Prize-winning physicist Peter Kapitza's lovely, insightful volume of essays enti-
tled Experiment, Theory, Practice. We received a fine note of congratulations from
Kapitza for Carolyn's translation (and he had spent many years in the other
Cambridge and was a master of British English); she had worked with a rather
poor draft and a very large Russian-English dictionary, with me at her side as
both critic and source. The other Russian book was Boris Kuznetsov's deeply
meditative work of philosophy, Reason and Being, which Carolyn edited.
Kuznetsov loved Paris above all, through his long life in Russia and later with
travels to France, and dear Carolyn showed her sensitivity to the esthetic as much
as to the scientific and philosophic in this book.

Her German was also very fine, and we worked together on my edition of
Otto Neurath's Philosophical Papers. She was my very helpful co-editor of a
Festschrift for the American philosopher of science Adolf Grünbaum, ranging
through physics and psychoanalysis. She was the stalwart editor and, partly,
translator of our volume Hegel and the Sciences. There were many more, and all
done with pleasure over the subject matter, over the happy detective chase for
the right phrase. And I knew little, really nothing, of her work at the Harvard
College Library, except to press her a bit for bibliographical help.

To my mind, Carolyn was a humanist, a skeptic, a woman of reason and music
and art, and of great good humor and beauty. Perhaps one personal story will
stay always in memory. We were in Leningrad, and I was taken ill at the hotel.
Carolyn came to see how I was being treated. She remonstrated to the doctor
that his search for drug injection on my arms was not proper, because I was an
American professor and not a hippy. So we were brought to a district hospital,
and my fever went up, along with other miseries. I was quite involved with the
Great Leningrad Parasite, so we and the doctor thought. The fine Russian doc-
tor spoke no non-Russian language; the place was nearly empty in summer vaca-
tion time, but there was a kind of Gray Lady, a volunteer assistant of older years,
who knew German. She told us a little of her story; Carolyn and I did our best
through our German to follow her. She had lived in Leningrad throughout the
years of the siege in the Second World War, in the course of which she lost her
husband and her two sons. But why German? Why the language of those who
responsible for their deaths? How did the Gray Lady know it? Those German
prisoners, she told us, they were also sons, also still boys; someone had to talk to
them, not simply interrogate them, just talk to them, simply be with them. So
she chose to learn German. It was the only time that I saw my beloved, cool,
skeptical Carolyn weep. And I too.

From time to time, back in Boston, we walked in a park, and she played with
our daughter, and my wife and I were happy to share some of Carolyn's time.
Once when I was with her I saw a raccoon, and she noticed it happily. Through
difficult or happy times, she stayed with her advice to me, "through thick and thin,"
a cliché she matched with her favorite phrase, "This too will pass." And so she did.

I adapt some words from my friend Erazim Kohak: The fulfillment of time
Carolyn once described her work as “the cumulation of attention to myriad small details, hardly rocket science, but, over time, I think that the results are significant.” Many are the library users who delight in those significant results, whose scholarly lives are made easier and calmer because of Carolyn’s attention to the myriad little details.

It was somewhat improbable that Carolyn would find her career in Widener Library, just across the Yard from Radcliffe, where she received her B.A. degree in 1945. From Radcliffe, she went on to Florence as a Fulbright Fellow for two years, and from there she progressed to England, where she received her B.Phil. from Oxford University in 1969. Along the way, she also was named a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, but was not able to accept that award. Instead of returning to her native Washington, D.C., where she had been born on 23 May 1944, she tied her future to Widener and Harvard.

Her library science degree from Simmons College, supported by her experience, enthusiasm, and solid education, led to her appointment as Bibliographer of the History of Science in the University Library in 1970. Only three years later she became Selection Specialist in the College Library, rising rapidly to the position of General English Language Book Selector for all English-speaking countries. All of them. As one of the senior bibliographers in Widener, Carolyn mentored new staff and young graduate students alike.

Those who lined up at Carolyn’s desk for advice on myriad topics ranged from freshmen to Nobel Laureates, because all knew that Carolyn had the answers and would give them freely. No person was too minor, no question was too facile for Carolyn. Some years ago Barbara Halporn, Head of Collection Development, described Carolyn as “the key person in building the Widener collections. It can be said unequivocally that the library and the Harvard community would be much the poorer without her long and dedicated service.”

Carolyn’s friend and closest colleague, Nat Bunker, Warren Bibliographer for Americana, shared these memories:

> For almost thirty years, I worked with Carolyn in Collection Development. She was my partner and, most importantly, my friend. I marveled at the quantity of work she accomplished as she added to the library several hundred thousand books of interest to Harvard scholars and students. She also found time to review an endless succession of gift books, to take on her share of massive library projects, and to pursue the time-consuming negotiations needed to acquire microfilmed copies of manuscripts and newspaper files requested by faculty and students.
Carolyn often referred to herself, with justifiable pride, as a “full service” book selector. And no one who remembers her dashing to D-North to retrieve an uncatologued book for a professor or hurrying to the Harvard Bookstore to purchase an urgently-needed book for a student or library colleague will ever think of her as anything else. Carolyn would always stop whatever she was doing to answer a question, clarify a procedure, expedite a book order or do whatever was necessary to satisfy the person seeking her help.

But Carolyn’s sense of “full service” went far beyond collection building and other library matters. To all, she offered her friendship and understanding, and she tirelessly gave support to those of us who, in time of personal difficulty, needed her to hear our problems, to console us in our grief, and to lift our spirits with her wonderful humor. In the language of the day, Carolyn was always there.

And when she was there no more, it seemed to her friends as if some breakdown in the natural order of things had taken place, as if the sun had somehow failed to rise, so accustomed had we become to her constant presence in our lives. In shock, we could only pause to share with each other memories of her goodness, and to ask: who will help me, listen to me, laugh with me now?

Bernard Bailyn, Adams University Professor Emeritus recalled Carolyn’s “perfect radar” and service to scholarship:

Carolyn Fawcett went so far beyond her duties in a broad area of acquisitions that she became a colleague over the years on all sorts of problems of bibliography, availability of materials, searches, and the mobilization of library resources. She had some kind of perfect radar for knowing where everything was, should be, or would be, and she was efficient to a remarkable degree. Above all, she was fun to work with. For many years, I would insist, in view of some small item I had spent hours looking for, that Widener was simply an empty shell, a mere set of walls and shelves with nothing in it, to which she would respond by instantly, and apparently effortlessly, locating the thing, saying nothing, but raising an eyebrow. She was charming, always agreeable, and efficient beyond any expectation. For people doing research in any of the areas she handled so wonderfully well, the Harvard College Library will never be the same without her.”

Carolyn’s unfailing cheerfulness and commitment were legend, and were particularly appreciated by Richard Thomas, Professor of Greek and Latin, who worked closely with her:

Widener, as we have all felt in the past days, will not be the same without Carolyn. Her cheerful presence, her incomparable critical judgment, and her uncompromising commitment to building and maintaining this great research collection—these are qualities that Widener, and Harvard, can ill afford to lose. And with the loss of Carolyn we have indeed lost much, on the human and personal level as on the professional. Carolyn knew that what she did mattered, she understood her place in the tradition that she
inherited from the great Harvard librarians who have served, silently and outside the spotlight, in the mission of providing Harvard’s researchers, student and faculty alike, with the resource that has made this building the place in which we most hunger to spend our time. Widener will indeed not be the same, but there is comfort in another reflection: Widener would not be what it is today had we not been so blessed and privileged that this wonderful person chose to devote her life to our library. It remains for all of us, as we continue in our work in this special place for which Carolyn did so much, to keep her selfless example before us.

Perhaps what touched people as much as Carolyn’s dedication to the library was her concern for people, expressed here in the words of James Engell, Professor of English and Comparative Literature:

Carolyn cared about books, ideas, and people, and for her there was no priority among these, because they each implied and involved the others. All of them she advanced, fostered, and helped in the place that provided a roof for them all—Widener. Not only was her spirit ubiquitous, she herself seemed to be as well: in books, ideas, and people, and making them—and the institution she loved—better, more intelligent, more complete, more humane. I felt privileged and lucky to be able to turn to her on matters of acquiring books or getting advice on which ones to acquire, on consulting about our departmental library, about improving the collection in British literature, culling and strengthening it. How one person could have had all those talents is hard to imagine. She did. To lose her is really a multiple loss. We, and even those who come after us years from now, shall always remain indebted to her.

Respect was something that Carolyn returned in kind. Her selfless approach engendered affection and helped launch careers, as recounted by June Rutkowski, Serial Records Librarian:

My first job out of college was as a bibliographic assistant for Carolyn. I worked for her for 9 years. During this period she gave me, and all of her assistants, encouragement and freedom to explore career options and enjoy our personal lives. She treated us with respect and easily won our affection and loyalty. She was a dear person and an exceptional role model: professionally, through her commitment to HCL’s collections and patrons; and personally, through her kindness, generosity, good humor, and integrity.

Mark Kishlansky, Frank B. Baird, Jr., Professor of History and Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, found in Carolyn a kind of librarian like none he had known before. He wrote:

When I first met Carolyn Fawcett, she asked me what I was working on and how she could help. Both questions startled me. I had come from a university in which librarians and professors fought a cold war over shrinking budgets and competing priorities. Whatever the state of her budget, Carolyn always led me to believe that my priorities were hers. We had many conversations in her crowded work space about new media, which projects were worth purchasing, what should be rushed and what waited for. She
also took an interest in my students and was remarkably helpful to a number of them when microfilm purchases meant all the difference between a completed and a languishing dissertation. She was unfailingly helpful, kind, competent, cheerful, courteous, and professional. Indeed, if I had one word to apply, that would be it—unfailing.

The way Carolyn worked, and the impact that had on the collections, is illustrated by the comments of Michael McCormick, Professor of History:

Carolyn Fawcett was a rock. Quiet, unobtrusive—until she perceived some threat to the collections—and solid to the core, she was utterly dedicated to making the Widener collection of British materials remarkable even to those of us who are privileged to use it daily. On this rock, scholars of this and successive generations will build with confidence and gratitude. They can be sure that they will have all that imaginative, resourceful and searching scrutiny could discover and obtain. It is a tragedy for us all, and for those future scholars, that her years were not longer.

Friends and colleagues have established a book fund in Carolyn’s memory. Contributions to the fund may be made to: Harvard College Library, c/o Office of the Librarian, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138