



## Among Harvard's Libraries: About this issue (Harvard Library Bulletin, Volume 6.2)

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## Among Harvard's Libraries

### ABOUT THIS ISSUE

A hundred years ago, more or less, that is in 1899, the Harvard Library acquired one of its great treasures, the collection formed by Count Paul Riant on the Latin East and the Crusades. In addition to increasing Harvard's holdings of incunabula from 200 to more than 300, the collection was rich in books of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, while at the same time it had virtually comprehensive holdings of the scholarly literature of the nineteenth-century. The Riant collection found a good home, for Harvard long has been and continues to be a center of medieval studies.

The force behind acquisition of the collection was Archibald Cary Coolidge, professor of history. Since Coolidge had a special interest in Turkey, the Riant collection made it possible for Coolidge and his students to have at hand a crucial body of the relevant early literature.

The account of the Riant purchase in this issue results from the effort of James E. Walsh to provide a brief history of Harvard's collection of incunabula in volume 5 of his *A Catalogue of the Fifteenth-Century Printed Books in the Harvard University Library*; volumes 1–3 have been appearing since 1991, with volume 4 expected soon. They are published under the imprint of Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, the publishing program of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies at the State University of New York at Binghamton. By agreement with the publisher of the *Catalogue*, we are pleased to publish this account of the purchase of the Riant collection.

The price of the collection, even without doing the calculations to convert francs and dollars of 1900 into 1995 dollars, is, of course, so low as to make one nostalgic for an earlier era. Yet, Mr. Walsh's research in the Harvard University Archives also shows that it was no easy matter to come by the necessary funds.

The College Library itself could not have afforded to buy this collection, which was about 25 percent of Harvard's total acquisition budget in 1899–1900. The purchase came about, instead, through deal-making between two different faculty libraries and different donors, stimulated by Archibald Cary Coolidge placing a large pot of money on the table. What happened in 1899 is analogous to what occurs today in the decision-making about purchase of large electronic databases. One of the ways in which decentralization can be positive is that it encourages drawing on funds from different sources. The story of the Riant collection is of more than antiquarian interest, and it, as well as the other pieces in this issue, are unusual in the extent to which they further understanding of research libraries and of the Harvard Library in particular.

Mr. Walsh's account of the Riant purchase also draws attention to the internationalization of the collections, a process that accelerated at the end of the nineteenth century and for which Archibald Cary Coolidge was so largely responsible. The account of recent ceremonies honoring Coolidge for his role in shaping the fate of the Austrian province of Carinthia points up that Coolidge was a precursor of the many Harvard faculty members of today who help to make Harvard an international university, and it suggests the tie between an international university and library collections of the widest possible scope.

Yet another essay in this issue, by Menahem Schmelzer, touches on the internationalization of the collections furthered by the building of a great collection of Judaica, a body of literature that is itself international, because it contains imprints from around the world. The focus of Professor Schmelzer's essay, originally a lecture, is, however, less the collection than its catalog of Hebrew books, though the two are related. It is the collection that contributes to making the catalog a significant contribution to Jewish studies for scholars both at Harvard and beyond, since the Judaica Division's coverage of material of

all sorts from Israel is so extraordinarily complete. Professor Schmelzer points out, though, that it is also the nature of the catalog that gives it importance. Inspired collection building and intelligent use of the latest technology to provide access both go hand in hand in making the Judaica Division an international influence in Jewish studies.

Professor Schmelzer's essay deserves wide readership for its clear articulation of the variety of goals that have been behind bibliographies and catalogs of Hebrew books and have shaped their content and form. He makes, by implication, the point that bibliographical work is never value free. To ignore that is itself to insert values into the making of bibliographies and catalogs, including, of course, electronic catalogs.

I almost wrote that "Professor Schmelzer's essay deserves readers outside the specialized field of Jewish studies." Then, I caught myself. If I were Ann Landers, the punishment would be forty lashes with a wet noodle. To consign any geographic area or any language to "speciality" status is to give to it a degree of marginality. To be sure, non-roman alphabets and writing systems generally mean a separate department or division of a library, but that itself does not mean the material is "specialized." Or, no more specialized than other material. Individual librarians, particular scholars, have a speciality, but the material itself, the discipline, is not inherently specialized. Of course, a library must make choices, but it is desirable that they be conscious, uninfluenced by a term that, though neutral on the surface, carries with it negative connotations.

A totally different aspect of the Harvard Library is represented by Jerome Rubin's description of the News in the Future Program. This fascinating account, initially a talk at a meeting of the Overseers' Committee to Visit the Library, concretely points up that the Library must continue to keep abreast of technological developments, for they will one day affect methodologies of scholarship and the Library's role.

The final part of "Among Harvard's Libraries" is a notice about the establishment of two endowed book funds by a librarian in Widener. In a sense it brings full circle the first essay about the Riant collection, whose acquisition was made possible by a man who later became director of the University Library. Michael Olson's tangible gift is a sign that the Harvard Library can continue to draw forth unusual commitment from those who daily work within its walls.

Although there is space in this issue for only one traditional scholarly article, it is a notable one. About African American literary societies in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is also a symbol that the Harvard Library can support scholarship on all aspects of American society, just as it can on most of the nations around the world. Elizabeth McHenry's beautifully researched work will long continue to enrich specialists in African American studies, in American literature, the history of the book, and the history of American libraries, but at the same it constitutes one of those rare scholarly studies that will draw forth an emotional response from readers.

*Kenneth E. Carpenter*