The Farnsworth Room, 1916-1947

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NOTES

The Farnsworth Room: 1916-1946

For a generation of undergraduates succeeding to the facilities and tobacco-comfort of seven House Libraries, it may be difficult to imagine the green oasis which the Farnsworth Room was to the pre- and postwar generation of twenty-five or thirty years ago. It was the one room to which most of us turned in a free hour to read certain books we had long wanted to read or (more important) to discover others which we well might not have discovered otherwise in that particular atraium of our lives, if ever. The simple rules regulating one's department within the room were not entirely to its full advantage, and they stemmed from a scholastic discipline which the youth of today would not understand. There was no smoking, no sprawling, no notetaking—even for pleasure, no genial informality. Such liberties, of course, were not dreamed of by frequenters. We entered, a pleasant Victorian haze enveloped us, and we read as in a world apart. Mrs Florence Milner—helpful, patient, informed; ready with appropriate answers—presided at her little desk. It was she who edited and introduced a valuable catalogue of the Farnsworth Room, published under the imprint of the Harvard College Library in 1931, and she who is still identified in the minds of us charter readers with a quiet graciousness extended to the freshman on the threshold. A room of many debtors. Esto perpetuum!

The Farnsworth Room was opened the fifth of December 1916. That was just thirty years ago. In those thirty years it has passed from an experiment of unpredictable influence to an entity complete and unabridged. By 1931, according to Mrs. Milner, the room had served as a model for something like twenty-five similar rooms in both college and public libraries in the United States and Canada. How many other rooms have since been built in its image I do not know. Probably no small number.

With the completion of the Lamont Undergraduate Library in the not too distant future, the Farnsworth Room will have a fresh setting. In name and books and general physical character it will be transferred to the new building and reopened for the exclusive use of undergraduates. Supplemental to the House Libraries, the new Farnsworth Room will continue to cater to that need of the sequestered and adventurous which the House Libraries, in their more active and functional spheres, do not quite supply.

Meanwhile the Room remains in Widener, its door now open for the first time since 1943. Crowded as the academic schedule is at this writing, some five hundred to six hundred students are using the room each week, and the number is still rising.

The postwar opening has given the administrators an opportunity to take some stock of the books on the Farnsworth shelves; to see which ones might
be jettisoned, and for what reasons, and
to devise certain new categories of
books which would seem to belong in
a reading library of this sort. The
catalogue of 1931 is somewhat over-
conspicuous in sets occupying too
much shelf-footage to justify their col-
lective presence for the two or three
significant volumes which they each
contain. Thus a complete set of Tol-
stoi in 28 volumes, one of Bulwer
Lytton in 32 volumes, Scott in 48
volumes, and Purchas in 20 volumes
call for revaluation. The room will
probably retain but the principal works
of the three novelists—perhaps but
one of Lytton—and a selection of Pur-
chas. The fairly large shelf dealing
with the first World War seems, on
the whole, to have outlived its useful-
ness in this collection. Perhaps a dozen
of the books on it will remain. One or
two not there will be supplied: The
Spanish Farm Trilogy, Undertones of
War, All Our Yesterdays, for example.
Queer vacancies—no Hudson, no
W. W. Jacobs, no Owen Johnson—
will be filled. There will be a small
shelf of books on college and school-
boy life; and on childhood as in Lub-
bock’s Earlston and Frank Kendon’s
The Small Years, and in Goss’s im-
portant Feiber and Son. And another
on spectator sports such as baseball,
tennis, and the like; and one on sports
for solitary, such as fly fishing,
mountain climbing, riding, sailing, and
shooting. And one on the joys of
walking, and another on traveling.
Science for the layman will gather
books by Jeans, Haldane, Bradley’s
Parade of the Living, and kindred
titles.

1 The room needs, above all, a card cata-
logue by authors.

And then there will be a shelf for
hobbies, indoor and out—a reason-
able coverage—which will include books
in certain genial areas of the craftsman
and collector. The naturalists ought
to be together; and books like Tar-
ka the Otter, The Feet of the Furrie, Red
Fox, Wild Lone, White Fang, Solar the
Salmon, and Maeterlinck’s La Vie des
Abeilles, distinguishable as a group.
Regional books, with a selection of the
Rivers of America series and kindred
volumes, will have a place. The New
England playground and skiground—
the Berkshires, the two Caps, Maine,
New Hampshire, and Vermont—will
show their lakes, streams and valleys
and Appalachian strength in a selected
list from Frank Bolles and Walter
Prichard Eaton to Weygandt and
Odell Shepard, Samuel Chamberlain,
and the guide books themselves. Part
of a Harvard education is the private
mapping of the Northeast Coroner—
afoot, by car or bicycle, on skis, with
a rod, or in a white-water canoe. Here
the Southerner, Westerner, and Mid-
west man will find the cordial intro-
duction.

For all the atomic age, there will
be a shelf of Utopias, from More to
Hudson’s A Crystal Age, and a shelf
for a selection of the world’s great
letter-writers— to remind one of a
failing faculty. Art and music call for
segregation; and books on the dance
and the cinema. No man’s education is
in any sense rounded unless he has
learned to live in his own company; so
there will be a little shelf of loneliness,
to include such as The Private Papers
of Henry Ryecroft, The Outermost
House, Far Away and Long Ago,
Lonely Americans, and Richard Jefer-
ries’ The Story of My Heart. Embed-
Notes

Beyond a few anthologies and volumes in sets (such as Kipling and Emerson) there will be no poetry, since the Poetry Room is to be housed in the same building. But one will find a carefully selected harvest of light verse, supplementary to a shelf of humorous prose. Last of all, there will be some attempt to offer a representative handful of books about Harvard, factual and fictive; and a collateral shelf of books like Fulleylove and Thomas' Oxford, Downs' Cambridge Past and Present, and similar volumes surrendering the delights of Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, and sister institutions. Williams College, for example, might be reflected here in Carroll Perry's emerging classic, A Professor of Life.

It is not possible here to predict what the physical Farnsworth Room will look like under its new roof. It is my personal hope that it will carry over much of the essential atmosphere of its present state, that the shelves will be low enough to permit a changing list of prints, aquatints, etchings, watercolors, and such to form a casual meander along the top. In short, that it will, much more informally than it does now, truly represent the library of a cultivated person—a library to be remembered vividly by its visitors when they are dispersed in the world as young men entering a business or profession, and building libraries of their own. A time for any man to lay the foundations of his life's reading is in his later school days, his college or university years. If he has not acquired, by the time he is thirty, a few shelves of good and lasting books which for him are always 'home to the instant need of things,' he has neglected or lost not the least valuable part of his education. A small and reasonably rounded collection of books, such as those in the Farnsworth Room, can be both an example and a stimulus. It was that to many young men of my time, and it will surely be the same to many others in the complex days ahead.

David McCord
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