Ralph Waldo Emerson's report on the Harvard College Library

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Ralph Waldo Emerson's Report on the Harvard College Library

Edited by Kenneth E. Carpenter

In the year 1766, a committee of the Overseers (or Overseers and Corporation) began annually to visit the Library and to prepare a report. That for the year 1868 was different. It consisted of actual minutes of a meeting, plus a report. The reason for the unusual format is clear: some formal business had to be duly noted, but at the same time the chairman of the committee, William Gray,1 wanted to provide a forum for its most famous member. Thus, Ralph Waldo Emerson was asked to write the report. Emerson who became an overseer in 1867 continued to serve on the board until 1879. The year 1868 was, however, the only one during which he was a member of the Committee to Visit the Library.

Below are printed the minutes of the Committee, plus Emerson's Report. These documents are bound in a volume of Reports to the Overseers, Libraries Series, covering the years from 1859 to 1874.2 In transcribing them the conventions used in volume 16 of Emerson's Journals have been employed: ( ) = cancellation; ↑↓ = insertion; [ ] = editorial insertion; [ ] = marginal matter inserted in text; [ ] = Emerson's square brackets.

Minutes of the Committee

The Committee for the examination of the Library of Harvard College met at Gore Hall on Friday, the 7th of August, at 10 o'clock, A.m. the Hon. William Gray in the chair.

The Librarian, Mr Sibley, read his Annual Report. The Report of the Librarian elicited considerable discussion in connection with the subject of the present rules regulating the closing of the Library during the summer vacation. In this discussion nearly every member of the committee present took part. At its conclusion the following Resolution was unanimously adopted: “Resolved, as the sense of this meeting, that the Library of Harvard College should be kept open during the whole year, with the exception of Sundays & legal holidays and such time as is necessary to prepare for the annual examination.

Resolved, that any additional force that may be necessary to administer the Library agreeable to this end, should be provided.”

The chairman appointed sub-committees of two members, who repaired to the alcoves to make the usual examination of the books.

On reassembling the committees severally reported, that so far as they had examined they had found every thing correct & satisfactory.

Mr Hodges offered the following resolution, which was unanimously adopted. “Resolved, That the Committee on the Library feel that their obligations are due to the munificent donors of books and other valuable articles during the past & preceding years & they hereby, in their official capacity, most heartily express this feeling.”

Agreeable to a vote of the Committee the chairman appointed Mr Emerson to prepare the Annual Report of this Committee to the Board of Overseers.

Charles Deane
Secretary

[EMERSON’S REPORT]

The Committee have little to add to the Minutes of their meeting on August 7th taken by the Secretary.

After their adjournment, in obedience to their vote, application was made to the Council on the Library for any suggestions they might think proper to make for insertion in our Report. This letter was addressed to Rev. Dr. Walker, as his name appeared first on the list of names sent down from the Corporation to this Board for Confirmation.

Rev. Dr. Walker replied [Sept. 14.] by referring us to Rev. President Hill as the Chairman of the Council; adding that the President had spoken to the President on the subject of the vote, & learned that he proposed to call a meeting of the Council in a few days that it may be laid before them for their consideration. “If it be necessary,” continues Dr. Walker, “to finish your Report before that meeting takes place, I believe I may say, that we have nothing to communicate but the cry of the horseleech’s daughter. We are sadly in want of funds, & the want is the more keenly felt, as we have been spending pretty freely for some years Mr William Gray’s money, which is now exhausted.” On receiving this note, Rev. President Hill was written to addressed in a note of like purport, but no reply from him has been received.

It may be added to the brief record of the vote of the Committee on the Librarian’s Report, that, in considering the question, due regard was paid to the known fidelity & devotion of the Librarian to the interests of the Library & the College, & it was admitted that there were grounds for the sensibility expressed by him in his Report, at a confinement to his charge quite exceptional among the officers of the College. Yet the Committee also consider that the largest usefulness of the Library is the first point to be secured: And they adhere to the opinion that this would be seriously diminished by closing the Library for any length of time beyond that required for its annual examination. The privation to the public of closing the

5 John Langdon Sibley was librarian from 1841 to 1856. The library’s hours had become an issue during the 1850s. Sibley’s stance being that if longer hours were wanted, more staff should be provided.

4 See Prov. 30:15: “The horseleech hath two daughters, crying, Give, give.”
incrementally. But more than the alumni, she has even more seriously the scattered community of undiplomated scholars.
"No library is perfect until it has within its walls, besides men of that method & spirit of invention & activity, which the conservation & circulation of books require, a master of bibliography, and we must add certain moral qualifications. And whilst the Committee are not prepared at this day to recommend the addition to the University of a new Chair of a Professor of Books, they would be glad to secure it in some form."
Library could not be compensated; the inconvenience to the Librarian of keeping it open can be relieved by an addition to such addition to the present force as may allow him opportunity of reasonable absence from time to time.

The Librarian's Report sets forth anew the extreme poverty of the Library. The voice of the Council, it appears, seems, if we could hear it, would echo the Librarian's. It is the less necessary for this. The Committee entered on the details of this grief, unless we are prepared to offer counsel. It is the less necessary since an account of the a timely paper in the North American Review for the current month, which has treated the subject with great knowledge & good sense. The Committee will venture to add a single suggestion: In the perplexity in which the literary public now stands with regard to university education, whether instruction should be given by lectures of professors, or by private tutors; whether studies shall be compulsory or elective; whether the stress shall be laid on the Greek & Latin, or on the modern languages, whether on languages, or on the modern sciences; in this doubt, the one safe investment which all can agree to sustain & increase is the Library. For, whatever decision may be arrived at in these questions, books are sure to be wanted. A good book can wait for a reader a hundred years. Once lodged in the Library, it is inexpensive & harmless, whilst it waits. Then, it is a good of the most generous kind, not only serving the undergraduates, but much more the Alumni, & perhaps even more seriously the scattered community of undiplomated scholars.

No library is perfect until it has within its walls, besides men of that method & despatch & general prudence & activity which the conservation & the circulation of books requires, a master of bibliography, and we must add certain moral qualifications: And whilst the Committee are not prepared at this day to recommend the addition to the University of a new chair, of a Professor of Books, they would be glad to secure to it the contemplated advantage in some form.

The first use of a college library is to be irresistibly attractive to young men. In daily experience it is not so. Young men go in & then go out of it repelled by the multitude of books which only speak to them of their ignorance, their very multitude concealing from the gazing youth the one or the few volumes which are there waiting for him with the very information & leading he wants. Would some kind scholar take pity on his sincere curiosity, & by a little discreet [blank space for a word to be inserted] guide him to the class of works & presently to the precise author who has written as for him alone. Could not a gentleman be found to occupy a desk in Gore Hall as the Library Counsellor, to whom the Librarian could refer inquiries on authors & subjects? We are aware that such selection would be a delicate point, easy to miss, & that it requires a man of sympathy, a lover of books & of readers of books, to fulfil the design. Every one of us has probably known such persons, but it will commonly happen that they are of such condition or pre-engagements as not to be thought of as candidates.

The suggestion was made in conversation at the last meeting of the Committee but found such favor that it was directed to be embodied in the Report.

For the Committee.

R. W. Emerson.

October 24, 1868.

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3 Charles Anson Cutter, "Harvard College Library," North American Review (1868), 568-593. This article concluded: "The doors are now open longer, the use of the books facilitated by a better catalogue, both of authors and subjects, and by the personal assistance of a larger corps of attendants, than ever before, or than in any other college library in the country. Is it too much to ask of those who enjoy its privileges, that they do their part to augment its means of usefulness?"

4 President Hill had resigned in September, and the debates that led to the appointment of Charles William Eliot were underway. Emerson's statement of "one safe investment which all can agree to sustain & increase" reflects his attempts to direct the debate. See "A high ground above the party & passion." See The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 16:1866-1882, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Glen M. Johnson (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 98. Also, see the eighth page, with five lines on it. The report, which resumes at the top of the following page, is written in a somewhat different ink.
In putting forth the idea of a professorship of books, Emerson returned to an idea first stated two decades earlier. A lecture recommending such a professorship was reported in at least one English newspaper, the Nottingham Register in 1847. It was printed in American periodicals and then appeared in book form as "Books" in the volume of essays Society and Solitude in 1870. In it, Emerson wrote: "Meantime the colleges, whilst they provide us with libraries, furnish no professor of books; and I think no chair is so much wanted."10

An obvious connection also exists between this report and passages in Emerson's Journal NY, begun in March 1868 and used through late September or early October of 1870.11

The University wants a professor of reading.
A Shakspeare chair.
The University clings to us.
How important an educator has Scott been!

(P. 114)

Evils of the College—
It does not justify itself to the pupil.
It does not open its doors to him.
Balks him with petty delays & refusals.
The instructors are in false relations to the student.
Instead of an avenue, it is a barrier.
Let him find good advice, but of a wise man, sympathetic,

(P. 123)

Library

In the perplexity in which the literary public now stands with regard to College University education, whether it shall be compulsory or elective; whether by lectures of professors, or whether by private tutors; whether the study shall be on Latin & Greek, or on modern Sciences,—the one safe investment which all can agree to increase is the Library. It is a good book can wait for a reader hundreds of years. Once lodged in the Library, it is unexpensive & harmless whilst it waits. Then it is a good of the most generous kind, not only serving the students undergrades, of the college, but much more the Alumni, & probably much more still, the scattered community of scholars. (P. 130)

The above paragraph is clearly a preliminary version of a paragraph in the Report, for the Report reflects the changes made in the Journals text; it is also stylistically preferable.

The idea of a professorship of books may be related to a notebook Emerson kept during the 1870s titled Books Large.12 The notebook is not a list of reading done at the time. It is not a catalog of a portion of Emerson's library. It is a list covering a wide range of disciplines and subjects and cultures. Could it be a written record of what Emerson would have drawn on to advise students had he been without "pre-engagements" that prevented him from serving as the professor of books?

11 The Journals (note 8), p. 97. The three quotations are identified by page number of that volume.
Because "professor of books" was known from other writings, it has also played a role in American library history. First cited in 1876, the phrase has persisted in library literature; at least as recently as 1954 it was used as a chapter title in a book about public libraries. In at least three educational institutions, the librarian has even been officially a "professor of books."13

Perhaps this report's emphasis on use also exerted influence at Harvard: the man who in 1877 succeeded Sibley as librarian, Justin Winsor, emphasized the role of the library as a "workshop." Moreover, his policies were effective. In 1874-75, before he became librarian 57 percent of the students used the library; in 1887, after a decade of his tenure, the figure was 90 percent.

13 McMullen, "Ralph Waldo Emerson and Libraries" (note 10), 161.