



Among Harvard's Libraries: On the change in format; The HLB's new series

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Among Harvard's Libraries

ON THE CHANGE IN FORMAT

The last issue of the *Harvard Library Bulletin* contained a new section, Among Harvard's Libraries. The current issue begins a new format. No one is more surprised than the editor, who is not a risk taker in love with the idea of change. For him long historical precedent—forty years of the same size, of the same color cover—constitutes more a reason for continuing on the same course than for veering off it. In fact, the impetus did not come from the editor, but rather from the Managing Editor, Daniel J. Griffin, who had become keenly conscious of murmurings about the “drab, gray” appearance of the HLB.

As the person responsible for seeing the *Bulletin* through the press, Mr. Griffin had, long before assuming the title of Managing Editor, also become aware of technical problems presented by the design, for he had participated in the myriad decisions that make for a publication. Should this photo be turned on its side and run vertically? (“Never!” said he and his colleagues.) Should this photo be cropped? How about wrapping the text around this one? Would these look okay on the page together? What size should this one be? Is this picture really worth a full page? How do we get this table all on one page without blank space at the bottom of the preceding?

The increasing number of difficult decisions suggested that possibly the type and source of illustrations was changing. The HLB format was splendid for reproducing title pages and plates from earlier books, but we were seeing articles that called for printing photographs, and not ones from earlier books. That is not surprising. Since we have just celebrated the 150th anniversary of photography, we know that an ever growing chunk of history can be documented by photographs.

It also seemed that we were seeing more illustrated articles, especially exhibition catalogs, a type of publication that has become

fashionable in libraries. Also, those parts of the library with pictorial collections report ever increasing use. These trends promise to accelerate. A guide to photographic collections at Harvard was published in 1984, and the Photo Curators Group might well expand its charge to other types of pictorial materials, with the result of making them more accessible.

The spread of the personal computer has also affected publications such as the HLB. We now receive almost every paper on disk, and in the future the computer is likely to exert further influence on content, in part through easing the task of amassing and presenting statistical data. (Perhaps some readers recall using a typewriter and carbon paper to prepare multiple copies of a table.) Almost as if planned, we were given an opportunity to publish “The Sales of Louisa May Alcott's Books,” by Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy; its complex tables could not before have been presented as clearly. Recently the editor used the computer to produce for another journal a text and commentary on it in two columns. More columns could easily have been accommodated. In ordinary memos circulated around the library colleagues distribute graphs and charts that would formerly have required the services of an artist.

We came to feel reasonably confident that a new design for the HLB was a rational response to changes taking place around us, but we also know that readers want their books to look familiar. The earliest printers wanted books produced by the new technology to resemble the familiar manuscript codex, and we wanted the new HLB to include many elements of the familiar as well.

And so we met with individuals such as Jeanne Newlin, curator of the Harvard Theatre Collection, and also convened a group of thoughtful people who could be counted on to have opinions about design. The group consisted of Richard Wendorf, librarian of the Houghton Library; William Bentinck-Smith, honorary curator of type specimens and letter

design; Roger E. Stoddard, curator of rare books; Eleanor Garvey, Philip Hofer curator of printing and graphic arts; Joan Nordell, assistant director of the University Library for external affairs; and Nancy Finlay, assistant curator of printing and graphic arts. We dropped off in advance specimen pages of a new design.

We were not surprised to be met with strong opinions and specific suggestions: Could the design be changed so as to work equally well with articles consisting solely of text, the type that is the standby of every scholarly journal? Wasn't Bembo a better type face than the one we proposed to use? Could the gutter margin be enlarged and the outer margin be made smaller? Could the style of the footnotes and captions be improved? We listened as carefully as we could, incorporated most of the suggestions, and again asked our colleagues for comment. Once more, useful specific suggestions were made, though the overall design found favor. (A few more changes may be made, for a new design always requires breaking in.)

As the possibilities of the new format become clearer, we suspect that contributors will take advantage of them. We hope, though, that no one will be deterred from submitting a paper that is only text.

THE HLB'S NEW SERIES

This New Series begins with the Spring 1990 issue. The old series ended with volume 36, no. 4, Fall 1988. No HLB dated 1989 will be produced.

ANONYMITY OF AMONG HARVARD'S LIBRARIES

Whether or not to sign the first installment of *Among Harvard's Libraries* was not consciously decided. Probably, though, if the issue had surfaced, a choice not to sign would have been the outcome. After all, an editor's name appears in print sufficiently often that that magical quality accompanying one's first appearances has long since disappeared. Not to sign also has the positive advantage of promoting a public persona of modesty, should anyone notice. After the last issue, two people did notice, both women. One, a feminist theorist of my long acquaintance, argued that the absence of a signature, far from making a modest statement, arrogates to one's words an aura of general truth, or at least an air of being an institutional statement. The reason is that anonymity, save in special cases, keeps the focus

on the words rather than the writer, which is one reason authors have chosen anonymity, as Archer Taylor and Fredric J. Mosher note in *The Bibliographical History of Anonyma and Pseudonyma* (1951). Feminist scholarship turns that virtue on its head, through emphasizing the close relationship between gender, class, race, etc. and the products of one's pen. The editor will henceforth sign *Among Harvard's Libraries*.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

J. R. Hall on William G. Medlicott (1816-1883)

Intact private libraries tend to stimulate descriptions of the collector's accomplishment, whereas the dispersal of a library is a sad story whose telling delights no one. Such an account can, however, be a fascinating contribution to the cultural history of an era, in one respect more telling than an account of the library's creation. The collecting is, after all, carried out from among a world of possibilities, whereas buyers at the sale of a collection have concrete, visible choices to make. In J. R. Hall's account of the Medlicott library, we learn of those selections, and also of the struggle of Medlicott and his heirs to sell important books and manuscripts. Each institution bought only a small group of material. No broad-ranging collection-development policies there. Instead, the Medlicott collection presented a special opportunity that was perceived and pursued only if an institution were lucky enough to have a particular individual who acted as advocate. From our perspective it can seem odd that no institution stepped forward to buy the entire collection. Had Medlicott's library been for sale in the several decades after 1890, the time when Archibald Cary Coolidge was involved with the library, Harvard might well have purchased it in toto. After World War II, a number of American libraries would surely have competed for it.

In contrast to 1878 or to the post-war era, libraries today concentrate on building collections of current material along lines carefully mapped out by collection-development policies. Our model is of individuals going through national bibliographies and making decisions about whether to buy, one after another, each choice shaped by a written policy document.

The period before 1878 also provides a contrast. The Harvard Library then bought little but pleaded mightily for gifts. At times the collection grew almost solely through gifts, as in 1869-1870 in the College Library: 197 pur-

chases, 1,323 gifts. Or, at best, gifts were a much higher proportion of the total additions, as in 1877-1878: 5,566 purchases, 2,796 gifts.

Perhaps in these changing patterns of collection growth lies the clue to the significance of the Medlicott purchase to Harvard. That the purchase was important is clear from its being noted in the 1912 *Descriptive and Historical Notes on the Library of Harvard University* as one of the major events in the library's history. But objectively the purchase was not that important. Certainly not in size. In 1878 Harvard acquired from Medlicott only 252 lots (about 400 volumes) out of the total of 3,667 lots (4,200 titles; 6,950 volumes). Not in the proportion of the Medlicott purchase to total acquisitions that year. It was only about 400 volumes among 5,566 purchases during the year 1877-1878 (the year ran from 27 September 1877 to 26 September 1878). Not in extraordinary quality either. Thus, it seems bizarre that the purchase should have been given such prominence. It must have represented or signified something.

One can speculate that it represented, from the vantage point of 1912, a transition. Since the Medlicott purchase was of research material, all from one source, a collection within a collection, it may have represented a major signpost along the road toward forming—by research collection after research collection—an internationally renowned library in Cambridge, Massachusetts. William Medlicott may have given the Harvard Library a shove forward.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Visiting Committee Report of 1868

In the University Archives in Pusey Library, in a volume of reports to the Overseers, is a document that stands out from the others in its authorship and content. It is by Ralph Waldo Emerson and is his extended statement about the desirability of a "professor of books," someone in the library who could, from among the "multitude of books," guide a student to the right one, the book that provides "leading." Emerson is, of course, a good ally to have, and American librarians have used his idea, first expressed in the 1840s, to affirm the importance of librarianship. Cited since 1876—the year of founding of the American Library Association—the idea has also been employed to foster an emphasis on furthering use, a characteristic of American librarianship that has been one of its great glories.

No longer, though, can American librarians employ Emerson's concept of a "professor of books" as did their predecessors. The garb in which the concept appears is part of the problem: "The first use of a College library is to be irresistibly attractive to young men." Also, embedded in the statement is the problematic expression that "once lodged in the Library," a book "is unexpensive & harmless," a sentence that many, especially deans and library administrators, would find woefully lacking in realism.

More importantly, the issue of use has changed, there being more faces to it, many of which loom larger than that of bringing the student and the right book together. Books are still everywhere at Harvard—in some fifty buildings—but not all of Harvard's books are as readily available as formerly. Size inevitably reduces access, and other reductions are perhaps equally unavoidable, because of the need for enhanced security, for coping with space shortages, and for preserving texts of books on deteriorated paper. The growing body of electronic materials and the increasing demand for them also raise new issues, which the library is facing. A recent study, undertaken with support from the Council on Library Resources and the Harvard Business School, was published in April as *Electronic Materials in College and University Libraries: Notes on Practice from Harvard University and Selected Other Institutions*.

Yet, the student-librarian personal connection does remain, even if in a different form from that envisaged by Emerson. It is probably rare today—as earlier—that the librarian provides the very book that gives a student the "leading" wanted, an expression conjuring up a sense of the right book at the right time to shape a student's life. No longer do we believe that the librarian can or should do that. Instead, the librarian usually helps the student in learning to use the library, in obtaining access to a database, or in locating a piece of information in the appropriate reference work. But at times, the library, through its collections and staff, can serve the student in a way similar to that envisioned for the professor of books. The librarian can help a student experience the joy of discovery, which might be accompanied by a feeling of awe in the face of the tangible record of other lives or the creation of another mind. That possibility particularly exists in this library, so rich in the old, the rare, the beautiful, the historical.

Kenneth E. Carpenter