



Among Harvard's Libraries: About this issue (Harvard Library Bulletin, Volume 1.2)

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Among Harvard's Libraries

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This section, Among Harvard's Libraries, contains two very different essays about library collections and library use by scholars. The articles are timely, for change is occurring in libraries here and abroad, requiring that librarians and scholars attempt to perceive as clearly as possible the issues and options. One paper reports on a conference of scholars, most of whom use what are thought to be "nontraditional" research materials. In the other essay, three scholars (one a librarian) tell of their quest for sources at Harvard on a nontraditional scholarly subject: food. They find here riches, many that the conference participants would term "nontraditional" sources: "images, including photographs . . . popular literature, even advertising and other forms of ephemera . . . and virtually anything else that might reflect the attitudes, activities, and culture of society." The scholars working on food locate photographs, bookplates, postcards, trade cards, sheet music, diaries, cookbooks. In fact, they and the conference scholars find so much in libraries that one wants to ask, "Nontraditional to whom?" The answer is that such sources are nontraditional to researchers, not to those who have formed our libraries.

A librarian at Harvard from 1841 to 1877, John Langdon Sibley, is the author of the oft-quoted statement, distributed in a circular to all alumni at the Commencement dinner of 1856, that it would be well if it were generally known that the library would welcome a copy of every book, map, or pamphlet written or published in the United States, or pertaining to America. In fact, Sibley was at odds with the faculty and with the head librarian under whom he worked from 1841 to 1856 over his collecting of such material

as directories, school books, city and state documents. In response to those who said that he only "lumbered up the Library," Sibley wrote, "What is trash to me may be the part of the Library which will be the most valuable to another person." It was Sibley, acting alone on his own instincts, not in response to the Harvard faculty's needs of the time, who gathered much on our shelves that is now prized, women's magazines included.

Sibley was not unique among those who formed great libraries. Frederic De Peyster, president of the New York Historical Society, in an address delivered in 1865 and published as *The Moral and Intellectual Influence of Libraries upon Social Progress* (New York, 1866), stated, "There is danger . . . that we shall not have any adequate idea of the importance of collecting and preserving books, apparently the most worthless, as well as those which have vindicated their claim to be regarded as standard works. We may admit that the works of the great poets, philosophers and statesmen of the world should be preserved in all our libraries, but we may not unreasonably inquire of what possible use it can be to perpetuate the existence of that which is evidently utterly unworthy to exist?"

De Peyster spelled out his reasons. Two he passed over quickly: the possibility of there being among the apparently worthless a fact that it may be useful at some point to know, and the possibility of being wrong as to what is pronounced worthless. He focused instead on the utility of the seemingly worthless: "In estimating the effects of various systems, social, political or intellectual, upon the mind or character, the discovery of some obscure pamphlet, written under certain influences which may be under consideration, will oftentimes prove a very important witness,

and throw unexpected light upon the question involved." He cited H. T. Buckle's *History of Civilisation in England* (1857), as showing that "upon . . . evidence . . . collected from the most obscure sources, the character of epochs is in a great measure determined." Put differently, De Peyster is saying that libraries need to make it possible for historians to study the history of *mentalités*, of ideologies, of those patterns of feeling and thinking—different from era to era—that are so much a part of the very make-up of a culture as to be unconscious and not directly expressed in its major works.

De Peyster also was aware that the writings of individuals are shaped by widely diverse influences. Even the "intuition of genius" is not enough. A Shakespeare or Goethe, far from being isolated, drew on numerous aspects of other cultures. "The rich accumulations of the past enabled him [Goethe] to give a new impulse to the future. There is thus evident a most intimate relation between the accumulation of literary stores in libraries, the development of genius, and the providing of it with the instruments of its mighty influence."

Our own lives tell us that human beings bring together widely different strands to make something uniquely their own and that we often come to value books, or subjects, or approaches that we once might even have scorned. We all know stories of scholars turning to materials that had been neglected for decades. Especially at Harvard, we know that without Archibald Cary Coolidge's collecting of diverse materials from around the world, especially from Russia and the Slavic lands—long before American scholars were prepared to use them—this country would have less effectively played its role in the world in the twentieth century.

At the same time we know that libraries cannot go on as they have in the past. Every few months another story in *The New York Times* on a library or educational institution makes clear that financial pressure requires libraries to act on the basis of certain realities. Resources are finite, but the number of publications and their price keeps increasing, faster than the growth of resources of funding agencies. To catalog and provide access to the degree we did in the recent past becomes ever more expensive; our inability to do so has resulted in massive cataloging

backlogs. Unfilled space keeps decreasing, or it shows clear limits; even massive buildings or additions promise only breathing space, not a solution lasting beyond a decade or two. Technology has not saved us, nor is it likely to. Although in this country some texts that once would have filled shelves and been acquired at great expense may instead be available on-line as needed, most of the world will not soon stop producing printed matter. In fact, here, as well, many types of nontraditional sources will continue to be printed.

Necessity requires that change take place, and change has arrived at Harvard as it has elsewhere. A refocusing of priorities that puts more emphasis on ease of use may be one result. Another may be a use of storage facilities for purposes other than warehousing alone, to provide, for instance, optimal conditions for embrittled material. It may be that greater pragmatism, as displayed, for example, in more inventorying rather than full cataloging for every item, will enable us to cope with some kinds of ephemeral material. Will new cooperative ventures emerge? One can imagine new kinds of institutions, perhaps regional libraries, perhaps more special libraries formed to collect certain materials and able to do so more effectively than our present university libraries with their broader responsibilities. The Hoover Institution, for instance, housed at Stanford though not part of the university library system there, has preserved and made available to scholars sources on the twentieth-century's political movements that otherwise may well have disappeared.

To this librarian, change itself is not the danger but rather that we may inappropriately make desirable what is merely necessary, i.e., that our obvious inability to collect and care for everything may lead us to cease to value the nontraditional exactly at the time when scholars are using it more. That path would increase the loss that is part of change. Both loss and gain there will certainly be, but with more of the insights—and humility—that formed our great libraries, we (our society that is) may continue to find ways to supply scholars with the nontraditional sources that are so important to broader understanding of our world.

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