Among Harvard’s Libraries

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The Harvard Library is one of the great international libraries, in part because it has acquired books on the spot. To some extent this has been done by non-librarians. The most famous instance in Harvard Library annals is Thomas Hollis V, who in the 1750s and 1760s gave more than 2,000 volumes. Through these gifts Hollis hoped to preserve and extend the English heritage of liberty. Probably no other donor has made such an effort in support of such grand aims, but annual reports note many gifts of material acquired on the spot. For instance, the report for 1946-47 cites Bulgarian pamphlets and handbills from Colonel John Bakeless, and Japanese and Australian propaganda leaflets from Sgt. Kenneth E. Colton. It seems safe to assume that Bakeless and Colton had been on the spot.

On-the-spot collecting has also been carried out by agents in foreign countries who were specifically hired for the task. Notably successful in using this approach has been the Judaica Division, which has built extraordinary collections of Israeli political and theatrical ephemera. For a concrete example of the result, see Hanna Herzog, Contest of Symbols: The Sociology of Election Campaigns through Israeli Ephemera (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Library, 1987). Efforts are now underway to use the same approach to collect from Moscow.

Some booksellers, though they supply libraries besides Harvard, work closely with Harvard librarians. One such bookseller, who supplies material that would be unobtainable except to someone on the spot, is Leonardo Lerner. He has built a great collection of Judaica from Argentina, including ephemera.

Employing agents does not, however, work for all cultures or all types of material. Librarians or others connected with the university must sometimes travel if the library is to obtain current output. The most famous such buyer was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. His trip of 1835-36 has actually been partly retraced by a Harvard librarian who is carrying out an intensive study of Longfellow’s career as a book buyer. At the time he made his trip, means did not exist for the library to judge the quality of Northern European publications and to acquire them from afar, the kind of problem that Fawzi Abdulrazak points out in the account of his book-buying trip to the Middle East.

Librarians on the spot are also important to building up great retrospective collections. The most notable example in Harvard Library history is Walter Lichtenstein, who spent fourteen months in Europe in 1905-06, purchasing older books for Harvard. In fact, he was more out of the country than in it until 1915. For the last fifty years, it has been primarily librarians in Houghton (or in other collections of rare material) who have travelled to acquire those special materials that would so often be missed without visits. In the essay by Roger Stoddard, readers will have an opportunity to read of a trip by someone who has been called “today’s most astute librarian-bookbuyer.”

Most of this issue is devoted to Everett Wilkie’s bibliographical study of rare books such as those acquired by Roger Stoddard. Mr. Wilkie is able to demonstrate the utility of examining the books themselves rather than merely repeating what has been written before, and it is accumulations in one place that particularly makes possible such scholarship. Even without special efforts to collect Americana, Harvard has more editions of the Histoire naturelle et morale des îles Antilles than all but two other libraries. Thus, this issue of the Bulletin shows within its covers both something of the process of creating a great library and the benefits of looking freshly at what it contains.

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