The importance of rare books and manuscripts in a university library

The Importance of Rare Books and Manuscripts in a University Library[1]

THIS generation has witnessed a phenomenal growth of rare book collections in American university libraries. In the past such libraries have usually had a reserved section which contained a miscellany, including some real rarities, inferno books, and many other items which were neither rare nor important, but merely fragile or difficult to administer either because of their size or material, or because they really were not books at all but curiosities. Now, in most of the larger university libraries special departments have been established for the preservation and administration of rare books, and the relative growth in size and expense of these departments has frequently been greater than that of the libraries of which they are a part. This evening let us consider whether this expensive growth is justified by the utility of these books in our educational processes.

But first, may we pause to define what a 'rare book' is? The term is often an embarrassment to those whose lives are spent mainly in the study and care of such books, for, far too often, to the layman it appears to have a connotation of triviality and superficiality which we believe to be unwarranted. 'Uncommon' or 'seldom found' is only one meaning of the word 'rare,' and although the one which perhaps first comes to mind, is neither the traditional nor the proper one when used in the phrase 'rare books.' The *Oxford Dictionary* gives as one of the definitions of the word 'rare': 'unusual in respect of some good quality; of uncommon excellence or merit, remarkably good or fine; distinguished,' and, aptly enough, as the earliest use of the word in this sense instances William Caxton's prologue to the *Book callid Caton*, 1483: 'There was a noble clerke named pogius . . . whiche had in the cyte of Florence a noble & well stuffed lybrarye whiche alle noble straungers comynge to Florence desyred to see. And therin they fonde many noble and rare bookes. And whanne they had axyd of

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hym whiche was the best boke of them alle, and that he reputed for best. He sayd that he helde Cathon glosed for the best book of his lyberarye.' A 'rare book' is then a book which either has been regarded for generations as an intrinsically important one, or which, if a little-known book, may be so regarded when its virtue has been recognized.

It has been often observed by bookmen that a volume which has only its rarity to commend it, even one which is so 'rare' as to be unique, may well be worthless. It is only when in varying degrees intrinsic worth, condition, and rarity are combined that one has a 'rare book.' For example, a telephone book of New York City for even one of the later years of Edwin Arlington Robinson might well be scarcer and more difficult to find today than a city directory of the later years of Franklin's life, and yet the telephone book would hardly fetch ten cents. It may well be that a hundred years from now the scholars of that time will recognize the usefulness of our current telephone books and then they may be sought after as avidly and pertaciously as we now seek the city directories of one or two centuries ago. Then, because their worth has been recognized, they will be 'rare books'; because they will be uncommon they will be doubly valuable; and because the paper on which they are printed is of a poor quality, ones in good condition will have an added virtue.

In considering rare books in university libraries, it is pertinent to examine what role, if any, they may have in solving the educational problems of our generation. Our educationists rightly regard 'the capacity for research as a test of ability in scholars and a guarantee of soundness in teachers,' and they recognize that in the humanities there is a disciplinary tradition as severe and exacting as that of any of the sciences, and indeed even more venerable. The sciences of epigraphy and palaeography, the newer procedures of bibliography, the patient assembling of data in history and biography, textual criticism — these are the time-proved methods and processes of humanistic scholarship, and scholarship will not remain sound unless training in such disciplines is fairly widespread. And in all of these disciplines the access to original material, often, of course, rare books or manuscripts, is essential if the training is to be maintained at a level which will enable the younger scholars to advance beyond their teachers. How easy it is for humanistic scholarship to become static without access to research material may perhaps be illustrated by the phenomenon observ-

able among many of the most competent of our Indic scholars, who can read any printed text in that field but can hardly identify even the language of a palm-leaf manuscript, ancient or modern.

In the past, many of our scholars received their training in these sciences in Europe as part of their graduate work, and it is to be hoped that in the future an even larger number will be granted the opportunity for study in the libraries, muniment rooms, and seminars of Europe. These larger numbers may be an impediment, however, for if our students arrive without some familiarity with the material they are to use, they will at best lose much valuable time, and will often be denied access to the muniments and manuscripts they wish to see, because they will be unable to convince the custodians of those documents that they are sufficiently competent to be entrusted with them. This, of course, is particularly true in those fields involving the use of early manuscripts, for all the wealth of such material that has crossed the Atlantic in the past three or four generations does not equal the riches to be found in London, Paris, or Rome, while of muniments we have only scattered examples, useful for training but hardly suitable for research.

Nevertheless, the American palaeographers trained by Rand at Harvard and Lowe at Princeton, to name only two, although they have perforce had to begin with facsimiles, have had available sufficient original material with which (I was going to say, to try their teeth) — with which to try their prentice skill, so that many of them have gone on and bid fair to equal their masters. And the difference between learning with facsimiles only and having original material to work with suggests the predicament of a man who, never having heard an orchestra or an organ, tries to understand Bach from the score alone. To some of you this may sound merely sentimental, but the limitations of photographic reproduction are too well known for me to discuss at this time. However, I may say that, useful, indeed indispensable, as such aids to scholarship are, they cannot, in many cases, be substituted for the originals without grave danger of error.

In printed books the relative strength, in many fields, is not so overwhelmingly unbalanced. There are many subjects and authors of which the holdings of American universities are as complete, or more so, than those of any one foreign library, as, for example, the early Mexican printing at the University of Texas, or the law books at Harvard, the Goethe collection at Yale, or the Petrarchs at Cornell,

to name only a few. In these and many other subjects and authors, the scholar can find one or more university collections which have virtually all the printed books and pamphlets that belong in a complete collection of that subject or author, together with all the relevant reference material. A student of John Locke, for example, can find at Harvard every book by Locke known to his bibliographer, as well as probably most, if not all, of the printed commentary, certainly a more nearly complete collection than exists in any one library in England. (If, having used that, he wishes to carry his researches further, he must then go to the Bodleian to use the Lovelace collection, to the Public Record Office, and the other manuscript archives of England.) So it is in countless fields; the resources of American university libraries for scholarly work in the humanities and in the history of science, so far as the printed materials are concerned, are already rich. In spite of many gaps and many weaknesses, there are few fields in which there are not some representative books with which our scholars can become familiar with the problems, textual or bibliographical, peculiar to their subjects.

It is true that these resources are not very evenly divided among the universities of the country, and probably never will be, in spite of the large sums of money presently available to some of the newer state institutions. In general, there would appear to be no very close correlation between the age of university libraries or their total budgets on the one hand and their strength in rare books on the other. Far more important, it would seem, is the presence on their faculties, on their governing boards, in their libraries, or among their alumni, of men who have recognized the value of such material.

George Lyman Kittredge is still remembered by many of us present here today, a giant among scholars, the bibliography of whose writings occupies more than a hundred pages, and whose influence upon scores and hundreds of living scholars cannot be measured. It is conceivable, however, that posterity may conclude that his greatest contribution to scholarship lies not in his own writings, or in the innumerable men whom he trained to his own rigorous standards, but in the ballad and folklore collections which, on the foundations laid by F. J. Child, he built at Harvard, without the aid of any special grant, fund, or any other means than his own insistence that, however meager the book-funds might be, those books must be acquired. These collections are not now being used in the same way and for the same purposes that

Kittredge used them. Studies in ballad literature in the Child-Kittredge-Rollins tradition are not at the moment in fashion. However, these collections are in constant use by the students of the American folk ballad and those studying ballad music. It is, perhaps, not proper for a mere librarian to say whether this is a better use or not, but I refer to it in order to call your attention to the fact that a collection of rare books, even one severely restricted in scope, may be used for many different purposes by many different students. Each generation must rewrite and reinterpret the history of the past, and the critical standards of each generation always have been and always will be different.

We have observed that neither age nor endowment is necessarily a coefficient of the wealth of rare books in university libraries, but age apparently does have some relation to the type of material collected, for the newer libraries in general have tended to collect books and manuscripts of more recent periods and, in particular, to specialize, though by no means exclusively, and with some notable exceptions, in American books and manuscripts. These fields cannot be said to have been neglected by the older institutions, as witness Yale's great Aldis and Coe collections, but the preference for the later and the American among the younger libraries has obviously, judging by the results, been both wise and fruitful, for thereby they have often gathered material that is not elsewhere available. Brown University is without a peer in printed Americana before 1800, though it can hardly be said to have deserved its good fortune through any effort of its own, but Michigan and Virginia have, by the vision of their librarians and, doubtless, a great deal of hard work, as well as good fortune going in one case under the name of Clements and in the other under the disguise of McGregor, done wonders in that earlier period. The collections of historical material, mainly of a somewhat localized interest, which are to be found in such libraries as that of Duke, the University of Texas, and the University of California, the Bancroft collection at Berkeley and the Cowan at Westwood, are important and growing. Furthermore, they are in a large measure not elsewhere duplicated and therefore will increasingly draw to themselves the attention and attendance of scholars from far beyond their local communities.

In other fields besides local history, the emphasis upon the more recent past has reaped a rich harvest, since it is often possible to acquire more nearly complete documentation than is possible for the

earlier periods. The collections which are strong in both books and manuscripts are not restricted to those of American origin, such as the Lanier collection at Johns Hopkins, or the Cable collection at Tulane, but include foreign ones, such as that of Leigh Hunt at the University of Iowa, or of Keats at Harvard. In these, and in many similar collections, it is possible for the scholar to find the major part of the relevant material. Indeed, collections of this type, whether or not they include a large proportion of an author's manuscripts or of his correspondence, in so far as they do contain important unpublished material are among the most useful for a university library, since they afford material for scholarly work on both a large and small scale. For example, during one recent summer twelve different scholars were at work on the Emerson collection at Harvard, for periods ranging from a few days to the full three months.

The possession of such collections entails responsibilities for their proper preservation and administration which ought not to be lightly assumed; for whenever there is concentrated in one institution any considerable number of important books and manuscripts, the world of scholars has, justly or not, come to expect not only that reasonable access will be given, but that a competent staff will be provided to answer the questions of those who cannot come to the library, and that there will be available cameras for photostat or microfilm reproduction, as well as some at least of the scientific aids, such as ultraviolet lamps and microfilm reading machines, for those who make use of the collections in person. These facilities, together with proper storage, now normally expected to be air-conditioned if the library is in a large city, means for adequate repair and binding, and cataloguing more or less accommodated to the kind of books and manuscripts collected, are all rather costly and only justified if the collections are of genuine scholarly use. In the larger research libraries with important and growing collections of rare books and manuscripts, the provision of such facilities may, and in many cases does, cost as much as ten per cent of the total budget.

The larger research libraries which possess not only original source material but also vast reference and periodical collections, often in the ratio of one to fifty, are without question obligated to provide the apparatus and the skilled personnel to which I have just referred. Whether institutions which are unwilling or unable to assume the cost of providing such aids are acting in the best interests of learning in

general if they accept the custodianship of important material of this nature is a question which perhaps ought not to be dogmatically answered. But all too often it happens that unique material, which would be of use to scholars from a distance and indeed is eagerly sought by them, is kept in libraries without photostat equipment and even without facilities for its proper use or care. While perhaps the tendency today is to make scholarship too easy, this particular hardship is not merely an exasperation but sometimes a virtual denial of access.

The adequate housing of rare book collections is an expensive business, but it has often proved to be well worth the cost in the attention which it draws not only from scholars but from collectors and the public in general. Usually the books themselves can be utilized as part of the decorative scheme, and the facilities for their exhibition and use provide a constant demonstration of their importance. It will be interesting to observe the effect of the newly constructed rare book reading room and stack in the Harvard Law School upon the support given to that extraordinary collection by the average Law School graduate, who until recently has had little means of knowing how rich are the antiquarian resources of the library where he spends so many hours of his graduate years. This 'window dressing' use of the rare books of a great research library, though unrelated to the primary purpose of their acquisition, is one which it would be foolish to ignore.

There is much misunderstanding and ignorance concerning the cost of rare books. The knowledge which laymen acquire comes usually from newspaper accounts of spectacular auction sales, often reported without the background details which would explain why such prices are occasionally paid, mostly by private collectors and in relatively restricted fields. Not many institutions indulge in such activities, and when they do the publicity which results often does more harm to the cause of scholarly rare book collecting than may at first glance seem likely. Generalizations about the cost of rare books, particularly in relation to university acquisition, are admittedly very difficult to make. Yet it may be observed that almost any field of rare books in which it would be worth while for a university library to collect is likely to contain a few items which will, if obtainable at all, cost many times the prices at which most of the other books can be obtained. The high-priced ones are likely to be either the key books, or natural or artificial rarities, which the library will either have to forgo or

obtain by the aid of private donors who have become interested in the completing of the collection.

Further, any book which is being avidly collected at the moment would seem a poor choice for an institution. In general this would rule out most, if not all, contemporary 'collected' authors, for two reasons: first, because of the uncertainty of their future importance and the cost of keeping as rare books such questionable gambles; and, secondly, because if they are now popular among collectors it is likely either that the price will fall when they are no longer fashionable or that the institution may be given one of the collections currently being formed. As an example, when Galsworthy was at the height of his reputation, the Harvard Library spent a fair sum in acquiring two of the four John Sinjohn books in rather less than the most desirable condition. Since then, not only have these books dropped greatly in price, but on several occasions much finer copies have been offered to the Library as gifts. It is true that most rare books, except some of those valued mainly because of their beauty, were once relatively inexpensive, and that if we only knew what will be valued by those who come after us we might save our successors a great deal of money and effort, but it is unlikely that we should have had the prophetic eye to buy for sixpence or less, a hundred odd years ago, a *Necessity of Atheism* or a Bristol *Lyrical Ballads*, and it is equally unlikely that we shall now be more percipient.

Again, institutional libraries may occasionally be custodians for posterity of books in remarkably fine and fragile condition. If the state of such items should be unique, or of such rarity that it would be extremely difficult to find other examples, their use for normal scholarly purposes may be precluded, in order that they may be preserved physically as bibliographical 'type specimens.' It might be said of libraries acting as custodians of such books, in Pope's now anachronistic words, that they 'value books as women men, for dress.' Therefore, it would be the negation of the normal reasons for the acquisition by university libraries of rare books if they were sought always in the finest condition, in 'original boards,' in 'immaculate wrappers,' etc. Inevitably every rare book collection will receive a number of such books, and the extra care that their preservation will entail will usually be sufficient responsibility, so that libraries are well advised not to seek to have all books in such fine condition that if opened at all they will unavoidably be damaged.

All custodians of rare books have been told frequently by otherwise apparently competent and tolerant scholars that they have no use for 'first editions,' as if they were speaking of tiaras or suits of armor of a feudal aristocracy, with which they, as modern democrats, would have no truck. I venture to say that among the most useful, and certainly the most used books in the collections of our university libraries are those of which there never was a second edition, or at any rate no modern reprint. They are the books which must be studied in order to understand the background and meaning of greater books; they are the ones which are necessary for studies in the history of ideas; and it is by extracting the essence of innumerable books and pamphlets of this character that the history of many periods, since the fifteenth century, is being drawn in truer and more just proportions. Oftentimes such books are traceable in only a single copy, at least in any American library, and therefore, because of their irreplaceability, they are properly cared for among the 'rare books,' even though, particularly in fields outside those most popular with private collectors, they may not be more costly than the average work of modern scholarship.

It would be convenient to have assembled together in each of our university libraries the greatest monuments of literature, science, art, and history, but of all books they are the ones which can be most easily located in other libraries. They are the ones which have been studied most in the past (though by no means has there been discovered all that this or future generations of scholars might find on a re-examination of them). And they are the ones which have been reproduced in facsimile most frequently and which therefore are available in a partially satisfactory form.

It cannot be said that these great monuments will be consulted frequently by scholars; indeed, in this respect they belong in the category to which librarians hesitate to assign any book, viz., that of 'little used.' It is unlikely, for example, that anyone during the past decade has consulted, for a scholarly purpose, the magnificent Van Antwerp copy of the first folio of Shakespeare now in the Harry Elkins Widener Collection. But it has been frequently exhibited, and doubtless numbers of people have been moved by the sight of a copy of the book which alone has preserved twenty of Shakespeare's plays. In this way the volume has earned its board and keep many times over. But it has likewise had an imponderable and almost unanalyzable utility. For it is surely not by mere size that libraries are known throughout the

world of scholars, but by the quality of the books on their shelves. If libraries are to be ranked at all, an invidious task which I have no intention of attempting at this time, it must be both by the completeness of their collections and by the number and importance of their books which are of the first rank or which are nowhere else to be found. Further, it is by the possession of these great books that the special collections and resources of the libraries become known, and, also, by a curious magnetism, peculiar to rare books, that other books of like importance are added to them, according, it would seem, to the principle laid down in the Parable of the Talents.

In the year 1543 there were published books by Copernicus, Vesalius, and Ramus, each one of which is important in the story of man's intellectual advance, for together they broke the chains which had bound man's speculative and scientific growth to the Ptolemaic, Galenic, and Aristotelian doctrine. On occasion in the Harvard Library, copies of these books are exhibited together, and the student, young or old, who pauses to look at them in the case and who is not stirred by the sight of them — the neat quarto of Copernicus, the magnificently illustrated folio of Vesalius, and the beautifully printed little octavo of Ramus — such a one, I say, can have only the vaguest knowledge of the revolution in men's thoughts inaugurated and marked by their publication in the same year. There before him lie not mere relics in the history of thought, but a copy of the veritable book, fresh from the printer, which Copernicus saw on his deathbed; of the tome which Vesalius labored with Van Calcar for several years to produce; and of the volume which was condemned by the king and the Sorbonne and eventually cost Ramus his life. It was with these types, these woodcuts, and this paper that first, in 1543, were published these books which ended man's thralldom to the ancient science and made possible the advances of the modern age. One could continue, indefinitely, the catalogue of similar books now treasured in many university libraries of our country. At any moment, the sight of any one of them may be the spark which will kindle in some young scholar the desire to unravel the complex which makes them important for mankind and set forth on a scholarly adventure which may result in one more solid addition to the structure of man's understanding of his past.

But, it may be objected, this is all antiquarian, it is looking backward, and despite Thucydides' dictum that 'an exact knowledge of

the past is a key to the future which in all probability will repeat or resemble the past,' the concepts of our scholars should be in terms of the present and the future. I need not repeat to you the truism that though the conditions of life may change, sometimes with vertiginous speed, human character itself alters slowly, it would seem almost imperceptibly. This 'new world' of ours, despite the addition of the fears and hopes which accompany the advances in nuclear physics, will still be inhabited by men and women, who, if there is any civilization worthy the name, will be concerned with what 'we instinctively call the higher interests,' who will be curious about the whole drama of life, if only because it may reveal important data concerning our present and future.

And in this 'new world' it is obvious that the role to be played by America will be a leading one. If it is to be guided by something more than pure opportunism, it will be because our statesmen will be provided by the scholars of our country with a far more complete and surer understanding of the background of culture and history of the peoples of the world with which to judge the wisdom of our present and future policy. Some of the scholarship upon which these decisions may be based will seem, and in fact will be, remote from the situation presently to be dealt with. John Jay Chapman once referred to the hegemony, in his day, of the English universities in all branches of Greek scholarship as merely another manifestation of British Imperialism. If our country is to be adequately armed for the great opportunity which is ours, an opportunity which is the antithesis of imperialism, but nonetheless epochal, it will demand American leadership in all fields of learning. We do not fear that our scientists will be denied the instruments and laboratories which they need. So in the humanities it is to be hoped that our libraries will be able to fulfill the needs and demands of our scholars. If they do, it will be found that rare books and manuscripts form one of the most useful and most important parts of their resources. In Chaucer's day a library might be merely 'twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed,' but there is much truth, *mutatis mutandis*, in his familiar lines:

> For out of olde feldes, as men seyth,
> Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,
> And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
> Cometh al this newe science that men lere.

The 'science' to which he referred is, of course, *scientia*, learning in general, and scholarship will always be dependent on 'olde bokes' for much of the wisdom which surely will be needed in the world we face today.

WILLIAM A. JACKSON

List of Contributors

WILLIAM A. JACKSON, Professor of Bibliography and Assistant Librarian of the College Library in charge of the Houghton Library, Harvard University

DONALD CONEY, Librarian and Professor of Librarianship, University of California at Berkeley

NEWTON F. MCKEON, Director of the College Library and Professor of English, Amherst College

HARVIE BRANSCOMB, Chancellor, Vanderbilt University

I. BERNARD COHEN, Assistant Professor of General Education and of the History of Science, Harvard University

HYDER E. ROLLINS, Gurney Professor of English Literature, Harvard University

HEINRICH SCHNEIDER, Professor of German, Harvard University

EDWIN E. WILLIAMS, Assistant to the Librarian of Harvard College

LEON EDEL, New York City

MERTON M. SEALTS, JR, Assistant Professor of English, Lawrence College

CAMILLA HAY GILLIES, University of Leeds

JOHN J. ENCK, Teaching Fellow in English, Harvard University

HERMAN TEERINK, Arnhem, Netherlands

HAMILTON VAUGHAN BAIL, Treasurer of the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

PHILIP J. MCNIFF, Assistant Librarian of the College Library in charge of the Lamont Library, Harvard University

FREDERICK C. PACKARD, Associate Professor of Public Speaking, Harvard University