



# Intention and acumen: Recent acquisitions in Harvard libraries

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## Intention and Acumen: Recent Acquisitions in Harvard Libraries

*Kenneth Carpenter*

**L**ibraries have grown in the past by adding both newly published books and periodicals as well as by adding older works. The new and the old; that is obvious. Yet behind that simplicity lie complications. What is the mix of new and old? What kind of new and what kind of old? What subjects were covered? What cultures? By what means were books acquired? To what ends?

The answers to such questions can be revealing and unexpected. Thus, only in 1859 did the Harvard College Library begin to make systematic purchases of newly published books. A gift from William Gray, 1829, made expressly for "new books," enabled the library to make such purchases, and it did so on the basis of desiderata drawn up by members of the faculty. To be able to buy substantial quantities of new books was a transformative development, but it did not mean that for the first time the library was acquiring new books. Newly published materials had long been received as gifts, some from trade publishers; many, many from governments and societies; and some from friends. Thus, new and old does not by any means equal purchase and gift, or even source material and secondary literature.

Gifts of the old are also by no means entirely similar. Some might result from cleaning out the attic. Indeed, the late distinguished librarian and book historian Hugh Amory used to say that the Harvard Library was long the attic of New England, that is, the combination of individual attics. To say that is to emphasize the heterogeneity and lack of intentionality, not to denigrate, since the materials that came to rest in the attic were then, and still now, often highly useful. But there have also been gifts of material brought together with the intention of adding them to the Harvard Library, and gifts of money have frequently made it possible to add to Harvard's shelves collections formed with intention and acumen, such as the Ebeling Collection of Americana in 1818.

"Intention" and "acumen" also apply to the decisionmaking behind the acquisition of the source materials described in this special issue of the *Harvard Library Bulletin*. Some are old, some new; most are purchases, a few are gifts. English-language materials predominate, but many of these source materials are appropriate only for a library serving a university that is international in its faculty and student body and in the spread of their concerns. In subject matter science is little represented, because scientists now rarely rely on the library for the source materials of scientific advance, but these acquisitions certainly do show the

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library adding source materials in the social sciences and humanities, including the history of science.

To show the breadth of material being added was one of the goals behind this special issue of the *HLB*. For that reason, librarians from throughout the various parts of the university were asked to write—but each person was to produce only a single description. For many librarians, selecting one item was more difficult than writing about it. To provide a limitation, librarians were asked to select only from material acquired between June 1998 and May 2000.

It took a lot of knowledge and, frequently, considerable imagination to make these acquisitions, for each, in a world of limited resources, involved a choice of whether to buy this, or that, or perhaps, to wait for “that”; of whether to solicit or accept a particular gift, given its inevitable demands on staff time and space. Knowledge of the collections entered in, perhaps also an awareness of how other materials already in the collection would as a result become more useful. Above all, these brief essays show librarians thinking about the uses to which these acquisitions might be put, whether by faculty or students.

These acquisitions of source materials, along with the much more extensive inbringing of (or providing access to) secondary materials, help to make the library a vibrant and ever-changing, richer place—for faculty, students, and librarians alike. They (these acquisitions and the librarians behind them) enhance the opportunities to advance knowledge by a group of people passionate to do so, namely, the library’s users. That is the primary message that these acquisitions and essays, in their specificity, make clear.