



# "Introduction" in "The first 350 years of the Harvard University Library: Description of an exhibition"

## Citation

Carpenter, Kenneth E. 1986. "Introduction" in "The first 350 years of the Harvard University Library: Description of an exhibition". Harvard Library Bulletin XXXVI (1), Winter 1986: vii-x.

## Link

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## Introduction

A book or exhibition based on the history of the Harvard Library cannot avoid expressing a sense of grandeur about the Library, even a feeling of awe over its size and richness. Such a feeling does exist about a great library, even among those who daily work in it. To enter the Widener stacks on 4 East and walk past rows and rows of American history to 4 West, and then to go down the stairs to level D, past the record of culture after culture, in order to find a book on Scandinavia or on Swiss history — that is an emotional as well as physical journey. In the Widener classification scheme used until the adoption of the Library of Congress classification in 1976, books are classified much more by culture than by subject; and anyone who is motivated by a desire to enter into other cultures finds Widener a place of endless possibilities.

For a Harvard librarian to give a tour of the University is another kind of emotional journey, for perhaps in no other community are books so omnipresent. In the course of the tour one might leave the Yard and proceed as follows: "There's the Cabot Science Library which was especially built for undergraduates but also has rows and rows of old scientific and technical publications in the basement; though few undergraduates need them, they still have all kinds of uses for scholars. Recently, someone researched in them the ways in which fear of fire and the resulting insurance regulations have shaped American buildings and communities. The Library, you know, almost never throws anything out." Going on to Divinity Avenue, one could point out to the visitor that "on your right is the largest university collection on East Asia; its Tibetan scrolls, wrapped in orange cloth, are an impressive sight. The Tozzer Library of Anthropology over there has an extraordinary index of anthropological articles, which it began early in this century; beyond Tozzer, in that

building, is the Gray Herbarium library and other botanical libraries, and behind them is the great Divinity School Library, whose early books, thanks to years of steady conservation work, must be one of the finest looking collections anywhere." Turning left, one might point out the existence of libraries in the University Museum: the Museum of Comparative Zoology Library and the Geological Sciences Library. "Those are not just a few books in a room; the MCZ is approaching 250,000 volumes. Beyond is the largest university music library, and in Langdell Hall over there is the world's greatest legal library. Actually its collections are housed in several of the buildings you can see." Of course, only a long tour could cover all those in the Boston area, such as the world's largest collection of business literature and the Countway Library of Medicine, which is the country's second largest medical library. Extended journeys would be required to visit other Harvard libraries in such locations as Washington, D.C., or Florence, Italy.

One could point out that within the large and individually distinguished libraries are many special collections of high quality. Within Widener, for instance, is Harry Nelson Gay's collection on nineteenth-century Italy, which was the work of a Harvard graduate resident in Italy who spent a lifetime collecting and studying the Risorgimento movement. The Classics collection is superb, thanks to on-going purchases in the past but also to gifts of special collections, such as Professor Morris Hickey Morgan's Persius collection, or Professor John W. White's of Aristophanes. Philosophy was long selected by Benjamin Rand, the compiler of an exhaustive bibliography, and among the Harvard philosophers whose libraries are here are Hugo Münsterberg, Josiah Royce, and William James. Author after author is represented by collections that were lovingly formed. To name only two: the Dante Collection, which was enriched by the great Harvard scholar Charles Eliot Norton; or the Cervantes Collection, formed by Carl T. Keller. (W. A. Jackson was able to purchase the great gap, the first edition of *Don Quixote*, when Keller lay dying — and to inform him of the acquisition.) Along with discussing these in this catalog, one could have pointed out that the walls of the Houghton exhibition room are lined with books printed before 1501. Or one might have emphasized the numerous special collections in faculty libraries, perhaps the archival records being preserved in the Countway Library of Medicine, or the pre-1850 business and economic literature in the Kress Library at the Business School; it never

ceases to amaze that a school devoted to teaching the latest in business administration should also cherish early books.

Along with emphasizing special collections that are notable for their completeness and the rarity of the material in them, this book could have focused on individual items, ranging from manuscripts in this country's largest collection of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, to first editions of great authors and thinkers.

This catalog does convey an impression of the size of the collections, their diversity, and their strength, but its emphasis is somewhat different. It tries to further understanding of how the Library came to have such strength and diversity in collections, how librarians and others have faced the task of cataloging the collections, housing and preserving them, and helping students and scholars use them.

Much more than a celebration of grandeur, this catalog is also a history of the problems and opportunities that individuals, often quirky individuals, faced, or, in some cases, failed to perceive. Librarians and others often acted with great wisdom to shape the Library; in other instances chance played a major role. In a sense the absence of central control in the Library and the University has even fostered chance. It has encouraged the entrepreneurial building of collections by librarians, and by others as well. It has enabled books to be widely dispersed, which removes any single factor as a determinant of policy.

There is something about the life of this institution that is very much like the life of an individual. Seeming failures sometimes led to later developments; Crosswell's catalog of the 1810s, made in part by pasting slips on sheets, was never completed, but his idea of slips seems to have led to a card catalog, the first in the country. Small steps occasionally — and sometimes accidentally — formed the basis for major new directions: the Corporation's delegation of book selection to a committee — and the later inclusion on it of faculty members — established a mechanism that subsequently permitted book selection on a large scale. (Small steps also sometimes exerted a long-lasting influence for the worse, such as Winsor's setting up a special room for Radcliffe students.) At times something most devoutly wanted, above all a new building to replace Gore Hall, would probably have been unfortunate if obtained when first needed.

This catalog does not try to depict the Library's evolution as one purposeful accomplishment after another. There were many, and, indeed, the history of the institution is filled with innovative responses to problems and individuals who creatively seized opportunities. In

numerous instances, however, people could not break away from preconceptions derived from the past. It seems that we today also find our options shaped by the past and that one of the desirable tasks for those who work in an institution is to understand its past. In doing so, one does not transcend the past. Decentralization, for instance, is a fact of the Harvard Library environment, for better and for worse. But understanding the Library's history is one means by which the individuals who work in it today can more effectively overcome those factors that inhibit productive change and enhance those that foster creativity in the institution. And perhaps those who interact with the Library, whether Harvard administrators, librarians elsewhere, foundation executives, or private donors, can more effectively accomplish their goals, if they are more conscious of the factors that have historically been at work in the Library.

It is hoped that Harvard librarians and those who are concerned with the Library in one capacity or another will find that this publication fosters understanding as we set out on the next segment of the Library's history. The story here is certainly not complete. For instance, it is not noted that Coolidge reconstructed the Harvard catalog as well as expanded the collections. This publication is more, though, than an assortment of disparate entries, and readers who wish to pursue a particular topic will find that the entries, though separated, can be brought together by using the index, which has topical references as well as references to names and libraries.

It is also hoped that readers will include those who are not intimately connected with libraries, for technical language has been avoided and illustrations have been chosen with the general reader in mind.