

Among Harvard's Libraries

WILLIAM BENTINCK-SMITH (1914–1993)

William Bentinck-Smith, Honorary Curator of Type Specimens and Letter Design in the College Library, died on 19 January 1993, three days shy of his seventy-ninth birthday. A remarkably modest man, he would have been embarrassed by the unfeigned sadness with which news of his death was met, by the statements that have since been made about him, and, certainly, by this essay.

One statement was made by Richard Wendorf, Librarian of the Houghton Library, who said: "William Bentinck-Smith was, like Philip Hofer, quite prescient in his understanding of what would be of interest to collectors and scholars. He not only appreciated classic, traditional typographic forms, but also was extremely interested in how newer technologies were building upon past typographic experience. I think that he had an extraordinary ability to combine standards of the very highest order with great kindness and thoughtfulness. We shall all miss his presence in our lives very much."

Another, by Eleanor Garvey, Philip Hofer Curator of Printing and Graphic Arts, *Emeritus*, and a longtime friend of Bentinck-Smith, noted: "William Bentinck-Smith was a close and generous friend of the library who supported the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts not only with important gifts but with wise counsel and personal concern for its well-being. He was not only a specialist in type history but knowledgeable in contemporary developments of computer type and a constant source of information and encouragement. A close collaborator in acquisitions and exhibitions in his own field, he was a stimulating and delightful colleague."

Sidney Verba, Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and Director of the University Library, captured another important side of William Bentinck-Smith in noting that "he was always our conscience to maintain the library's greatness."

Bentinck-Smith well knew that the library is great, one of the greatest in the world. He understood how it achieved its greatness. He personally contributed books and money to keeping it so. He celebrated what it is, but he also probed, cajoled, prodded all of us. He tried to look at problems and opportunities with honesty and directness and to get others to do likewise, all in support of an institution that to him was crucial to Harvard, the world of scholarship, and, more broadly, to uplifting the human spirit. After all, he graduated in 1937, just before the dark days of World War II.

One forum for Bentinck-Smith's probing was the Overseers' Visiting Committee to the Library, on which he served officially from 1984. Chaired in recent years by Nancy Morgan and Arthur Hartman, the Committee has ever more actively sought to understand the library and help foster needed change. Bentinck-Smith played a crucial role.

This man who was so completely un-bureaucratic felt free to serve, informally, as a "conscience" in other ways as well. The *Harvard Library Bulletin*, for example, on whose editorial board he served, fell under his critical gaze. A few years ago we met in his inconspicuous office at 17 Quincy Street, and I heard his message. The *HLB* needed to print the results of scholarship, but not just that. It should convey to the world outside the library what the Harvard Library is and what is happening here. He urged that I try to paint vividly the Harvard libraries for readers. He said that the *HLB* should celebrate the collections and the individuals who formed them. It should discuss issues and problems, not to make propaganda but to foster informed and thoughtful conversation.

Controversial matters were not to be avoided, just written about even-handedly, he urged. That, I now know, was how he had tried to act as editor of the *Harvard Alumni*

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn

*on the occasion of her visit to the Houghton Library, Harvard University
during the celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of
His Royal Highness Prince Mahidol of Songkla of Thailand*

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In 1990 Bentinck-Smith commissioned calligrapher Jean Evans to create a digitized typeface, Elli, in honor of Eleanor Garvey on the occasion of her retirement as the first Philip Hofer Curator of the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts. Ms. Evans used this typeface in a presentation piece for her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand, when she stopped to view Sanskrit manuscripts in Houghton on a three-day visit to Harvard in November 1992.

Bulletin, the predecessor of *Harvard Magazine*. As he wrote in the fifteenth-anniversary report of the class of 1937: "I think I have resisted successfully the temptation and opportunity to become a professional alumnus rather than one concerned . . . with producing a quality editorial production of an individual and independent character."

In our conversation on the *HLB*, I wondered aloud whether I was up to the task of writing such articles. "Just be yourself," he said. "Don't posture. Don't try to be someone you aren't. Don't be afraid. Just be yourself."

So, with his criticism, his honesty, also went support. Of course, he was right. The *HLB*'s "Among Harvard's Libraries" still falls short of his goal, but one clear result has been to stimulate others in the libraries to write as well. An example, by Clark Elliott, is in this issue, and by coincidence it is an article on which Bentinck-Smith advised. I asked Clark Elliott to send it to him for help in finding the right tone in his account of both the University Archives and the life and work of a specific archivist. It is, indeed, that combination of institution and people that Bentinck-Smith sought, so as to make comprehensible this increasingly complex library.

I am greatly in Bentinck-Smith's debt, but he was insistent that I not mention him. Others also found him self-effacing. Just as he did not hesitate to criticize, politely, in the interest of the highest standards, so he is legendary for his willingness to accept editing of his own

writing. The best result was the goal, not ego inflation. Another example: Several years ago all holders of studies in Pusey Library received a form letter urging, if at all possible, that they surrender the study. The one-time personal assistant (1954-1971) to Harvard President Nathan Pusey, for whom the library is named, promptly gave up his study. Bentinck-Smith's sense of belonging was so strong that he could with serenity retreat to his office at 17 Quincy Street and eventually move well beyond the Business School and the Harvard stadium to quarters on Western Avenue in the Office of the University Publisher.

To have an office in a printing shop was eminently appropriate for William Bentinck-Smith, who formed and gave to Harvard a great collection of typefounders' specimen books, numbering more than 2,000 volumes. The original purpose of typefounders' specimen books was, as the name indicates, to sell type, and they show only type and ornaments. Relatively few people have seen a type specimen book, or have any desire to do so; but there are scholars and graphic artists who do, and they come from around the world to consult the Bentinck-Smith Collection. It is outstanding and important. The books are used by scholars to document letter forms, to trace the history of a typographic style. These type specimens, which are often very beautiful, have, like all books, a utility that extends well beyond obvious purposes.

The Bentinck-Smith Collection contains books and broadsides from the fifteenth

century to current times, and Bentinck-Smith even became interested in digital type fonts. In fact, he had one designed in 1990 in honor of Eleanor Garvey, Curator *Emeritus*, of the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts. He also made it possible for the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts to acquire computers, with the software and fonts to carry out desktop publishing.

The type specimen books are under the care of the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, which Bentinck-Smith cherished and supported for decades. He established a fund to purchase additional typefounders' specimen books and made it clear that he expected to be informed if a buying opportunity came along for which funds were insufficient. He was also always approachable about acquisitions outside his main area of interest. Eleanor Garvey did not need to ask coyly or indirectly. A forthright request was expected, and the answer would be equally direct. He might decline, or he might say, as in fact he once did about an adventurously modern item, "I don't like it, but I think you know what you're doing, and I'll help." He liked enthusiasm, backed up by competence. Then he would go along with the new or the different.

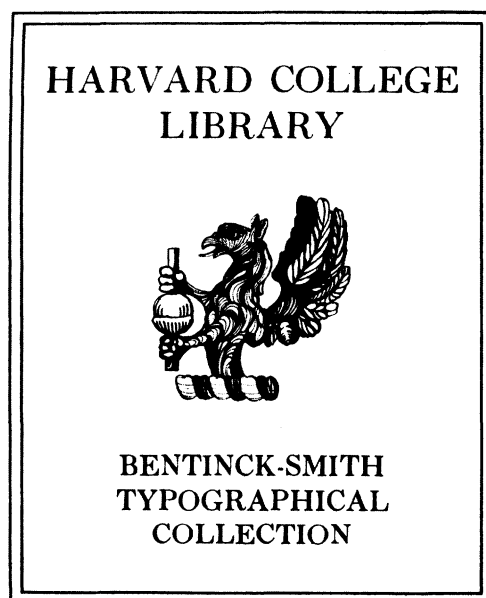
One of Bentinck-Smith's greatest services on behalf of the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts was to co-chair, with Melvin R. Seiden, his fellow member on the Overseers' Visiting Committee, a drive to endow the

position of Philip Hofer Curator of Printing and Graphic Arts. It guarantees that the department, the first one in an American library, will long prosper. At the same time Bentinck-Smith was able to honor through the endowed position his friend Philip Hofer, about whom he published a tribute in the *Harvard Library Bulletin* in 1984, "Prince of the Eye: Philip Hofer and the Harvard Library." (Alas, a projected second part never was written.)

Gifts in honor of others were the pattern. One was a book fund in Widener in memory of Neil Gardner Melone, a classmate. Another, for Houghton, was in honor of Jacob Blanck, who for decades labored on the top floor of the library on the monumental *Bibliography of American Literature*. Jake was one of a bookish weekly luncheon group that also included Houghton's librarian, William H. Bond, Haverford '37, who was elected, of course at Bentinck-Smith's suggestion, an honorary member of the Harvard Class of 1937.

Bentinck-Smith even established a substantial book fund in Widener to memorialize a past figure whom he admired, Edward Holyoke, Harvard's ninth president. (Perhaps Edward Holyoke was a kind of stand-in for the Harvard president for whom he worked.)

Among Bentinck-Smith's major contributions was his *Building a Great Library: The Coolidge Years at Harvard* (1976), a work that



Bookplate for the Bentinck-Smith Typographical Collection. The griffin with inkballs, depicted on this bookplate, is also part of the collection.

HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY



HARVARD HALL, BUILT IN 1682; DESTROYED BY FIRE IN 1764.

May this book signify to its readers
something of the respect for books
and libraries illustrated by the career of

EDWARD HOLYOKE
1689-1769

LIBRARIAN • TUTOR • FELLOW
• FOR 32 YEARS PRESIDENT OF HARVARD COLLEGE •

At 75 he fought the fire that destroyed old Harvard Hall on
the tempestuous night of 24 January 1764 and then spent his
last four years of life finding the books and money to restore
the priceless library, greatest in the American Colonies



The Edward Holyoke bookplate (left)
and that in honor of Jacob Blanck
(right).

Harvard College Library



in honor of

JACOB BLANCK

1906-1974

Bibliographer of
American Literature

J·B

began in his mind as a brief article and grew into a full-length account of Archibald Cary Coolidge's crucial role in forming an international research library. Biographies exist of people connected with libraries, but there are almost no full-length biographies of librarians or of the library careers of individuals also active in other fields. Bentinck-Smith's publication is important to library history in general, but especially to our understanding of how the Harvard Library came to be what it is. Moreover, this highly readable, thoroughly delightful book will always hold before us the ideal of an international institution, rich in the special collections that make it possible for Harvard's faculty to view this library as a scholar's paradise.

Bentinck-Smith's research on Coolidge might have come about because he was interested, it seemed, in everything. He read voraciously. He even learned Russian through self-study, supplemented with help from a tutor; but probably the work on Coolidge was initially undertaken on behalf of one of his projects on Harvard history. His planned continuation of Samuel Eliot Morison's *Three Centuries of Harvard* did not come to fruition, but three others did, in addition to the work on Coolidge: *The Harvard Book* (1953, revised 1982); *More Lives of Harvard Scholars* (1986) and *Harvard University History of Named Chairs: Sketches of Donors and*

Donations (v. I, 1991). The last two were co-edited and written with Elizabeth Stouffer, who is finishing the second and third volumes of the work on named chairs. In addition to editing the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* from 1946 to 1954, during which time it received an award as the best alumni publication in the United States and Canada, Bentinck-Smith edited *Harvard Today* from 1957 to 1972. He also brought out a series of reports from the class of 1937.

In the fashion that was typical for him, he celebrated with generosity and genuineness the accomplishments of others, but downplayed his own. Here is what Bentinck-Smith wrote of himself in his fiftieth class report:

I can list no profusion of publications, either entertaining and enduring or solidly and broadly significant. I influenced few students or young minds. I saved no lives, improved no souls, cured no inner torments, climbed no unscaled peaks, and I added very little to the sum of the world's knowledge.

Still, I more or less succeeded in my original objective to be a small-town editor. In my case, the community happened to be Harvard.

We can only give thanks that it was.

Kenneth E. Carpenter