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# Loss of a Recorded Heritage: Destruction of Chinese Books in the Peking Siege of 1900

CHENG HUANWEN AND DONALD G. DAVIS JR.

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## ABSTRACT

Late-nineteenth-century China suffered from a weak and declining central government, the incursions of Western interests, and a necessity to grapple with the demands of a modern national state. For sixty days in the summer of 1900 the legation quarters of Western governments in Peking came under siege by the Qing government and Boxer forces until finally relieved by an international military expedition. During the siege, the Hanlin Academy, a repository of Chinese bibliographical treasures representing centuries of cultural accumulation, suffered destruction through fire and pillage. From the immediate aftermath of the siege and throughout the century following, questions have been raised as to what actually happened and who was to blame for the atrocity. The observations of the British and other Western government officials differed from those of the Chinese participants. A variety of sources, some recently rediscovered, make fresh conclusions possible.

## INTRODUCTION

The loss of recorded heritage has attracted the fascination of scholars for centuries, and no more so than in modern times. Since before Alexandria, the effects of natural and human disasters on books and libraries have received attention in lamentation, if not in description and explanation. In instances of expropriation and theft, cultural treasures may sometimes be returned to their place of ownership; in cases of loss to fire, flood, and other elements, there is little to be done.<sup>1</sup> Individual incidents may include both kinds of threats. In the postcolonial and post-Cold War era of the past quarter century, delicate questions about cultural artifacts and books

have been raised and addressed, sometimes for the first time in a serious manner.

The destruction and dispersal of the bibliographic contents of the Hanlin Yuan (or Hanlin Academy, imperial center for scholarly studies) in Peking in 1900 is one such event that has stirred the curiosity of few historians. The 1996 International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) conference in Beijing proved to be a memorable opportunity to open and discuss the matter. The further research that resulted has continued a process of historical revision. Thus, this article seeks to outline the historical context of the event, review the actions leading to actual destruction, describe the significance of the collection concerned, assess the extent and consequences of the loss, and in conclusion, place the event and ongoing research in modern library history.

### THE BOXER UPRISING AND WESTERN INTERESTS

The siege of the Allied Legations by the Boxers, known in China as the Yihetuan Movement, in the summer of 1900 was not an isolated series of events. It must be seen as one expression of mounting tension between the Chinese people and government and the Western powers with their commercial, military, and religious aspirations. Because the siege involved diplomatic missions of European nations, the United States, and Japan, it attracted worldwide attention in a way that previous incidents had not. For the Chinese, however, the two-month episode was, in the words of one historian, "of trivial significance" because it was eclipsed by the aftermath of humiliating concessions and crushing reparations.<sup>2</sup>

Nineteenth-century China witnessed a recurring cycle of "fragmentation and reform" as Great Britain and other powers resisted efforts of the Chinese to curb the opium trade, commercial exploitation, and missionary activity.<sup>3</sup> Far too complex to detail here, but characteristic of the period, are the Opium Wars of 1839–42 and 1857–58 in the southeast, the Taiping Movement of 1851–66 in the central region and centered in Nanjing, the Muslim Revolts of 1855–73 in the northwest and southwest, and the loss of satellite states. All contributed to the effort to strengthen the imperial government through military preparedness and limited reforms. These initiatives suffered setbacks later in the century in disastrous wars with France (1880s) and Japan (1894–95), as well as from ominous threats from Russia.

The carving up of the periphery of the Chinese empire and the Yangzi River, with treaty ports and concession regions, brought both some adaptation of Western administrative practices as well as much antipathy to reflective Chinese citizens. A brief attempt at reform by Emperor Guangxu under the leadership of Kang Youwei in the summer of 1898 was stifled by the Empress Dowager Cixi who had in effect ruled China for the Qing dynasty since the 1860s. The cumulative frustrations of all these factors seemed set to break out again.

Shandong province, the province that had seen perhaps the greatest degree of recent encroachment by Western powers, was the source of a revived popular movement against foreigners in general, missionaries in particular, and most of all Chinese who had adopted Christianity. Beginning in 1898 the “Fists United in Righteousness,” as they called themselves—or “Boxers,” as they were known in the West—drew upon secret-society and magical rites, reminiscent of the Small Sword Society, Red Lantern groups, and the White Lotus sect of earlier times. Claiming to be invulnerable to bullets and swords and believing in folk mythologies that involved religion and street rituals, the Boxers called for the revocation of special considerations enjoyed by Chinese and European Christians and by 1899 had begun to destroy property and kill converts as well as foreigners in Shandong and Hebei provinces.<sup>4</sup> At the same time a massive Yellow River flood seemed to call for desperate measures against nature and the foreigners.

The Western powers were shocked by the Boxer Uprising but saw in the crisis an opportunity to extend their influence and ensure their security. Thus, they looked to the Qing government to employ serious strategies to quell the Yihetuan Movement, while at the same time through negotiation (May 28–30) they prepared their own forces to take action. On May 31 more than 400 men of the Allied forces entered Beijing to “protect the Legations.”<sup>5</sup> Shortly thereafter the Boxers entered the capital, preceded by scores of Western missionaries and thousands of Chinese converts. On June 10 the Allied force—consisting of 2,064 men representing Austria-Hungary, France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United States of America under the leadership of British Admiral Seymour—landed at Dagou, on the coast. The next day the Boxers killed a Japanese diplomat, and the following day the Allied force took the forts at Dagou that guarded the entrance to Tianjin, the lifeline and railhead to Beijing. On June 20 a German minister was killed on his way to the ZongliYamen (Office for the Management of Business of All Foreign Countries, or Foreign Commerce Office) in the capital. The next day the Qing government felt compelled to declare war on the Allied forces and ordered the imperial Qing soldiers and the Boxers, some 200,000 strong, to lay siege to the Legation Quarter, defended by about 450 guards. The siege would last until relief from an expeditionary force entered the capital on August 14, a struggle that the rest of world knew about primarily from the reports for the *London Times* by correspondent Dr. George Ernest Morrison, whose perspective of imperialism and antipathy to the empress dowager was thinly veiled (Yishu, 1986, vol. 2, pp. 638–55).<sup>6</sup>

#### THE SIEGE AND DESTRUCTION OF THE HANLIN

The Siege of Peking—called by one historian “the episode best remembered abroad” of the Boxer Uprising—was a dramatic event that captured worldwide attention, which more minor incidents did not.<sup>7</sup> It is not within

the scope of this article to recount the story of the actual siege, its lifting, or its aftermath—exciting though these may be. Once the attacks began in earnest with the encouragement of the empress dowager, the Allied hostages and their Christian Chinese converts prepared for a siege of unknown duration. They consolidated their small area of control and fortification by withdrawing from the exposed extremities and resettling nearly 3,000 people into the remaining quarters.

Not long after the first assault on Saturday, June 23, when Sir Claude MacDonald emerged as commander-in-chief, the Chinese tested the perimeter of the western side of the enclave by burning an area of native dwellings south and east of the British Legation. Fire became a new frightening tactic. To the north of the legation was situated the Hanlin Yuan, a complex of courtyards and buildings that housed “the quintessence of Chinese scholarship . . . the oldest and richest library in the world” (Fleming, 1959, pp. 121–22).<sup>8</sup> A late morning fire there was quelled and the compound cleared of Chinese troops (L. Giles, 1970, pp. 125–27).<sup>9</sup>

The British became worried that the incendiary intentions of the attackers might include this vulnerable site, the buildings at some point being only an arm’s length from the British building walls. On the other hand the Allies, knowing of the Chinese veneration for their cultural heritage, felt that they would face no real destructive threat from that direction.<sup>10</sup> Yet, on Sunday, June 24, when the winds shifted to come strongly from the north, the unanticipated happened: some of the buildings of Hanlin and the library that abutted the British building began burning on a bigger scale than that of the previous day. Peter Fleming summarizes contemporary descriptions: “The old buildings burned like tinder with a roar which drowned the steady rattle of musketry as Tung Fu-shiang’s Moslems fired wildly through the smoke from upper windows.” Through a hole made in their own wall that was near one of the Hanlin cloisters, the British Royal Marines hastened through the breach, followed by a motley crew of others who formed a human bucket brigade. To quote Fleming again,

Some of the incendiaries were shot down, but the buildings were an inferno and the old trees standing round them blazed like torches. It seemed as if nothing could save the British Legation, on whose security the whole defense depended. But at the last minute the wind veered to the north-west and the worst of the danger was over.

The fire-fighters had already demolished the nearest of Hanlin halls. The next one was the library.

An eyewitness, Lancelot Giles, son of Chinese literature scholar Herbert A. Giles (1937), described the situation of the grand encyclopedia of the Yung Lo emperor as follows: “An attempt was made to save the famous *Yung Lo Ta Tien* [now spelled *Yong Le Da Dian*], but heaps of volumes had been destroyed, so the attempt was given up. I secured vol. [section] 13,

345 for myself" (L. Giles, 1970). These volumes measured about one foot square and one inch thick.<sup>11</sup>

The Chinese have long suggested that the British destroyed the library as a defensive measure. The primary British accounts, however, noting the direction of the wind, have maintained that the "Chinese set fire to the Hanlin, working systematically from one courtyard to the next," to use Fleming's words based on Morrison's (1895) account. While it is true that the besieged British and their allies felt extremely vulnerable and fearful for their lives, there is another side to the story. Other evidence, exemplified by siege survivor and American missionary Arthur A. Smith, suggests that the fire was controlled in thirty minutes and the Chinese Muslim troops dispersed. It was then that the British defenders immediately began systematic destruction of most of the remaining buildings of the Hanlin, along with their precious contents. Some of the books were taken as booty by the curious. Others were simply thrown on the ground and still others tossed into lotus ponds and later buried—all later covered when the compound was leveled soon after the siege.<sup>12</sup> Authorized and official interpretations not unnaturally have persisted to the present, despite credible evidence to the contrary. However, important as this issue is, it is eclipsed by the significance of the Hanlin Library itself and the results of its destruction by fire and looters.

### THE CONTENTS OF THE HANLIN LIBRARY

The exact contents of the Hanlin Library are not known with certainty. No record of its collections survives. What is known is that the materials housed in it were irreplaceable. Among the collections was the noted encyclopedic collection of volumes, *Yong Le Da Dian*, commissioned by the Ming Dynasty's emperor in the early fifteenth century, and the original texts of *Si Ku Quan Shu*, the Four Treasure Library.<sup>13</sup> One of the largest works of its kind ever produced, *Yong Le Da Dian* was compiled between 1403 and 1407 by the Yung Lo emperor Chu Ti (1403–24), and consisted of 22,937 sections (or *chuan*), of which sixty were the table of contents. Altogether the nearly 23,000 sections or works in 11,095 handwritten folio volumes contained more than 370 million words—or twelve times Diderot's famous encyclopedia of the eighteenth century (Zhang, 1986, pp. 3–4).

After a bloody accession and at the suggestion of chancellor Hsieh Chin, the emperor, a patron of literature, authorized and implemented the collection and copying of the literary treasures of China's past and gave his chancellor the task of oversight. Headquartered in the imperial library at Nanjing, more than 2,000 scholars and many imperial officials participated in the compilation work, and some of them scoured the countryside for texts that had not been seen in the imperial library nor replicated since ancient times. Ultimately some 8,000 books from the earliest periods of Chinese

history through the early Ming Dynasties were included in this vast compilation. They covered an array of subjects, including agriculture, art, astronomy, drama, geology, history, literature, medicine, the natural sciences, religion, and technology, as well as descriptions of unusual natural events.

Because of the cost of woodblock cutting, the encyclopedia was never printed; it only existed in a single manuscript copy in Nanjing and then moved with the capital to Beijing in 1421, where it was housed in the emperor's palace in the Forbidden City. After being threatened by fire in 1557, a second set was produced in the 1560s and housed in the Huang Shi Chen (the imperial archive). A third set was moved to the Hanlin Library during the period of the Emperor Yong Zheng (1723–36). The original texts of *Yong Le Da Dian* in Nanjing possibly perished by fire in 1449, and the first manuscript copy possibly perished in the collapse of the Ming Dynasty (Zhang, 1986, pp. 3–4). The only remaining copy was then housed in the Hanlin Library where, although venerated by scholars and emperors, it was gradually diminished through a variety of circumstances. Some items were stolen by collectors or speculators seeking precious items to keep or sell. Other items were lost to poor preservation and fell prey to environmental conditions, insects, and rodents. Warfare and fire accounted for the loss of another segment of the collection. Indeed, some calculations suggest that of the 11,095 volumes existing in 1407, only about 800 remained in 1900—the greatest number of losses occurring in the late nineteenth century (Zhang, 1986, pp. 12–13).<sup>14</sup>

### ASSESSMENT OF DESTRUCTION AND LOSS

During and after the several hours in which the Hanlin complex burned, smoldered, and the buildings were demolished, the British and other legation personnel entered the library and rescued or simply removed or destroyed virtually all of the remaining volumes. Fleming relates:

A few undamaged books and manuscripts were salvaged more or less at random by sinologues. Some of the hand-carved wooden blocks on which works of great antiquity were preserved found their way into the British Legation; they were used by the Marines for shuttering up loopholes and by the children, among whom "Boxers" was now the only fashionable game, for constructing miniature barricades.

Otherwise, the Hanlin and its treasures, laboriously accumulated down the centuries, perished in a few hours. Vandalism so wanton and so decisive would have been hard to forgive if it had been committed in a conquered city as an act of retribution. History affords no comparable example of cultural *felo de se* [suicide]. (Fleming 1959, pp. 122–23)

Attributing this catastrophic calamity to an act of incredible self-destruction was a gratuitous claim by British commentators. It was their own countrymen and their allies who engaged in the vandalism. In any case, during the remainder of the siege, as destruction of intervening buildings

drew the battle lines closer, both Chinese and Allied fighters doubtless obtained additional artifacts as souvenirs.<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned above the Hanlin Library also contained a later series of classic books, the *Si Ku Quan Shu* (the Four Treasure Library), which was completed in 1782 during the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty. It consisted of some 3,500 selected titles in 36,000 manuscript volumes and included 385 books drawn from the *Yong Le Da Dian*.<sup>16</sup> Several copies of this set have survived. But the bulk of the fifteenth-century collection and the original texts of the *Si Ku Quan Shu* were irretrievably lost in the Hanlin fire.

In its waning years the Qing Dynasty established a national library. This was developed with the coming of the Republic in 1912. The national library, known by various names, initiated an effort to recover as many volumes from the collection of the *Yong Le Da Dian* as possible. More than 370 volumes, or about 810 sections, have been accounted for in China and elsewhere. In the early 1950s the Soviet Union returned 64 volumes from various repositories; East Germany returned 3 volumes in 1955. By 1959 the National Library of China possessed 216 volumes. There are currently 41 volumes in the United States at the Library of Congress. Chinese authorities have photocopied all known exemplars of the collection that were not in China. Two projects have begun publishing the extant works. Zhong Hua Shu Ju (Chinese Press) has published 797 sections since 1959; the Taiwanese published 742 sections of the collection in 100 volumes in 1962.<sup>17</sup> How many more volumes from this unique collection exist in European and Japanese research libraries or are in private hands is a matter of speculation. How many souvenir volumes, carried home by persons in the Allied Legations in 1900 and hidden away in attic trunks, is unknown. Some could yet appear.

## CONCLUSION

The much celebrated siege ended on August 14 with the entry of the Allied troops into Peking. The attention of the world now rested on the aftermath, which is another story. The destruction of what remained of the Hanlin Library in 1900 through fire and pillage was apparently forgotten. Yet it is more than just a minor footnote of history. It has symbolic significance. First, it portrays the fragile nature of a civilization's written heritage. Vast compilations seem to devalue the originals on which they were based; that is, what was not chosen to be copied and passed on was most often lost. Second, in the case of China, it illustrates the threat of a modernity that causes antiquarian interests to suffer when practical relevance is unknown or at least unclear. When a society seems to be moving ahead to a new era, the artifactual legacies of the ancient or even recent past seem of little interest except as curiosities. Third, in times of national upheaval, such as the Boxer Uprising, cultural treasures can fall prey to popular mass movements that do not appreciate them and even view their destruction as a positive thing. Unlettered groups destroy or allow to be destroyed

books that represent to them the accoutrements of oppression. Finally, the destruction of the Hanlin Library, albeit a minor episode in national and world history for many, contains in microcosm the elements of the conflict of national cultures and the industrial powers of the nineteenth century, in which indigenous culture tended to suffer for a variety of reasons when other interests with greater power seriously threatened it.

In summary, this episode illustrates one of the results of a great nation's disintegrating cultural structure—a system that had governed it for centuries—when it encountered the modern world. It contains all the explosive drama of the East-West encounter: elements of commercial exploitation, missionary zeal, and diplomatic interests, and military history combined with the emergence of new technologies. It is a microcosm of actions and their implications that continue to haunt civilization.

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Round Table on Library History at the 62nd IFLA General Conference in Beijing, August 1996, and appeared in the *IFLA Journal* 23, no. 2 (1977): 112–116; a popularized version appeared as “The Destruction of a Great Library: China's Loss Belongs to the World,” *American Libraries* 28 (October 1997): 60–62. Greenfield (1989), treats the ongoing issue of cultural property in alien hands with current examples of various responses.
2. See McAleavy (1967, p. 166). Chapter 11 of his book deals with “The Boxer Rising.” A contemporary, historical perspective is the chronological treatment of Emerson (1901, vol. 3, pp. 1882–95).
3. See Spence (1990, pp. 137–268) for a thorough current treatment and perspective of this period. This supplements earlier standard works, such as Hsu (1975, part 3, “Self-Strengthening in an Age of Accelerated Foreign Imperialism, 1861–95,” and part 4, “Reform and Revolution, 1898–1912”).
4. The standard treatments of the subject in English are Esherick (1987), Purcell (1963), and Tan (1955). A work from contemporary Chinese sources is *The Boxer Rising* (1967), in which there is a reference to official engagement in “plunder and incendiarism” that included the Hanlin (p. 51). Chinese treatments include the Historical Society of China (1957), Ming and Ching Archive (1959), and *The Historical Data of the Yihetuan* (Institute for the History of Modern Times, 1982).
5. The eleven legations included those of Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, Russia, Spain, and the United States of America.
6. On Morrison, see (Morrison 1895) and his private papers (1895–1918) at Mitchell Library, Sydney. For a critical assessment of Morrison as a reliable source, see Seagrave (1992), which has extensive references throughout.
7. Although commercial and missionary enterprises and their personnel had been in serious risk for some time, the danger of the diplomatic community attracted the focus of the emerging global press. Though many participants wrote their memoirs of the event—most notably George E. Morrison, a physician turned reporter for the *London Times*—perhaps the most engaging single volume in English is Fleming (1959), reissued in 1983 and in several printings since that time. Although based largely on Morrison's impressions, and thus somewhat one-sided, it is the major English account used judiciously in this article. Diaries of Robert Hart and others offer alternative interpretations of the context for the siege.
8. Unless otherwise noted, the direct quotations describing the Hanlin Yuan destruction come from this source.
9. L. Giles's authentic account is one of the best British first-person narratives. The Australian National University Library has mounted a splendid collection of nearly 300 photographs of the siege and contemporary China in the Giles-Pickford Photographic Collection on its

- Web site: <http://anulib.anu.edu.au/clusters/ap/digilib/chi/gp/aaindex.html>. Another informative narrative in the form of letters is Putnam Weale [pseudonym for Bertram Lenox Simpson] (1907, pp. 136–43, part 2, chapter 3, “Fires and Food”). See Chen and Chen (1970, pp. 199–394) for a Chinese translation of part 2 of Putnam Weale.
10. O'Connor (1973, p. 134) emphasizes the incredulity that the Chinese would allow “use [of] the Hanlin Library—which was not only a library but the premier academy of the empire, the Chinese Oxford/Heidelberg/ Sorbonne—as an instrument of military operations.” The point is supported by Keown-Boyd (1991, pp. 106–7).
  11. L. Giles (1970, pp. 126, 128–29) includes some of the few contemporary, printed photographs of the Hanlin building exteriors and a interior shot of the library.
  12. This is summarized by Smith (1901) and discussed by Seagrave (1992, pp. 376–378 and 538–40). According to Seagrave, “In general, the whole story of the Hanlin has been ignored by Western scholars.”
  13. Brief mentions occur in survey articles by Wu (1974, p. 630) and Seymour (1994, p. 134). I am indebted to a research paper by Li (1989) prepared for a graduate seminar, Library and Information Science Since 1500, GSLIS, University of Texas at Austin, Spring 1989, which is the source of otherwise undocumented information. See also Huang (1989, pp. 280–82).
  14. German sources on the siege, compiled by Herbert Birett as “Library History: The Destruction of Chinese Books in The Peking Seige of 1900—German Sources” (8 pp.), listed as Fire in Hanlin-Academy Beijing 1900/Brand der Hanlin-Akademie Beijing 1900 (1.12.04), retrieved from <http://www.kinematographie.de/HANLIN.HTM>.
  15. O'Connor (1973, p. 135) relates the eyewitness accounts of Bertram Simpson, whose colleagues apparently did not appreciate his candor. Simpson describes an occasional “Sinologue” who would select an armful of rarities and dash back through the flames only to be met by marines “with a stern order to stop such literary looting.” However, he thought that some copies must have found their way out of the library and “may be someday resurrected in strange lands.” One such example of this occurred as late as the 1960s, when the British Museum acquired a volume taken by Captain Frances Garden Poole during the siege for £50.00 that was worth some £10,000.00 in the early 1990s (Seagrave, 1992, p. 539; refers to Grimstead, 1962).
  16. These included 66 from the Confucian canon, 41 of history, 1,032 of philosophy, and 175 of poetry, according to Li (1989).
  17. The University of Texas at Austin, among many other research libraries, has a copy of this set. Chinese authorities are urging holders of items from the *Yong Le Da Dian* to share them with them. See “Experts Urge Collectors to Share World’s Earliest Encyclopedia,” Xinhua News Agency, April 17, 2002, retrieved from <http://service.china.org.cn/link/wcm/ShowText?infoid=31248&pqry=Yongle and Dadian>. In conjunction with this request, the National Library of China has announced plans to digitize the 281 volumes under its control, of about 400 known worldwide. See “China to Digitize World’s Earliest Encyclopedia,” *People’s Daily*, April 19, 2002, retrieved from <http://service.cina.org.cn/link/wcm/ShowText?infoid=31120&pqry=Yongle and Dadian>.

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Cheng Huanwen is professor and chairman of the Department of Information Management and university librarian of Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China. He holds a B.A. and M.A. in library and information science from Wuhan University, and a Ph.D. in history from Sun Yat-Sen University. He used to be a visiting scholar at the University of California at Los Angeles (1993), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1998), and Harvard University (2000). Now he is vice-chairman of the Academic Committee of China Society for Library Science (CSLS), chairman of the Library History Research Committee of the CSLS, and president of the Library Society of Guangdong Province, among other duties. His academic achievements in library and information science include 10 books and more than 130 articles published at home and abroad. Among his books are the *Selected Works of Book History in China* (1994), *An Introduction to Book Culture in China* (1995), *A Biography of the Father of Library Science Education in China: Samuel T. Y. Seng* (1997), *The Forty Years of the Library Society of Guangdong Province* (2003), *Selected Works of Alfred K'aiming Ch'iu in Library Science* (2003), *History of Library Science in the Late Qing Dynasty (1840-1911)* (2004), *The Development of Library Science Education in the World* (2004), and *Information Resource Sharing* (national textbook, 2005).

Donald G. Davis Jr. is professor emeritus of library history at the School of Information and in the Department of History, University of Texas at Austin, where he has taught book and library history, collection development, and reference sources from 1971 to his retirement in 2006. He holds a B.A. in history from the University of California at Los Angeles; and M.A. in history and M.L.S. from the University of California at Berkeley; and a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, as well as a M.A.T.S. from Austin Seminary. From 1964 to 1968 he served at California State University, Fresno. Editor of the quarterly *Libraries & Culture* (UT Press) from 1976 to 2005, he has published widely on topics related to library history for more than thirty-five years. These papers range from classical history and English Reformation periods to American subjects spanning the century 1850 to 1950, as well as phenomena in twentieth-century India and China. His broad interests have augmented his leadership in the library history units in the ALA and IFLA. His passion for scholarly book reviews and review essays is legendary. He was co-editor of *American Library History: A Comprehensive Guide to the Literature* (1989) and *The Encyclopedia of Library History* (1994). Three recent publications include *A Bibliography and A Chronology of Texas Library History, 1685–2000* (2002) and *Dictionary of American Library Biography, 2nd Supplement* (2002). Among his recent honors was election as a fellow of the Molesworth Institute.