

Guest Editorial

Small Futures?

In 1993 The New-York Historical Society came close to shutting its doors for good. The California Historical Society ground to a halt several years ago and is slowly trying to resurrect itself. Small denominational colleges and seminaries continue to sell off their rare book collections. The John Crerar Library found salvation, but only at the cost of its institutional independence, when it merged with the University of Chicago. More recently, the Annenberg Institute—formerly Dropsie College—has become part of the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania, thus ending for now a long and complicated odyssey.

And so libraries come and libraries go. It seems a story so familiar as to be unremarkable. The fate of libraries usually attracts little interest or attention in the media or in our professional literature. The case of The New-York Historical Society is instructive. It has garnered a few columns in the *New York Times* but little else. There has not been much if anything about it in the professional literature. As we fill journals and conferences with more and more papers on the possible obsolescence of libraries in the electronic age, we remain oddly silent in front of the real situations of real institutions. We seem prepared to accept the demise of libraries as natural happenings, as natural as life cycles, evolution, and the free market. I remember once seeing plans for a new central library at the University of Chicago drawn up in the 1930s. They had space reserved for the Newberry Library. The assumption of a sort of Darwinian inevitability is revealing.

There are thousands of small, private institutions in this country with topical

collections embracing medicine and the sciences, religion, ethnic and regional history, the arts and culture. A few are well funded and well endowed; many, however, exist in a twilight zone, wrestling with a difficult present and moving toward an uncertain future. Their histories and destinies, on the whole, have been little studied or appreciated. But it needs to be asked whether we as a profession, we as citizens, don't in fact have some larger interest in the future of these institutions and their collections. Why do they change identities or disappear altogether? What is lost and gained in such passages? More than protests or laments, analyses and evaluations are needed that can be used to inform policy, management, and strategic thinking. But first we must become engaged with the topic. We must feel a keener sense of urgency about the fates of some of our most interesting, valuable, and irreplaceable cultural institutions. I have no specific recommendations to make at this point, nothing to put on the table except a modest proposal that more attention, watchfulness, and thoughtful consideration of institutions become part of our professional agenda.

Habent sua fata libelli: books have their own destiny. And so do the repositories that house them. Created for specific purposes and identifiable constituencies, these institutions often outlive their original *raison d'être* and fail to find a new one. Constituencies disappear and with them interest and support. Meanwhile, policies and programs remain locked into place, frozen in time. The institution ceases to have any organic relationship with the world around it. In

effect it dies. But not quite. Library collections are not easily relinquished. Their very materiality proclaims, "We exist, therefore we should exist." The fact that no one may be using them, that they are slumbering quietly on the shelves is less important than their sheer presence. As the Israelis say in another context, they create facts. Since the Renaissance, if not earlier, books have served as symbols of entitlement, confirmations of status, proofs of position. And what has been true for individuals has been just as true for the clubs, societies, fraternal and professional organizations they have created. To have an organization without a library or museum, without objects and material presences, is to have a phantom organization. Thus, patriots, true believers, and well-wishers see in such collections that symbolic capital that certifies the institution's right to exist. The collections become their own rationale.

This institutional sclerosis, however, is usually fatal. What happens next is the most important part of the story, yet here I would argue is where professional nostrums are open to challenge and where there is a clear and pressing need for sustained analysis. The worst case, we imagine, is dismemberment: the collections are dispersed, sold off. But is this necessarily a bad outcome? Bad for whom? For the institution, surely. But who else loses in this transaction? The community? Scholars? How and why? If the collection has lost its constituency in one venue, could not the books find life in other, more congenial settings? The compromise position—and often the only meaningful alternative to dismemberment—is merger: finding a healthy and sympathetic partner. Identity and independence may be sacrificed, but collections are retained intact. This, we imagine, is a desirable outcome. A small, struggling institution is absorbed by an enlightened, well-managed, cognate organization with constituencies, support, and clout. The assumption here is that collections will be better cared for when integrated into a larger fabric of resources that will insure their use and

well-being over time. Bigger is better, safety in size. Yet, is this always or necessarily a desirable outcome? Is it not possible that sleeping collections will continue to sleep, only this time in the company of thousands and thousands of volumes?

However, there are serious obstacles to studying and appraising the fates of libraries. As a profession, we understandably tend to be more concerned with those nuts-and-bolts issues that make up our working days. The destinies of institutions, unless they impinge directly on us, are not topics to which we have devoted any significant attention. Moreover, the general topic is a sensitive one, involving delicate issues of management and stewardship. Yet such issues are aired regularly in business publications covering the ebb and flow of corporations. There is no *prima facie* reason why we could not be just as open. We can admit that the field may be sown with land mines and at the same try to pick our way through them. Not to do so is to beg the issue of accountability, and that, I think, truly is the worst case scenario—for institutions and for us as a profession. The most formidable obstacles to the study of institutions, however, are usually thrown up by the institutions themselves, who often prefer to work out their futures in private for fear of calling attention to chronic problems. While such fears are valid, they inhibit learning and probably restrict options open to the institution. We all lose in the process.

Even as I write, institutions are quietly negotiating their futures. I know of several here in the Philadelphia area, but—alas—prudence and respect counsel discretion in discussing their situations publicly. I wish them all well, and yet I am bothered that these are simply more narratives unfolding out of sight, out of mind. Trustees and boosters will work among themselves to reach acceptable conclusions. Someday we will learn of the outcomes, but we will have learned little else. And that will be it. Books do indeed have their own destiny.

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