

## THE STATE OF THE RARE BOOK MARKET TODAY

John Parker

I hope that no one will read a defensive tone into these remarks, for the rare book librarian is at first startled at the thought of bringing a discussion of the rare book trade into a symposium on "the practical operations of libraries in [acquisitions] functions." We have become weary in the struggle to establish our belief that rare books are a fit subject for discussion among other "practical" aspects of librarianship. I happily substitute gratitude for defensiveness, noting that rare bookmen here are accepted as practical librarians, interested in and capable of discussing the broader aspects of building library collections.

In our emphasis upon the older books, we are not unmindful of the fact that we seek financial support from budgets that are heavily committed to the necessary acquisition of next year's latest journals and monographs in a variety of subject fields. We do not resent the truth of Shakespeare's observation

"That all with one consent praise new-born gawds,  
Though they are made and moulded of things past,  
And give to dust that is a little gilt,  
More laud than gilt o'er dusted."

There is nothing about life among original boards and vellum that makes modern books any less interesting to contemplate. Rather, we feel that we have an important contribution to make toward a proper understanding of the latest publications.

An educated man, according to the contemporary Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, is one "who understands and appreciates the cultural tradition which produced him, and who is willing to spend himself in his own lifetime in order that that valuable heritage might be preserved, protected, perfected, and extended for the benefit of future generations." Books are the repositories of much of this heritage, and as keepers of them we are confident of our contribution to education. In making that contribution, we too have acquisition problems, but they are not those of mass purchases and mountainous paper work which trouble order departments. Rather, they are problems of an historical nature, growing out of our position as an emerging part of

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the book world long dominated by booksellers and private collectors. We bring narrow budgets and the trappings of bureaucracy into a trade where ample means and a close personal relationship between the merchant and his client are an ancient and warm tradition.

There is little that needs saying about the technical processes involved in buying rare books. Every rare bookman will see to it that orders are speedily placed, that the books are properly protected in their migration through processing departments, and that approval for payment is given quickly. We sometimes wish that the bookseller were more understanding of the bureaucracy that is necessary to the buying of rare books in a public institution. But he has a right to a definite order or rejection within two months of a book sent out on approval, and he has a right to expect prompt payment for a book that has been purchased. This is not rare bookmanship; this is simple efficiency and human courtesy. But what needs more discussion, I believe, are the means by which rare book acquisition programs originating in institutional libraries can be made to bear a stronger influence in the rare book trade. I would plead that the selection of rare books and the impact of selection policy upon the budget are well within the meaning of "practical operation" as called for in the program of this institute.

You have asked me a question, "What is the state of the rare book market today?" When Dr. Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt asked "What is happening in the rare book trade today?" in the April 1961 issue of Library Trends, he prefaced the answers that he and his fellow contributors gave with the remark that it would be difficult to find a more challenging question about the world of books. The question is still challenging to the rare book librarian, especially if he feels that today he and his colleagues have the possibility of exerting an influence that will, to an important degree, determine what is to happen in the antiquarian book trade tomorrow. In my discussion of the problem, my intention is to look at the rare book business as a part of it, although I am a librarian. Members of our profession have too long looked upon booksellers as "the trade" and themselves as its victims. Any trade requires a buyer and a seller, and if both are to be successful, there must be a feeling of equality between the two parties to the sale.

I do not say that the lack of confidence that has sometimes hindered an understanding relationship between librarian and bookseller is entirely unjustified. The traditions of and education for modern librarianship have not been oriented toward the long out-of-print book. And the rare book trade was not established to serve institutional libraries. It was not the desiderata of Oxford and Cambridge libraries that gave rise to the rare book trade in the English-speaking world. It was the private collector, and although he may have had a university library in mind as he bought, the personal relationship was still

between the collector and the bookseller. The traditions of dealer-collector relationships came to America in the nineteenth century, flowered in the period between Reconstruction and Depression, and it is with such notable collectors as Morgan, Huntington, Clements, Folger, and Brown that the beginnings of the institutional collection are to be found. These libraries, although institutionalized, had deep roots in the private collector traditions. They bore the marks of the eighteenth century in which prime condition was the watchword; yet they were dominated by the nineteenth-century spirit with its emphasis upon incunabula, first editions of outstanding authors, and its vigorous concern for the early books relating to the history of the Americas.

The monuments to the love of history and literature which these men built in our country did their work too well. They helped establish certain books and types of books as the required holdings or desiderata of a respectable rare book collection. Author bibliographies and subject lists were created to provide guides for the aspiring bibliophile. By 1921 Seymour de Ricci had prepared a strait jacket for collectors in his The Book Collector's Guide. Here he recorded "the two or three thousand British and American books which fashion has decided are the most desirable for the up-to-date collector." Following the list with a large purse brought forth a fine library, but the acquisition of it was a singularly uncreative activity. There were other lists that one could follow, such as Wagner's The Plains and the Rockies, 1921, and the catalogs of the Church and John Carter Brown libraries. Many a bookbuyer became a follower of lists rather than a creator of a library, whereby he helped to solidify the demand for certain books and bypassed the unlisted as if they were things unclean.

The bookseller quite naturally kept a close account of which collectors were following which lists and supplied their desiderata as it became possible to do so—also a rather uncreative activity, but immensely safe. Thus, a conservatism settled in upon us that took little account of many potential areas for collecting. Prices were revised steadily—usually upward—but the rest of the bookseller's description was little tampered with in his well tended files. The bibliographical remarks of Sabin, Muller, Palau, or HARRISSE were (and still are) quoted as gospel, while in most other fields of learning, revision was the very stuff of scholarship.

Into these traditions of collecting and bookselling the American institutional library emerged as a vigorous participant after 1945. Very often its earliest participation resulted from the financial assistance and advice of a private collector, and this fact may have been responsible for the adoption of the standard fields for collecting as well as attitudes on the part of librarians who viewed the rare book collection as a prestige and public relations aspect of the library rather than as a part of its research holdings. It cannot be said too

often that rare books must have a function beyond prestige to justify their presence in an institutional library. Louis B. Wright said it admirably, "The unifying factor that any rare book librarian must consider is what genuine utility will be served by the material he buys."

What is the state of the rare book trade today? The most important thing I can say about it is that the trade is feeling the impact of utilitarianism. Usefulness is making demands upon an enterprise that formerly made its appeal through fashion, emotion, and beauty. The institutional buyer with Wright's words on his conscience is gradually bringing the research interests of professors into the marketplace. Antiquarian booksellers of my acquaintance have estimated that from 60 to 75 per cent of their sales are made to institutional libraries. Yet we rare book librarians have had our indoctrination in the traditions of private collecting and do not deny that the books we have read on the romance of and adventures in book collecting have not ideally suited us to be utilitarian. I find myself rejoicing over a fine calf or pigskin binding now and then, and I am willing to admit that it is much more exciting to do an exhibit of beautiful volumes than to fill cases with books that are merely important. I would by no means suggest abandoning the old traditions; particularly their concern for quality should remain with us, but we must keep utility always in mind.

How deeply are we committed to the interests and traditions of the past, and what influence is our desiderata having upon the rare book trade? To answer these questions I asked institutional rare book librarians and booksellers with institutional clients what types of books are most actively sought, and I am going to share the resulting impressions with you. They are, of course, only impressions, for this is not a subject which lends itself to scientific terminology and measurement. I doubt that those who responded to my inquiries would even agree exactly upon what a rare book is. My impressions are based upon a general view of our larger and medium-sized college, university, and public libraries, excluding, however, certain of the very large rare book collections, the extent and diversity of which made it impossible for the librarians to answer the questions I asked about current emphasis in their acquisitions policies.

The first impression I would note is the tendency for rare book collections in institutional libraries to be administered together with something generally called "special collections." Usually these are subject collections which have less stature than rare books in the mind of the librarian; yet they are receiving more and more attention because their subject emphasis gives them research potential. The booksellers repeatedly call attention to the growth in buying according to subject interests, and it is likely that some of these subject interests reflect the growth of what we are still calling "special collections."

The distinction in our minds seems to be based upon the notion that rare books do not have the same usefulness as "special collections," and nothing could be farther from the truth. I have heard librarians ask of a particular library, "Is it a research library or a rare book library?"

Actually, are not both special collections and rare book collections merely specially cared-for extensions of the research holdings of the library? More than two thirds of the librarians who answered my inquiry indicated that they consider their rare book holdings closely related to the research strengths of their libraries, and of those who replied otherwise, several indicated their concern at the diversity in emphasis between the general library and the rare book collections. It seems to me that we are gradually producing a new definition of a rare book, and that definition will have something to say about the utility of that book to the library which acquires it. The segregation of books on the basis of price or class has produced situations in which valuable eighteenth-century books are to be found in the unrestricted area of the stack, because they were bought for a few dollars two decades ago, while fine manuscripts go into "special collections" as a part of the material used for exhibits, and undistinguished limited editions find their way to the rare book room because they supposedly represent fine printing. If subject buying can be accompanied by subject knowledge, we will develop within our rare book holdings "special collections" which will in fact dominate the rare book interest of the library, for what rare book does not have a subject emphasis? That emphasis rather than any other consideration must be the reason for its purchase.

The booksellers' awareness of our interest in rare books, and their estimate that from 60 to 75 per cent of their sales are made to institutions might suggest that we have achieved a position of dominance in the trade. This is not true. We probably dominate in the bread and butter type of rare book, but where the more spectacular rarities are concerned, the private collector and a very few rare book libraries still hold the high ground. Librarians informed me that 88 per cent of their rare book purchases cost less than \$100, and ten per cent fell in the \$100 to \$500 category. We are buying a great many books, but we are not dominating the financial structure of the rare book business.

It will not be what we pay for books or how we administer them that will be the measure of our influence in the rare book trade. What we buy is the important factor, for important collections can be built with small budgets, and truly creative bibliography creates demand where none existed, giving importance and value to books that were previously but little known. An enthusiastic young assistant once suggested to his employer, one of the great booksellers of the past generation, that the firm follow a particular trend that appeared to be

gaining some momentum (it was the history of science): "We do not follow trends; we make them," the bookseller decreed. I doubt if this statement of the origin of trends is quite as valid today as it was then, and surely we librarians ought not to accept the trends established by booksellers unless they are trends of value to us. Each of us has the traditional strengths of our libraries to keep in mind, regardless of trends, and our budgets rarely take into account the impact of trend-following upon prices. But even more important, the librarian is a full-time bibliographer who has no reason to wait for the bookseller for direction. He ought to be capable of deciding what historical, literary, or artistic movements are significant to his library, and then solicit the help of the bookseller in finding the materials he needs.

He will, of course, be under pressure to shift emphasis with new trends in the political, economic, and academic worlds. He will be torn between building to strength and building to novelty, hoping in the latter case to acquire the important books before they become too expensive. If he begins buying a popular new field, he will shortly find that the books of second rate importance are soon too expensive for his budget, and the really important ones that he did not get in his first surge of enthusiasm are far beyond reach. Five or six years ago I was buying seventeenth—and eighteenth—century tracts on the Commerce of West Africa for the Bell Collection at \$20 apiece. Lately I was offered a collection of such items, some of which we already have, at an average price of more than \$200. The Africana bandwagon is rolling. I do not recommend it for an economical ride.

But there is just as much danger in staying with those fields where our libraries have long-standing commitments, for these are often the areas in which we compete with private collectors. About one-third of the libraries answering my queries indicated that their fields of emphasis had not changed significantly in the last 30 years. Another third noted significant variations in emphasis, and the remaining third stated that they had no rare book collection 30 years ago. What then are the old collecting interests that hold our loyalties, and when we change, or when we start a rare book collection, what are the new directions we are taking?

We are held most firmly by English literature, more I believe because of the heritage (or habits) of the nineteenth century than because our scholars in English literature have a greater need for rare books in their research than do scholars in other fields. The same is true, I believe, of American literature, which is steadily growing in popularity among institutional collections. While one can surely admit some research pressure in these areas, it is unlikely that the urge to collect private press publications and books illustrating the book arts comes from any source other than the librarian who feels an obligation to make a contribution toward recording the history of the printed word. However, while the book arts rank just behind English literature

in popularity, the booksellers note again and again the decline in interest in incunabula as part of the history of printing, and the even more marked lack of interest in the finely printed books of earlier times. The history of printing is still popular among private collectors, and it is possible that the high prices to which these books have risen have forced the institutions into modern fine printing which they can afford and which still keeps them convinced that they are within the old tradition. Let us hope that the fine books of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which are essential to any good collection on the history of book arts, will eventually come to us from the private collectors, who have driven most libraries out of the market for such books.

The rise in prices and the utilitarian approach to collecting have also brought about a change in the type of Americana that is being acquired by institutional libraries. The boundlessness of the term "Americana" makes it an area into which no library can venture without first setting rigid limitations. The old "high spots" style of collecting has little validity in our type of library, and it is precisely the high spots which are well beyond the budgets of most of us. The Harri-*risse* species of early Americana, including many items which briefly mention the New World, is not popular with rare book librarians who prefer more research content for their money. It is to be wondered if the Wagner-Camp type of Americana, which is not only replacing the discovery era in popularity but also the Colonial and Revolutionary War period, is as useful to scholars as it is exciting to the imagination. The West has a tenacious hold on our instincts for adventure and romance, and it is possible that our utilitarianism is being stretched a little as we lean away from our earlier history in the direction of the plains and the rockies.

Utilitarianism shows its influence again in the vigorous buying of Renaissance materials reported by both booksellers and librarians. The main current in buying Renaissance books has shifted from interests in book arts of the period to texts of significance to scholars. This is a field, it seems to me, that should not be entered without considerable thought. The Renaissance has more international appeal than have most other traditional collecting areas, and the near monopoly that Americans had on Renaissance material a decade ago is now being seriously challenged by a revived European interest.

English and American literature, book arts, Americana, and the Renaissance, these are the fields in which we have the strongest traditions. Local history has been strong and will remain strong, but by its nature it usually does not put one library into competition with another. State imprints are a special part of local history, and these remain strong, with more competition resulting, because libraries frequently seek imprints beyond those of their own states. The Civil War is not yet popular with institutional libraries, and I was surprised to find remarkably little interest in it.

If the utilitarian approach and restricted budgets are altering the emphasis in the areas of our greatest tradition, what are they doing to create new fields of collecting for us? I suppose we may call it utilitarian to collect history of science in this science-dominated age, although one detects some fad-following here. We might hope that it results from the scientists' search for a way back to a proper position among the philosophers and humanists, as Dr. Lehmann-Haupt suggested to me. Whatever its cause, collecting of history of science materials is here, and we are probably going to find budgets more ample in this field than in any other. Yet we would do well to set our limitations early, for science is at least as broad as Americana, and having greater international appeal, is likely to be even more expensive. An important dealer in rare scientific materials notes the beginnings of list-following among buyers of science history. Librarians come armed with the Grolier Club Classics in Science, and while no one would belittle the importance of books listed there, they are likely to go beyond our budgets long before we have all of them, and when we have all of them, we have only "high spots" which are of research value only when they are buttressed with quantities of related contemporary material. Would it not be better to collect Darwinism, the history of chemistry, or the history of radiology, with less money and some hope of having a collection sufficiently complete to be of research value?

Other new fields are claiming our attention. Medieval manuscripts without illustrations but with textual value are finding a market in institutions, as are incunabula with important texts. The eighteenth century is emerging into respectability in the eyes of rare bookmen. Fine illustrated books are being acquired, probably as exhibit material, a utilitarian justification for extravagance. There seems to be a growing interest in books on theatre and stage technique. Scholars are finding valuable uses for business records and unpublished manuscripts of all sorts. Africana is one of the fastest growing fields of international significance, and we are not getting all of it in this country by any means.

We have a tremendous assortment of subjects that are being collected; yet the hand of tradition is still too heavy upon us for our own good. We are raising prices for each other by duplicating, and it seems to me that we are not sufficiently creative in our collecting. Booksellers tell me that we are staying close to established lists of books, that we are in a great hurry to build our collections, and that we are more quantity— than quality— conscious; hence the rash of collection-buying.

I would like to dwell a moment upon list-buying and collection-buying. They are essentially the same thing: buying what someone else has assembled, whether physically or bibliographically. Both, I believe, are rather uncreative, but not necessarily unwise. In both

instances the buyer is using someone else's judgment as to the importance of what he is buying, and this practice seems to violate the principle of wise utilitarian purchasing, for even the list compiled by a great scholar and bibliographer was not made with someone else's library in mind. Unless we are firmly committed to a subject which is well covered in a list or a collection, would it not be more worthy of our calling to buy books in a field in which there is no list and then compile one? This would be truly a double contribution to scholarship, whereas list-buying is at best a single contribution. As for collection-buying, it enables a bookseller, as one bookseller put it, to sell a great many rather dull books. A collection is made up of individual titles, and it ought to be approached with attention to individual items, rather than with an awed regard for the size of the lot.

Finally, I should like to lament briefly the number of libraries which feel that their budget restrictions are such as to keep them from buying any rare books, or very few at best, and to point some directions in which they might go and in which some of the rest of us might well follow in the spirit of utility and economy. I would like to suggest that we ought to break out of the concept that only those books which have been declared rare by tradition are worth collecting as rare books. There is no reason that the buyer ought to be the passive half of the rare book business. He ought to be creative, exploring new subjects, discovering books, ascertaining and declaring their rarity, and compiling bibliographies intended to stimulate research in the field he has collected. He ought to be sending the bookseller in search of things that are not recorded and priced in the bookseller's files.

Creative bibliography offers opportunities almost without limit, even within the field of Americana. Calvin Coolidge once said "the chief business of America is business." Yet I find only one library that professed an interest in the rarities of business history in America. Although we are a nation of immigrants, no library that replied to my questionnaire indicated an interest in immigration. I should think that the immigrant press, showing the gradual assimilation of new Americans, would be at least as exciting as private presses. The most mobile people of the modern world, whose grocery stores, banks, movie theaters, and whole way of life, are geared to the automobile, we seem to be satisfied with a few private collectors of old cars. What an area for collecting, the emergence of the horseless age! Will it one day be looked back upon as the beginnings of a machine-powered mobility that literally has no end? Or the age of flight, man's liberation from the confines of the earth. Might it not one day be considered almost as important as the Renaissance? Speaking of liberation, I found only a single expression of interest in the feminist movement among libraries that replied to my inquiries. Can we think of a more profound revolution than the equalizing of the sexes? I am convinced

that in all of these subjects there is a great quantity of literature awaiting our attention.

We collect literature avidly, presumably because it gives insights into the minds of men and the times in which they wrote. But we collect songs hardly at all. Perhaps what we sing tells as much about us as what we read. Records, sheet music, song books, all are vital Americana needing the attention of rare book librarians. Until recently we were a nation of farmers, and much of our history is bound up with land and its management. Yet I found no expression of interest in rarities of agricultural history. Nor did I find any library interested in the various third-party movements which this country has known, and whatever interest there was in the history of religion in America seems to have been confined largely to the now declining New England sermons.

I am not trying to convince you that these areas of collection are more important than English and American literature, but I do believe that they and dozens of others similarly overlooked offer abundant opportunity for creative bibliography at little cost.

There are certain to be some real rarities in these subject areas, and as for utility, there have been researchers at work lately on the history of farm machinery, the Prohibitionist movement, folklore, American songs, automobile history, etc. Are these subjects not just as valid for research as the Lake Poets or Dante? George Bernard Shaw saw in genius "a man who sees the importance of things." Edwin Wolf, in speaking to the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America on February 7, 1961, urged booksellers to look for truly important elements in American history, and he cited numerous items from a college history text. I would urge upon librarians a careful reading of a history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not for specific titles, but for movements and historical development that both separate and join our times and those of earlier generations of Americans. You will find, I think, that the land flowed with pamphlets, the air was filled with speeches and songs, and the economic development and social attitudes of a people found expression in books and journals on steam engines and roadbuilding, diatribes for and against birth-control, God, Republicans, public schools, and almost anything else worth discussing. I commend them all to your interest.

It is time that the institutional libraries brought some new ideas to the rare book trade. New demands will turn up suppliers to meet them, and with the help of booksellers, we can discover rarities in areas that are still bibliographical jungles. "Emulation," said Shakespeare, "has a thousand sons." I ask you, is there any reason that we must be among them?