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# The Antiquarian Bookmarket and the Acquisition of Rare Books

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IN ONLY A FEW CASES is the acquisition of general out-of-print and of rare books identical. Usually two different approaches and two different types of dealers or private owners are involved. One of the most frequent headaches is the little old lady who comes in off the street and expects that because her book is old (to her) it must be rare. It seems entirely reasonable to throw away most of what is so carefully preserved in safe deposit boxes and replace this with pamphlets and broadsides all too frequently carelessly forgotten in attics. Few family Bibles are of value beyond the immediate family, and eighteenth century German prayer books seldom budge the purse strings of order librarians. Occasionally there will be a local historical society that will accept Bibles with genealogical entries, if they are of local interest. Otherwise, that Bible, with the immigrant ancestor's other forms of piety, had better be handed on to another member of the family, less cramped for space than a library. The late Rumball-Petre<sup>1</sup> had something to say on this particular matter.

Effectiveness in both kinds of antiquarian buying, general out-of-print and rare books, is crucial to the health of any library. And neither is too well understood by librarians. It is a rare library school teacher who mentions the matter, and too little is written on the subject. The only way to find out, given imagination and an enthusiastic flair for the work, is to learn on the job in a good library or a bookstore, or both, to read dealers' catalogs and the other literature of the trade assiduously, to talk with dealers and collectors, or better yet listen to them, and, most of all, to be in love with the excitement of books, bibliography, and the book trade. The best practitioners are artists and their learning came easily.

If current books pose problems because of the numbers of books,

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the shortcomings of the bibliography and the complications of the market, the world of out-of-print books can be awesome to the uninitiated. The successful hunter in this jungle must be filled with the excitement of the chase. Should he try a specialty dealer, one in French books or one in sporting books, for example? Or should he try a general out-of-print dealer, use a search service, or advertise on his own in the *Antiquarian Bookman*? Or dare he venture into the auction room, and if so is the bid to go to the auctioneer or through an agent? Or is it better just to read catalogs and hope the right books turn up at the right price and that someone else does not buy them first? And what is the right price, and should he cable or just write air mail? And what about book scouts, or should he do his own shop browsing, and where? And what about desiderata lists? Questions like these baffle many librarians, and the answers can not be found in a textbook. Moreover the experts often suggest conflicting advice. Experience helps.

The general out-of-print market is important to many kinds of libraries, of course, both public and academic. All librarians are continually looking for some kind of book that the publishers no longer stock. That is what the antiquarian trade is for, and no practical amount of reprinting will solve the whole problem. The New York Public Library's book sleuth G. W. Bergquist<sup>2</sup> looked into this question for the American Library Association a few years ago, and his report gives some picture of the problem. Reichmann's article in this issue says something more about the operating procedures and records involved, and, to judge from an earlier article of his,<sup>3</sup> this is a field in which he is interested and an expert. Judging from the questions that librarians ask and from the complaints that they and dealers make, the whole matter needs more consideration, probably joint consideration by dealers and librarians. There is an apparent tendency for the two groups to talk together more freely and to count less on mutual suspicion. Possibly each group is becoming more sophisticated. Perhaps it means that more libraries are buying heavily in the antiquarian market. At any rate the tendency is there, as witness the University of Chicago's Graduate Library School Conference in the summer of 1953<sup>4</sup> and a recent small meeting at the University of Kansas.<sup>5</sup>

Librarians are even beginning to write on the subject. This is refreshing and hopeful, for some of their statements are acute. Fall's<sup>6</sup> report is concerned primarily with the current book market abroad, but it also considers some aspects of antiquarian buying. Miller's<sup>7</sup> opinions and findings deserve to be more easily available for reading than they are in their present form, and so do several of the European

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book-buying reports that Jens Nyholm, librarian of Northwestern University, has occasionally sent home for his staff newsletter.

The authors are more interested here however in the discovery and acquisition of really rare books and out-of-print materials that seldom come on the market, even though when they do they are not necessarily expensive. Some libraries have arbitrarily set date limits before which everything becomes a rare book.<sup>8</sup> At Yale, for example, this is true of any book printed before 1551; any English book before 1641; any American book before 1801 whether of North or South America. One result of this is heavy buying in American imprints at one or two dollars apiece and any complete *Short Title Catalog* book offered for not more than ten dollars. They still exist although they become, for Yale, fewer each year as holdings grow stronger. Eventually the end date will be extended in all categories, but by that time it may be easier to move the resulting few circulating volumes to a smaller stack space. Scholars have often marvelled at the difference in price between an edition printed in 1500 and another a year older. It may seem strange, but now is the time to pick up the cheaper 1501 variety before someone makes a census and proves their scarcity. Because there are so few bibliographical tools for the first half of the sixteenth century it is still possible to buy these early works cheaply, particularly if they are anonymous. Reformation tracts from Germany have recently been available in bulk for about fifteen dollars a title. Yet to buy a specific tract, more than that may probably be spent in time and postage before a copy can even be located. There are those who will settle for a photostat or a microfilm and sometimes this is the only way to produce a text quickly and inexpensively, but they can never be as satisfactory for some important purposes as the original and they sometimes cost more. Gordon Ray's<sup>9</sup> opinions on this and other matters of concern to this article are always pertinent and refreshing.

This is not the place to go further into the vexing question of what is a rare book and why, but it needs saying that, on this whole matter of the scholarly importance of rare books and their place in libraries, librarians appear to be coming into a period of maturity and sanity. To be sure, not every librarian and scholar agrees in the matter, and the term "rare book" still retains enough pejorative sense to some people that many libraries now hide behind the phrase "special collections." Nonetheless, the mere titles of recent publications from Minnesota<sup>10</sup> and the University of California at Los Angeles<sup>11</sup> suggest the saner trend, as does the development in recent years of effective rare book programs and rare book rooms in many university libraries. Thus

the period when most librarians and scholars expressed an immature disdain for rare books and many rare book curators, in self-defense, were only lily-white and captious, is left behind.

It is only natural that the majority of rare and antiquarian books continue to come from England. There are periodic howls of anguish that America is despoiling one country or another, but there still seems to be almost enough to satisfy the demand. Two skillful and eloquent American operators bear this out. Lawrence Powell<sup>12</sup> felt that, "all the gems have not been mined, nor all 'sleepers' awakened." Ray<sup>13</sup> suggests that "we hardly give much heed to the gloomy protestations of English bookmen that their sources of supply are rapidly dwindling." The howls of anguish may have little real substance anyway since many English dealers in rare books report little buying activity among English libraries and indicate that two-thirds or more of their business comes from this country, particularly from American libraries. In fact the American library in general begins to be a larger customer for many antiquarian dealers than does the private collector. Only a few years ago the opposite was clearly true.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, one now hears much of vigorous buying by wealthy collectors in such unexpected places as Switzerland and Latin America.

Most purchases are made in England through catalogs or by private treaty. Everyone has an uneasy feeling that others may see catalogs before he does. Attempts are made to receive advance copies by air mail, but there is no sure way of arranging mailings so that copies are delivered everywhere at the same time. A cable may perhaps raise suspicion. All librarians have had the answer, by surface mail, "copy offered previously sold. Have another identical at higher price." Were there then two copies? Anyway, some prefer an air mail letter sent the day the catalog is received. Quick decision and rapid action are requisite if the acquisitions department is to operate in this market. To be sure, one can avoid some of the frustration of catalog buying by gaining such a good reputation among dealers that they will offer desirable books directly, before issuing a catalog. Auction catalogs are something else. Why does no auction house produce even a decent job of description? There are various answers, none of them completely satisfactory. There was a time when as underbidder Yale fairly regularly had its wants offered after the sale at a lower price than the Yale underbid, and from Switzerland! Fall has something to say about auction buying,<sup>6</sup> and a fine way to gain some feeling for the color and excitement of the auction room is to read the "Notes on Sales" section in each issue of the new English quarterly, *The Book Collector*.

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A good many antiquarian English books are offered by American dealers after a book hunting expedition abroad. More recently they too have complained that English stocks are low, that one cannot bribe his way behind the scenes or into the cellar, or that now prices are ridiculously high. Still, the material keeps coming, every year more and better buys, as is indicated by the Powell and Ray reports cited earlier.

The honesty and integrity of book sellers all over the world is profoundly impressing. The fly-by-night operators who want a quick turnover are few and seldom last more than a season. The good book dealer's knowledge of books and bibliography, a knowledge often rising to scholarly heights, offers great service and advantage to librarians if they will only come to know their brethren in the trade. John Carter, one of the giants himself, discussed this matter wisely,<sup>15</sup> including a tribute to the greatest of them all, the late E. P. Goldschmidt. The two fine annual volumes issued in England by the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association in 1952 and 1953 offer further proof, as do the articles in *The Book Collector* and the collected volume of *Talks on Book-Collecting* that was issued in 1952 under the auspices of the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association. These men and women in the trade are not only scholarly but also helpful to librarians. They, along with book collectors, are among the most interesting and warmest friends that a bookish librarian can find, as many will testify. The world of books is full of richly rewarding human relationships. The recent formation of the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America, as a member of the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers and with several regional chapters throughout the country, has been widely praised and the choice of officers, thus far, has been extraordinarily fine. Here is a court of appeals ready at hand, but its existence almost precludes the necessity for arbitration, and the very fact that the trade is now organized offers far better possibilities for librarians and dealers to discuss their mutual relationships and to work toward the solution of common problems. It will indeed be a pleasure to have the next international meeting of the book trade in this country.

Continental dealers in antiquarian and rare books are of all kinds and types, sending out catalogs with everything from colored illustrations to illegible mimeographed sheets. It is quite impossible to make a list of which dealers to try for which kind of books. Experience once more is the only guide, and even there a new man with his first catalog may usurp a field previously jealously guarded by someone else. One must read catalogs all the time in order to stay abreast. At the

moment, Oxford is the place for Portuguese Judaica and the Japanese book you want may be in Rutland, Vermont. A few years ago the best outlet for current Russian publications, rare in their own way, was a department store in Finland. American librarians have all learned a lot from the refugee book sellers now in this country. The earliest comers had a missionary zeal and impolitely instructed librarians that books printed in 1500 were also incunables. Now they have learned better manners, and frequent trips to Europe have replenished their stocks to the extent that there is a pretty good chance that the book you need may already be in this country and for sale.

American librarians are more conscious today than they were twenty years ago that foreign books need mention neither America nor tobacco to be worth buying. The slight trickle that is grandly referred to as the Farmington Plan helps to keep librarians aware that all the world is interested in everything. A few years ago ten bad books a year on Victor Hugo might be bought by twenty American libraries, while one good book on him, published in Belgium, would not even be heard of. Perhaps with better bibliographical tools and with better universal coverage librarians will be able to improve their collections tremendously. The necessary human element is still the cordial relationship between libraries and dealers. Where that relationship exists, superb work has been accomplished; the lack of it has often done such damage that our libraries are still far behind in our delirious, exhilarating race toward adequacy.

Fashion has always played a large role in the minds of collectors. In the great days of American buying, the man who owned a telephone company frequently beat the man who relied on cables. Most large libraries now have the basic early works printed abroad about the new continent. The day is with us now for Western Americana, with pamphlets of local imprint plainly charted by the McMurtrie type of state bibliography. More recently color-plate books of birds and flowers and topographical views have more than come into their own. What really starts a deluge is a printed bibliography with the happy dealer shouting "not in . . ." or more rarely "not found in . . ." This can become ridiculous. A short while ago a copy of Balzac's most minor work on the tying of a cravat was offered with the added inducement that it was "not in Pforzheimer." Someday *Gone with the Wind* may be described as "not in Huth, Clawson, or Dibdin."

This digression on collecting fashions reminds us that the acquisitions librarian should know and enjoy the world of the private book collector and the literature of private book collecting. The private

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collector has not only formed many of the great collections that give scholarly distinction to libraries; he can also teach us much about the acquisition of books, for though institutional book collecting may differ in some ways, in many ways it is part of the same exciting search. What librarian could not learn from the imagination and sheer genius for collection building revealed by Michael Sadleir in his "Passages from the Autobiography of a Bibliomaniac," introductory to the bibliography of his unsurpassed collection of nineteenth century novels,<sup>16</sup> a collection that now enriches the research strength of an American library?

When a library takes on a new interest it is often the result of a new collection, more or less complete, which has come by purchase or gift. It should be the solemn duty of every library to do everything in its power to add something annually to each of its major collections. When a university undertakes to teach a new subject, the problem is very different. The only likely solution then seems to be to buy a collection as complete as the purse can afford, if the collection can be found. Back files of periodicals rank now with Elizabethan quartos in expense. The older libraries are very lucky indeed when they are well stocked with the scientist's first desideratum, a rare item of quite a different stripe. It is difficult today to find runs of German periodicals. The professor's widow used to call in the dealer and hope for the best, but today all too often the local university makes her feel a traitor not to replace its bombed set at a fraction of what a dealer would pay. Holland and Switzerland may have the set you need, but no one in either country is unaware of current values.

The purchase of Latin American books is extremely troublesome, as Fall<sup>6</sup> and others have indicated. Some libraries like to have a local dealer in each country, but none would admit to complete satisfaction. It is so terribly hard to find dealers who will reply to letters, and some countries have no national bibliographies. In Venezuela, it is said, one does not put one's novels on sale. They have to be presentation copies and so unprocurable until, as has happened, the author is divorced and the mother-in-law can be persuaded to clear her shelves.

Perhaps of all countries, Egypt presents most difficulties. Exchanges are agreed to but nothing comes. Books are ordered by purchase, but Egypt does not want dollars. The only solution, in one case, has been to find a dealer with a second ménage in France where, at a certain time every year, at his convenience not the library's, accounts can be settled. In the more remote parts of the Near and Far East, where the chances of duplication are least, some libraries have benefited most by

giving travelling scholars a few hundred dollars to buy what they will find useful on their return. In fact, if one knows his faculty and the faculty knows books, the acquisitions librarian should miss no chance to work them hard when they go abroad for a leisurely sabbatical. Illinois' Gordon Ray, much cited here, offers a fine case in point. Many European scholarly collections have been ferreted out for American libraries by book-wise men of this kind.

There are as many ways of locating and acquiring antiquarian and rare books as there are imaginations to grapple with their multifarious problems. Everyone cannot get a set of the *Kanjur* out of Tibet by yak train with one air mail letter, but it has happened once.

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