



# The Place of Rare Books in the Public Library

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RARE BOOK DEPARTMENTS in public libraries are themselves a little rare. Certainly they are not common enough to be taken for granted. They are the glorious exception rather than the general rule, and their curators are occasionally called upon to explain and justify the existence of such departments.

Of course, it was not so long ago that the public library itself had to justify and explain its own existence. In the long history of books and libraries, the free library is a comparative newcomer. It is a modern institution which has been functioning for about a century. Probably, during its early beginnings, it was argued that a public library was not essential; private subscription libraries adequately filled the needs of the average reader, while the exceptional reader and the scholar might look to the libraries maintained by institutions of learning.

Today no one questions the value of the public library—it is recognized as a great cultural force in modern life. It is assumed that it will meet the major demands of the reading public—and the public today is demanding considerably more than recreational reading. It is now expected that the library will provide those books which the individual could not afford to have in his own library, but in which he has a definite interest. Reference books, too bulky and too expensive for private ownership, books of a highly technical nature, as well as books of purely aesthetic appeal, are now taken for granted as a part of the public library. That institution tries to satisfy the widely varying needs of its patrons, among whom it is not unheard of to find scholars, research workers, and bibliophiles—provided the library has books of a calibre to attract them.

Many a public library does have rare books. They may have come through a gradual accumulation or through outstanding gifts, or

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through both. An older institution, which has kept pace with the expanding needs of its patrons for a considerable period of time, may find that it has gradually acquired a number of books of unusual significance. Again, a library may be the fortunate recipient of one or more outstanding collections of rare books, which represent years of careful, discriminating collecting on the part of the persons assembling them. Thus, in the case of some public libraries, notably the older and larger ones, it is not a question of whether or not they ought to have rare books; they already have them. The question rather is: what should they do with them?

Several courses are open. They may regard them as expendable and give them the same treatment accorded any other books, including a liberal use of indelible and/or perforated stamps, (how bitterly many a rare book specialist can testify to this) and then give the volumes routine usage. This procedure today, fortunately, has few followers. Many librarians are trying to rescue from the stacks the already badly defaced books processed by their predecessors and care for them as best they can.

Another course of action sometimes followed is simply to store the books away and not use them at all. Their storage quarters may be over-dry or over-damp; they often accumulate layers of dust, and general neglect proves as damaging to them as careless handling.

Sometimes a library which finds itself in possession of rarities it cannot adequately care for nor use to good advantage may, if free to do so, sell, trade, or give these books to an institution which does want them and will give them protection and intelligent use. This arrangement is usually satisfactory.

The final course of procedure is to decide to make a special place in the library for these books, treat them as precious volumes and a valuable asset to the library, give them the care they require physically, and put them in the charge of people who have some knowledge of rare books. This has been the practice of a number of libraries, and, as time goes on, it seems likely that more institutions will do likewise.

Some public libraries long ago realized that they had acquired books which merited special care and preservation, and, also realizing that in the field of rare books lay new opportunities for cultural service, they made special provision for them. The public libraries of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia have for years maintained separate departments for their rare book holdings, and Detroit now plans a wing for its rare books. The fact that the large public library buildings erected in the last few years, such as those of Providence, Cincinnati,

### *The Place of Rare Books in the Public Library*

and Denver, have provided quarters specifically designed for rare books shows a growing consciousness of this new responsibility on the part of public libraries.

Besides providing adequate quarters for rare books, it is equally important to provide qualified personnel. To realize the potentialities of a rare book department to the fullest, it is advisable to have a rare book specialist as curator. Such a person can appreciate the resources of his collections and advise as to their development. Usually he has whole-souled enthusiasm for rare books and can assist both scholar and amateur bibliophile with equal interest. He can manage his department competently, win the confidence of donors, and direct a well-planned, aggressive acquisitions policy. He can also seek out the rarities that all too often lie buried in the stacks of his own institution. Since there is an increasing demand for rare book librarians, it would seem that these specialists have proved their worth.

The greatest collections of rare books in public libraries today are found, as might be expected, in large institutions in big cities. The New York Public Library, the Boston Public Library, and the Free Library of Philadelphia are, in the order named, the three greatest possessors of rare books. All three of these libraries owe their initial strength in this field to donors who presented them with outstanding collections. The private collector has been their chief cornerstone. On the other hand, the rare book holdings of Buffalo, Cincinnati, and Denver are the result of a steady growth, and their collections have developed gradually.

Most rare book departments in public libraries seem to operate on trust funds. Generous, farsighted donors have provided for books that might appear too rare and too expensive to be purchased from public funds. Their money has bought many a white hyacinth for book-hungry souls, and bibliophiles are forever in their debt. The great collections of the New York Public Library, the Arents, the Berg, the Spencer, and Reserve Books, all make purchases through trust funds, as do the rare book departments of Boston, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia. The Buffalo Public-Erie County Public-Grosvenor Libraries, however, add to their collections through public funds, and the Denver Public Library also uses appropriated funds for books germane to its collections. Most of the Detroit Public Library's rare books have come to it as gifts or purchases made by the Friends of the Library, but it uses city funds on occasion, and its Director feels such use well justified. Actually, in most cases, the maintenance of the department, aside from book purchases, and the salaries of the

staff are paid through public funds, so the rare book collections all do receive some degree of public support—as indeed they should.

Trust funds rejoice the souls of all rare book curators. They give a certain independence and security. Through them it has been possible to bag many a prize which otherwise would have escaped. They are a warrant that precious collections may be kept growing, for a static collection—as many a librarian knows to his sorrow—soon dies. Trust funds may also remove guilt complexes some librarians might have about spending money for rarities when bread and butter books were needed.

But should there be guilt complexes? In today's cultural life rare books also provide essential nourishment. A well functioning rare book collection in a public library is a valuable asset to the community. The public should come to recognize this and give it support. Such support may come slowly—but it is important that it should come, partly because it will make the public more conscious of its treasures. As to the amount of support given, that must always depend upon the individual case. There is no one answer to the question: "How much is enough?"

More than other rare book institutions, perhaps, the rare book department of a public library has a missionary role. It functions at all levels and its patrons present a more varied cross section than would be found in college and private research libraries. The general public feels that it has a stake in the public library and, therefore, approaches its special collections without hesitation. Even security measures, such as locked doors and guards, are not resented, nor do they overawe the patrons. When it is explained that these steps are taken to safeguard the books the library holds in trust for them, they approve. It is a public library, they are the public, and they are pleased that their treasures are being properly protected.

It has been asked what part of the general public is interested in rare books. Rare book enthusiasts are drawn from no one group or groups. They may be of any age and any occupation. Their varied interests range from the utilitarian to the aesthetic. Authors engage in research for books they are preparing. Research for Catherine Drinker Bowen's *The Lion and the Throne*, for example, was done in a special collection of a public library. A teacher of layout design in an art school may find the Nuremberg Chronicle an interesting example to his students. A firm of engravers may reproduce a series of oriental miniatures for a special client. A Benedictine monk uses

### *The Place of Rare Books in the Public Library*

choral books of the fifteenth century to study variations in the music of the Mass at that period. Writers and scholars all over the country and in Europe call for microfilm of needed books.

The presence of several colleges or universities in the area may serve as an added stimulus to use of the rare book department. Professors and students alike eagerly welcome the resources afforded by it. A professor may bring a class to study some particular field (it may be anything from oriental manuscripts to early American children's books) and occasionally he may appear to work on a project of his own—such as the publication of previously unrecorded letters of a noted writer. Graduate students—and now and then a book-loving undergraduate—may also work in the department, and the project can be English State Trials of the seventeenth century or the study of a certain incunable. It is a fortunate situation when the holdings of the public library and the universities and colleges combine to make the whole area stronger in its wealth of rare book material.

The scholar and the research worker are at home in any rare book library, public or private. They know what they want and ask only to have it made available. But in the public library one is also apt to find the more timid novice whose field of interest is still undeveloped. He does not know what books have particular appeal for him until he is introduced to them. It has been the experience of rare book curators that most visitors show interest and enthusiasm when rare books are sympathetically explained to them. With guidance and encouragement, some of these people may develop into bibliophiles, Friends of the Library, and future donors.

Not every one had a course in the history of books and printing in school (not even some librarians) and many people respond to the story of books and their history and development. Such knowledge adds immeasurably to their appreciation of books in general. The public library here has an opportunity to turn teacher, and frequently takes full advantage of it. In some rare book departments groups of teen-agers are shown rare books and given short talks concerning them. Occasionally adult groups come in the evening for tours of the department. Series of lectures give booklovers an opportunity to get together. Exhibits often arouse interest and a casual display of some treasure and a few informal anecdotes about rare books have often won a friend for the department. The late Randolph G. Adams in an unpublished manuscript remarked that everyone "from nine to ninety"

should be welcome in a rare book library, and added that "a good curator must be at least one-half showman." This applies with particular force to the curator in a public library.

Everyone can understand how the rare book department is valuable to those who have definite fields of interest, those who use it in connection with their work. The department also serves those visitors who come simply to see the interesting, the unusual, and the beautiful. They like to browse along the exhibit cases and see books they never knew existed. They may thrill to the beauty of a Japanese Nara Book or be fascinated by a seventeenth century record of a trial for witchcraft. Some have heard the word "incunabula" and wish to see an example. Others ask for a glimpse of a fore-edge painting. Association books move them deeply. It seems a near miracle to see a volume in which Stevenson once sketched, a book which Washington owned, or a copy of one of his own books which Dickens presented to his daughters. Perhaps their appreciation is entirely sentimental—but it is quite as real as that of the scholar. The little high school girl who saw her first illuminated manuscript and murmured, "there just aren't words, it's so beautiful," was as happy over her visit as the specialist in Anglo-Norman paleography who made an unusual discovery in a manuscript.

It is not necessary to be a rare book specialist to find genuine enjoyment in viewing a library's treasures. Probably a very small percentage of those who come to see the Liberty Bell in Independence Hall are specialists in the Revolutionary period, and fewer yet are likely to be authorities on eighteenth century bell-casting—and yet will any one doubt that for them seeing the Liberty Bell is a soul-enriching experience? One can love music without being a musician and enjoy paintings without being a painter—so why should a feeling for rare books be limited solely to the specialist?

Rare books are a part of the cultural heritage of all people. They represent the essence of all libraries. They are the ancestors of the books that are read today. They are the beauty that man has achieved in his efforts to crystalize thought on clay, papyrus, parchment, and paper. It would seem peculiarly the province of the public library to preach the gospel of rare books.

In the last few years public interest in the subject has been stimulated by traveling exhibits. The Freedom Train with its precious books and documents made American history come alive. The Pierpont Morgan Library is now commemorating its fiftieth anniversary by sending some of its greatest treasures on tour, and Yale's Gutenberg

### *The Place of Rare Books in the Public Library*

Bible and Bay Psalm have already made their debut in Denver, where they were sent to celebrate the opening of the new public library building. More people are traveling abroad and visiting famous foreign libraries. With added opportunities to see fine and rare books has come a surge of public interest in them. More people are seeking them out—perhaps for purposes of scholarship, perhaps solely for their own personal enjoyment, a motivating factor which can hardly be discounted, since it has been responsible for the assembling of some of the greatest collections. A need for more rare books is gradually developing, and public libraries of the future may take rare book departments for granted.

At present they may still be considered to be in a pioneer stage. More than one public librarian has felt that rare books as such had no place in his institution. They required too specialized care and too specialized personnel, and, as far as his patrons were concerned, he felt unjustified in spending the time, money, and effort that would be necessary to establish a rare book department. A few years from now he may be won over, for the departments now functioning have proved that they fill a definite need in the public library—educationally, culturally, and aesthetically. It was a proud moment for one curator when a former opponent confessed that after seeing a well functioning rare book department in action, he had become an enthusiastic supporter.

Sometimes a donor gives a large collection to a library which has had no previous experience in the rare book field. The recipient may find the collection a white elephant or an unparalleled opportunity. Several years ago a life-long collector presented his books to the Phoenix Public Library. That institution rose joyfully to the occasion. In a recent letter, which sparkled with enthusiasm, the librarian told what a superb asset these books had been to the library and the community. Both she and her patrons were obviously enjoying the books.

The large public library in a big city would seem the logical place for most great collections. In theory, at least, such an institution might be presumed to have sufficient funds to care for the books and augment the collections. It is not to be argued, however, that all libraries, regardless of size, should try to maintain an expensive rare book department. A small library might find a valuable collection given to it without adequate funds for its maintenance to be an embarrassment. The possession of a great collection entails the responsibility of administering it properly.

But there are rarities and rarities, and some of them adapt themselves admirably to smaller institutions. Every library should have a few choice and unusual volumes to treasure. A few examples which illustrate the history of books and printing can sometimes open up a new world to a patron. Special collections emphasizing local history are always a proud possession, and the residents of the community can participate in their assembling. It is good for morale to have a few books which are handled with respect, and it is good for one's sense of proportion to have volumes that come from other times and other places.

The author of this article will always be glad that one small library had a few such books. As a high school student she worked as a part time assistant in the public library of her native city, Leadville, Colorado, and there she discovered the first old books she had ever seen. Most people did not bring books with them when they came into this mining camp in early days, but some booklover had brought along a few volumes he cherished, and they had eventually found their way into the public library. There were the Comic Histories of England and Rome with their colorful Leech illustrations, there were such eighteenth century classics in contemporary bindings as the works of Addison and the poems of Ossian. And there was a history of printing by Isaiah Thomas. They were not great rarities, indeed, their intrinsic value was small as she now knows, but they were there when she needed them, and they struck a spark. It was wonderful to be able to see and hold a tangible bit of the past, and the experience led to a pursuit of old and rare books which continues to this moment. It is to be hoped that those books are still there in Leadville, and that books like them are tucked away in other small public libraries, where they may lead other booklovers to those realms of lifelong happiness found in the avocation or the profession of rare books.