



The Utility of the Special Research Library

LOUIS B. WRIGHT

IT SHOULD BE A PLATITUDE by now that the privately endowed library of rare books has no justification for existence unless it serves in the advancement of learning by making its literary resources available to qualified scholars. If there was ever a time when a magnificent library, brought together by the zeal of a private collector of means, could stand unused as a mausoleum and monument to the founder, that day has gone forever. If the enlightened consciences of trustees and administrators did not provide for the effective use of such libraries, the hungry tax-collector would soon swoop down upon them. Happily, the great libraries brought together in America by the energy and wealth of book collectors have become a part of the intellectual resources of the nation. Even those collections still in the process of development and those still the private possessions of collectors are for the most part open to scholars. Nowhere in the world does the serious scholar receive a warmer welcome than in the research libraries of the United States, both private and public. Throughout the nation these libraries are actively engaged in making their materials available to the individuals who can best use them. They are significant and important agencies of higher education in this country. And their importance is greater today than ever before.

No important geographical section of the nation is without one or more research libraries, sometimes independent and privately endowed, sometimes bequeathed to local universities. In the East there are such private institutions as the Pierpont Morgan Library, the John Carter Brown Library, and the Folger Shakespeare Library. In the Middle West there are the Newberry Library; the Clements Library, a part of the University of Michigan Library system; and the James Ford Bell Collection recently given to the University of Minnesota. And in the Far West there are the great Huntington Library; the smaller but important Clark Library under the aegis of the University of California at Los Angeles; and the Bancroft Library, attached to the

The author is Director, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D. C.

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University of California at Berkeley. Some local institutions and societies play important roles in the research activities of the nation. Among them are the American Antiquarian Society at Worcester, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Boston Athenaeum, the Boston Public Library, and the New York Public Library. All of these institutions have assimilated private collections of major value to learning and they make these collections freely available to scholars. The great university libraries, notably Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, have inherited from alumni and others princely collections of special interest. Recently Indiana University received as a gift from J. K. Lilly, Jr., an extraordinary rare book library.

Many, if not most, of these collections and libraries carry with them endowments of varying amounts for their maintenance and development. Wealthy as some of them are, none can continue to collect on the scale of their founder, some of whom had almost unlimited means. The question of what policy of collecting the special library should follow is one that requires common sense, wisdom, and sometimes the capacity to harden one's heart against sentimentality and the siren sounds that emanate from eager booksellers.

The administrative officers responsible for the transition of private collections into working libraries for the use of scholars have a difficult task little appreciated by the public who benefit from their labors. Indeed, they sometimes find themselves criticized by users of these collections because they do not transform them overnight into effective instruments for research. They are sometimes abused by booksellers who smart with disappointment because they do not spend money for rarities with the same happy abandon characteristic of the libraries' founders. If the administrator of one of these private collections is going to succeed in making his library into an effective research institution, he must try to put himself in the place of one of his potential users and ask himself what purpose the library is designed to serve. He must likewise turn a deaf ear to the blandishments and occasionally to the ill-concealed condescension of certain booksellers who suggest that he really doesn't know a good thing when he is offered one. It is always a help of course if the administrator actually knows from personal experience what a scholar wants from a rare book library.

The fundamental lesson that the librarian has to learn is that he is not a projection of the private collector who brought the original material together and that he is not likely to have the means to buy as lavishly as the donor. One would think that such a conclusion would be self-evident and obvious from the figures in the budget. But li-

brarians easily succumb to the fantasy of imagining themselves collectors in the grand manner. No class of customer is more easily taken into camp by a salesman than is the librarian who for the first time has the opportunity of spending somebody else's money in the purchase of rare books. He learns to roll precious bibliographic terms upon his tongue; he likes to discuss with an air of sophistication the "points" of this or that book; if he is young and provincial, he is flattered at the opportunity of mingling at bibliographic gatherings with collectors who have hitherto been names to him; and he is vastly impressed when a bookseller brings to his particular attention a work of great rarity not yet offered to anyone else. If the "preparation" has been sufficient, the chances are that the librarian will be tempted to strain his budget and buy the rarity, though for the life of him he doesn't know whether the book is worth a tinker's dam to the users of the library which he is supposed to develop.

The first lesson that he needs to learn is that mere rarity is not a criterion of a book's value to learning. Some of the rarest items never were and never will be of much intrinsic value. And furthermore, price is frequently a poor indicator of the scholarly worth of a book or a manuscript. Many things determine price: passing fashions in collecting; the particular avidity of certain collectors active at the moment; the belief of the bookseller, sometimes erroneous, that a book is rare; the fact that it is not listed in the usual bibliographies ("not in the *Short Title Catalogue*" or "not in *Wing*," for example); the fact that it is a variant issue or edition that may or may not be significant; previous ownership ("association copies"); and a score of factitious reasons that may have little or no bearing on the book's ultimate utility.

The private collector can buy a work for any reason that pleases him. The appearance, the associational interest, the rarity of the imprint, the quality of the binding, any of a multitude of reasons may influence an individual to pay premium prices for books. The custodian of endowed funds has an obligation to follow other more objective criteria. Concerning every item offered he must ask whether it will serve any significant purpose in the library. If for instance someone turned up a Prayer Book which King Charles I carried to the scaffold, it would command a high monetary value; but the librarian of a seventeenth-century research library would not be justified in buying it for a premium price, however much of the royal blood may have spattered on it. All he could ever do with it would be to put it in a glass case and label it "King Charles I's Prayer-Book with His Blood-Stains." On the other hand, if a trifling sermon of Henry Smith turned

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up in which an apprentice of London had scribbled on the margins his impressions of that fateful scene on January 30, 1649, the librarian would have a valid reason for buying it, for the document would throw a bit of new light on an important event in history and would be of interest to several sorts of scholars.

No one can draw up rules that will apply to every research library. Each varies in its materials and its purposes. The unvarying factor that any rare book librarian must consider is what genuine utility will be served by the materials that he buys. A particular library may be justified in purchasing items merely for exhibition if its museum is an important factor in its public relations. Such a library might indeed buy King Charles' Prayer Book if the exhibition of that memento would further the library's interests. However, the librarian must be sure that he is not being motivated by sentimental or factitious influences.

The utility of a collection of rare books, however precious, is greatly restricted if the scholar cannot find the essential secondary works that make the rare books comprehensible and useable. Endless hours may be wasted if he has to consult rare books in one place and the necessary reference works in another. The inability to get rare books and secondary works together on the same table has been a fruitful cause of frustration and has made a few collections virtually useless to the scholar who had to conserve his time and energy. The inefficiency and waste of time from such causes in most instances are unnecessary and could be corrected if the custodian of the rare books possessed common sense and imagination.

Some years ago a well-meaning old gentleman, himself interested in rare books, wrote to the present director of the Folger Library protesting the dilution of the Folger's collection of rare books with secondary works and other books that would make it, he feared "just another library." In his opinion, the Folger as originally created was "a little gem" filled with "books of excessive rarity not found elsewhere" and it would be a profanation to mingle "these jewels" with common books. To have followed his advice would have made of the Folger Library a tomb for the interment of rare books rather than a library where these books serve the ends of learning.

In the early days of the Folger Library someone evolved the theory that a secondary library of reference books would not be needed because the Library of Congress was immediately across the street and its great store of reference materials would be available. Accordingly the Folger attempted to get along without the books required to illuminate its rare book collection. This effort proved so wasteful of both time

and money that it was abandoned. An analysis of the time consumed by members of the catalog department alone going across the street to refer to books in the Library of Congress showed that the needed books would cost the Folger Library less in actual cash outlay than the monetary value of the time wasted by its staff, not to mention the inconvenience to potential users of the Folger's rare books. As every working scholar knows, no one can carry on his research effectively without the tools of his trade close at hand. No reference collection, it is true, will have every item that every scholar may want to consult, and no librarian in his right mind will try to procure every item that conceivably might be needed by someone. Yet, if he is going to run an efficient institution, he will see that the scholar is not handicapped by lack of an essential working collection.

The development of an effective research library requires everlasting vigilance on the part of the administrator to see that his institution does not become merely a warehouse of dead books. He must be vigilant to see that he does not spend that portion of his budget devoted to acquisitions in useless books and manuscripts. He must also be alert—and tactful—in fending off unwanted gifts that would make his library a warehouse of junk. Perhaps no fallacy is more seductive than the notion that the special library must be "complete." Few libraries can be complete in the absolute sense and there is not much wisdom in trying to achieve that end. Although the Folger Library's primary concern is with materials for the study of the civilization of Tudor and Stuart England, for example, it would be foolish to try to procure every trivial item that has been written on this great period. The Folger Library has the largest collection of Shakespeareana in the world, but it would be equally foolish to try to collect every tract and pamphlet written about Shakespeare. For one thing, few subjects known to the present writer have ever accumulated so vast and worthless a "literature." Cranks, dullards, pedagogues, and pedants have contributed their mites, and those mites have grown into mountains of rubbish. The administrator of a library like the Folger must exercise discrimination lest he be smothered by trash.

The administrators of special libraries must also guard against friends who will try to give them unwanted volumes, pamphlets, off-prints, pictures, walking canes, rocking chairs, shaving mugs, locks of hair, and miscellaneous mementoes without number. Sometimes would-be donors want to present a gift with the condition that it be specially exhibited or kept in a certain place. If a librarian is so unwise as to accept miscellaneous gifts, he ought always to insist that they come

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without any strings. Then his successor can quietly dispose of the white elephants. The rejection of gifts, of course, requires tact. Sometimes a monstrosity has to be accepted in order to get some really valuable collection and one must be doubly careful not to alienate prospective donors who have worth-while books and manuscripts to give the institution. Nevertheless, discrimination in the acceptance of gifts is the best policy, because most donors want their gifts to go where they can be used and appreciated, and it is no service to them to make them believe that some useless item will find an honored place in a great library.

Libraries of all kinds, and the special research libraries in particular, should devote more thought to the elimination of useless items. Of course this is a ticklish procedure. The rubbish of one generation may be the valued social documents of the next. The Bodleian Library's reluctance to accept Robert Burton's plays and pamphlets because they were "riff-raff" books stands as an object lesson to us all. On the other hand the fear of disposing of something valuable to posterity does not require us to take leave of our wits. A few years ago the Folger Library sent to the incinerator many bales of miscellaneous newspaper clippings. From early in his career Mr. Folger had subscribed to clipping services in various parts of the world and had instructed them to send him every clipping that mentioned the word "Shakespeare." When the Folger staff came to examine these bales of clippings, a great many had already crumbled into the dust that is the destiny of all wood-pulp publications. Most of the rest were too trivial and non-descript to have any value. If some benighted Shakespearean had set himself the Herculean task of trying to classify those clippings that remained legible, it would probably have been necessary to summon a psychiatrist from St. Elizabeth's to supervise the effort as occupational therapy. The only sensible thing to do with this tinder-dry rubbish, which constituted a fire hazard in the building, was to send it to the city dump. Unhappily, material like the Shakespeare clippings is not unusual in special libraries. Everyone suffers from the temptation, not only to hoard worthless material, but to go on collecting it because they always have. Nowhere is the hand of precedent heavier than in libraries.

The criterion of utility which ought to govern the special research library does not overlook the value of the esthetic and the obligation to preserve beautiful examples of the bookmaker's craft, but the examples themselves must have internal validity in addition to their external appearance. Fancy printers like nothing better than to bring out

a handful of Shakespeare's sonnets or a few precious words of some other poet. These usually appear in limited editions, printed on heavy deckled paper, in some unusual type face. Sooner or later a bookseller thinks the Folger Library, for example, is remiss in its obligations to posterity if it does not pay a stiff price to give these items house room. What purpose they would ever serve, no one can say. Fine printing should be encouraged by every means at our command, but fancy preciousness ought to be allowed to find oblivion without expensive burial in libraries.

The special research libraries of the country are performing such an important service to learning that they cannot afford to spend any of their efforts on irrelevancies. During the coming years, with the enormous increase in the college and university population, an even greater responsibility will fall upon the special libraries. More than ever they will be the oases where harassed scholars can find intellectual refreshment and nourishment. If learning is going to be kept alive in a world dominated by mass production in education, the special research libraries must be acutely aware of their responsibilities to make their resources more easily available to scholars who will have less and less time for contemplation and study.