Introduction

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**What is happening** in the rare book trade today? It would be difficult to find a more challenging question about the world of books in America at this particular time. Strange, unheard of things have happened and are still happening in the rare book world. Whether we like it or not, it is a fact that for the first time in the history of American book collecting rare books have begun to flow back to an appreciable degree from the Western world to countries along and behind the Eastern shores of the Atlantic Ocean. For the first time since American collectors began to dominate the field about a hundred years ago, have European private collectors returned to the position of serious competitors. Even state and university libraries in Europe have entered the arena. True enough, these are not conditions which have developed suddenly and without any previous warning, but they have taken on considerably enlarged proportions and an accelerated pace today.

New York's position as a leading center for rare book auctions, conspicuous before World War II, has been appreciatively overshadowed by London as pointed out in John Carter's article in this issue.

Relatively little has been written about these rather startling developments. The astonishing thing is that they are taking place at a time when rare book interest in this country can be seen in a more dynamic state, and growing in volume and intensity at a much faster rate than ever before. There is hardly an article in this issue which does not mention this pattern of growth in one way or another.

Last but not least among the trends that strike even the casual observer of the rare book scene with singular force is the spectacular rise in price.

There is no single, simple explanation for all these things, and it may be a little early in the game for a complete and satisfying answer. However, it is possible to point out at least some of the reasons for

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these changes. First of all, there is the obvious fact that prices for nearly everything are mounting steadily in our present inflationary economy. In the rare book field, the contrast between yesterday’s and today’s prices is accentuated by the fact that unjustifiably low prices prevailed between the two world wars, especially during the depression of the 'thirties. The breaking up of some of the great traditional monarchies and other political changes on the map of Europe created a pattern of forced sales—“fire sales” one is almost tempted to call them. Many great collections, preserved for centuries in castles and monasteries, had to be disposed of under duress. The pressures were created by the dwindling of capital resources and disastrously low prices for such staple commodities as wood, wine, and various agricultural products, on which these institutions and families had depended for survival.

The European collectors today are largely the result of the phenomenal postwar prosperity of Western Europe. They do not come from among the nouveaux riches, rather they are men of education and taste, ready to make up for the losses and forced resignation of the past and eager to show their prowess on the international scene. Also, they are aware of the fact that rare books, like paintings and other art objects, are a good investment. They have learned the secret that in spite of the scarcity of books it is still possible to build a great library—provided that money is no consideration.

Our American collectors, by comparison, are not infrequently in the difficult position of having to live with all too vivid memories of the “golden age” of collecting when, a generation or so ago, war and depression made it possible to buy some very great treasures at very low prices indeed. The new European collector is not inhibited by such comparisons.

Some aspects of this situation will be further dealt with by the authors of the following articles. There seems no harm in the fact that certain observations have been made by more than one contributor. It simply proves their importance. A good example is the repeated statement that the greatest difficulty for the rare book dealer today is not so much the selling of his wares, but the replenishment of his stock.

No matter how carefully one may survey a certain territory and divide it up among a group of contributors, there will always remain a certain amount of no-man’s land. It is hoped that the following introductory notes, while serving as a general framework for the
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separate articles, also will reduce the "terra incognita" by discussing matters that have only lightly been touched upon, or not discussed at all, in the articles.

These notes are offered by someone who has had the good fortune of having lived and worked on both sides of the fence, so to speak. They are mostly observations from the field, the fruits of a certain amount of practical experience gained as rare book librarian and library school teacher and, subsequently, as consultant to a leading rare book dealer.

One important question of definition has to be settled first. When we speak of a rare book nowadays we do not really mean a book whose main attraction lies in its scarcity. The term "rare book" is used as a convenient label which identifies a great many different things. In this issue of *Library Trends* we are concerned mainly with what rare books mean to libraries. There is really no reason why a public or university library should try to build or acquire a collection of volumes distinguished mainly or entirely by the scarcity of the volumes it contains.¹ ²

A realistic, up-to-date interpretation of the term "rare book" should rest on the definition of another, more general and more important concept—that of education. The often raised question of the real value of a rare book collection in a library depends wholly on what we believe to be the basic function of education on all levels.

A case can be made and always will be made for a type of education which, generally speaking, aims at preparing the individual for economic survival, or to improve his economic status. If we think of education as the means to prepare a man or woman for a given vocation or profession, then there is hardly room for rare books in his training. In the library serving such an educational program rare books are indeed a luxury. They may add a little prestige and perhaps attract donors of some further prestige books, but the whole affair remains on the periphery of the true function of such an institution. On the other hand, there is a very different concept of education, and one in which rare books have indeed an important function.

This kind of education is perhaps best described as one which aims at the development of the entire personality, challenging the mind, awakening or stimulating a multitude of curiosities and capacities, sharpening perception and observation. It is the training of a man for thought and action against the background of the society he lives in. The perspective of history is an essential ingredient of such an
education. How can we find out where we are going without knowing where we have been? Contact with the past is established not only by the observation of ideas and beliefs but also of trends and events. Equally important is contact with the social and cultural climate of former generations.

The aesthetic quality of the vast majority of surviving manuscripts and early printed books is a very important point. It should be remembered that the sanctimonious separation of that which is useful from that which is beautiful is a very recent thing in western civilization. It goes back no further than two hundred years to the eighteenth century and the beginnings of the industrial revolution. During the preceding ten or twelve centuries such a separation was unheard of. Content and form, image and message, were an inseparable entity, a homogeneous whole. That is why medieval and renaissance manuscripts and early printed books have this very special quality of authenticity. As the combined products of the intellectual leaders and of devoted artist-craftsmen of the generations that lived before us—as tangible objects which have survived to the present day—they are precious first-hand witnesses of some of the most noble efforts of our ancestors, living tissue of the fabric of history.

For this reason, the photostat and the microfilm, or any of the other methods of reproduction (see L. S. Thompson’s article, p. 437), can never hope to compete with the originals in this vital function—anymore than even the best reproduction of a painting by Titian, Rembrandt, or Manet can be anything more than a mediocre substitute.

Of course, rare books and manuscripts share this quality of authenticity with other artifacts surviving from the past, such as paintings, sculpture, architectural monuments, or examples of the arts and crafts. Yet, in the educational process the book has the advantage of greater mobility, which makes possible a multitude of uses, in the reading room, the classroom, and the exhibition case. The book also has the advantage of easier storage and conservation—especially much easier safe-keeping in times of disaster.

The rare book dealer who devotes himself to the search for such treasures and to finding suitable homes for them is sometimes asked how he goes about this business of selling. This is very much a matter of personal experience.

The secret about the art of rare book selling, in this writer’s opinion, is that there should be no salesmanship, for the simple reason that
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there is really no need for it. A good book sells itself. The real art for
the dealer today is not selling, but buying, a much more difficult,
intricate, and delicate process. Selling is really just about the same
thing as matchmaking—finding the man who will fall in love with
your book and take it away from you. The true rare book dealer
knows, understands, and himself loves his books. He will not need to
make special efforts to “project” his belief in the books which he offers
to his friends and customers.

This image of rare book selling as matchmaking is perhaps an
oversimplification of a rather complex procedure, but it has a good
deal of truth in it. For this reason the library is lucky which has a
person on the staff who is capable of thus falling in love. In other,
and more sober words, it is essential for the healthy growth of a rare
book collection that it be tended by someone with a genuine instinct
for the beauty and dignity, the character and valor of rare books.
Without a real bookman on the library staff the best laid plans may
never really come to life.

It is no secret that the man who does the buying of rare books in
a library is not necessarily its director. One could of course name a
handful or so of directors of libraries who have done and are doing
an outstanding job in the building of their rare book collections. But li-
brary administration has become an ever more absorbing task and the
main emphasis in library school training has been on the raising of a
generation of future administrators as Rollo Silver discusses later in
this issue. In this connection a significant step is the establishment by
the Indiana University Libraries at Bloomington, Indiana, of the “Lilly
Library Fellowships,” a training program for rare book librarianship,
to begin July 1, 1961.

Also, there is a certain Puritan tradition still alive in our libraries
which denies the librarian or curator the right to follow his own taste
and use his own, personal judgment. There is no written law or regula-
tion to such effect, but rather a quirk of conscience. Such a man may
pass up an otherwise worth-while purchase for the simple reason that
it appeals strongly to him. He will seek reinforcement and justification
from someone else and, when this is not readily forthcoming, will
prefer to say no rather than yes. Actually, he may be doing the
opposite of what he desires to do, namely, to render his institution the
fullest service he is capable of rendering. Where a man has spent
most of the years of his life in constant and close contact with books,
and a great many of the years serving one institution, his taste in books
is not a casual, personal whim, but a mature and seasoned capacity. Such a person's judgment, applied to the purchasing of rare books, is one of the most valuable assets which he has to offer to his institution.

There is, of course, the obvious consideration that in a college or university library, the relationship of the library staff with the faculty is a factor of the greatest imaginable importance. The crucial point is whether or not the head of the library has the ultimate authority in deciding what books to purchase, when, and at what prices.

It would be difficult to find a librarian who does not consult his faculty, keep in contact with those of the teaching staff who have developed tastes in book collecting and strong interests in the growth of the resources available for consultation and research. He would be extremely foolish not to avail himself of the experience and wisdom of the scholars in his community and to cultivate their good will. But there lies a certain danger in over-dependence on the faculty. With a few very rare exceptions, a scholar is bound to remain interested mainly in his own field of research and of instruction. He is fully justified in favoring purchasing policies which will benefit primarily his Ph.D. students and his own research. However, such a program is by no means identical with the best possible growth of the library as a whole. Even if one were to imagine an ideal university, staffed in each discipline of learning, research, and instruction with the best talent available, and if the librarian of such an institution were to carry out to the fullest the combined wishes of each faculty or department, he would still by no means be making the best use of the funds available to him. He would still not be developing the library as an organic and integrated whole; he would still not be filling gaps which only he and his staff are aware of and which may hamper not present, but future generations of scholars; last, not least, he would not be free to avail himself of those rare, and frequently unique opportunities of acquiring materials still available today, but certainly unobtainable in the future. He will not be allowed the full exercise of his judgment, wisdom, and vision as a bookman, he will not be able to render one of the most important services to his institution of which he is capable—namely to build and strengthen those resources which will render his university a better, more desirable place for the scholars and students of the future.

It is a historic fact that the great rare book libraries, and for that matter most of the important research libraries in this country, are the fruit of the personal initiative of inspired collectors and the en-
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thusiastic reception and cultivation of their treasures by the bookmen on the staffs of these libraries. The combination of separate collections into an ultimately homogeneous entity is the great challenge to the skill and the vision of the librarian.

On the question of funds the wise old observation that “money follows ideas” seems to be the answer. In the long run, better results may be expected in an institution with comparatively meager funds but where there is imagination, enthusiasm, and determination, than in a place where there is money available but no personal initiative. Even a developed acquisitions policy, carefully drawn up to fit what appear to be the most urgent current needs, unless interpreted liberally and with some flexibility, is less likely to bring lasting results than a less well defined, but forward looking and enterprising attitude which is sensitive both to special opportunities in the rare book market and to the many possibilities of fund raising as Frances Brewer points out in her article.

No single element in the financial attitude of a library is so likely to attract attention and bring in outside help—often from the least expected quarters—than the willingness to spend at least a portion of one’s own, appropriated funds for rare books. One often hears the argument: “We are not ready for such a program. There are too many pressing current needs, inherited gaps in our holdings, faculty demands, support of new research projects. Rare books are a luxury we cannot afford.” Where this attitude prevails, chances are slim for the development of a rare book collection. The institution which will invest all its funds year in and year out primarily for current use, will inevitably acquire a fairly high quota of textbooks, manuals, and similar books that will become obsolete in the due course of time, resulting in a correspondingly low quota of materials of lasting and increasing value. By contrast, there is the library which will set aside each year a portion of the available funds for rare books. The annual appropriation may be a modest one, and the percentage put aside for special purchases a very low one. Take for example an annual budget of $50,000 and only 5 per cent of this reserved. This would still mean that within say fifteen years nearly $40,000, or almost the equivalent of an annual appropriation will have been spent on books, manuscripts, and other special materials which will be permanently and increasingly valuable. This is an investment in the living tokens of the past, preserving precious monuments of the growth of western civilization.
The proposition for an institution is not so very different than for the individual in regard to his saving from current income. Will he, or will he not be able and willing to lay aside each year assets which will bear fruit in the future?

Where such a plan is initiated, it would be a good idea to have it understood from the outset that the rare book fund should normally be used for items priced above a certain mark—say one hundred dollars. Why? Many librarians are afraid of the raised eyebrows of faculty members, trustees, friends, accountants, and comptrollers, when a substantial amount is to be spent for one single purchase. Such criticism in many cases can be forestalled by a frank statement of the purpose of a rare book collection and the realities of the market. In other cases, a process of gradual education may be wiser.

In some libraries book money has been budgeted at the beginning of the fiscal year at the disposal of certain departments or research programs. There may be situations where this is advisable or inevitable. But the practice has also been followed without special necessity. Experience shows that, as a rule, the unrestricted, undivided appropriation is the most useful one. It may turn out that by all means the most productive thing is to spend all of one (or even two) year’s money on a single, exceptionally attractive, and worth-while item.

Money given by an angel or a group of friends is frequently given with certain stipulations. Unless impossible conditions are made (and this has happened to museums as well as to libraries by bargain hunters for a cheap mausoleum) it would be foolish to turn down such gifts. The personal interest of a patron in a given subject or type of book can have most desirable results and there are librarians with a lucky hand who have “developed” several regular donors, each interested in a different collection in his library. However, donations from friends, the same as appropriations, are often most effective in rare book purchasing when available without restrictions and conditions. Many still uncommitted friends of libraries will understand this if it is properly explained.

Like any other commodity, rare books are subject to the law of demand and supply. What about the demand for rare books? Is it shrinking, stable, or growing? There can be no doubt that it is growing, growing at a rate that very likely will amaze the future chronicler of cultural life in America.

There is some pretty hard evidence in support of this, very clear in regard to institutional libraries, less so for private collectors. One fre-
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quently hears the opinion—not backed up by statistics—that there are fewer collectors active in our own time than “in the past.” This may very well be a fallacy, comparable to the familiar optical illusion when in a forest the trees around one seem fewer and further apart than those further away. I suspect that the future observer will find at least as many, if not many more collectors active in our own as compared with any past generation.

When thirty years ago I accepted the post of rare book curator at the Columbia University Library, I looked around for colleagues with the same or similar positions. I found very few. This refers of course to curators of departments set up within the framework of an institutional library, not to such autonomous (or semi-autonomous) libraries as Huntington, John Carter Brown, William L. Clements, Newberry, etc. That this was not the mere ignorance of a newcomer is borne out by an observation made some years ago by F. B. Adams, Jr., the director of the Pierpont Morgan Library: “Twenty-five years ago the rare book rooms in American college and university libraries could be counted on one’s fingers. Now the institution that doesn’t have one tends to feel it is out of step. Rare book rooms are not just at Harvard and Yale, they are literally everywhere.”

A close parallel is the truly amazing increase in the number of “Friends of the Library” groups, described here by Mrs. Brewer.

These institutions, their directors, their rare book and acquisitions librarians, as well as their individual patrons and groups of friends by and large are competing for essentially the same kinds of rare books on the market today.

Now, how about the supply? “Are rare books getting scarce?” One does not need statistics to see that by and large and in the long run they undoubtedly are. The reservoir of rare books available from all sources for purchase by collectors and libraries is shrinking. Partial or total destruction caused by wear and tear, loss through fire, water, warfare, and other natural and man-made disasters take their constant and steady toll. Possibly more serious even is the ever growing number of books that disappear permanently from the market because they are finding their final homes in institutional libraries. They go there both directly and via the home of the private collector. Due largely to the tax situation the number of private collections put back on the market is becoming smaller and smaller; purchase of books from institutional libraries is virtually nonexistent, except in the very few instances where duplicates are disposed of.
But, one may ask, is it true that this rare book reservoir is only shrinking? Is it not also growing? Are there not constant additions of new books, which are assuming rare book status? Yes, there is a continuing progress of what we might call canonization, whereby books published (and manuscripts written) comparatively recently are being recognized as rare books. Advances in science furnish such candidates, and as a classic example in this field one may cite the writings of Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein. In his article, M. J. Walsh describes the situation in the field of Basic Americana, and W. R. Howell for Western Americana. However, it is very doubtful that this process of canonization could ever fully compensate for the rapid shrinkage of the classic repertory of rare books available for purchase. There is no question, rare books are getting scarce. The conclusion is inevitable that there is a steadily growing demand for a steadily dwindling commodity.

This is another reason, in addition to those cited earlier in this article, for the conspicuous and unprecedented rise in the price of rare books. Compared with the amounts paid even as recently as five or ten years ago, the current prices do seem rather high. And compared with what one had to pay, say, a hundred years ago for the very same titles, the increase looks almost unbelievable. It is entirely plausible that the future may bring a downward trend, at least temporarily and for certain kinds of books and certain individual titles. After all, there are fashions in collecting which influence all buyers, private and institutional, and which are quickly understood by the trade. For instance, within the last half generation or so, incunabula have gone into something of a decline and have soared again to new heights—not only of prices but also of understanding and appreciation. This changing attitude towards fifteenth century books is well described by Thomas Marston in his article in this issue.

All in all, it is not a very daring prophecy to say that any possible lowering of prices would be of only very brief duration. One need only look back into the last century to gain perspective on what may be ahead. R. A. L. Tree has cited some excellent examples of rising prices, e.g., The Bay Psalm Book from $400 in 1855 to $151,000 in 1947; Milton’s Poems, 1645, from $370 in 1895 to $1875 in 1952. To add another example, with more recent quotations, there is Newton’s Principia, 1687, sold at the following prices: 1894, presentation copy, $7.50; 1925, in vellum, $22; 1937, contemp. calf, repaired, $390; 1948, contemp. calf, repaired, $570; 1950, original calf, $1,500; 1958, with
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contemp. ms. notations, $1,850; also 1958, the Devonshire copy, in contemp. red morocco, c. $5,300.

What will this book sell for in 2061? For a university library, or a public library with research interests, that is not looking too far ahead.

There is really no reason why this pattern of steadily growing demand for an ever dwindling supply of rare books should not continue, why the competition should not become keener and keener. Our textbook publishers are getting ready for the “population explosion” during the next few decades, an expectation clearly reflected in their financial policies. To be sure, nobody in his right senses expects a mass movement demanding rare books. There are no statistics available to show us what percentage of the total population needs contact with rare books at one point or another in their education. But however small that percentage may be, and assuming that it will remain reasonably stable, it is safe to say that several generations from now many more teachers and students than today will want to find rare books in the libraries of their institutions.

References