The Training of Rare Book Librarians

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Within the last few years, there has been an increased demand for rare book librarians, a demand which, in the opinion of many, should be supplied by the library schools. Library schools, however, have been unable to fill such requests in sufficient quantity, seldom even in sufficient quality. Such a shortage is, of course, by no means confined to rare book librarians; it exists in many other fields of librarianship. The employer who today bemoans the lack of rare book librarians has probably lamented the shortage of catalogers yesterday and will probably look in vain for a reference librarian tomorrow. In this respect, the short supply of rare book librarians is only in part owing to lack of appropriate training in library school; it also exemplifies the general lack of manpower in the profession.

Nevertheless, some graduate students, finding themselves attracted to the prospect of a rare book room, do appear at one’s door from time to time, if only to inquire about the possibilities of a career. They are puzzled young people who have failed to obtain much definite information about a training program—small blame to them since very little exists. The library schools, harried by the great demand for librarians of all sorts—from administrators to Zatocoders—have had what seemed to be more pressing problems to consider. Informal discussions about rare book education have occurred over highballs at meetings of librarians and collectors, but few people, whether they be librarians, collectors, or educators, have ever put their ideas in print.

Obviously, the reason for the lack of literature lies in the fact that, until recently, the problem did not exist. The staff of a typical rare book collection formerly was comprised of the librarian and one or two assistants who knew how to type. The librarian, in addition to doing all the jobs from acquisitions through cataloging to reference...
work, also had some time left for scholarly research. The assistants handled all the clerical work, oiled the bindings, and often assisted in research. If the collection happened to be part of a larger library system, the librarian was relieved of some of the technical processes—and probably an assistant as well. The image of that collection comes readily to mind: the attractively furnished and paneled room, often containing nothing more than the books collected and endowed by one person, the long library table in the center, the easy chairs facing the elaborate fireplace under the portrait of the donor. Fortunately, these rooms still exist to exemplify a less functional but more craftsmanlike period.

Finding a librarian for such a collection was not too difficult; a specialist in the subject of the collection might be available, a librarian—active or about to retire—might be selected, in some instances the librarian came with the collection. In one place or another, the person who was most appropriate for the position could be found. Furthermore, he usually wanted it, was delighted to get it, and worried not about "opportunities for advancement" or fringe benefits. He did not, in fact, expect to advance; he had arrived where he wanted to remain, the lucky man or woman.

While a few of these collections were housed in their own buildings and governed by a board of trustees, most of them were to be found in college and university libraries, some in public libraries. As these institutions grew, books accumulated which, because of value, content, or rarity, had to be shelved under conditions of security. These went, in increasing numbers, to the rare book rooms. Thus the scope of the collection enlarged; the "Rare Book Librarian" became "Curator of Special Collections," acquiring a staff of professional assistants. Today, the rare book rooms employ their own reference librarians and catalogers. This rather astonishing growth in size and scope of collection may be attributed to various factors: the general expansion of colleges and universities, the need for research materials because of the competition for faculty, and the income tax laws which often make gifts a profitable transaction on the part of a donor. One may expect these conditions to continue. One may also look to a constant if not augmented demand for rare book specialists.

It is apparent, therefore, that the problem of supplying these specialists has become more complicated. Rare book librarians, i.e., custodians of special collections, are not the only professional librarians needed for these collections; catalogers, reference librarians, and first
professional assistants must also be provided. At present, the need for people in these lower echelons is even greater than the need for rare book librarians. This statement will not surprise anybody familiar with library management, but it is set down here to emphasize the ambiguity of the term "rare book librarian" as used in and out of the profession. Furthermore, distinctions must be made if training is to be considered. Obviously, the training of a rare book librarian is different from the training of a first professional assistant.

To begin with the lowest step on the ladder of rare book librarianship, that of the first professional assistant, the most appropriate background for this position, besides the baccalaureate degree, may be acquired by working as an aid in a rare book room, or clerking in an antiquarian bookstore, or attending library school. The first would provide an intensive knowledge of one library system and one collection, the second would insure an extensive knowledge of the book market and the dealers, the third would provide a more general knowledge of libraries and books. Here it might be well to point to the dilemma of the library schools in training first professional assistants because, ideally, they ought to be the source from which they flow. It is certainly no secret that many a rare book librarian has been dismayed because his new library school graduate knows comparatively little about the world of rare books. And, using this experience to make other assumptions, the rare book librarian goes on to declare that library schools are a waste of time, they teach mechanics not books, and, after all, he did not need to go to library school, etc., etc. Such statements are, of course, neither wholly true nor wholly false. They stem from a general misunderstanding of the present condition of our educational system.

Few people who have been away from schools and colleges for more than twenty-five years realize how much has changed—unless they have read Jacques Barzun. The college student today does not possess the training in languages, in the history of literature, in the disciplines of accuracy and clear communication which prevailed some years ago. And so students come to graduate library school without adequate background. In short, to one person at least, it seems as if, in the humanities, the colleges are now doing what the high schools used to do, and the graduate schools are doing what the colleges used to do. If this were not so, library schools would not have to spend time explaining the most elementary research methods and writing techniques, or introducing the scholarly journals in litera-
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ture to students who have majored in the subject, or introducing Evans, Sabin, and Writings on American History to students who have majored in American history, or even insisting that quotations and bibliographical citations must be accurate.

Languages constitute another source for discouragement. Few students know one other language, let alone two. How, then, does one expect to get assistants for Americana who know Spanish and French? What does one do for a librarian of a subject collection who says, "I'd like an assistant who knows at least three other languages. After all, we have eleven languages in our collection."? The lack of languages cannot be eliminated in library school, but, in order to make progress towards librarianship, the library school attempts to fill in some of the gaps in undergraduate education. All of which means that progress in library school is slower than the rare book librarian thinks it should be. Furthermore, he tends to forget that library schools must first train a person to work in a library before they can train him to work in a rare book collection. If a student expects to make a career of librarianship, he should be given a basic foundation or, as the jargon of education terms it, a core curriculum. This calls for courses dealing with the history and significance of libraries, the principles of cataloging and classification, reference books and methods, as well as courses in the literature of particular fields. Given one academic year in which to do the job, there is time for only a few more courses in one's specialty. In this respect, the problem of the rare book librarian is no different from that of the student intending to specialize, for instance, in music librarianship or in government documents. A student who intends to work with rare books can learn something about the history of printing, advanced bibliography, and perhaps do some research for a seminar before he receives his degree. Then he reports for work in a rare book room not knowing nearly as much as his employer thought he would. However, he has been trained to work in a library; certainly little more than that can be expected in one year.

If one year is not enough, what about two? The thought of a second year brings forth all sorts of wonderful possibilities: courses in the history of collecting, the rare book market, preservation, printing techniques, administration, public relations, perhaps even a tour of rare book libraries, not to speak of the clubs of collectors. As desirable as this would be, it is certainly not practical. What with the cost of a graduate year, few students could afford another without financial aid. Moreover, it is extremely doubtful that enough students
would register to make such a program worthwhile. At present, then, the only workable approach to the problem of advanced courses would be a summer term.

The surprisingly large attendance at the Charlottesville Rare Books Conference in June, 1959, seems to be sufficient evidence that, if the proper program were arranged, there would be enough interest to warrant it occasionally. The archivists now provide such a course; the rare book librarians should be able to do the same for themselves. Manifestly, the program of study must require academic standards for admission as well as for credit. A summer session combining class work and informal discussions among students and experts might turn out to be, in effect, a junior institute for advanced study. When this program has been successfully established, the library schools could then take over, offering more formal programs, including work in epigraphy and paleography, in incunabula and Americana, as well as advanced research in particular disciplines. When the library schools do undertake such programs, the libraries must be able to offer positions carrying the rank and salary appropriate to this training.

Until one or another facility for advanced work is available, the rare book librarians will have to train their own assistants. Whether the assistant should have a library school degree rather than a year of work in a library or in the rare book trade depends upon his future prospects. If he is already assured of a position in the library of his choice and he possesses an adequate background, the degree may not be too important. But if he plans to move from library to library or if he is not yet sure of the direction of his interest, a library school degree becomes a passport, enabling him to cross civil service borders and giving him some protection in moving from one division of librarianship to another.

Once ensconced in a rare book collection, the first professional assistant finds that the rate of his education is determined solely by his interest and ability. The books, catalogs, and bibliographies are readily available; his colleagues and their visitors bring him the unwritten lore of the rare book world. With the discovery of an unrecorded cancel, or a new issue, he begins to feel at home. And, if all goes well, he will be ready for promotion in a few years. It is such training that develops the next level of librarian: the cataloger or reference librarian.

But what about the training of the rare book librarian, the chief, the curator of special collections? Six years ago, the distinguished
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director of the Pierpont Morgan Library, F. B. Adams, Jr., printed his own thoughts on the problem:

Where shall we look for the book-loving professionals that we need to staff our rare book rooms? I think they will best be found in the graduate schools that give advanced training in the sciences and the humanities. Do not, please, misunderstand me when I say this. I am not trying to run down the library schools. Anybody who has worked in a European library will testify at once that the professional librarians of this country are a tremendous asset to scholarship. But I feel that the ideal rare book curator is more closely akin to the historian, the musicologist, or the English Ph.D., than he is to the technically trained librarian. And I believe that the curator can gain a sufficient knowledge of library techniques by brief indoctrination at a library school, followed by working visits to established rare book collections. There should be more such working visits, or temporary exchanges of personnel; one learns a great deal of painting or printing or surgery by working with various experienced practitioners.¹

Similar opinions have been expressed by others, though not as succinctly. One wonders, of course, what Adams means by “brief indoctrination at a library school.” After all, the M.S. degree, including some time devoted to rare books, can be acquired in ten months. If he is thinking in terms of two, three, or four months, what courses would be omitted or what, for instance, would a “brief indoctrination” to cataloging and classification be? One thing, at least, is certain: Adams agrees that some library school training is valuable.

His major point, however, is that “the ideal rare book curator is more closely akin to the historian, the musicologist, or the English Ph.D., than he is to the technically trained librarian.” Here the emphasis is on scholarship and research, attributes characteristic of the rare book world. If Adams is taken literally, there need be no dispute. Ideally, the curator should be primarily a scholar. Practically, several questions arise. Is there a director above the curator who will be responsible for administration and public relations, both of which are time-consuming? How many libraries today think that they can afford a scholar-curateur? Within the last few years, to cite an example, a well-known rare book library in a university became quite a problem because, in the words of the director of the university library, it “was not paying its way.” Thirty or forty years ago, a rare book collection with two or three readers a day and a scholar turning out monographs needed no further justification. Today, more is required; friends and
possible friends must be cultivated intensively, not only for books and manuscripts but also for additions to the endowment; adequate publicity must be secured. In other words, the trend from exploitation of resources to growth of resources has altered the characteristics desired in a rare book librarian. To be sure, a “productive” scholar who is charming enough to wheedle a First Folio this week and a Bay Psalm Book next week, who is able to supervise a staff of eight or ten or more, and who would appear in a different city every weekend would be an excellent rare book librarian. He would also be, it might be added, an excellent college president. Unfortunately, there are too few such people available for rare book rooms. Therefore one must settle for less and the trustees find themselves deciding among X who is a fine scholar, Y who is not as good a scholar but “gets around,” and Z who is not as good a scholar either but is more attractive than X or Y. If the trustees feel they must make the library “bigger and better,” they will consider qualities other than scholarship. Another factor is money. Book collectors are usually people of means who live in good style. To be able to associate with them, as a rare book librarian should, requires more money than institutions pay to members of their staff. Travel funds, not to speak of entertainment funds, are inadequate, and yet the rare book librarian is expected to join week-ends at this collection or that, to have the John Jameson ready when Mr. and Mrs. Doe arrive. Here is something more for the trustees to consider: as good a scholar as X is, he would be strapped.

Today, academic training is only a part of the equipment of the rare book librarians. Neither the library schools nor the other graduate schools can be expected to turn them out unless they also possess additional personal qualifications. This implies that recruiting for the profession of rare books must be conducted with increasing care. It is neither fair to the student or his employer to portray the rare book collection as a retreat for bibliographical scholarship. Nor is it fair to imply that sound scholarship is the sole requirement for advancement to the top level. In the middle of the twentieth century, the rare book collection has been moved a little closer to the market place.

References