Felix Reichmann and the Development of The Cornell Library

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Book selection in most large university libraries is a task in which many members of the faculty and library staff participate. The degree of participation varies widely and in many cases is determined by the interests, energy and persistence of an individual. In the libraries of professional and special schools, selection is frequently one of the major responsibilities of the senior members of the library staff, with such faculty advice and consultation as may be proffered or sought. Similarly in collections specialized as to subject, area or language, for which there are qualified curators or bibliographers on the library staff, the selection responsibility is commonly a major assignment. Because of the assistance it may bring forth and as a matter of good relations with its clientele, the library is always receptive to suggestions from faculty members, students, visiting scholars and other interested persons who take the trouble to recommend items for acquisition. The purpose of this paper is not to slight or overlook these valued contributions to the development of the Cornell University Libraries, but rather to concentrate on the efforts of one member of the library staff who has been in a key position to influence a major part of the Libraries' book selection activities.

Felix Reichmann came to Cornell in the spring of 1947 as Acquisitions Librarian. His background as a European bookseller included apprentice experience in bookshops in several European capitals and fifteen years of professional experience as a bookseller in Vienna after he had taken his doctorate in history of art at the University of Vienna. Shortly after coming to this country in the early 1940's he enrolled in the Graduate Library School of the

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University of Chicago and earned his MA in Librarianship. With this as his formal preparation for a career in American librarianship, he served in several libraries in Pennsylvania and then as a staff member of the Library of Congress, principally assigned to the postwar acquisitions activities of the LC. Reichmann thus brought to Cornell a rich and diverse background in the European book trade as well as formal training and experience in American librarianship.

Reichmann joined the Cornell Library staff as one of the first appointees in a program designed to rebuild the library staff, reinvigorate the library collections, and produce a reasonably adequate library plant. Cornell, in common with most university libraries, had depended in the years preceding World War II on faculty book selection as the principal means of developing the library's collections. With the return of the faculty from wartime service, and with the greatly increased influx of students, it became apparent very shortly that, with some notable exceptions, the library collections would not be built up if they were dependent on faculty selection. In the first forty years of its existence, the Cornell Library had made remarkable progress due primarily to the interest, influence and support of Cornell's first President, Andrew D. White. Given the momentum of that tremendous start, plus the continuing interest and support of several strong men in the University, the growth and strengthening of the libraries carried on until about 1920. There ensued a period of twenty to twenty-five years in which the Library did not receive the attention it merited and required either in the form of financial support or of strong faculty and staff effort. The result was a collection of about a million and a quarter volumes overall, with certain areas of very great strength, far more modest collections in many other areas, and very meager collections in many areas that were to become of prime importance to the University in the succeeding years. The University administration recognized, at least in a general way, what the library situation was and realized that serious and sustained attention to it was required. The University community as a whole perhaps had less appreciation of what was needed, since it was accustomed to the conditions in which it found itself.

For book funds the Cornell Library had been largely dependent on the income from endowments but there was also a small supplemental appropriation from general University funds. The word "supplemental" is used advisedly, because the appropriation was so regarded by both the library staff and the University administration.
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In this atmosphere, and in view of the relatively modest endowment income available, increased book funds were an immediate problem. It had been the practice at Cornell to wait until endowment income had been earned and credited to the library account before any of it could be spent. After exploration of this situation, and in view of the inability of the Library to undertake an acquisition program that could in any sense be considered adequate, the recommendation was made that the Library be permitted to spend its endowment income in advance of the actual crediting of that income to the library account. Thus, in one year it was possible to increase book expenditures by almost 100 percent. The practice of spending endowment income in anticipation has since been accepted as standard procedure.

With the postwar pressures on the faculty and with some increase in library book funds, it became possible through personal work with individual faculty members and departments to arrange, sometimes at their request and sometimes at the suggestion of the Library, to transfer all or a major part of the selection responsibility in the humanities and the social sciences to the staff of the central University Library. In a few departments where there were interested faculty members who wished to continue their book selection activities, no attempt to discourage them was made but an effort was undertaken to keep this book selection activity under surveillance to be sure that it was not sporadic. This continues to be the practice at Cornell, with the understanding that faculty recommendations are encouraged and welcomed at all times but the Library does not wait for faculty action, rather it goes ahead and takes the initiative whenever this seems to be indicated.

After a year as Acquisitions Librarian, to which was added the duty of coordinating the work of acquisitions and cataloging, Reichmann was made Assistant Director for Technical Services in 1948. This may properly be considered as the beginning of his major contribution to the development of the Cornell Libraries.

In reorganizing the book selection activities of the Library, one of Reichmann's first moves was an attempt to cover adequately the current publishing output. The means he employed for this purpose was a subscription to the proof slips of the Library of Congress which became one of the basic selection tools. These slips were examined and selections in the humanities, the social sciences and general works were made on the spot. Appropriate slips were set aside for review.
and consideration by the librarians of several special collections and departmental libraries as part of this process. This became an established weekly procedure which gave Cornell far better coverage of the current publishing output, as represented by the cataloging of the Library of Congress, than it had ever had before.

With this portion of current publishing covered, Reichmann moved on to regular weekly, fortnightly and monthly reading of the current national bibliographies of the major countries of Western Europe. The procedure followed was similar, with direct selections made in the fields covered by Reichmann himself and with references to other members of the library staff and, in some cases, members of the faculty for titles and subjects appropriate to special collections and departmental libraries. This procedure has continued down to the present and is now routine.

From the outset, a sharp distinction was made between the selection of current publications and older, out-of-print and rare material. With only occasional exceptions, purchase of this type of material was made only after consultation with appropriate faculty members or members of the library staff. It was clearly recognized that special knowledge and experience should be brought to bear in this area if funds were to be wisely used, and Reichmann had no hesitation in approaching any member of the University community whose opinion he considered relevant. In this way, significant acquisition patterns were developed and carried out. Reichmann took the initiative in this since he had immediate access to all of the catalogs and announcements coming from booksellers and publishers.

But Cornell did not wait for dealers to offer materials that it was seeking. It became clear almost at the outset that Reichmann had stored up a knowledge of dealers and their specialties and interests which could not be found in any directory or guidebook. This information proved invaluable. He was able many times to locate and secure books and sets of journals which had long been sought in certain markets unsuccessfully, but which he was able to produce because he knew where the publication was most likely to be found. In some cases, this was as simple as writing an airmail letter to the publisher; in many cases, it meant exploiting personal knowledge, acquaintance and friendship. As members of the faculty became aware of the success which Reichmann frequently had in securing material that was remote and difficult of access, he received many more requests from them to try to find materials which were normally con-
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considered unavailable. In many instances, it was possible to secure this material; in many others, of course, it could not be done.

Another aspect of Reichmann's operations which may be noted was his almost uncanny judgment as to the prices which should be paid for various publications. Naturally, we have all had to adjust our sights upwards over the years in these matters, but it is still true that Reichmann was a far better judge than many of the rest of us as to the reasonableness of a given price. He also manifested on many occasions remarkable ingenuity and effectiveness in persuading dealers to extend special discounts, to adjust prices or to find some unusual way to bring off a deal which, at the outset, might have seemed hopeless.

Reichmann also introduced at Cornell the use of the standing order with certain publishers or groups of publishers or for certain types of publications. One of the first of these was to place a standing order with all American university presses. Another notable step to build up the collection was a complete canvass of all states to obtain backfiles and current issues of historical society publications.

Over a period of time Reichmann developed a plan by which he formed small committees which meet weekly to review and pool information on current orders. Such groups cover the physical sciences and mathematics, the social sciences, and the fine arts. Similar committees deal with current popular reading and with all new serial subscriptions. This device has not only served to control duplication, but it has also developed a spirit of cooperation and understanding between librarians representing different but related subject fields. Working with the reference staff, Reichmann took as his own specialty the bibliographic resources and he is largely responsible for developing at Cornell, on a very good foundation, what is now a formidable bibliographic apparatus.

Cornell had only a modest exchange program over the years because the University did not have a substantial volume of publications to be offered in exchange, except in the field of agriculture. The materials published at the University and by the Cornell University Press were used advantageously for foreign exchange. It became apparent a number of years ago, however, that something considerably more ambitious in the way of exchange was required if Cornell was to acquire the volume of publications from certain countries, especially Russia, that were wanted. After lengthy negotiations, the first exchange in which Cornell undertook to purchase substantial
blocks of current material issued by commercial publishers for exchange purposes was worked out by Reichmann. This same device has been extended considerably in subsequent years, and it has proved to be a valuable source of material which would not otherwise be available.

Despite his lack of familiarity with the Orient, Reichmann has been of inestimable value to the faculty members and bibliographers developing the collections in these fields. He has been ever alert to the possibility of securing materials and out of his experience has brought forward many suggestions for sources and types of material which otherwise might have gone unnoticed. In this way, Reichmann has made a major contribution to the development of the Wason Collection covering China and Southeast Asia. He has similarly taken a major responsibility for the development of the collection dealing with Africa and, for many years, he covered the Latin American field. As bibliographers have come to the library staff in some of these specialized fields, his concern has been at a somewhat higher level, attempting to make sure that the Library secured the desired coverage, without his being directly involved in individual purchases and negotiations.

If one were to try to characterize briefly Reichmann's contribution in book selection at Cornell, there are two things that should be emphasized: the first is the very broad and yet detailed knowledge of sources and of the book trade and of the most effective ways of dealing with them, and the second is the application of method to any project which is undertaken. The first contribution is of the greatest value, and can only be duplicated by a person who has a similar background and interest, but the second can be applied in any library. If a library formulates an acquisition program even though it is fuzzy, it can then proceed to carry out this policy in a methodical, thoroughgoing and continuing manner. This is the great difference between book selection conducted by a man of Reichmann's stature and ability as compared with book selection by an amateur who will make great forays from time to time but who then permits periods to intervene in which no activity occurs. The program which Reichmann has been largely instrumental in developing at Cornell is a methodical day-by-day, week-by-week and month-by-month system. This kind of program, over a period of years, is bound to yield more significant results than even the most brilliant forays.

In 1964 Cornell was able to recognize formally what had long
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been apparent to many of us, namely, that Reichmann as Assistant Director of Technical Services and as informal chief of book selection was carrying two full-time jobs which proved to be too great a burden if both jobs were to be carried out at the high level which he sets for himself. At that time it was possible to relieve Reichmann of the administrative responsibility for directing the work of the Technical Services and to permit him to concentrate as a staff officer, serving as the chief book selection man, in the Cornell Library system. He functions now with a secretary and a bibliographer, as a staff officer primarily concerned with the development of the collections in the humanities and the social sciences, but by no means limited to these areas and extending very substantial influence over the development of the book collections as a whole. During the period of Reichmann's service to date the library holdings have more than doubled and there is every prospect of his continuing to participate in and monitor the book selection at Cornell until the collection has tripled in size.

Cornell has been very fortunate to have Felix Reichmann as its chief book selection officer for the past nineteen years.

General References