



Special Collections

H. RICHARD ARCHER

THE PROBLEMS of special collections acquired by research libraries (whether they be college, university, or private), are deserving of special study and analysis by librarians interested in the trends of the past decade.

An acceptable definition for a special collection is:

an assemblage of material in some field of knowledge which includes at least some of the rare or more unusual items and a greater proportion of other titles bearing upon the special subject than would be included ordinarily in a library of the size.¹

In order to consider special collections which may be sought out, acquired, and processed by the research library, there are certain questions which require special attention:

1. How does the library learn about the imminent disposal of a special collection? Whose responsibility is it to follow up on suggestions which may come from a faculty member, a dealer, a collector, or a friend of the library?

2. What agents are used for acquiring the collection? Is it the responsibility of the director, a formal body of friends, or does the head of the special collections department make the final decision and arrange for acquiring the material? How are the funds made available, and who decides how these funds are to be spent?

3. Who should make the offer and complete the transaction? What routines should be employed for processing the special collection? How should the collection be appraised? How should duplicates and unwanted (out-of-scope) materials be disposed of?

In considering these questions, it is well to recall what one experienced library administrator pointed out: "Special collections in a li-

H. Richard Archer is Librarian, Chapin Library of Rare Books, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

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brary generally come from gifts of friends whose collector's instincts brought them together or who acquired them in order to present them."² Such a collection may have been gathered by a friend or alumnus of the institution, or it may have been put together by an individual unknown to the institution, but one who during an active period of collecting managed to obtain distinctive and valuable materials for his own pleasure and use (e.g., the celebrated and valuable collection of nineteenth century fiction gathered and described by Sir Michael Sadleir, and sold to UCLA in 1952 after his bibliography on that topic was published).³ Often several institutions may be interested in purchasing the same large and important collection; therefore, the librarians responsible for seeking out research materials must be well-informed about the needs of their respective institutions and also be able to obtain the necessary funds by the time the negotiations reach the stage where decisions must be made.

It hardly needs to be emphasized here that all institutions do not follow the same procedures; a large research library may have certain advantages over the smaller university and college libraries that are struggling to gain a foothold on the ladder of academic respectability and are, therefore, less likely to attract unusual research materials for their growing collections. This is not to say that all special collections are appropriate at the time of their purchase or transfer to the institution that acquires them, but the annals of librarianship have shown that many research libraries have managed to anticipate the demands of future scholars, to gather special collections which are then mined and sifted in later years, and thus later greatly benefit both the users and the owners of the materials. (Experiences at Yale, Harvard, California, Texas, Chicago, Virginia, etc., are typical of this important aspect of special collections in recent decades.)

It is well to keep in mind that other problems may arise, especially if the special collection comes to the institution from a donor. The stipulations in a deed or gift, whether from an estate or a living collector, may be restrictive and not always in the best interest of the institution receiving the collection or of the scholars who plan to make use of the materials. There often will be some delicate matters to consider, and curators, as well as administrators, have had to face these situations for several decades. Solutions may be arrived at, but not without considerable thought and diplomatic maneuvering, and often the selection of a workable program that benefits the recipient and does not offend the benefactor may be difficult to achieve.

Traditionally, the older and well-established research libraries with their separate departments of special collections have had certain advantages. They can claim a knowledgeable staff, historical background, prestige, adequate space for housing incoming collections, as well as funds to support related acquisitions and for processing the materials. Often they are better able to exploit the collections for educational purposes. They may publish catalogs and books relating to subjects of the various collections, and often feature exhibits of the works or of scholarly research in process based on them.

Normally, the chief administrator of the rare book department, whether he has the title of curator, head, rare book librarian, or director of research, will be the officer of the library staff responsible for the final decision about acquiring a special collection offered to the library. Obviously, this person must work closely with the director or librarian who is in charge of the institutional library, and he should understand that the decisions made and agreements reached should be in line with the over-all collection policies of the institution.

The matter of employing agents for acquiring special collections depends on the nature of the collection being offered and upon the policies in effect at each institution. Some research institutions, private or state-supported, have their own "field representatives" who operate according to accepted practice and locate desirable materials for their institutions. (The Huntington, Lilly, Houghton, UCLA and many others employ this kind of representative for searching out special collections.)

Members of the antiquarian book trade likewise serve as valuable adjuncts in a great many instances where valuable and important collections are offered to institutions known to be active in certain areas of scholarly research. Each institution acts according to its own idea of what it feels is best for it. Those that have close ties with the antiquarian trade may enjoy greater success than others who rely upon different means of locating and acquiring special collections. It is not possible to present hard and fast rules for these procedures, and it is unlikely that many institutions will succeed in imitating the more fortunate libraries without changing their methods and adding larger amounts of money for the necessary activities related to searching out desirable collections.

When we come to consider the important topic of who makes the decision to acquire the material, whether an individual or a group

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(such as a committee on acquisitions or an official friends organization), we must realize that such matters are decided according to the established procedures by the administrative body responsible for acquisition policies. The availability of funds is an important consideration, and when the necessary approval is given by the acquisitions committee and approved by the financial officer or library administrator, then the arrangements may be concluded.

It is generally understood that the institutions most active in searching out and acquiring important and valuable special collections normally discharge their obligations to the world of scholarship as well as to their own students and faculties in that they make the materials available for research purposes. Privately endowed libraries and some of the well-known private collections may restrict the use of their materials depending upon individual donor or owner preferences, but the state-supported institutions generally maintain an open-door policy.

At most institutions, the nature of the graduate program and the established curriculum have a marked effect on the type of materials sought by the libraries of these growing colleges and universities. The policies in effect at Boston University and Syracuse University may differ from those at certain large state universities such as Illinois, Michigan, California, Indiana, and Kentucky, but recent activities indicate that many of these tax-supported universities are engaged in similar transactions as they build their research collections by acquiring materials en bloc.

With regard to acquiring manuscripts and papers of contemporary and regional authors, Washington University in St. Louis, the Newberry Library in Chicago, and UCLA among others have been particularly active. At Washington University, for example, the librarians in charge of book selection and of special collections invited the faculty of the English department to make a list of contemporary writers who, while not yet widely recognized, were still judged to have potentially lasting importance. The librarians then wrote to the designated novelists and poets, explaining the Library's interest in collecting their printed works and manuscripts, and invited them to deposit their literary papers and correspondence in the Library to be available for future study. This program has been immensely successful. Some libraries concentrate on the papers of their institutions' alumni who have achieved fame or recognition; others may attempt to develop collections relating to the area in which the libraries are

located. The regional approach in particular has had many adherents for at least two generations.

This is not the place to discuss in detail the problems related to the acquisition and maintenance of materials by and about living authors, though there are several institutions that have faced this situation and are aware of the headaches and inconveniences which occur when living authors continue to "live" for many years, and their heirs (for one reason or another) may attempt to control the use, as well as the physical materials themselves. Sometimes the current library administrator finds it difficult to carry out certain agreements and understandings that were specified by their predecessors in the administration.

Many collections have been donated, and even sold, with strict stipulations which seem unreasonable to librarians of today, although they may have been acceptable to the donors and recipients in the recent past. To avoid these problems, librarians acquiring en bloc collections, whether by gift or purchase, must be experienced and knowledgeable about such matters, otherwise the future generations of scholars and administrators may suffer as a result of hasty and inconsiderate actions performed by our present day curators and their advisors.

The matter of completing the transaction, once the library's decision has been made and accepted by the seller (or donor) is simply a business transaction. It is expected that the contract should be understood by both the recipient and the person selling the collection, whether or not he is represented by an agent. If there are restrictive clauses with regard to the disposal of any of the items included in the collection, or certain stipulations about processing and maintenance, these should be clearly stated. Naturally, the library as purchaser should abide by any of these stipulations so as to avoid possible misunderstandings, and even legal procedures, whenever a question arises about disposing of duplicates or out-of-scope materials.

After the materials have been acquired, the curator and his staff must decide how the collections are to be processed and made available, or cataloged and serviced. The additional considerations about maintenance and preservation are important of course, but they are not within the scope of this brief survey. If collections are acquired and stored without adequate finding lists or catalogs, they are useless to research scholars and library users.

The procedures for handling unit, or en bloc collections have been

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treated in some detail by Baughman in his contribution to *Rare Book Collections*, where these and related matters are discussed.⁴ With regard to the question of appraisals, there have been a number of articles published in recent years dealing with the ever-changing regulations. A fairly recent bulletin issued by the Internal Revenue Service is entitled *Valuation of Donated Property*, which librarians and interested donors should refer to for specific instructions.⁵

Another brief and useful code was included in *Rare Book Collections* as an Appendix entitled "A Statement of Recommended Policy Regarding Appraisals" and submitted by the ACRL Rare Book Section Committee on Appraisals.⁶

Robert F. Metzdorf⁷ and John S. Kebabian⁸ both experienced bookmen and qualified appraisers, have discussed the problems and sometimes complicated ramifications of this very important subject, especially as related to acquisition procedures and gifts by donors to institutional libraries. Other valuable suggestions appear in two articles by Andreas L. Brown⁹ and William L. Carter.¹⁰ These are verbatim reports of papers read at a panel of the Rare Books Section held at Stanford University, June 24, 1967. Other notices appearing from time to time in the *AB* (or as it is now called, *Bookman's Weekly*) call to the attention of librarians and other interested persons any news likely to be of use to collectors and librarians.

The final subject to be discussed has to do with the problems of duplicates and the disposal of unwanted (out-of-scope) materials. The problems related to the procedures for determining which items are duplicates and how these may be disposed of in a convenient and suitable manner are numerous. As Baughman has stated: "The sale or exchange of duplicates that have been acquired by gift should not be undertaken without the donor's express approval; *this entire matter should be cleared with him at the time the gift is being arranged.*"¹¹

If the collections have been received as bequests, there may be other questions with regard to disposal of duplicates and out-of-scope materials. In cases where the collections are acquired en bloc, by purchase, unless there are restrictive clauses pertaining to such matters, the library may handle the selling and exchanging of duplicates and out-of-scope items without worrying about offending a living donor or the families of the deceased benefactor.

The literature dealing with the problems of duplicates and their disposition is quite sparse. This topic was discussed at a panel of the Rare Books Section, held at Stanford in July 1967, and two of the

papers read at that meeting, one by J. M. Edelstein "On Disposal of Duplicates,"¹² and another by Edwin Wolf, 2nd, on "Fine Art of Selling Duplicates"¹³ summarize the thinking of these experienced librarians about current practices so far as rare book libraries are concerned. Edelstein states that:

The usual method for the disposition of special collections material is the tried and true one of establishing a relationship with a number of booksellers who know the collections in the library, are likely to want the type of duplicates which may show up in it, and are, in turn, likely to be able to offer at the time or later something wanted or needed by the library.¹⁴

Wolf, in his contribution to the panel, presented details about specific collections, mentioned certain famous transactions such as the Newberry-Silver and the Lilly-Indiana auction sales, and made cogent remarks on the dangers and pit-falls which librarians should attempt to avoid in the matter of disposing of duplicates.¹⁵

Practices at many research libraries in college and universities vary somewhat, and no doubt a great number of transactions are conducted between dealers in antiquarian books and librarians with considerable regularity and with varying degrees of success. As a means of developing the collections in the libraries engaged in these activities, it seems safe to assume that both parties in these transactions benefit, and that future dealings may continue along the same lines.

It is not the purpose of this article to take up a matter which is of considerable interest to bibliographers and scholars, that of the decisions made regarding the selling of library materials, whether duplicate or not. This topic has been treated in some detail by Robert H. Taylor in his article entitled, "Bibliothecohimatiourgomachia."¹⁶ Later, Gordon Ray in his enlightening article, "Changing World of Rare Books," suggests that many of our universities are going through a process of upgrading, and that as a result, some of them are disposing of duplicates and other materials.¹⁷

The philosophical and theoretical problems related to this practice would provide enough data for a lengthy treatise or learned book, therefore no attempt is made in this brief exploratory article to treat such a controversial subject.

In conclusion, it is necessary to state that the practices of the past decade or so (since World War II), have been fairly well documented, and those libraries engaged in the acquisition of special col-

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lections have become increasingly interested in procedures and plans for improving the collections and making them available for those who need the materials. It will be interesting to see how the older and better-known institutions fare in the decade of the 1970's, as we watch the expansion of newer and less famous colleges and universities play a role in this important area of librarianship and the development of resources.

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