

A Caucus-Race and a Long Tale: The Profession of Rare Book Librarianship in the 1980s

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“What *is* a Caucus-race,” said Alice; not that she much wanted to know, but the Dodo had paused as if it thought that *somebody* ought to speak, and no one else seemed inclined to say anything.

“Why,” said the Dodo, “the best way to explain it is to do it.”...First it marked out a race-course, in a sort of circle, (“the exact shape doesn’t matter,” it said,) and then all the party were placed along the course, here and there. There was no “One, two, three, and away!”, but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running half an hour or so,...the Dodo suddenly called out “The race is over!” and they all crowded round it, panting, and asking “But who has won?”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

WE KNOW THAT THERE IS a profession of rare book librarianship out there. Some people work in it. What it involves, however, seems a little less easily knowable. Perhaps the best way to explain it, Dodo-like, is to do it.

But not everyone does it. The vast majority of librarians will never have much to do with rare books or manuscripts. Nor will all who work with them do so in the same way. Their handling and functions differ from institution to institution and within institutions, work with them differs from position to position. Explaining the rules of the game is likely to prove difficult whether one is addressing those outside the field or those within it.

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Special Collections Operations

Special collections operations differ from one another. An observer might suppose that a person who works at whatever position in a rare book and manuscript department or library could assume, more or less indifferently, similar responsibilities in a college or university library, an independent research library, a historical society library, a special library, a public library, or a government library. Such a supposition is at least open to question.

The functions of rare book and manuscript collections at one sort of library (for instance, a university research library) are not entirely comparable to their functions at another (for instance, an urban public library). Some public libraries have closed or are questioning the merit of maintaining their rare book collections. Various circumstances explain such closings or questions; these may differ from city to city. Whatever they are, they suggest that a librarian with prior rare book experience at a research university is not automatically equipped to make a transition to a public library. Institutional functions may differ so markedly that a person's ability to build, publicize, make accessible, and justify a rare book department can prove less adaptable to different institutional contexts than, in theory, we might expect.

Special collections positions also differ from one another. We might suppose that the librarians responsible for reader services in a rare book and manuscript library are as intimately acquainted with "rare book librarianship" as the catalogers who work for the same department, its acquisitions personnel, its subject specialists, its conservators, and its administration. But it ought to be instantly obvious that each will experience special collections librarianship in a distinctive way. Movement between different spheres of responsibility may be no simpler than, in other library situations, movement between public services and technical services.

All of this is to say nothing that a person who works as a rare book and manuscript librarian does not already take for granted, but it may not be obvious to colleagues elsewhere in the field. Rare book and manuscript collections are less different from other libraries than it may seem. Their similarities to other libraries—to the many different kinds of other libraries—are much more striking than their differences. Perhaps more precisely, these differences are no more striking than the differences among "ordinary" libraries, which variously serve small towns and big cities, hospitals and steel companies, elementary schools, community colleges and state universities, the U.S. Congress and state welfare agencies, rural agricultural counties, and technological insti-

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tutes. Like all libraries, rare book and manuscript libraries differ among themselves.

If special collections *departments* (as opposed to special collections *libraries*) differ at all significantly from other library departments, it is because their range of responsibilities is usually the equivalent of those which, in large libraries, are parceled out among several departments. Special collections departments tend to be libraries in miniature. Acquisitions, public relations and fund-raising, exhibitions and catalogs, technical services, circulation, shelving, reference, copying, preservation, indeed, the whole gamut of tasks required to operate a library, are all also required to operate most special collections departments. Some are small enough so that their staff do a little bit of everything rather than practicing a specialty full-time. Others may have staff whose work is normally as specialized and stratified as is any library staff's. But for many who work in rare books, whatever specialized preparatory knowledge the field requires, it also encourages the development and use of more generalized professional skills than can be honed by those who work in circulation, reference, or acquisitions in a departmentally-organized general library.

Aside from this exception—which this author would not want to press too far—professional librarians who work in special collections find the experience of a professional career quite similar to the experiences of professional librarians in general libraries. Like all other librarians, rare book and manuscript librarians perform varied functions within their varied institutions. In consequence, it is as difficult to generalize about the profession of rare book and manuscript librarianship as it is to generalize about the profession of librarianship itself. All of us know, more or less instinctively, that people who begin their careers doing reference in a law firm library, acquisitions at a large research library, circulation at a public library, or cataloging at a historical society, are likely to have differing career paths. If the career paths of those who work in rare book and manuscript libraries are any less diverse or are diverse in unusual and distinctive ways, this author has yet to hear about it.

Physical and Psychological Isolation

The sense of a difference between rare book personnel and general librarians persists nonetheless. There must be a reason for it. One reason may be simple physical distance. The demands of security cause the placing of many special collections in their own wings, relatively inaccessible rooms, or entirely separate floors or buildings where their staff

do not easily mingle with colleagues elsewhere in the system. Special collections personnel themselves frequently complain of feeling isolated from their colleagues. They are often speaking the literal truth without necessarily being consciously aware of it. Forging relationships—professional or otherwise—with people who require an appointment to meet, or whom one reaches only after passing through cages, locked doors, and security devices, is difficult for those not in special collections. Similarly, the opportunity for special collections librarians to maintain both formal and informal contact with colleagues and to become involved in and have an influence on the daily operations and long-range policies of an entire library can be very hard to seize when those same special collections librarians are locked away with their books and manuscripts in a metal cage.

Another reason for this sense of distinction between rare book and general librarians is that the profession as a whole has not adjusted to the change in rare book personnel which has occurred during the last decade or so. The generation of men and women who built the majority of rare book collections in this country, by and large building them as self-conscious and separate units of larger libraries especially during the decades following the end of the Second World War, has generally retired or died. The economic expansion characteristic of that period has also died. Far fewer collections are now being built in quite the same way. The antiquarian book market may or may not be more limited in what it can provide budding collection builders. Despite the many theorists who believe that great books are no longer to be found, other more persuasive theorists suggest that an institution with money can find just about anything. It is money and not books that is in poor supply.

As a result of this change, different sorts of personalities have been recruited into or attracted by the field. On the whole they are not collection builders. Their budgets do not permit them to be. They are instead people who see their task as trying to manage the collections they have inherited, ordering them, cataloging them, publicizing them, making them function in their libraries or in the scholarly communities their institutions exist to serve. In another era it might have seemed possible and even desirable to acquire single-mindedly bulk collections of extremely uncommon materials and to postpone worry about how to make them accessible to readers. One's job was to put books on the shelves. The date has now arrived when rare book librarians, often unable to acquire bulk collections except as gifts, can no longer postpone making accessible to scholars what is already in their collections. In cooperation with their colleagues in technical services and systems, their task is not

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simply to put books on the shelves but also to put cards into the catalog or records into the database and to worry about service to the readers whom these records attract.

Rare book librarians nowadays tend also to be less exclusionary about their collections than their predecessors felt able to be. The previous generation was doing something new in a library world not always sympathetic to the segregation of expensive treasures into reading rooms which resembled private gentlemen's clubs. (I borrowed this image from a recent biography of Theodore Dreiser which uses it to describe the reading room of my own institution's Special Collections Department. The image is embarrassingly close to the truth.) If they appeared less than warmly welcoming to outsiders, this was not because they wanted to keep *hoi polloi* from polluting the incunabula and polished calf. All outsiders—colleagues as well as readers—might disperse materials which needed protective security and special handling. Through the adoption of exclusionary policies, that generation appears to have felt that they might better defend older, fragile, and special materials against a false democratization which would have left them at risk. Such dispersal might also have destroyed, even before they were fully formed, the intellectually unified creations that such collections might ideally become.

Their successors are no less concerned for the physical safety of the materials in their care. In an era of ever-increasing prices and well-publicized book thefts, they can hardly afford a cavalier disregard for security. But they are also more aware of the essential indivisibility of the research process. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century imprints are never the sole resource of a researcher. Those historical collections function best which exist in the context of recent and current secondary scholarship and reference tools—that is, in large, comprehensive research libraries. The larger and more comprehensive the research library the better. There are good reasons why more scholars use rare books at Bancroft and Houghton, surrounded as they are by the vast nonrare book resources of Berkeley and Harvard, than use them even at such immensely rich collections as those of the Huntington or the American Antiquarian Society. A healthy relationship with one's larger institutional context, or with one's neighboring library, is no longer perceived as something to be courted only with extreme care.

Simple survival is still the issue although it is pursued in new ways to suit altered economic circumstances. Special collections are expensive to run. If their holdings remain inaccessible and unknown, or if the tools which help to use and interpret them are unavailable, then they may attract so few readers that their costs outweigh any conceivable

returns—i.e., prestige, a show-off stop for the V.I.P. tour, pedagogical utility, source of scholarly publication. They may then be closed or dispersed. This is not merely a theoretical possibility. Libraries that have already closed or dispersed all or parts of their special collections include the Detroit Public Library, Hofstra University, and the Franklin Institute. Other libraries have questioned the continued existence of their special collections operations.

Current managers of special collections therefore face different imperatives from those faced by their predecessors of the previous generation. They must cooperate within their institution with their nonspecial collections colleagues. They must cooperate outside their institution with colleagues at neighboring or distant libraries who represent potential sources of necessary information that their own library cannot supply. They must seek readers. In general, they must seek support. At least some of their predecessors, several of whom seem to have left behind a two-faced reputation (a great collection builder; but also a dragon both to colleagues and to readers), might have found such imperatives incomprehensible.

But memories of the dragons still affect the attitude of the profession at large to the rare book community today. Contemporary librarians tend no longer to condone or to facilitate a single-minded concentration on collection development and exclusionary attitudes to readers. The costs in lost intra- and inter-institutional cooperation, reader services and support, and the ability to justify the utility of special collections whose utility may *not* be self-evident in all libraries, seem too high. The dragons may generally be gone, but their legacy lingers. That most of the dragons' successors behave very differently, responding to an altered environment, seems to have escaped widespread notice.

One result of this long-lived memory is that career paths for those in special collections differ in at least one respect from career paths for those in other areas of librarianship. From reference, acquisitions, circulation, or systems, a person may reasonably hope to advance within a library of any kind to progressive levels of supervisory responsibility. The prospect of becoming a library director is not unthinkable, although it is, of course, not common for most librarians actually to do so. For the vast majority of people in special collections, however, such a prospect remains not only uncommon but also very close to unthinkable.

Special collections personnel are not necessarily more "ghettoized," except physically, than catalogers or humanities bibliographers. But the cataloger or the bibliographer may find opportunities to

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advance—either within an institution or from institution to institution—which the special collections librarian will, normally speaking, not find.

By and large, special collections personnel can aspire to head a special collections department or perhaps to direct an independent research library which is nothing but a special collection. Even these positions may turn out to be, in effect, reserved for nonlibrarians and scholars such as those who direct the fortunes of several independent libraries—e.g., Huntington, Newberry, or Pierpont Morgan—or departmental special collections (such as Bancroft or Beinecke). Memory of the dragons may not be as significant in such appointments as is the sense which search committees seem to share, rightly or wrongly, of the relative prestige of a librarian and a scholar (and the distinction between the two) and their impression of the typical librarian's lack of entrepreneurial skills and academic contacts. The implications of such appointments on the prospects for upward mobility of rare book librarians make such a guess of academic interest only.

In any case, if advancement to senior administrative positions within special collections is difficult for special collections librarians who cannot also present themselves as scholars, then advancement to senior administrative positions in general libraries (the sort of advancement for which their nonspecial collections colleagues can work and hope) is more difficult still. Perhaps their colleagues regard rare book personnel not only as dragons but also as being too *much* scholars to be entrusted with the complex and dirty burdens of advanced administration.

Nonetheless, not all, perhaps not even many, special collections librarians aspire to senior administrative positions or directorships. Oriented more powerfully than many of their nonrare book colleagues toward the physical book, they are frequently concerned with maintaining close contacts with books, collections, and readers. Similar concerns, of course, are expressed by other librarians caught moving into upper administrative positions. Rare book personnel, whether by virtue of self-motivated choice or externally-limited opportunity, tend to manifest such concerns most convincingly by staying close to their books and readers. When they seek to advance—and raises tied to promotions are no less important to rare book personnel than to anyone else—they tend to look for advancement within the field.

They may seek to rise within a single institution (usually a tedious process) or by jumping upward from library to library, but generally they stay in special collections. A person who starts off cataloging

manuscripts in a modern manuscripts collection may move into acquisitions, then take on curatorial responsibility for the subject field of the manuscripts he or she has cataloged and acquired, and thus become reacquainted with printed books, and eventually take administrative responsibility for the entire rare book and manuscript department. Or a person may start off as a temporary cataloger for an ongoing special collections-related bibliographical project (such as the *Eighteenth Century Short Title Catalogue* or *European Americana*), move to an entry-level position in reference at a small research library's rare book room, proceed to directing all public services at a large university special collections department, and wind up the director of a similar department at another university or major public collection.

The promotion and advancement process is normally slow. People may stay in one position for three, five, ten, or more years awaiting a promotion possibility at home or elsewhere. Few libraries (Brown and Columbia are notable exceptions) advance the rank of people who remain in the same job improving their expertise. The advancement process may be slow, but such apparent immobility can advance a career nonetheless by providing the librarian with the opportunity of learning to do with increasing proficiency some of the tasks that rare book librarianship demands. This is far from wasted time. Special collections do ultimately require both subject and technical proficiencies, and the more time one spends with a collection and its users, the more one can learn of both. Increased expertise is likely to have a cumulative impact on performance, supervisors' evaluations, and eventual promotion or hireability.

Career Paths for Special Collections Librarians

How the new special collections librarian starts out a career will, as is already clear, depend significantly on the kind of institution with which he or she first affiliates and on the kind of position within that institution which he or she accepts.

But other factors also influence the shape of a career. They may most immediately have an important effect on the kind of first position a new special collections librarian gets. Does she hold a subject doctorate? If so, is it in a field relevant to an institution's collections? Or is it merely a credential which the institution admires but which will not prove directly applicable to interpretation of its holdings? Has she worked in the antiquarian book trade? Is he transferring from another position elsewhere in the library, or perhaps from the faculty, because of appropriate credentials for work with older books and manuscript and

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an interest in them? Or is he making this transfer because he is perceived as a misfit and senior library or academic administrators hope that his peculiarities will do the least harm in their institution's lightly-regarded special collections department? Is the collection established? Or is it a mass of materials which need organization and definition? Is it staffed so that one person does everything? Or does it have a large staff with distinct areas of responsibility?

The variables which affect the shape of a person's career do not lessen in number once that person has found a first position of whatever sort. The people with whom one works will make a major difference. If they share their knowledge (if they have any knowledge to share) and if they act as mentors (if their advice is any good), then their impact will be helpful. If they are neither knowledgeable nor sources of good advice, but generally pleasant, then they may at least make a first job seem like a welcoming experience. Alternative possibilities do, unhappily, suggest themselves.

A person may choose to work with external organizations, such as the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of ACRL, RTSD, the American Printing History Association, Society of American Archivists, the Manuscript Society, or local book-collecting or private printing organizations, and thus improve his or her visibility in the field. Such visibility may do little to enhance promotability at home but serve nonetheless to make a person seem attractive, because he or she is active, to hiring personnel at other libraries. Clearly a library's ability or willingness to help support staff professional activities will influence the activities one undertakes.

Or a person may publish. The appropriate background may result in publication in a traditional academic discipline. A person who produces articles, monographs, scholarly editions of primary texts, or edited collections of essays, normally improves his or her opportunities for advancement. A person may publish on bibliographical topics, whether related to his or her institution's collections or not. A person may publish on matters relevant to librarianship. He or she may try to become a reviewer of new books for *Choice*, for *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, or for the local newspaper. Publication will generally influence promotability favorably both at home and abroad. But some library hiring committees may be more impressed by "scholarly" publication, others by "library" publication—if they think that such a distinction means anything.

Public speaking, before local literary or book-collecting societies, before regional or national library organizations, or before scholarly groups, may be a possibility. Such an activity is likely to be most effective in advancing a career when it is clearly an extension of an active

publication record. Without being accompanied by publication, its effect on a person's career is likely to be mixed. Many library administrators still regard public speaking as a traditional outreach effort which merits no special recognition.

Both publication and active public speaking, however, depend on a person's having time to pursue such activities. This author has written elsewhere about the difficulties that special collections librarians face when they seek to find such time.¹ It remains true that a very small percentage of people active in the field at any level publishes anything at all. One sees little likelihood of change in this respect. It is hard to know what the impact of this situation is likely to be. It may, on the one hand, make the record of those who do publish or speak frequently seem even more impressive to hiring and promotion committees than is true now. On the other hand, it may make such activities appear less relevant to the job and therefore less significant criteria of promotability or hireability than they are at present. As increasing emphasis is placed on managerial skills as opposed to scholarly competence, this second possibility is likely to prevail.

Some institutions may offer opportunities for a person to teach. Courses may vary from formal instruction in a history department or library school (history of books and printing) to informal courses in the evening (collecting rare books for beginners). In a library that regards as important the sort of outreach which teaching permits, this activity too may influence one's chances for advancement.

A person may take an opportunity to add a subject master's degree or a doctorate. Such a credential may not, strictly speaking, be necessarily related to the job one is doing or to the job one would like to be promoted to, but its possession frequently has an impact on promotion or hiring committees within and without the institution, other factors being equal (as they sometimes are). Degrees make a difference, as has already been noted, in appointments to directorships at independent research libraries. They also appear significant in the choices of search committees seeking to find directors for university rare book departments. Appointments made during the 1980s to head special collections at, for examples, Delaware, Harvard, Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Stanford all went to people who hold Ph.D.s, usually in conjunction with traditional library credentials.

And of course one may seek opportunities to work within one's own institution at duties outside the sphere of the special collections department alone. Larger libraries especially are prone to have committees. These committees may deal with just about any conceivable question: finding appropriate furniture for computer workstations; library

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development projects; exhibitions; and transition to new online databases. Rare book personnel frequently find themselves, willy-nilly, involved with their institution's friends-of-the-library group and, if they exhibit success in increasing the support which such a group provides the library, their promotability is likely to be enhanced. The special collections librarian whose work with internal committees, projects, or support groups impresses colleagues and supervisors is clearly in a better position to receive advancement opportunities within the organization than one who engages in no such work at all.

It may not be inappropriate to remark that it also helps to do one's job reasonably well. Some administrators take competence for granted. Others, *mirabile dictu*, notice it. But everyone notices *incompetence* sooner or later.

How a person performs his or her job, as well as the various other activities that a special collections librarian can pursue, is likely, at least in theory, to have an impact on the shape of a career. Competence in any one branch of the field is not, however, a guarantee of upward mobility into another branch. A talented rare book cataloger may or may not be encouraged to move into a supervisory position that involves, for instance, curatorial responsibility for a subject collection or general acquisitions. The effective reader services librarian may or may not be excluded from supervision of the rare book cataloging staff.

Moreover, institutions vary in how they can respond even to the best of librarians who are also visibly active and highly regarded in a variety of related organizations or who publish. One library may be unionized or otherwise so hierarchically structured that promotion is a slow, lockstep process irrespective of personal qualifications and demonstrated abilities. Another may be so small that there is no place to go within special collections in that library. One cannot be promoted but must instead leave the institution. Or leave special collections if, in that institution, there is no such prejudice as has been discussed earlier against moving rare book and manuscript personnel into other areas of the library. Or wait for a supervisor to cross a busy street carelessly.

How and where one moves will be determined by at least as many variables as have already been discussed. The special collections market is far more restricted than the market for some other fields of librarianship. A collection development librarian, a subject bibliographer, a reference librarian, or an acquisitions librarian is not likely to encounter many libraries without some needs in these areas. Systems librarians are eagerly sought. A person who has overseen OCLC, RLG, NOTIS, or Geac transitions at one institution may be sought by others, perhaps at increased levels of overall responsibility. But not all libraries maintain

special collections operations, nor are all such operations entirely comparable to one another.

The person who seeks to leave a small, highly specialized collection in botany or an archive specializing in film history may not seem obviously attractive to hiring personnel seeking to staff a general rare book collection in a large university. Another who has worked for regional historical societies may easily make the transition to a genealogical society library elsewhere in the country but seem entirely inappropriate for the staff of a collection which specializes in private press books and modern literary manuscripts and first editions. An incunabulist from a collection rich in early printed books may find it difficult to convince the directors of a library with strong Civil War and American history collections that general special collections expertise is transferable.

The degree to which one has developed subject expertise in a field may also influence potential advancement. A person who has worked in a medical history collection or one with a strong emphasis on English and American literature, and who has become active in the scholarly and library communities associated with these subjects, may find it difficult to convince hiring committees that his or her library skills outweigh apparent subject specialization. Equally obviously, the person who has worked in a general collection may find it difficult to move to a highly specialized collection, particularly if its specialty was unrepresented in the collection with which he or she had been working. The lack of subject specialization may be as troublesome as its presence.

Still and all, people do move. They tend, generally speaking, to move within roughly comparable kinds of libraries. People whose careers begin in small regional historical societies do not easily wind up in special collections at large university general rare book collections, and vice versa, without strong subject competencies related to the needs of the other institution. But a person who has worked in a small college rare book library may not find it difficult to move to a larger university's rare book library. And people at large libraries may find opportunities for advancement at small, mid-size, or other large libraries of the same general sort.

Ultimately, however, movement tends to stop at the department head level. Some libraries may define that position differently from others. In large university libraries, the head of rare books may be an assistant or associate university librarian. Yet it remains uncommon, though it is not unheard of, for such personnel, despite their rank, to be active members of the library's management team. Their opportunities for movement into the broader and upper administrative reaches of their

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own or other institutions, if they want such opportunities, will consequently be severely restricted.

Of course there are some library directors whose early careers included a stay in rare books. The late Hugh Atkinson worked in the rare book collection at Chicago (but he was a student at the time); David Stam worked in special collections at The New York Public Library (but he was an intern at the time). Strikingly few library directors come from careers in special collections. Library directors whose careers have been spent largely in special collections direct special collections libraries.

One ARL library director has recently predicted (privately) that this situation might be about to change. It has not begun to change yet. The special collections librarian who thinks of work in special collections as the first stage of an ultimately more richly variegated career ought to think again. Unless one moves out of special collections relatively quickly, a person is likely to be typecast for his or her entire professional career. Fortunately, most special collections librarians do not seem to find this prospect dispiriting.

Conservators and Conservation Administrators

One subspecialty deserves separate mention in this connection. Growing concern with the preservation and conservation of library resources has provided an impetus for the introduction into many libraries of new kinds of professionals—conservators and conservation administrators. Effective performance of duties either as a hands-on conservator or as the administrator of a conservation program requires considerable training or experience beyond what most special collections librarians receive during their education. Although closely allied with, and, perhaps, supervised by, special collections personnel, such professionals often have library-wide responsibilities requiring a maturity that the years that go into their experience and training may help them to achieve. Conservators treat materials both within and outside special collections, although they will usually do both with considerable input from that department's staff. Conservation administrators may emerge from a special collections background but must interact with staff throughout the library in planning for the care of materials in a manner which *balances the needs of the entire system*. These professionals are therefore not quite so closed off from the rest of the system as the special collections staff itself.

Personnel in this field do not normally work with readers but with other librarians. While they may have certain affinities for their col-

leagues in special collections, from another point of view they are more closely analogous to other technical services personnel. Their work gives them one kind of overview of library-wide issues, just as catalogers or acquisitions staff have to develop such an overview to do their jobs well.

The field is still new enough so that it is far too early to guess at the eventual upward mobility of conservation-oriented professionals. This author is aware of one special collections library—a departmental library at a large university—whose assistant director comes from a conservation background. Some other conservation administrators may also be at the early stages of a transition into general library administration; one now already serves as director of a small university library. The career paths of professional librarians in this specialty seem likely eventually to become similar to those of nonspecial collections librarians. At present, however, this possibility can only be proposed very tentatively.

Balancing Access and Preservation

Nothing has been said about the working conditions which special collections librarians can expect to encounter. A recent essay considers this aspect of the job in greater detail than can be duplicated here (see the author's "The Rare Book Librarian's Day." *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* 1[Fall 1986]:93-105). The physical isolation of special collections personnel from their colleagues elsewhere in their libraries is often matched by feelings of intellectual isolation from colleagues in other kinds of librarianship.

The desire, which has been suggested is increasingly characteristic of contemporary rare book and manuscript librarians, to cooperate with and function in harmony with their nonspecial collections colleagues is frequently frustrated by their exclusion from upper management. This exclusion is only a natural consequence of the barriers which physical isolation can easily create. But their intellectual isolation is even less easily bridged than the physical. For there is at least one major distinction in outlook between special collections personnel and their colleagues that keeps even nondragon modern rare book professionals from complete identification with the goals of their colleagues. Modern American librarianship emphasizes almost above all else *access*—access to books, access to manuscripts, access to information, access that is unimpeded and free. The special collections librarian is not immune to this value and shares it. But he or she is also brought up to feel that, however significant access is as a value, it must always be balanced

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against the value of caring for, protecting, and preserving the *physical objects* which special collections contain. When the two values collide, as they often do, it is no easy matter for the special collections professional to determine where the lines ought to be drawn.

In libraries which measure success by circulation statistics, as some explicitly and many implicitly do, this conflict can rarely be understood or appreciated by colleagues or administrators. It creates a tension in the relation of special collections personnel to their colleagues that seems irremediable, though how serious the friction that emerges out of such tensions proves to be will vary from library to library as the personalities of librarians vary and as special collections personnel succeed in articulating the basis of their concerns. Moreover, as conservation ceases to be the province of special collections personnel only but increasingly attracts the attention of general library personnel and administrators, what had been a source of friction may yet prove to be a source of increased contact and improved mutual understanding.

Conclusion

This article began by suggesting that the profession of rare books librarianship is not so terribly different from the profession of librarianship generally. Special collections libraries differ from one another just as general libraries do. Special collections librarians have diverse career paths just as general librarians have. These views are truths, even though, as the rest of this essay suggests, they are not whole truths.

It is hard to generalize about the profession of rare books librarianship in the 1980s because the profession is in flux. The transition from the entrepreneurial collection builder to the collection manager is still underway (collection management itself need not be entirely divorced from an entrepreneurial sensibility—some managers, after all, acquire more support for their managerial responsibilities, both from internal and external funders, than others). The relatively recent emergence of the conservator and the conservation administrator as a force within both special collections and the larger library world, and as a potential bridge between the two, has long-range implications which have hardly begun to be felt.

The field of special collections is changing, and it is changing rapidly. Nothing is surprising about this flux; it characterizes librarianship as a whole in our time, and it is only to be expected that it should also characterize a branch of librarianship which has been self-consciously distinctive for so brief a period of time. The experience of a career in rare books is likely to be dissimilar in detail for all of those who

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engage in it at such a time of change. There will be a great deal of running around, some of it in no particular direction at all.

But the purpose of such a caucus-race (as Carroll's Dodo suggests) is to define its own meaning. Definition of the purpose of special collections, of their relationship to other library collections, and to the research, reading, and information functions which libraries exist to serve, is not such a bad race in which to run.

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Reference

1. *Options for the '80s* (Proceedings of the Second National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries), edited by Virgil F. Massman and Michael D. Kathman. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1982, pp. 463-70.