

The Subtle Symbiosis: Rare Books and Manuscripts at Mills College

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IT IS FITTING THAT WE DISCUSS the character and activities of rare book and manuscript collections in college libraries as distinct from those in university and public libraries, for, in general, special collections departments in college libraries operate in an altogether different mode and exist for different reasons from their counterparts in other institutions.¹ First, the collections tend to be of three basic types: (1) a broad selection of representative books and manuscripts drawn from many subject areas, from different countries, and from various centuries, and usually containing "high spots" from the history of printing; (2) one or more narrowly defined and sharply focused subject collections, such as the Margery Bailey Renaissance Collection at Southern Oregon State College² (which, in many instances because of their depth and the quality of their holdings, can be classed as primary research collections of importance)—these may or may not have any relation to one another and are often developed as separate entities; or (3) a combination of the two.

Second, these collections tend to be used by two major groups: (1) the students of the college for whom the broad, general rare books and manuscripts collection acts as an adjunct to the curriculum; and (2) scholars, either those affiliated with the college or those from other institutions who are doing original research. And third, although the special collections department in a college environment superficially seems to share some of the organizational patterns of its counterpart in the university setting, there are divergencies in their objectives which

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give it a wholly distinct quality. What follows will attempt to define the special nature of rare book and manuscript collections in college libraries by highlighting and analyzing these differences.

This necessarily panoramic overview will focus on Mills College in Oakland, California, since its special collections department is in many respects quite typical but in other respects quite uncommon. Mills is a small (just under 1000 undergraduate and about 200 graduate students), private, liberal arts college for women with strong programs in fine and performing arts, mathematics, English, and computer science.

Rare Books and Manuscripts Come to Mills

In general, but with some noteworthy exceptions, the genesis of special collections in college libraries in this country, especially in the western states, was for the most part due not to well conceived plans formulated early on by committees of librarians and faculty but rather to an unexpected donor or a felicitous conjunction of events. That chance (not intent) seems to have played an important role at Mills College or at similar small liberal arts colleges in no way implies that the librarians in charge lacked foresight or were insensitive to the intellectual requirements of the parent institution. The infant libraries were preoccupied with concerns and challenges of a sort that precluded interest in what must have seemed a frivolous waste of time. The basic tasks of acquiring books to support the curriculum, and then cataloging them, were certainly enough to keep a small and perhaps undertrained staff busy enough. Nonetheless, unusual materials did find their way into these libraries and were met with an ambivalent response—in most cases they were cataloged—just like ordinary books—and then closeted.

In 1919 a San Francisco insurance agent by the name of Albert M. Bender made a gift of six books to the Mills College library.³ It was a modest enough donation but it had an impact on the college quite disproportionate to its value, for these books were the first to come to the library burdened with the appellation *rare*. No doubt some of the material already in the library's circulating collection could have been (or would now be) classed as such—especially ephemeral mid-nineteenth-century Hawaiian imprints that founders Cyrus and Susan Mills had brought from their mission there—but like the purloined letter, they remained undetectably obvious. These, on the other hand, were something unusual—i.e., pretentious and antiquarian. Bender was at the door with a parcel that needed special attention: a first edition of *Little Dorrit* in a fancy binding, a framed leaf from the *Nuremberg*

The Subtle Symbiosis

Chronicle, and other oddments; they would go in the librarian's office behind her desk.

Elizabeth Gray Potter was the college librarian who oversaw the birth of special collections and her office was by default the only haven for these orphans. On the other hand, Bender had big plans. Over the next two decades he personally delivered hundreds, indeed thousands, of books and literary manuscripts, the great majority of them rare, to the librarians of Mills College. By 1929, Potter's office was no longer able to accommodate the bulk of Bender's philanthropy, and so what had indeed become a "collection" was moved to its own room in a wing newly added to the original Carnegie Library. That this was significant (or portentous) was not lost on the Mills community: there were festivities on the lawn, speeches, and John Henry Nash to toast Albert Bender. The care and feeding of the library's "treasures" had become a part—small at first but later much more significant—of the library's program.

The Shaping of Special Collections

At Mills the process of the formation of special collections could be characterized as *gradual accumulation*. This should be understood in its most neutral sense and not as a disparagement of the largesse of Albert Bender and other early donors or of the managerial skills of the first college librarians. Indeed, Bender was single-minded in his dedication to Mills (he was a great patron of the art gallery, too) and used to drive to the college from San Francisco once or twice a week bearing gifts, sometimes accompanied by his friend and protégé Ansel Adams. The regularity and predictability that characterized his visits to Mills, however, could not be said to apply to the contents of the packages he was delivering. Bender was an enthusiastic bibliophile with a wide and variable range of interests; he was a well-informed generalist who focused on certain stellar moments in book history. The result of his eclecticism for Mills was a steady influx of "high spot" rare books and literary manuscripts that no librarian would ever dream of discouraging.

As it happened, Albert Bender's book collecting tastes coincided perfectly with the academic needs of the college in ways that no one could have foreseen. For small colleges with small tuition bases and library budgets that are correspondingly small, the task of building a broad and better than adequate library is formidable; this was, of course, a problem shared by all libraries of this type. The particular configuration of courses offered at Mills (which by the way was based upon that of

prominent east coast women's colleges) required a broad-based approach to library collection development. The full range of *litterae humaniores*, "hard" sciences, and social sciences was (and is) taught at Mills. Bender's large, general rare book collection was then a resource which nicely dovetailed with the broad academic program, a resource which many students from the 1920s onward could and did enjoy within the context of their coursework. Because of this, the collection was understood by reason of the value and rarity of the materials it contained to be set apart in the physical sense only; never was it considered to be set apart intellectually.

This was more than just a "felicitous conjunction of events." Bender no doubt knew exactly what he was doing. It can easily be seen that more than any other single factor, the particular bibliophilic orientation of this first and principal donor shaped the library's rare book collecting policy in its early decades. Was this such an unusual scenario? How many college librarians actually solicited or purchased rare and unusual books and manuscripts for a discrete special collections department? Indeed, how many librarians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were even prepared for that first donation? The extra responsibility and effort required to care for and maintain a collection of rare materials must have seemed an unwanted burden, one to be faced with resignation or even reluctance. Nonetheless, these books and manuscripts started to accumulate and usually at a rate conditioned by both the affluence and the intellectual interests of alums or friends of the library. (It is worth noting here another aspect of the symbiotic relationship that exists between an institution's academic program and the content of its special collections department. Few will dispute the assertion that a school's particular curriculum and scholarly orientation will in large measure determine the future intellectual interests of its students. As alumnae they may form collections of books or papers based on those interests; often these collections are destined for the institutions that were in a very real sense their progenitors. Thus Mills, which has always had a strong program in the performing arts, also has a strong collection in rare dance and theatre books, largely the happy result of alumnae beneficence.)

Into the general rare book and manuscript collection originally formed by Bender are added large and small donations of miscellaneous items from various sources, materials from the circulating collection which have "become" valuable—e.g., the Hawaiian imprints mentioned earlier—and purchases made from the special collections acquisitions budget, a line in the main library's operating budget. In addition, there are at Mills a number of separate rare book collections

The Subtle Symbiosis

which were generated by and also support (note the symbiosis) some of the major subject strengths of the college: women's history, performing arts, fine printing, and book arts. Actually, there are ten of these distinct units in a collection which totals just over 11,000 titles. They are satellites that require separate care and feeding; they have their own budgets, card catalogs, and shelving needs (Betsy Davids's showercap binding comes to mind); they are fun to browse—too bad it is not allowed. Of course there is now much discussion on the issue of the effectiveness of these disjunct subject collections; that is, whether shelving groups of books apart from the general sequence may be used as an excuse or fall-back for a poorly maintained card catalog or whether in small- to medium-sized closed collections the time and labor spent in administering these independent units is disproportionate to the advantages that may accrue from their independence. And certainly even in small liberal arts colleges they do have great advantages as research and recruitment tools, as objects of faculty interest and pride, and as appropriate memorials to the largesse of certain alumnae or friends of the library. The issue is without doubt very complex, one with compelling theoretical arguments on all sides. Even so, practical considerations should be borne foremost in mind. Such is the philosophy at Mills which does not lure prospective donors of book collections with the promise of a named collection but which, on the other hand, probably would honor a donor's wish to be independently remembered if it meant getting a desired collection.

Rare Books and Manuscripts in the Academic Context

Among the discrete rare book collections there are several that are devoted to the book arts: books about papermaking, bookbinding, and graphic arts, and collections of examples of fine bindings and press books. These exist to support an active and innovative program of undergraduate and graduate study in the full range of hand bookmaking: printing, typography, bookbinding, and the history of the book. Indeed, education in the "technical arts" of fine printing and binding has been a tradition at Mills since the early 1930s when Rosalind Keep, Mills' first professor of printing, began publishing under the Eucalyptus Press imprint.⁴ In 1983 Mills instituted the first degree-granting graduate program in the book arts in the United States.⁵ Although it is a studio-oriented program, Book Arts is one of the departments at Mills that makes extensive use of the rare book collection. And inasmuch as the special collections librarian teaches a course on the history of the book, sits *de officio* on the thesis committees of several of the second year

Book Arts graduate students, and assists in the administration of the program there is a strong connection and good working relationship between the two entities. Often, Book Arts classes meet in the special collections reading room (the Bender Room): exploration of parts of the collection forms the basis for class assignments. For history of the book students, the rare book collection is their primary lab; all classes meet in the Bender Room (except for occasional printing and binding workshops) and all discussion focuses on the books themselves—they see and, what is even better, handle a great many rare books and manuscripts during the term. Book Arts students are hired with work/study funds to assist the special collections librarian in designing and installing exhibitions, in cleaning and oiling seventeenth and eighteenth century leather-bound volumes, and in working on bibliographical projects. Their exposure to special materials is thus increased and with that so is their interest, and with that so is their proficiency—more symbiosis.

Other humanities and social science courses may derive great benefit from an occasional visit en masse to the library's special collections department. The books they touch are among the only objects from early European history which are not behind museum cases. Handling a 400 or 500 year old object for the first time may be quite moving; this experience often does impart a sense of flesh-and-blood reality to their studies that cannot be learned in any other way. It also may provide unexpected insights. For example, each year the undergraduate course in Shakespeare comes to the Bender Room to learn how books were produced in seventeenth-century England and to see examples of printing from this period. Until the presentation, none of the students realizes what extraordinarily complex circumstances were required to get the Bard's words into print. They leave with a healthy appreciation for and, more desirable from the bibliographical point of view, mistrust of the printed word. But they are also turned on, not so much by the librarian's words as by physical contact with the past; it has a most impressive effect. Thirty to forty such groups—mostly from humanities and social science courses—visit special collections each year for presentations of rare book and manuscript material germane to their syllabi. These presentations are enhancements of the most poignant sort: students are given a physical handle with which to grasp their subject. It is a revelation to discover this collection of "handles," this tangible nexus with the past in the congenial heart of their library. Those whose interest is first stimulated by these lectures often turn up in the semester-long history of the book course.

Of course scholars also use and appreciate the research value of parts of the book and manuscript collection. However, Mills is like

The Subtle Symbiosis

many other libraries in small liberal arts colleges in that it cannot boast of the quantity and quality of materials needed to sustain the high level of scholarly activity usually found in the rich and varied collections of some university, private, and public libraries. Privately-formed book and manuscript collections are more often bequeathed to the institution from which the collector received his or her highest degree, and this may not be the college. Obviously, this should in no way imply that scholarly work does not take place in college libraries, which it certainly does. However, owing to the nature of their collections and to the special relationship that exists between their collections and the college curriculum, special collections librarians in college libraries may not view service to this type of scholarship as their primary function.

The Rationale for the Special Collections Program

Getting the students in contact with rare books and manuscripts, not only for their intellectual but also, and perhaps more importantly, for their talismanic value—this must be the strongest rationale for the special collections program in the college context. And of course by virtue of size, setting, and academic priorities, colleges seem to be the institutions best suited to effect this contact. College librarians must assume that their programs are influencing young people who are just embarking upon an intellectual life (it would be grossly unfair to operate under any other assumption) and who are eager to know its ways. These librarians add an indispensable dimension to the college curriculum when they provide exciting tools for understanding history and art in novel ways.

There is no question that it is an extremely important part of the special collections librarian's responsibility to preserve the collections under his or her care. However, the charge "to preserve" must be understood in different ways according to the purpose and functions of the particular collection. One will sympathize with the plight of curators and librarians who feel that their duty is to maintain their collections in such a manner that they will be of use to scholars in the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries and beyond. Most of us consider this intellectual continuity to be of the greatest consequence to civilization. In the case of special collections in college libraries, however, "to preserve" should never be construed to mean "to keep out of the hands of," since it is also of enormous consequence to civilization that students now be given all possible opportunities for becoming acquainted with the past. Unless this happens we will be cut adrift,

intellectually speaking, long before the "well-preserved" special collections crumble into dust; the existence in future centuries of these curious collections will certainly not be understood, much less appreciated. Seen in this light, the role of the special collections librarian takes on a different meaning: the duties of "custodian" give way to those of "facilitator" whose activities bring about the felicitous conjunction of object and intellect.

References

1. In this article I will not present statistical analyses of collections, budgets, staff, etc. since these have been so recently compiled in Christine Erdmann's *Special Collections in College Libraries*. Chicago: ALA, 1986. This survey of 108 special collections departments suggests the great diversity in holdings, organization, and philosophy that makes generalizations about the situation in college libraries difficult.
2. Harold Otness, the curator of the Margery Bailey collection, has recently written and produced a twenty-three minute videotape which gives the background, scope, and highlights of his collection. Clearly, the same principles that make videotape an effective tool in marketing, advertising, and education can be brought to bear upon the public relations and pedagogical programs of library special collections departments.
3. Reynolds, Flora Elizabeth. "The Albert M. Bender Room at Mills College." *Quarterly News-Letter of the Book Club of California* 23(Fall 1958):75. All factual details in the following sketch of the history of the Bender Collection also derive from Reynolds, Flora. "Evelyn Steel Little." *California Librarian* 31(April 1970):126-28; and _____. "Albert Bender and the Mills College Library." *Quarterly News-Letter of the Book Club of California* 44(Winter 1979):3-16.
4. Albert Bender, a native Irishman, retained close connections with those who back in Ireland were responsible for the great upheaval in the intellectual life there which was even then known as the Irish Literary Renaissance: Jack and William Butler Yeats, J.M. Synge, Lady August Gregory, et al. He was also supportive of the perhaps less well-known Dun Emer Industries, an organization of women founded just outside of Dublin in 1902 by Evelyn Gleeson of the William Morris circle "to find work for Irish hands in the making of beautiful things." A significant part of Gleeson's program, besides weaving and embroidery, was to operate a printing press which by 1908 had evolved into the famous Cuala Press directed by Yeats's two sisters, Elizabeth and Lily. Bender's enthusiasm for the Yeats sisters and their work caught on at Mills even then known as a school that excelled in the teaching of dance, music, painting, and other fine arts. So, one supposes with Cuala in mind, Mills founded its own press, the Eucalyptus Press, in 1932 (and soon after followed a bindery). Cuala had Emery Walker as its first typographic advisor and Mills had John Henry Nash.
5. For background on this program see Walkup, Kathleen, and Sumner, Melody. "The Mills College Program." *Fine Print* 10(April 1984):79-81.