

Book Collections

Book Selection and Collections: A Comparison of German and American University Libraries. By J. Periam Danton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963. 188p. \$6.

Almost twenty-five hundred years ago Eutydemus in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* expressed the perennially alluring, albeit elusive and unattainable goal of every selecting librarian: "I have a large collection of books, but I want to make it as complete as possible." In spite of the increasing efforts of librarians in all countries and at all times to elucidate the complexity of the issues involved, the problem still carries the same tantalizing question mark: "How can we define completeness in terms of a feasible objective of a given institution, and what is the best internal organization to achieve it?"

Danton's book is by far the best American contribution to this topic; moreover, it is an excellent example of comparative library science which will be read with equal benefit on both sides of the Atlantic. The author delineates in ample detail the development of book selection policy both in German university libraries (confining himself to the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany) and in comparable American institutions, and finishes with some concrete advice to his American colleagues. It thus combines a scholarly and most readable essay in library history which has a direct bearing on a pressing present-day issue, with a sophisticated do-it-yourself manual.

Both our German colleagues and we agree that the upkeep of our book collections is one of the foremost duties of the library. The point on which we differ, however, is already manifested in a subtle variety of terminology. The German essays on the subject generally emphasize the obligation of the *librarian*, whereas in the American literature frequently an impersonal noun is selected and the responsibility of the *library* is stressed. Danton calls attention to another

disparity. The abundance of books and articles on the history of German university libraries (for instance, the bibliography of Würzburg University library has fifty titles) is contrasted with the scarcity of corresponding American research.

It has been maintained often that the distinction between the German and the American operations can be expressed in the simple statement: in German university libraries, the library staff selects; in American institutions, selection has been the prerogative of the teaching faculty. Every careful reader of Danton's book will learn that such an assertion is a misleading oversimplification of a most complex situation. Göttingen, for a long time the *mater et magistra* of university libraries all over the world, has stressed faculty participation in book selection from the beginning of its brilliant history. The many examples of German nineteenth-century library regulations quoted by Danton underline the desire of the library administration to solicit book requests from the faculty.

The institute libraries, on the other hand, which have an enormous impact on the scholarly life of a German university, are completely under faculty control and are separated from the university library. Danton's estimate of thirteen hundred institute libraries with eight million volumes is probably too conservative; moreover, statistics do not always expose reality. Everyone who has studied at a German university will remember how much his scholastic life centered on the institute library. Here he had his assigned seat; he was surrounded by the books he needed, he was in daily contact with his colleagues who studied the same subject, attended the same lectures and seminars; here he found the only place which gave him some personal contact with his teachers. In the institute he received the most important part of his training; here he was taught the techniques of his craft; here was his scholarly home. The institute was his center of gravity; the university library seemed to be an insignificant appendix.

Neither is the American scene a clear-cut

picture in black and white. The outstanding American university librarians have never completely surrendered their book selection duties and responsibilities to the teaching faculty and always have maintained an active interest in the growth of the collections. They could not act otherwise because a librarian who is no longer interested in books ceases to be a librarian. During the last fifteen years there has been a trend to concentrate more and more selection responsibilities in the library staff. It is important that we do not go overboard and exclude the faculty from selection. The book collection is not the property of the library staff, but belongs to the institution as a whole. Danton's paragraph on this topic is worth repeating:

The role in book selection which the faculty should and can play is, for any university library, demonstrably an immensely important one. Faculty participation in book selection is the major asset of current American policy and practice, and it should be greatly strengthened and increased rather than otherwise. Members of the faculty will read different books and journals, visit and work in different libraries, go to different meetings, serve in visiting capacities at other different institutions, and talk to different colleagues, than will any group of librarians. From these numerous contacts the interested, persuadable professor who is assured that his ideas will be welcomed, will inevitably bring valuable suggestions for augmenting the library's holdings—even information, upon occasion, as to the availability of a whole collection (p. 82).

Our German colleagues believe that allocation to specific disciplines is an obsolete and inefficient method. I feel that it is a justified expression of an over-all policy to give to the selector an approximate figure; it makes quite a difference whether for a given field \$500 or \$5,000 can be spent.

In the last two chapters of the book, "What Should Be Collected" and "Toward an 'Ideal' Book Selection Policy," Danton discusses the everyday procedure of book selection. It is one of the great assets of the book that the author is not dogmatic, but clearly points out the possible answers to the moot questions. In the final analysis,

however, the practicability of his advice depends on an "if":

If the library has on its staff enough members with the highest subject and bibliographical knowledge, and if these individuals are given the responsibility and sufficient time for book selection . . . (p. 134).

Unfortunately, most American university libraries will not meet the above conditions at the moment. The reason for the failure does not lie in an "organic" disability of American librarians. The often quoted example of the New York Public library shows how well a good American library staff can fulfill the obligation of book selection. It is probably not an accident that this institution is one of the few American libraries which has a classic historical monograph describing its magnificent development. The New York Public library could not delegate book selection to a faculty and thus had to find a positive answer to Danton's "if."

The American university library was in a different position. American libraries have, in addition to book selection, a number of functions and objectives. In order to fulfill their diversified obligations, they have to employ a great number of men and women with a variety of interests and corresponding diversity of aptitudes. As the university administrations were convinced that the faculty could serve as selector, the library administrations were not able to get the additional salaries to engage new staff members or to free its potential selectors from the manifold operational duties. Book selection has now been accepted as an added responsibility, and we have to build up the necessary staff "with all deliberate speed," however, not in terms of an elite group like the German *Höherer Dienst*, but as coworkers who in addition to their operational functions have a special assignment—and obviously must have as well the requisite aptitude and essential subject preparation. Danton's book is a most timely contribution to this burning issue, and it should be read by university administrators and by all American librarians, regardless of their position in the administrative hierarchy and of their operational assignments. —Felix Reichmann, Cornell University Library.