

## Libraries and Research

*Mortimer Taube is head of the Order Department of Duke University Library.*

THE URGE to be collectors or bibliophiles has sometimes operated to obscure the standard of value which ought to guide university librarians in selecting books. It is the function of a university library to collect and make available for use books, pamphlets, broadsides, manuscripts, etc., needed for the teaching, public service, and research program of the university. The teaching and research program is not to be too narrowly conceived. A university library may legitimately collect material whose use is not imminent but whose value is demonstrable and which at some subsequent date may be used in either the teaching or the research program. This concern for future use may be matched with a concern for the needs of the scholars of a region or nation. A great university library usually serves more than the limited group of students or faculty members officially connected with the university of which it is a part.

In spite of the latitude of this conception of the function of a university library, a considerable part of the expenditure of the average university library is dedicated to the purchase of materials whose acquisition cannot be justified in terms of this function. For example, an examination of the report of the Board on Resources of American Libraries, *Notable Materials Added to*

*American Libraries, 1938-39,*<sup>1</sup> discloses that many of the items listed are notable only as collectors' items and have little significance for research. The pride that libraries take in their "notable additions" seems to arise independently of the importance of these additions. A library is not proud of the fact that it has Jowett's standard edition of *Plato's Dialogues*. Almost any library may have it, but not every library can have a first edition or a copy of George Spelvin's *Letters to His Son at College*. When Mr. Spelvin wrote these letters he became so impressed with himself that he decided to have them printed as Christmas presents for his friends and business associates. The lucky recipients of copies of the *Letters* lost no time in depositing the books in safe places such as attics, closets, or basements from which their emergence would be improbable. Some time after the departure of George Spelvin from this life, copies of the *Letters* were thrown away or sold as junk, but like the fabled Phoenix they have undergone a glorious rebirth. They began to turn up in dealers' catalogs as "rare Americana, not listed in Sabin and not in the Harvard library," and are priced anywhere from \$2 to \$25. The college, which up to that time did not realize that the residence of George Spelvin's son within its walls had been the occasion for the creation of rare Americana, buys the book and lists it proudly among its "notable additions for the year."

<sup>1</sup> *Library Quarterly*, 10:157-91, April 1940.

But the cream of the jest remains to be stated. The librarian who is forced to pay huge prices for the poems of Smith, the letters of George Spelvin, the dime novels of thirty years ago, or the back files of the *Saturday Evening Post*, resolves not to be caught again. He resolves to save everything, to collect "attic" material, to collect anybody's and everybody's letters, diaries, account books, etc., to throw away nothing even though he must crowd the books on his shelves until bindings break. Professor Branscomb effectively summarizes the factors which have led to this intolerable situation:

Apart from a tendency to rank libraries according to the number of their volumes and the pressure of accrediting agencies, the factor most responsible for policies of gross accumulation has probably been the feeling that every book contains something of value and should be preserved. This is an insidious argument because of the element of truth which it contains. Most librarians have discovered that it is really impossible to prove that any given piece of paper with writing on it will have no value for research studies of the future. The Oxyrhynchus papyri, which have been of the utmost historical importance, are, for example, personal letters, housewives' shopping lists and other ephemera recovered from the rubbish heaps of that small town west of the Nile. The dime novels of a generation ago are now being collected, and the handbills of local amusements and even patent medicine advertisements of a century ago may be material of great use for the social historian.<sup>2</sup>

I recognize, in agreement with Professor Branscomb, the element of truth in the argument that everything has some value, and also that over against this element of truth there is the unavoidable conclusion that material indiscriminately accumulated

becomes "a liability rather than an asset, increasing by its presence the cost of all routine processes and obscuring the presence of books which ought to be read."<sup>3</sup> Further, this element of truth serves to blind librarians to another truth, namely, the fundamental difference between a study such as Egyptology and the contemporary history of the United States. In the case of Egyptology scholars are confronted with the task of imaginatively reconstructing a civilization from a limited number of monuments, ornaments, papyri, etc. But workers in the field of modern American history are faced with the opposite sort of task. In order to realize that this is the case, consider what it would mean if every shopping list of every American housewife were saved; if every letter now lying in a desk or bureau drawer were preserved; if the business correspondence of every individual or corporation were stored; if complete files of every magazine sold on the newsstands had a valid claim to preservation in libraries. The prospect would be ridiculous if it were not so menacing. The task that faces the scholar of the contemporary scene is not one of preserving materials but of eliminating them. The scholars in American history have themselves come to realize that the sheer accumulation of undifferentiated "research material" may have disastrous results. In a report to the Committee of the American Historical Association on the Planning of Research, the Eastern Conference on American History held that

... an enormous quantity of data is accumulating, to such a degree as to create a serious problem of storage facilities, and, in the case of certain classes of sources, make the problem of plethora menacing to

<sup>2</sup> Branscomb, Harvie. *Teaching with Books*. Association of American Colleges and A.L.A., 1940, pp. 166-67.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

efficient scholarly exploitation. We therefore recommend the appointment of a committee to study the question of what materials, if any, may wisely be neglected by collecting agencies and to study any other possibilities of coping with this problem.<sup>4</sup>

As far as I have been able to determine, no committee was ever appointed and nothing has been done to cope with the "plethora."

The sanctity which surrounds the term "research" disguises a good deal of downright nonsense. In the *Survey of Activities of American Agencies in Relation to Materials for Research in the Social Sciences and the Humanities*, compiled for the Joint Committee for Research of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council, it is disclosed that an overwhelming majority of these activities are devoted to the uncritical collection of local history, local imprints, diaries, letters, genealogies, account books, autographs, old newspapers, etc. Even if the legitimate nature of these activities be granted, the fact that hundreds of collecting agencies compete with one another for the same materials has the effect of raising prices to farcial proportions. Consider, for example, the aforementioned *Letters* of George Spelvin. Let us grant that some librarian, who finds Mr. Spelvin and his letters revolting, nevertheless believes that it is his duty to posterity to preserve the record of all social phenomena. He, accordingly, is willing to receive the *Letters* in his library and bear the expense of cataloging and housing. But the issue is not resolved so simply. Aside from the value which may accrue to the *Letters* because of Sabin's indifference or Harvard's oversight, the *Letters* may

<sup>4</sup> American Historical Association. Committee on the Planning of Research, *Historical Scholarship in America, Needs and Opportunities; a report*. New York, 1932, p. 98.

have several other characteristics which add to their value. In the first place, Mr. Spelvin cannot be supposed to have had his book issued by one of the well-known publishing houses. He would undoubtedly have employed the local job printer and the book will thus have a rare imprint. Secondly, since Mr. Spelvin's son received the letters while at college, the book has significance for research in the history of American education. Thirdly, Mr. Spelvin is a local author and his book is a legitimate collector's item for the local library, the county library, the state library, the historical society library, and every college and university library in the state which lists "the collection of the works of local authors" as part of its program of collecting materials for research. The net result is the competition of a hundred libraries, each anxious to secure the book, and the question becomes, not who has sufficient good will to accept it but who has money enough to buy it.

#### *Determining Value of Research Materials*

It is possible to present certain concrete conclusions and proposals for coping with the situation discussed in the preceding pages.

1. A university library is primarily a service institution devoted to the furtherance of teaching and research. It is not a museum for the storage or exhibition of literary monuments and curiosa.

2. Libraries should resolve to eliminate scarcity as a measure of the value of a book. In general, it can be said that the value of the contents of a book varies inversely with its scarcity. If, due to historical accident, a really valuable book should be scarce, its value will, in most cases, lead to reprinting.

3. In general, the most recent edition of

a book is preferable to any earlier edition even if the earlier edition should be the first.

4. Autographs and association features, whatever monetary value may accrue to books from them, are not germane to the concerns of a university library except in cases where the occurrence of an autograph is an important historical fact, not previously noted.

5. Libraries, by means of concerted action, should force down the prices on Americana. The possibility of film reproduction indicates one method of making "rare Americana" cheap and universally available. If necessary, libraries should declare a moratorium on the purchase of such material. The booksellers will then be compelled to give most of it away and charge reasonable prices for the balance. Parenthetically, it can be added that the traffic in Americana between book-dealers and libraries has reached the proportions of a flourishing racket.

6. Books whose value and importance are derived solely from the fact that they were published at a certain time and place (including a large proportion of Americana) likewise have no value for a university library once the fact of publication is known and recorded. They should be discarded or sent to a museum or to some other type of repository. Libraries hesitate to do this because they pay so much money for "rare imprints." But combined action on the part of libraries could reduce the price of "imprint" books just as in the case of Americana.

7. Manuscript collections are usually considered the most important research materials, but publication of the contents of a manuscript reduces the manuscript to a collector's item and dissipates its value for a research library. No library should

collect manuscripts already exploited or edited by scholars unless there is good reason to believe that the editing has been badly done and needs to be done over. In his review<sup>5</sup> of the *Guide to the Latin American Manuscripts in the University of Texas Library*, Professor Rippy makes the following observation:

Much of the cream has already been taken from this collection. Many of its important items have been published in documentary collections. . . . Many other manuscripts have served as the basis of works written by a number of historians. . . . In fact, many of the manuscripts were largely exploited or in the process of exploitation before they were deposited in the University of Texas Library.

Professor Rippy goes on to lighten the sting of this comment by adding that "manuscripts are always useful to antiquarians . . ."

8. I wish finally to present a plan that will help to solve the problems of a librarian who must decide whether or not to purchase a manuscript, a rare pamphlet, a first edition, or similar materials. Items of this sort come high. To be sure, they can usually gain publicity for the library or mention in the account of "notable additions." But suppose the librarian wishes to make his decision not in terms of advertising value, but in terms of scholarly value or significance for research. His own judgment may not be equal to the task of deciding and the current interests of the men on the faculty may be too limited or too catholic.

Various organizations concern themselves with the collection and preservation of research materials. These same organizations might sponsor the creation of a committee on the determination of the re-

<sup>5</sup> *Library Quarterly*, 10:433-35, July 1940.

search value of rare books and manuscripts. If such a committee could be set up which published, at regular intervals, a list of authors whose works had been issued in definitive editions, the presence of a name on such a list would be a declaration to librarians that the manuscripts, first editions, or pamphlets written by this man had value only for book-dealers and collectors. There would be nothing dogmatic about such a list. Several preliminary drafts might be circulated in order to take advantage of any suggestions for the inclusion or omission of names. The discovery of new materials would automatically lead to a correction of the list. Besides names, the list might include topics. The committee would also have a permanent secretary who could answer questions about names or topics not on the list. If a librarian were not sure whether some manuscripts offered to him by a dealer had ever been published he could write to the committee for information. If the committee replied that the manuscript had been printed and was available, the librarian might still want to buy the manuscript as a collector's item but he could not disguise the grounds of his decision with high-sounding phrases about source material, scholarship, or research.

I can present two examples drawn from my own experience in which the existence of such a list would have been valuable. In both cases the scholarly insignificance of material offered by dealers was discovered without the aid of a list; but this does not lessen their value as examples. There are probably many other cases in which the library has bought material whose significance for scholarship has been overestimated, but since the type of check list I am proposing is not available, these

cases remain undiscovered. It was only by accident that in these two cases the knowledge that the materials were unimportant happened to be available.

In one case we were offered by a dealer, at a very high price, the run of the *New York Herald Tribune* in which Karl Marx's comments on the Civil War appeared. Undoubtedly we would have bought this item if we had not known that these particular writings of Marx had been collected and reprinted in a very reasonably priced book. So far as scholarship is concerned, the book, together with the information concerning the first appearance of the articles which is contained in the preface of the book, does away with the value of the newspaper.

In another case a man on our faculty recommended the purchase of a published decision of one of the earliest and most important cases in the history of American labor. Fortunately, another member of our faculty happened to know that this decision had been reprinted in a collection that was already available in the library.

#### *Positive Program of Action*

I realize full well that these proposals are essentially negative and contain few suggestions for a positive program. A positive program for a university library must await the achievement of cooperation between administration, faculty, and librarian resulting in a concrete and detailed collecting policy with well defined goals and limits. Further, this policy must be a phase of a regional or national program. Until such cooperation is achieved, and its achievement is all too rare, the collecting activities of university and research libraries will be characterized by confusion, waste, and lack of purpose.

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as to the word "research," we cannot get away from the cynical remark that he who copies from one book is guilty of plagiarism, while he who copies from three is engaged in research. We cannot forget the cartoon in a literary periodical depicting a shabby individual, armed with a pointed stick, who was picking scraps of torn paper from the ground. The caption suggested that he was a professor of education doing research. Likewise there is a distinction between "research" and "research" which curators of rare books have to draw.

#### *The Curator of Rare Books*

It is my own opinion that rare books in college and university libraries should be treated as such—and that means that every library which has any regard for

them should have, if possible, a separate curator of rare books. It is to be urged that this curator shall not be a person of inferior training, salary, or personality. A prospective benefactor will infer much from the kind of person a librarian puts in charge of the rare books. The curator must be able to meet people. Increasingly librarians will wish to refer the more important bibliographical enquiries to such a curator—hence training and experience in that field are more important for such a position than training in a library school. Often we are inclined to think that experience in antiquarian bookselling is the best kind of training for such a position. In any case, a rule-of-thumb assistant, fresh from college, is not ideally equipped, in fact, may not be equipped at all, for such a position.

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There is a further question, of course, concerning the responsibility of librarians for the existence of such a situation. It may be that our research libraries but mirror the confusion and meaninglessness that characterize much of research itself. If, as the Librarian of Congress has charged, our scholars are irresponsible, bored with meanings, and indifferent to values, the libraries which serve such scholars and are responsive to their demands must share this description. However, this paper is not concerned with the allocation of blame or responsibility. We must first recognize the situation as it is; we must realize that the boast of completeness disguises a frightful waste of money

for the purchasing, cataloging, and housing of trash; we must realize that "rarity" is usually an indication of the lack of intrinsic value; and, in general, we must realize that a research library must develop standards of value and importance, similar to those exercised by a museum in selecting its exhibits or by a symphony orchestra in selecting its repertoire. Catholicity of interests does not excuse the lack or obviate the need for such standards. Without them our research libraries tend to become mausoleums in which a small percentage of worth-while books are buried beneath accumulations of trivialities.