
What is So Rare...: Issues in Rare Book Librarianship

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TO POINT OUT THAT rare book rooms contain items which are possibly not rare and are not necessarily books, and that the rooms themselves may not even be rooms, is to show the protean and kaleidoscopic nature of the profession of rare book librarianship. An article on such a broad topic, covering the many aspects of this subject that scholars have written about and librarians and administrators have thought about seriously for nearly fifty years, will be more expository than profound. Although rare book collections have been in existence since long before the 1930s, only in the past fifty years has rare book librarianship become a profession under critical scrutiny and discussed in professional journals and books.¹

From 1937, the publication date of Randolph G. Adams's "Librarians as Enemies of Books," to the 1950s, a slowly increasing interest manifested itself in print. The 1960s and 1970s maintained a steady interest in the subject, but with different focuses. In the 1980s, with new understandings of how library materials deteriorate, with new tools for the care of books,² with computers and other scientific equipment, with new fields of analytical and textual bibliography, and with a great expansion in research and scholarship emanating from the growth of academic institutions worldwide, there is a new burst of energy—a new flood of publications—about rare book librarianship, again with some new focuses and some enduring old ones.³

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Generally the subject is divisible into two main and not always distinct areas: i.e., physical and theoretical.⁴ Librarians have been interested for decades in the acquisition, care, handling, storage, preservation, cataloging, classifying, and processing of books, as well as their circulation to users. On the theoretical side, there are also many issues; the earliest ones are still being wrestled with: defining "rare book," justifying the separation of rare book collections from others in the library, justifying large outlays of money for the purchase of what some people might call "useless" or trendy items for the rare book collections, and, in general, justifying the existence of a rare book collection in the first place. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were additional concerns: organizing the collections, funding, which areas of specialization the library should develop, and the roles of the rare book librarian, the patron, the administration, the dealer, and the collector. In the 1970s and 1980s, new issues (along with some of these older ones) have been under scrutiny: computer-assisted cataloging for greater access to the wider variety of information that scholars using rare books need,⁵ scientific approaches to dating, conservation and preservation of collections, theft prevention, and legal aspects of rare book librarianship such as appraisals and tax exemptions for book donors, and the "legal aspects of librarian-book collector relations."⁶

The physical acts of acquisition and processing are closely related to the issues of the handling and care of rare books. In "Librarians as Enemies of Books," Adams mentions the

treasure room of any one of a hundred public libraries [with its books with] bindings broken and poor cripples tied up with pink tape; you will find books cracking at the joints; you will find rare pamphlets in scuffed and dirty paper envelopes instead of slipcases; you will find books on the floor, where the janitor is sure to wet them with his dirty mop; and of course you will find books worn out by constant use at the hands of improper persons.⁷

Though conditions may have changed in the fifty years since that was written, it is a picture that has been painted numerous times over the decades⁸—along with issues of care, handling, preservation, and so forth. For example, Haugh describes all the handling a book gets from acquisition to its placement on the shelf. She discusses unwrapping, checking in, opening the pages (sometimes entailing cutting the pages), collating, insertions, photoduplication, ownership identification, bookplates, accession numbers, call numbers, spine labels, shelving aids, collation notes, and so on.⁹

Naturally, to facilitate access to the item and to prevent theft, the standard practice is to mark the books. But some libraries try to minim-

ize such marking because it reduces the value of the object. This is a major area of discussion for rare book librarians.

A good deal of writing has been done on preservation of library materials, especially important in rare book collections partly because of the age and/or value of the items, partly because many items have been exposed to the ravages of the modern age (smog and other air pollutants, humidity, parasites, excessive temperatures), and partly because of the acidic nature of the materials that many items are made of. Also, most rare book materials are either quite costly or irreplaceable. Several manuals have been written on library preservation, focusing on the repair of already damaged volumes.¹⁰ Baker and DeCandido and Banks, on the other hand, call for a program of "preventive preservation,"¹¹ where the emphasis is on the collection as a whole. Collection surveys can also identify large-scale preservation problems; Walker describes the Yale survey, while Harris discusses surveys as well as other approaches.¹²

More recent issues in rare book preservation consider the use of modern scientific equipment and research. Abt, for instance, mentions the application of forensics and the scientific analysis of paper and binding materials (see the article by Abt in this issue).

Another physical aspect of rare book librarianship concerns security and theft. Korey, for example, points out that there is an "alarming increase in the theft of valuable books and manuscripts."¹³ The Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of ACRL has established a security committee advocating what many librarians are now doing: marking books and manuscripts, joining Bookline Alert: Missing Books and Manuscripts (BAMBAM), a nonprofit database which is a "central location for records of missing books and manuscripts,"¹⁴ helping pass legislation to enforce existing laws and create new ones specifically applying to libraries, and allowing for the recovery of stolen property. Other measures practiced now by many libraries are "[r]estriction of access to materials, positive identification of readers, and visible and indelible marking" of holdings.¹⁵ This is accompanied by many other efforts, including publishing information about losses, carrying prosecutions through, working with authorities, establishing a national registry of library markings, and so on.¹⁶

French, VanWingen, and Wright claim that one of the responsibilities of rare book rooms is to offer reference services to scholars and to qualified members of the public—especially if the rare book collection is in a public, tax-supported institution.¹⁷ This brings up an issue extremely common that is both physical and theoretical—use. Theoretically, writers have spoken about who should have access to the various

kinds of rare book libraries, how that access was to be permitted, and for what reason. The basic use was for research,¹⁸ for the advancement of learning,¹⁹ and to perpetuate availability of historical and social records.²⁰

Many writers treated the physical use of materials in terms of their actual handling²¹ and the purposes to which the materials were put—overlapping with the notion that rare book librarians need to justify the existence of their collections.²² Many writers have had much to say about use, primarily because if a collection is not used, it is not justifiable. Baughman even points out that special reading rooms should be provided close to the rare book room circulation desk so that users can be observed and the volumes need not travel far from their shelves to the tables.²³ Greater and easier use will attract more scholars, which in turn should generate more published scholarship. This enhances the reputation of the library, and thus makes it a more likely recipient of further bequests and additional funds (and possibly more of a target for book thieves?).

This theoretical concern of rare book collections—a justification for their existence—was quite strong in the 1940s and 1950s. Libraries needed to rationalize the expenditure of seemingly extraordinary amounts of money on rare items when other collections and facilities in the library were wanting. There were many justifications. Some pointed to the educational, social, and historical value of research;²⁴ some pointed out that much of the funding came from private sources, donations, bequests, friends groups—money that would not otherwise have been available to any other branch or department in the library;²⁵ and others stressed the many services that rare book rooms provide to society.²⁶ This overworked topic prompted Thomas R. Adams to say in 1984 that there was no longer a need to justify the existence of a rare book collection.²⁷

Another theoretical and practical consideration of rare book librarians concerns money. Several writers pointed out their theories on how to keep the rare book funds coming in, and on why rare books are so expensive.²⁸ Some showed practical, practicable, and proven methods for funding, including catering to a generous public in order to get gifts and donations,²⁹ appealing to alumni and other extramural sources,³⁰ having exhibits to spark public interest,³¹ and even outright advertising in public media.³² The many articles on drumming up support points to a constant problem for departments or libraries that deal with exceptionally expensive and precious materials.

One of the more interesting theoretical concerns focuses on the training of rare book librarians. Special collections present special

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problems not encountered in other departments of a library. For example, the handling, evaluation, and supervising of a rare book facility require a different kind of knowledge from that of, say, an English library or a general facility. Silver's essay is one of the more thorough treatments of this topic; he points out that rare book librarians need to offer users kinds of information not normally offered in regular catalogs—information like provenance, papers used in a book, binding styles and materials, and so on.³³ The rare book librarian may need training in languages, special cataloging, preservation and handling, special kinds of acquisition (from dealers, private parties, and other libraries), knowledge in the subject specialties of his or her own library, love for books, and respect for scholarship.³⁴ If the collection is strong in manuscripts, the librarian may need training in paleography.

The librarian must also be an administrator,³⁵ or even a fund-raiser. McCrank adds that a rare book program should teach archives, organization of collections, and public relations.³⁶ Cave's informative chapter³⁷ on "The Training of Rare Book Librarians" is encouraging; he says that at least the profession now recognizes the need for this specialized training and some library school programs are beginning to address this need. He mentions the study of foreign languages and paleography, and the history of books and libraries; the study of descriptive and analytical bibliography and booksellers' catalogs; practical experience; a knowledge of preservation theory and practice and of the antiquarian book trade; and broad exposure to the reference tools of all countries represented in the books of his or her collection. Peckham adds that the rare book librarian needs training in dealing with dealers and at auctions.³⁸

The rare book librarian should be encouraged to participate in the professional conferences in his field (the Rare Book Group of the [British] Library Association and the RBMS section of the American Library Association).³⁹ Since Cave's work over ten years ago, great advances in the computerization of bibliographic records have been made. A rare book librarian needs to learn about bibliographic utilities, online databases, and thesaurus construction (see discussion below regarding cataloging).⁴⁰ Some of this extensive and specialized training will come on the job, and some will come from the programs emerging in library schools (see the article by Traister in this issue). Daniel Traister discusses some of the social/professional responsibilities of rare book librarians in "The Rare Book Librarian's Day."⁴¹ After the practical recounting of a day's activities, he points up the theoretical approach to his position: the "idealistic" versus the "realistic" view of the profession. Rare book librarians must be aware of both—and must

be able to function well within the parameters of both. His closing remarks stress that the profession is a *job* requiring service to a public of scholars. The rare book librarian must understand this.

Two issues just raised (organization and cataloging) need special mention. Friedman discusses the organization desirable in the entire rare book field—between cooperating libraries. Such cooperation will benefit the profession in general and individual libraries specifically, for there will be a cross-current of information about sales, availability of certain items, stolen books, professional meetings, and so on.⁴² There is also organization within collections—a serious concern for rare book librarians. For instance, should the works of a private press be shelved together, or should they be distributed by subject matter throughout the collection?⁴³

Cataloging, as I have indicated, presents such special problems for rare book holdings that the RBMS Standards Committee has undertaken to create a thesaurus of MARC “formats for terms indicating the physical characteristics of material catalogued.”⁴⁴ The document accounts for scores of physical characteristics of books which might be useful access points for researchers in rare book collections. Even before this organized and computer-assisted method was possible, cataloging had been a serious area of inquiry.⁴⁵ Goodwin especially raises the questions of not only how to catalog rare books (i.e., what cataloging entries should contain) but also who should do it, the book’s owner or the bibliographic utility?

Rare book librarians must also face the practical and theoretical problems of weeding and disposal. No collection has unlimited space. Many writers deal with the handling of duplicates, books out of scope of the collection,⁴⁶ obsolete items never used, and so on. Wright says, “special research libraries...should devote more thought to the elimination of useless items”;⁴⁷ but he then adds that this is a sensitive issue because “[t]he rubbish of one generation may be the valued social documents of the next.”⁴⁸ The rare book librarian has difficult decisions to make about what materials to retain in a collection.

Closely related to this—and another major concern for rare book librarians—is what to do about donations to the library, especially ones with strings attached. Peckham says: “Gifts are usually a boon, yet sometimes a problem.”⁴⁹ Rare book librarians must be good at public relations in order to draw good bequests to the collection. Wolf points out that “Creating an Image” is one of the rare book librarian’s most important duties, as the history of the growth of the Library Company of Philadelphia demonstrates. His main piece of advice for developing a collection is, “keep the image of your institution in the media”; and “it

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helps if the librarian is a known civic 'character.'" Such notoriety can bring bequests to a library.⁵⁰ But as several writers bemoan, some bequests come burdened with conditions which must be met. While some "gifts to a university have often been the incentive that brought a rare book program into existence,"⁵¹ many come with the provision that they must be kept intact; a large collection with only a few desirable items is a serious problem. Wright says that there is nothing wrong with turning down gifts.⁵² "The rejection of gifts, of course, requires tact. Sometimes a monstrosity has to be accepted in order to get some really valuable collections....[D]iscrimination in the acceptance of gifts is the best policy."⁵³

Rare book libraries must have clear acquisitions policies—plans for adding to, funding, developing, specializing, and caring for a special collection. Archer stresses developing a plan to get more materials;⁵⁴ Peckham says the library should have a clear list of priorities,⁵⁵ and Powell⁵⁶ even formulates the basic concerns: "What to Get, How to Get It."⁵⁷ As early as 1938 Huntington wrote a thesis on administrative practices and how to formulate them for rare books.⁵⁸ And Harlow says that one basic plan is to get good people to administer the collection and publicize it; his idea is, to get more, have more. The best collections attract books.⁵⁹

An acquisition policy should provide for opportunities and funds for dealing with private collectors and dealers, who may have a wealth of information useful to the librarian, and who can supply the library with valuable items—the dealer through sales, the collector through bequests and gifts. Wright points out that many a collector has helped an institution develop its collection.⁶⁰ Beyond collections and dealers are library friends groups,⁶¹ wealthy local (or nonlocal) businesses, and private and public groups, who might be able to generate support for the library. Grendler writes about the importance of "grantsmanship" to rare book collections. Her essay on the "responsibility for the solicitation of outside support" is an excellent guide to the problem of financial support for rare book rooms.⁶² The general consensus was that any source of income—through academic, federal, state, or local government, or philanthropic groups, public or private—was worth pursuing to finance or add to the holdings of the rare book library.

A few other areas of rare book librarianship worth mentioning in passing as of concern to librarians are the decision of what areas to concentrate on in collecting,⁶³ the status and duties of rare book librarians,⁶⁴ "legal aspects of librarian-book collector relations,"⁶⁵ and "Restoring Tax Incentives for Manuscript Donations,"⁶⁶ and dealing with alumni.⁶⁷

Though many of the areas of rare book librarianship that I have discussed here are relevant in general to other areas of library management (cataloging, acquisition, preservation and handling, use, etc.), each of these areas requires special consideration from a rare-book perspective. The expansion and increased specialization of the profession only serve to point up the axiom, the more we know, the more we need to know.

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2. For convenience, I use the word *book* generically to mean all the holdings that rare book librarians deal with, including nonbook materials.
3. Terry Belanger has called this new burst of energy "A Special Intensity." See Belanger, Terry. "Rare Book Librarianship: A Special Intensity." *Wilson Library Bulletin* 58(Oct. 1983):96. One indication of this new energy is the number of committees and discussion groups that the RBMS has formed in recent years (e.g., Conservators' Collations, Continuing Education, Curators and Conservators, Developing Guidelines for Borrowing Special Collections Materials for Exhibition, Developing Guidelines for Professional Ethics, Exhibition Catalogue Awards, Information Exchange, Literary Rights, MARC for Special Collections, Publications, Security, Standards). See the *ALA Handbook of Organization, 1986/1987*. Chicago: ALA, 1986.
4. Clearly there is a theoretical approach to any practical issue—e.g., the theory of acquisitions as opposed to the actual acquisition.
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14. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-32.

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