

The Role of the Rare Book Library in Higher Education: An Outsider Surveys the Issue

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This article explores the role of the academic rare book library in terms of its financial justification, and concludes that the primary justification lies in its utility as a research library. Experience suggests that haphazard groupings of "highspots" do not constitute a proper rare book library and that facilities that cannot maintain research-oriented rare book collections would serve their institutions better by developing special collections that may or may not include rare books.



This is an age when university and college rare book collections, rightly and wrongly, have been increasingly criticized by administrators who are keeping a sharp eye on the budgetary bottom line. There have been charges that for many universities and colleges the rare book room or library is an expensive and unnecessary bauble serving, at best, as elegant window-dressing calculated to bolster institutional egos. Such charges are not always without foundation. Nevertheless, a defense of individual academic rare book collections is often possible. Moreover, the best such defense lies in the general perception of the positive role of college and university rare book collecting. It is also apparent that rare book librarians have been less than outspoken in their own defense and have frequently failed to define even generally the role of the collections entrusted to their care. One may conclude that rare book librarians are so deeply involved in the tremendous responsibilities inherent in their day-to-day and fiscal-year-to-fiscal-year tasks that they lack the opportunity to distance themselves sufficiently to take a general overview and engage in self-analysis.

Any extended essay on the role of the rare book library in an academic setting requires several prefatory remarks. These may be gathered into two categories, the first of which includes a general criticism of the literature available. In the second may be found what can be described as working definitions.

A search of the literature indicates that there has been actually very little written on the role, purpose, or function of any rare book library. This is even more the case if the subject is limited to such collections within higher education. Daniel Traister perceives a fundamental gap in the intellectual underpinnings of librarianship in general—and in rare book librarianship in particular. He writes that we know (more or less) what we do, but that our knowledge of why we do it is another matter.¹ This criticism is also apparent in Traister's critique of Roderick Cave's *Rare Book Librarianship*. He says that the book deals only with processes and teaches nothing on the central intellectual issues of the subject.² Cave's book, he maintains, does not explain why we have rare books in libraries or how their presence there makes a contribution to the progress of humanistic learning.³

That Traister is nearly alone in the charges he makes serves to strengthen his case. Only William Matheson, of all the writers to be cited in this paper, joins Traister in his approach to this sensitive point. He cites what he views as a valid displeasure with rare book librarians who never address the serious questions that might well be raised about the place of rare books in the academic library, but who, nevertheless, patronize "plain" librarians and talk glibly about "collection strengths" and "highspots."⁴

Even the writers who do touch upon the intellectual underpinnings of rare book libraries often wander far from the crucial topic because they dwell on the history of individual collections or rare book libraries in general. Individual writers too frequently provide excessive information on the rare book libraries with which they are associated or familiar. Much of the literature is characterized by a heavy use of generalities. This last point, however, is not always a negative feature, as discussed below.

There are many definitions of "rare" books. For this reason, very different items may fall into the category of rare books or be properly added to such a collection. Thus the best definitions are general. In addition, it will be seen from the definitions presented below that such useful generalities do possess common elements.

D. Cox suggests that rare books are those books "which replacement both in terms of cost and opportunity for replacement makes it prudent to lock them up."⁵ John Cook Wyllie echoes a portion of the above definition. He defines rare books as "the unexpendable parts of a library's collection."⁶ Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt's thought on the nature of rare books holds that such items are "books whose physical depreciation would mean a documentary and artistic as well as financial loss."⁷ Thus rare books are expensive and difficult to replace even if an institution can cover the expense. In addition, they are books whose preservation is of high priority because they represent a portion of the written or even artistic record of humanity. The popular image of a rare book as

something from the fifteenth century and bound in leather is, therefore, while not necessarily incorrect, nevertheless, not exclusively correct.

A second elusive term is "special collections." William L. Joyce depicts the term as deliberately ambiguous, but then goes on to dispel the ambiguity with a definition of his own. He declares that "special collections" should designate "a concentration of books, not necessarily rare, on any given subject."⁸ Marjorie Gray Wynne suggests that special collections materials are items that deserve or demand a kind of special treatment that the general stack area is unable to supply.⁹ It is important to note that neither writer suggests that rarity is a mandatory criterion for any book's entry into the kingdom of special collections. It is unfortunate, therefore, that so many of those who write about rare books use the two terms interchangeably. Although this writer will make some later mention of special collections, for the purposes of this paper, the two terms are distinctly different concepts.¹⁰

The need for rare book collections in universities can be defended on at least two levels: the idealistic and the practical. There is perhaps no better way to make known the shortcomings of the idealistic appeals than to include some examples, consisting of quotations covering a twenty-six year span, 1959-1985. Clearly, idealism continues to influence the pleas made on behalf of rare books in libraries. Such pleas, however, lack the nuts and bolts specifics that appeal to increasingly budget-conscious administrators.

Especially worth reading are the books that record man's most significant ideas and actions. Rare book collections preserve these titles and others that for varying reasons are considered special.¹¹

The college is humanity conscious, . . . books are the heart of the college, and . . . rare books and materials have vitally to do with ideas, information, and the understanding of the human spirit.¹²

Universities have, however, a peculiar obligation to the human record as they are the primary centres in our culture for the study of man and of nature.¹³

The strength of every university lies in its ability to achieve a just evaluation of mankind's past attainments. Nothing brings such attainments so vividly to mind, or forges such a powerful link with the great figures of the past centuries, as a collection of books which they themselves handled and read, or the letters and other papers which they actually wrote.¹⁴

“ ‘Except for a few glamour items its [a rare book library’s] holdings are not likely to stir the public’s imagination or open an administrator’s purse.’ ”

Such appeals to humanism may have sufficed in the affluent 1960s to justify a university's indulging in rare book collecting, but today's realities demand something more specific. In the words of John Bidwell, "Except for a few glamour items its [a rare book library's] holdings are not likely to stir the public's imagination or open an administrator's purse."¹⁵

The topic of funding raises the issue of the basic processes that take place in a rare book library. These activities create a large-scale financial need that must be justified.

In order to have a properly functioning rare book library, at least four basic requirements must be met. First, there must be provision for the acquisition of new materials as well as for the development and refinement of current collections.¹⁶ Second, rare materials must be properly housed in a secure facility which will, nevertheless, guarantee their accessibility to researchers.¹⁷ Third, such a facility requires a staff with appropriate training, abilities, and knowledge.¹⁸ And finally, there must be a conservation and restoration program.¹⁹

The acquisitions of a rare book library may range from the rarest of fine, early printed books to relatively recent items printed on pulp paper. Likewise, such acquisitions may deal with either the exotic or the commonplace. The important point is that, as S. Roberts observes, the rare book collection must never become fossilized.²⁰ No such collection is ever "com-

plete" and final; there must be a provision for adding related materials as they are offered for sale.²¹ Inherent in this need for growth and development is a large-scale financial commitment.

Not only are rare books expensive to buy; they are also costly to house. Rare holdings must be secure from theft and other types of abuse to which the general holdings of any library fall prey. Because the lack of proper environmental controls can destroy the utility of a rare book as easily as can a careless patron, a rare book facility must also have systems to maintain environmental conditions best for the physical well-being of rare books.²² No university library building is inexpensive, but buildings to house rare books will always be "more expensive."

In order to be most useful, rare books must be described and made accessible, often in uncommon ways. A seventeenth-century illustrated edition of Ovid, besides being of interest to classical scholars and art historians, will also offer scholarly appeal because of its binding, the presence of a fore-edge painting, or the critical apparatus or notes that accompany the Latin, to name only a few possibilities. Such multifaceted insight taxes a library staff without specialized training and expertise.²³ Only a staff with the necessary skill is able properly to assemble, arrange, care for, and interpret a rare book collection.²⁴ Such additional skill and expertise translate into additional funding requirements.

The rare book library looks to the future in terms of conservation and preservation as well as in acquisitions. Preservation implies conservation—that is, maintaining the rare object in its original format for as long as possible.²⁵ The corollary to this, of course, is the goal of preserving material for future use. This is no small objective. Indeed, as Richard G. Landon notes, "When the instability of the materials themselves, particularly for the period after 1870, is taken into account the responsibility to provide research collections for future generations of scholars becomes awesome indeed."²⁶ Needless to say, such responsibility also implies over the years an "awesome" expenditure of funds.

To find the justification for the expenditures described above, one must briefly consider the history of higher education in this country. During the late nineteenth century, American universities and colleges began to feel the influence of the German universities. Thus research began to be a primary university objective.²⁷ The lecture and the seminar slowly took precedence over the textbook and recitation.²⁸ In short, scholarship was institutionalized and professionalized.²⁹ With this development it may be said that the library became the center of the academic endeavour. And where in all this is the role of the rare book library? Martha M. Smith writes:

Intellectual sensitivity is a characteristic of the mature scholar, who, through the study of books, produces new ideas or integrates old ones into fresh interpretations for the benefit of present and future generations. Rare book collections play an important role in research because they preserve these books for study.³⁰

The primary justification for expending resources on the rare book library is its role in support of research and scholarship.³¹ This role is both general and extensive. The world of scholarly research is vast and changing. For example, who would have thought, twenty years ago, the time would come when advanced academic degrees would be granted in a discipline known as "Popular Culture?" Such a justification, though general, is important. Individual institutions, once they accept the premise, add their own institution-specific details to the "rare books for research" concept and, hence, to the collecting patterns.

Rare book collection development can be tied specifically to an institution's academic programs.³² The teaching and research needs of the faculty and the research needs of the students together create the basis on which an academic library collection is built.³³ In short, for each academic rare book library, the key point is academic relevance. This is especially true if rare book acquisitions are funded by a library's general allocation and when such spending is in direct competition with that for periodical subscriptions, new books, or multiple copies for undergradu-

ates.³⁴ Awareness of the institutional collection policies and a knowledge of regional resources and cooperative plans is also of use in this area.³⁵ Such resources and cooperative plans can guide rare book collection development decisions by suggesting where current holdings can support new areas of development or where new areas of development may lead to costly duplication.

F.W. Ratcliffe describes a 1976 purchase made by the John Rylands University of Manchester, details of which provide an excellent example of just how well the acquisitions of a university rare book library can be made to coincide with the teaching and research needs of faculty and students.

The outstanding 1976 purchase for the John Rylands University Library was a late thirteenth/early fourteenth century Anglo-Norman manuscript entitled *La Vie Saint Edmund Le Rei*.³⁶ The purchase of this manuscript was important in the long history of Anglo-Norman studies in the university's French department.³⁷ It complemented other similar primary research materials held by the library, and its acquisition was supported by large research collections in the Anglo-Norman area.³⁸ As an item of paleography, the manuscript also made a distinctive contribution to the larger university manuscript holdings, all especially relevant because the university had at that time two lecturers in palaeography.³⁹ Indeed, the manuscript was already much in demand among Anglo-Norman scholars both within and outside the University. That the copy purchased was also textually superior to all other known copies was also significant.⁴⁰ Ratcliffe draws a moral regarding this purchase and it deserves quoting.

Had the reasoning to [buy the manuscript]. . . been purely "bibliophilic," or even purely bibliographical, this purchase could not have been justified. As it is, the texts are of immediate relevance to university research as well as to university collections. Both historians and theologians supported strongly these acquisitions in the contexts of their subjects.⁴¹

Rare book libraries are expensive to create, maintain, and develop. The academic institution that makes the necessary com-

mitment to such an enterprise can, however, expect a return on its investment. That return takes the form of support for the research needs, both current and, in the best of situations, even future, of the faculty, students, and academic programs. Such expenditure is little justified if the result is only an odd assortment of interesting collectibles which, as a group, lack the depth and thematic cohesion necessary to support serious research. When academic rare book collections are assembled to support research, other subjective but positive developments will take place. As William L. Joyce writes:

As such, the acquisition of these [i.e. rare] materials creates an aura of institutional success, participation in the act of scholarship and the creation of new knowledge through possession of valuable artifacts, all of which assist the institution in validating its purposes.⁴²

It is perhaps the importance of the "aura" described by Joyce that has led some institutions to make very poor decisions regarding the creation of rare book libraries. In many cases status rather than need has been the predominant motive.⁴³ It is, in such cases, as if an institution's administration had heard that a rare books library is now one of the "maturity symbols" of the American college or university.⁴⁴ The result, as Gordon N. Ray suggests, is often a paneled "treasure room" with locked cases and carpeting on the floor, not to mention scattered collections and star pieces that have been assembled without regard to the special interests of the faculty, and a curator converted from a librarian past his or her prime or the weakest member of the English department.⁴⁵ And all of this Ray characterizes as no more than "window dressing" of the most expensive and useless kind.

Just how realistic is it for all colleges and universities to become committed to rare books beyond special collections of local interest or in fields strictly limited by cost? Rare book "highspots" are increasingly more expensive, and seldom can their acquisition be justified in relation to the modest funds that a library can hope to have available for their purchase.⁴⁶ What service can a limited number of unrelated

"highspots" render scholarly research?⁴⁷ When public funds are involved, another question arises. Can it be proper to subsidize with public funds what can only be termed the desire to acquire items simply because they are bibliographical rarities?

"Ratcliffe warns against the proliferation of small caches of rare books or even large ones that have no cohesion as collections."

F.W. Ratcliffe identifies three implications of the above concerns. He first suggests that it is unwise for new academic libraries, in the context, say, of American literature or English history, to attempt to build up primary resources in any depth.⁴⁸ He also maintains that it is reasonable for all colleges and universities only to accept certain kinds of gifts, provided that they do not lead to significant expenditures.⁴⁹ And, finally, Ratcliffe warns against the proliferation of small caches of rare books, or even large ones that have no cohesion as collections.⁵⁰

In order to illustrate the dangers he perceives, Ratcliffe writes:

A collection of manuscript and printed book "highspots" donated by a local man, Mr. Hart, to Blackburn Public Library . . . demonstrates similar dangers. The collection is a real cause of civic pride, but its role in scholarship is minimal, isolated as it is from any comparable material.⁵¹

Ratcliffe continues:

Ask any Hardy scholar about the dispersal of that author's manuscripts, in accordance with his wishes, around various institutions. It may have guaranteed a Hardy presence in a great number of places, but it has put major obstacles in the way of editors.⁵²

Clearly "highspots" and piecemeal caches without the support of a proper scholarly and research context will not suffice as an academic rare book library. It may be better to do without the rare books library than to settle for expensive "crumbs" of minimal scholarly value. Moreover, such flawed collections will be

left to languish unless the parent institution exhibits a commitment to academic research on the highest level.⁵³

At this point let us consider reasons for the appearance of so many ill-conceived rare book libraries and collections on the campuses of this nation. The current situation may be traced back to several sources. The first is the example set by the University of California in 1950, when a rare books and special collections department was deliberately planned and brought into existence.⁵⁴ From coast to coast this example was emulated on numerous campuses, both large and not so large.⁵⁵ In addition, at the turn of the last century, Yale University, in the interest of preservation, began actively to segregate the rarities in its general library holdings.⁵⁶ Other institutions soon picked up on this notion and began checking their holdings for "rarities."⁵⁷ Thus, few of the institutions that were inspired by the California example doubted that they had already in their possession the beginnings of a collection for the newly conceived rare books department.

Another factor, deeply ingrained in the American psyche, that contributed to the rise of academic rare book collections is the concept that "more is better." In the area of rare books, such a concept, without the proper critical scrutiny, can do more harm than good, especially when large sums of money become available for funding this dangerous endeavor.⁵⁸ As we know, the fabulous 1960s were just such a time of bounty for American higher education. And as a result, Richard G. Landon observes, from Alberta to Florida, from Nova Scotia to New Mexico, any university library of any appreciable size and pretension contains a collection of Anglo-Irish literature.⁵⁹

Rare book librarians of the 1970s and 1980s face formidable obstacles to the growth and even the continued existence of some special or rare book collections.⁶⁰ Among these are static or declining book budgets, together with increased competition for books, due in part to the limited availability of established rarities.⁶¹ In the wake of these developments, Landon perceives two trends. First, it would appear

that large universities have been able to handle their commitment to developing research-level rare book collections.⁶² On the other hand, Landon believes that smaller universities and colleges have never really realized their commitment and are currently in even less of a position to continue the struggle.⁶³ Landon continues:

There are a few instances where small institutions with important collections that they are unable to care for properly have agreed to transfer to a larger institution with better facilities. The arrangement worked out between Trinity College at the University of Toronto and the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library is an example.⁶⁴

At the most extreme there is some indication that certain rare book libraries . . . will disappear altogether. A substantial part of the Pforzheimer Library is now being offered for sale, Hofstra University has closed its Rare Book and Special Collections Department, and the rare books from the Franklin Institute have come under the auctioneer's hammer.⁶⁵

The above measures might strike the reader as drastic. There is, however, at least one moderate solution to the financing dilemma. It is a concept strongly backed by Martha M. Smith and involves cooperative collection development and resource sharing. Smith believes that the concept of self-sufficiency must be modified if research libraries are to meet their responsibilities to higher education.⁶⁶ She suggests that the more important goal is not the acquisition of a greater number of books, but rather an improvement in the availability of a greater number of books.⁶⁷ "Little used" library materials, Smith holds, present themselves most readily for sharing. In addition, the concept of cooperation among special subject collections and archives has already received much endorsement.⁶⁸

The guidelines Smith offers to small rare book libraries for cooperation in acquisitions are based upon the experience in such an enterprise of the rare book collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Department of Special Collections at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Smith depicts this experience as successful and suggests it

could be an example for others. The first of five guidelines for such a relationship, considered by Smith to be essential, is that the cooperating institutions be within close proximity.⁶⁹ A positive attitude on the part of the librarians involved is the second prerequisite.⁷⁰ Third, there must be support for the plan from the concerned library administrators.⁷¹ The fourth element in the formula for success is agreement among participating librarians upon the criteria used in collecting books.⁷² Fifth, each participant must survey the holdings of his/her collection.⁷³

Implicit in collective resource development, as outlined by Smith, is resource sharing. In the case of rare books, the concept of resource sharing clearly does not involve sending materials by interlibrary loan. It is the researcher who moves from library to library.⁷⁴ Another aspect of resource sharing is the increased use of photocopies and microforms, when such copies will serve the researcher's purpose.⁷⁵ The debate on the relative merits of originals versus copies is outside the scope of this paper. Both arguments have their merits and each type of material can be used in ways the other cannot. It need not always be, as Stanley Pargellis maintains, that "the better the scholar, the more he insists upon seeing the rare book."⁷⁶

"S. Roberts urges smaller institutions to build any comprehensive research collection around a person, place, or topic."

At this point it is worthwhile to consider the fate of rare books in the "non-major" academic institution. Is there a useful presence for rare books in such libraries, especially given the problems and limitations presented above? The answer is yes and involves the concept of special collections. As Ratcliffe notes, it is entirely reasonable for newer institutions, for example, to build up collections relating to their collecting strengths.⁷⁷ In the course of

such collecting, they will acquire some costly, scarce or irreplaceable items.⁷⁸ Similarly, S. Roberts urges smaller institutions to build any comprehensive research collection around a person, place or topic.⁷⁹ Also of potential use would be a collection of sufficient material to illustrate the history of the book.⁸⁰

There is, of course, no reason to believe that the above purposes cannot be served as well by the rare book collection of a major academic institution. In the case of such a collection, however, the question often becomes a matter of patrons. In particular, how many patrons are necessary or desirable? Likewise, what types of patrons should a rare book library seek to attract?

Richard G. Landon observed in 1979 that rare book collections are facing the problem of underutilization, often for the first time.⁸¹ Few people use such collections, relative to other library resources.⁸² Even worse, rare book librarians can, with some justification, complain that the last people to be aware of the resources they offer are their own faculty.⁸³ In such cases it may be concluded that such a collection fails to make any measurable, active contribution to the intellectual life of a campus.⁸⁴

Publicity is the best remedy for the situation described above. Displays and exhibitions are one approach. Rare books on display appeal to curiosity about the old and antique and, often, to aesthetic sensibilities.⁸⁵ On such occasions the books are eloquent in their own defense. Exhibitions speak to students, faculty and even on occasion to potential donors.⁸⁶

Each exhibition presented by a rare book library ought to be the occasion for publishing a catalogue.⁸⁷ Besides enhancing public awareness, such catalogues and similar publications offer the opportunity to interpret rare book holdings.⁸⁸ S. Roberts suggested in 1967 that, in the absence of a national survey of rare book collections, it was only such exhibition catalogues that alerted the public to the existence and location of collections.⁸⁹

Cross currents that pit the interests of rare book librarians against those of other librarians frequently surface within an ac-

ademic library system. The source is a difference in point of view about library services. Stephen Ferguson writes:

Because curators [of rare books] deal mainly with objects as opposed to information, it makes it harder for them to relate to the theory that binds together their other library colleagues, many of whom think of themselves as "information professionals."⁹⁰

Because the rare book librarian realizes that a well-preserved item has a value beyond its intellectual content, there can often be disagreement with the "information professionals" who do not necessarily believe that the destruction of a book's physical integrity is a problem, provided the intellectual content survives.

It seems, therefore, that the role of a rare book collection in an academic library may be a very precise balancing act. On the one hand, there is the clear need to justify the collection in terms of its usefulness to scholars and researchers. On the other hand, there is the equally pressing need to preserve as physical objects the items in such a collection. The curator knows, probably far better than others, that use means wear and tear. Because there are perils implicit in erring in favor of either of these extremes, one suspects that there is no definitive answer for the use-versus-preservation dilemma. The issue must be resolved individually by each academic rare book library. The answer lies within the goals and objectives of the institution and the mission statement that governs the activities of its rare book facility.

Defining the patrons an academic rare book library should seek to attract is an equally difficult issue to resolve. Should rare book librarians agree, for example, with Lawrence Clark Powell, who writes the following?

We can dispose of teaching needs by the flat statement that rare books have small place in the undergraduate program. The very nature of rare books and manuscripts—their scarcity and their value—means that they cannot be subjected to steady and heavy use.⁹¹

Clearly so drastic a proposition need not be the standard for all others. It should be obvious to all that a well-established academic rare book library serving scholars and researchers has, as well, the potential

to serve many others. The case has been made for the use of rare materials by undergraduates.⁹² There are, in addition, uses to which a rare book library may be put by nonscholarly patrons.⁹³ The extent to which any one academic rare book library's basic role may be extended to serve nonresearch needs will depend, ultimately, upon its perception of its service mission.

Certain conclusions can be drawn from the discussion thus far. The concepts of rare book collections and special collections are not interchangeable, even though elements of one may appear in the other. For numerous very good reasons, an academic rare book library is an expensive enterprise simply to maintain, let alone to continue to develop. The proper and useful sort of rare book facility for an academic institution is first and foremost a working resource for research; an odd assortment of "highspots" is of no real value, save perhaps as window dressing. The institution that supports rare books with the necessary levels of funding has every right to expect a high degree of correlation between institutional goals and objectives and those of the rare book library. A properly established rare book library needs to publicize its resources to scholars and others. At the same time, each such library must strive to maintain conditions that will preserve its holdings physically and intellectually.

In addition, it should be apparent that many institutions that quite mistakenly in the past sought to create rare book libraries have, in truth, little or nothing of the sort. Those institutions that are quite unable to support financially a proper rare book collection or whose academic goals do not emphasize original research have two basic options. They might, in some cases, persevere through the establishment of cooperative collection development and resource sharing programs. On the other hand, they might be well advised to discontinue their attempts at rare book collecting per se and seek, instead, to develop special collections that will reflect their particular educational interests and goals.

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79. Roberts, "Relevance of Rare Book Collections," p.114.
80. Ratcliffe, "Priorities," p.230-31.
81. Landon, "Rare And Special Collections," p.470.
82. Traister, "Rare Book Collections," p.115.
83. Ibid., p.117.
84. Ibid., p.116.
85. Ibid., p.115.
86. Ibid., p.117.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid.
89. Roberts, "Relevance of Rare Book Collections," p.115.
90. Ferguson, "Rare Books," p.165.
91. Powell, "Policy and Administration," p.7.
92. See, for example, R. Mortimer, "Manuscripts and Rare Books in an Undergraduate Library," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 58:107-10 (Oct. 1983).
93. See, for example, Randolph G. Adams, "Who Uses a Library of Rare Books?" *English Institute Annual* (1940), p.144-63.