

By MARY A. BENJAMIN

The Manuscript Market and the Librarian*

Miss Benjamin is director, Walter R. Benjamin Autographs, New York City.

WHEN I WAS INVITED to address the present group of members of the American Library Association and had suggested to me the title: "The Manuscript Market and the Librarian," I was both startled and pleased. For one thing, the very fact that a dealer was asked to speak before a group of librarians shows how far the feeling of cooperation and mutual understanding between librarians and dealers has progressed. Such an invitation would have been most unusual when I first entered business 30 years ago. Few librarians were then even aware of the existence of a manuscript market or that records of the past could be secured and that dealers handled them. In fact back in 1890 things were even worse. My father, Walter R. Benjamin, commented in an issue of our monthly publication, *The Collector*, "About the deadest thing in this country is the average historical society. Not one in a dozen has the slightest sign of life about it." Today, the formation of the Division of Rare Books and Manuscripts of the ALA refutes that statement directly.

There is very definitely a manuscript market, and today its existence is known to almost every librarian. Indeed, a very sizable percentage of the present market is due to the demands of institutions. For anyone who desires to collect or handle autograph material a knowledge of this market is imperative. There will be those listening to me for whom any-

thing I may say on the subject will be old news. I ask them to be patient with me. I address myself rather to those who have had less experience and who would like to learn some of the basic facts about the purchase and sale of autographs, either because they are contemplating the possibility of starting collections at their institutions, or perhaps because they wish to be helpful to those who approach them about collections.

A library has generally one of two aims in view when starting an autograph collection. It may plan a small one intended chiefly for exhibition purposes. Or it may have in mind a sizable one, intended primarily for scholarly research. Small collections usually present no special problems, but in the case of large collections experience has taught that it is wisest to specialize. Costs of generalizing are very great and can be assumed safely only by institutions of the magnitude and financial status of the Library of Congress and a few others, mostly university libraries. Specialist collections may be devoted to a period, to a general subject, to a particular subject, to matters of special local interest, or to material pertaining to an individual.

Aware that there is competition for material not only between libraries themselves but also between libraries and private collectors, those in charge of starting a collection will avoid wherever possible any duplication of effort—especially with other institutions. Such duplication serves only to force prices higher and makes things more difficult for all concerned. The ideal is of course for each library to specialize in that

* Paper presented at the meeting of the ACRL Rare Books Committee, Philadelphia, Pa., July 5, 1955.

which will be of greatest interest and use to the community which it serves.

The aim of the collection determined, the next step is how to acquire material. There are two ways: Either the material is brought in to the library by private individuals or dealers, or the librarian must go out and seek it. In either case there comes up at once the problem of appraisals and estimates on material offered or sought.

The average librarian, however, has neither time nor energy to become an expert on autograph values, a knowledge it has taken the dealer, who devotes his undivided attention to his work, years of hard study and often painful experience to acquire. I have been in touch with librarians for a long time, and I think I can truthfully say that I appreciate and understand many of their problems: the many duties and responsibilities, the heavy pressure of endless details of routine work involved in managing institutional affairs, the lack of time, the red tape which is so hampering to them and which restricts them from securing valuable material they long to acquire. As only the largest institutions can afford to have curators of manuscript divisions, the librarian of a smaller institution, who is already a combination of business executive, promoter and fund raiser, diplomat in the handling of visitors, adviser and consultant, must nevertheless take on this added trust. It is hardly a wonder then that at times he will make mistakes. The problems that face him in supervising this one department alone are onerous.

Let us consider for example material brought in to him. This may fall into two categories: that which is to be presented to the library as a gift, and that which is offered for sale. Material presented as a gift would seem to present no problem at all, but the contrary may be very much the case. If the owner seeks to have a tax deduction, how can

the amount be determined in a manner satisfactory to the government? It is not an easy question. I shall have more to say about it later on.

More frequently than not, collections drawn to a librarian's attention are brought in with the purpose of making a sale, either to the library itself or to someone to whom the librarian can refer the owner. In those cases where the owner sets a figure on what he has, the only problem for the librarian is whether or not the price is an excessive one. Even if he is unable himself to determine this fact, it is fairly simple to call in others who can advise him. The difficulty arises when an owner wishes to sell what he has but does not know what to ask. He invites an offer.

It is my impression that experienced librarians—and experienced dealers too—try to avoid making offers. They have had their fingers burnt too often. Owners are frequently on shopping expeditions. One cannot blame them for seeking to secure the highest price possible for what they possess, but some owners make a practice of going from one dealer to the other, from one librarian to another, using any offer made them as a bargaining lever with the next contact. A librarian or dealer, who may have spent hours of valuable time studying a group of letters and deciding its worth to him, has reason enough to be upset, if after all his trouble the owner takes away his collection, saying that he will think over the matter and meaning that he is now going to try somebody else.

When material is offered there is also in the manuscript world—as in the art world—the serious problem of authenticity. Without long experience no one can be sure that he is not acquiring contemporary copies or facsimile reproductions or even forgeries. Incidentally, the librarian who is familiar with manuscripts shies away from making any statements along these lines. He knows that to prove legally for example that

an item is a forgery is sometimes almost impossible, and any statement by him that affects the market value of an item may expose his institution to a lawsuit.

Librarians, then, if anxious to secure a collection for their institution are really safest in referring the owner to a reliable dealer who will, for a small fee, appraise the collection in question. A dealer's appraisal automatically carries with it a guarantee of all items appraised. Generally speaking, if a person wants to sell something, he should be the one to pay the fee for the knowledge that protects him. However, in the case of gifts, when an appraisal is desired, libraries often take over the charges themselves.

Material is often, of course, offered to librarians by dealers. In fact, dealers may be one of the chief sources for institutions. That there are honest and less honest dealers no one denies. As most librarians probably know already, one guide is membership in the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America. The ethical requirements of this organization are high, and are strictly enforced by its Board of Governors.

Most dealers issue from one to ten catalogs a year. Their lists are well worth studying for items pertinent to an individual library's collection. Prices may vary from one catalog to the other, but in the manuscript field this is to be expected, as all autograph items are unique and must be appraised on their own merits, based on contents, condition, date, and other factors of supply and demand.

The sometimes generous supply of material that is offered or brought in will at times give the librarian a false impression of values. This must be carefully guarded against, and he should never lose sight of the fact that demand affects values as greatly as does supply. The librarian may be familiar with what is offered him, but he cannot possibly have a full knowledge of the *public* de-

mand for what he is buying. He may know what *he* can afford to pay for it, what is worth to *him*, but that is not a knowledge of the value to others, which may be greater or less.

Let me give an example. Some years ago I quoted to Mr. X, librarian of a very large and prominent institution, an excellent letter of a distinguished figure in history in whom this library specialized. I placed what I considered a fair price on the item and offered it to him. The librarian was appalled by my price. He did not stop to consider that no letters of this individual had appeared on the open market in years, but protestingly commented, in criticism of my valuation, that his institution owned any number of letters of this man. Very quietly I drew his attention to the fact that the supply of letters in his institution had nothing whatsoever to do with the price of any item on the open market, except insofar as it reduced the quantity available to others. He could not see it in this light and refused the item. Whereupon I promptly turned around and sold it to another institution which was delighted to secure the letter and thought my price a reasonable one.

I mention this example to point out that only the dealer, who buys and sells, and issues catalogs, and knows how quickly certain items move and what others remain on his shelves for long periods, and who is in touch with dealers and auctions all over the world, can have the experience necessary to judge and appraise items correctly.

In connection with material brought in, there is one additional problem that the librarian must at times consider. An owner may have a large mass of material of which only a few items would fit into the institution's collection. The owner may be astute enough to realize that if he disposes of the more interesting pieces separately, he lessens his chances of selling the balance. Under such cir-

cumstances, I would suggest that the librarian call in a dealer. Very often an agreement can be reached whereby the librarian gets what he wants, the dealer gets the rest, and the owner makes a sale of all he has. Everyone is content.

It is a safe guess that most collections brought in to a librarian will be of little interest to him. He should, however, be in a position to refer the owner elsewhere. That is part of his responsibility to the public. Being prejudiced, as is understandable, I have mentioned the dealer as the normal person to be consulted. A dealer will buy anything whether it is of a general nature or a highly specialized collection. Incidentally, I may say that he will gladly buy any duplicate material that a library may not want. This is not the place to discuss the services or work of the dealer, but I will mention briefly that any reputable dealer in manuscripts considers himself a professional, as much as the librarian, the lawyer or the physician. His delight is to place single items or collections most appropriately where they will be best housed and used to greatest advantage. He will not break up the continuity of a group of papers and sell the items piecemeal until he has made every possible effort to sell the collection as a whole. This feeling of responsibility on the part of dealers with regard to the historical value of manuscript material may come as a surprise to some librarians. But it is so.

A collection that has unity of interest or is highly specialized may also be referred to other institutions. But quite possibly the librarian may not know of these. For the dealer, on the other hand, a wide knowledge of both private collector and institutional specialists is imperative. Without such information he could hardly make a living.

So much for material that is brought in or offered to the librarian. Not all desirable items are as simply acquired as this. Autographs can be very scarce and

at times must be sought outside of the library precincts. The librarian must, metaphorically speaking, go out and hunt for them. The simplest method is to study carefully all dealers' catalogs sent him. Since not all dealers are familiar with all interests of all librarians, items that are pertinent to the institution's collection will often be found included in these lists. Still better, wherever it is possible, it is advisable to make personal contact with individual dealers and talk over the library's interests and aims, and discuss the type of material sought. Ninety per cent or more of a dealer's acquisitions are likely never to appear in his catalogs. Printing is costly today, and dealers generally quote out new material bought, hoping to avoid the expense of cataloging. If the librarian is to get on the ground floor of such acquisitions, he must make his interests known and have himself placed on want cards kept by the dealer. In this way, anything that comes along that falls into his line of collecting will be offered him prior to its being cataloged.

Auctions are another good source of manuscript material. Estates and family collections are frequently placed on the market and sometimes sold at inviting prices. Of course no guarantee of authenticity is given on material so sold, and for this reason it is usually advisable again to avail oneself of the services of a dealer, who will, for a 10% fee, represent the librarian at the sale. For this fee the dealer checks over the material, reports on condition, guarantees its authenticity, sees that the contents of a lot corresponds with the description given, and warns the librarian of any discrepancy. If requested, he will advise as to value and will pass on information about estimated valuations given out by the auction house itself. He personally attends the sale, or has his representative do so, and secures the lot at the lowest possible figure. The librarian customarily names the highest price he

is willing to go and trusts the dealer to do the best he can. For the librarian who is out of town, such help is indispensable. Often even the city librarian, who manages to go up and examine auction offerings himself, cannot find time to attend the sale. And so he calls on the dealer to represent him. Again, librarians do not always wish it known that they are bidding for fear they may be run up in price. A dealer considers the identity and the bid of a client, be it librarian, private collector, or colleague, strictly confidential.

What I have said about the services rendered by the dealers to the librarians indicates the importance of close and sympathetic collaboration between librarians and dealers. Another reason for such collaboration is the relationship with private collectors who often, once their collections assume sizable proportions, begin to think in terms of gifts to institutions. It is up to the librarians to coddle such collectors and encourage them. It is not only a question of bequests. Many collectors, if treated in friendly and cordial fashion, make generous gifts of money or material during their lifetimes. Today nearly every major college or university has its Friends of the Library, and the librarian depends on these groups to increase the acquisitions of the institution he supervises. A collector frequently leans heavily on a certain trusted dealer, whose prejudices are bound to be reflected in the collector's own attitude toward particular institutions. The good will of the dealer can be just as important to the librarian as the good will of the librarian is to the dealer.

I might add here in connection with good will, that dealers avoid like the pest those institutions which:

1. Do not pay their bills promptly.
2. Require bills in triplicate and quadruplicate and which must be notarized.
3. Hold material sent on approval for

long periods of time and then return it.

4. Ask that material be sent them on approval and then return it without comment. No dealer can cooperate in building a collection if he is not told why material offered is not suitable.

There is, of course, another important method of acquiring material by librarians which I have left to the last, for certain points of ethics are involved in it. I refer to the direct approach—the communicating directly with descendants of a distinguished individual, in the hope that his papers will have been preserved and that they may be obtained by the library for research purposes.

Due to limited funds, the librarian will understandably first attempt to persuade the owners to present their holdings to his institution. If unsuccessful, he may then try to secure permission to have the material copied or photostated or microfilmed for the library's files. As a last resort he may seek to purchase the collection. Many valuable collections have been secured for institutions by librarians taking one of the three steps mentioned above.

The second approach, the request for copies, brings me to the discussion of a subject which is a delicate one, but which I do not feel I can omit. I refer to the question of ethics. It may startle librarians present to be told that there are some among their profession whose honesty is questionable. It startled me when I myself first realized it. I had overlooked the fact that, human beings being what they are, there is bound to be a certain percentage of dishonesty in the scholarly world, just as there is outside it. I will add, however, that the unethical behavior I have occasionally met among librarians is not always intentional. It has often been due to ignorance. Yet actions committed in ignorance, when repeated too often, can be suspect.

There are two points in connection

with manuscripts in which a librarian can lay himself wide open to severe criticism unless he walks most circumspectly. The first has to do with the appeal for copies of material.

I mentioned that a librarian on occasion approaches an owner for copies of a family correspondence. In so doing the librarian is naturally thinking in terms of the historical significance of the papers and of the need to preserve a record of the correspondence. So anxious is he to secure these records for his institution and to preserve them for future generations of historians that he has been known to become blinded to the present very real obligation of treating the owners with common justice. The librarian, who quite naturally is not as conscious of market values as is the dealer, tends to forget that the contents of a certain correspondence may have not only historical value but also quite possibly monetary value. In securing access to these contents through copies, the library is being given something which is in much the same category as publication rights. The owner is often unaware of this fact, and usually trusts the librarian implicitly. It does not occur to him to question the ethics of anyone in the librarian's position. It is only later, supposing he has given such copies, that he learns of his error. Not only may he find that he has not been paid a compensating sum, but also that he can now quite possibly realize very little for the manuscripts themselves. His market has shrunk. Other librarians are not interested. If the material is such that interest among private collectors is comparatively small, the dealer, foreseeing that he may have to hold the items in his files over a long period of time, will naturally not offer much.

There are a few librarians who disclaim what I have said above. In proof that they are mistaken, I can relate a recent distressing experience in which I found myself the unhappy middle-wom-

an. An owner consulted me about a very fine family correspondence which she sought to sell. She had offered it to Library A, whose librarian persuaded her to give a set of microfilms to the library. He then, at her request made an offer for the papers themselves, at the same time telling her, obviously with honorable intentions, however mistakenly, that she *should* get twice as much elsewhere. The owner, perhaps having heard rumors, questioned the librarian as to what effects giving copies of her letters to him would have when she offered the material to others. She was assured that only a small and poorly informed percentage of dealers believed the value would be effected. Subsequently the owner came to me and in the course of our conversation mentioned that she had given the copies. Though I agreed to handle her papers for her, I voiced doubts as to my being able to sell the collection unless the microfilms were recalled. In due time I drew the collection to the attention of Library B—one of several institutions interested in the period covered—whose director I informed of the fact that copies had been made. He promptly wrote me that if Library A would return the microfilms, Library B would gladly pay the price asked for the collection, but if the microfilms could not be secured, they would not be willing to pay even a small fraction of the sum.

There I was in the middle, between two heads of outstanding institutions, each taking an opposite stand. The director of Library B flatly disagreed with the librarian of Library A. He asserted unequivocally that 99% of all librarians would automatically agree with him that unpublished and uncopied manuscripts were worth far more to their institutions than published or copied ones. I mailed a carbon of this letter to the owner. She showed it to the librarian of Library A, who, of course, under the circumstances, was forced to return the microfilms, and

the sale went through. The final result was that the owner obtained, net, over *three* times the original offer. The experience, however, left a bad taste in her mouth, and her confidence in librarians was shaken. This example illustrates the case of a librarian who not only did not advise an owner correctly as to the value of her collection but also misled her in the matter of giving copies of what she had.

In my opinion, then, no librarian has the right to ask for copies of letters belonging to a private owner without making him fully aware of the monetary equivalent he is handing out. This gift is an asset, which, translated into dollars, may at the very least be taken as a tax deduction.

In those cases where it has been my painful duty to enlighten the owners of their heretofore unsuspected generosity, the reaction on their part has invariably been an indignant "Why was I not told by the librarian?" Such feelings on the part of owners, often repeated, will do little to enhance the prestige of or instill confidence in our library institutions. In fact, legal action against a librarian who has innocently or otherwise taken advantage of an owner is not inconceivable.

I believe that many librarians as well as research scholars in the past have not realized the seriousness of their offense. True, owners are, for the most part, proud and happy to give copies. Their family pride, their delight in helping scholars may well be worth more to them than any monetary recompense. Nevertheless, I question whether these same people would refuse the offer of a perfectly justifiable tax deduction. In any case, to accept a gift without letting the donor know the value of what he is giving is, in my opinion, strictly unethical. The taking of copies of any material, even in part, without permission is, of course, an outright theft and is

countenanced by no reputable institution.

The other subject which may prove a thorny stumbling block for the librarian is that of appraisals. I have already spoken of some of the difficulties and dangers of a librarian's appraising material offered, but there is a special danger in appraising gifts. In connection with these, there is an understandable strong temptation on the part of librarians either to accept unquestioningly the donor's appraisal, which may be excessive, or, with a mistaken sense of gratitude themselves assign excessive tax-deductible valuations on material given them. Not only are the ethics of so doing questionable but, as Mr. Baughman of Columbia University Libraries pointed out, there is always the danger that if the librarian volunteers such information, or accepts valuations blindly, the government may well question his actions, claiming that as the recipient of the gift he is an interested party and may not play the dual role of recipient and appraiser.

In drawing to the attention of the librarians here present the ethical questions which must inevitably come up where copies of manuscripts and appraisals are concerned, I would like to make a recommendation. Librarians and dealers have many points on which they could be of assistance to each other and many problems in common on which it would be helpful to compare notes. Also there are differences which could bear open and frank discussion. Would it not be possible to establish some sort of joint committee, consisting of several librarians and several dealers, who could meet at intervals once or twice a year and thrash out these questions, reporting to their individual organizations the progress and recommendations reached?

Finally, I would stress one more point. It is my belief that were the existence of the autograph market stressed more generally and were greater publicity

given to the fact that manuscript material may well have monetary value, or tax-deductible value, much important material would not be destroyed. To hear of the burnings or the throwing out of family correspondences is not at all unusual, as many of you are aware. Scholars, historians, and librarians have always emphasized the historical significance of manuscript material, but obviously this approach has not always been sufficient to ensure its preservation. Human nature being what it is, I believe that the stressing of monetary value might do what an appeal to an appre-

ciation of historical values has obviously accomplished only partially.

Dealers have striven for years to stress this angle, believing that such knowledge would lead owners to care for their family archives with greater solicitude. Most people are more apt to take good care of what can be turned into ready cash. But the dealers who handle manuscripts in the United States are few. Librarians, on the other hand, are legion. They meet the public to a far greater extent and could help immeasurably in disseminating this information.

Grants Program Aided by New York Times

The *New York Times* has made a grant of \$5,000 to the American Library Association for the Association of College and Reference Libraries, provided the Association raises a matching \$5,000. The money will provide back files of the *New York Times* on microfilm to non-tax-supported colleges and universities with four-year liberal arts programs. The grant has been gratefully accepted by the Association.

Provided the additional \$5,000 is found, grants will probably be made to 10-12 colleges which have little or no back file and which have budget resources sufficient for current subscriptions to the microfilm edition. No applications for grants will be received at this time. Full information on the *New York Times* and other grants will appear in the July or September issues of *C&RL* and applications will be invited in the early fall.

The ACRL Committee on Foundation Projects has made two additional allotments from the United States Steel Foundation Grant of 1955.

One thousand dollars has been assigned to the Division of Cataloging and Classification to continue its study of the use of the card catalog under Sidney Jackson.

The University of Chicago Graduate Library School has been granted \$1,000 to help finance a study by Patricia Knapp, associate professor of library science, Rosary College, of the relationship between instructional objectives and methods and library use. Data collected at Knox College are being used.