The Rare Book Librarian’s Day

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I.

In the autumn of 1975, I entered library school, where I was pleased to find a program especially designed for the preparation of rare book librarians. I was less pleased to hear my instructor inform my class, at its first meeting, that jobs in rare books generally went to rich WASP males. But I am a baseball fan and know that .333 is a respectable major league batting average. So, even though I failed both “rich” and “WASP,” I gambled on “male”—and, I suppose, I have won my little bet.

I am the Curator of Special Collections—that is, the person in charge of the rare books and manuscripts department—at the University of Pennsylvania’s Van Pelt Library. I have a title on my door, though no Bigelow on my floor. People call on me to write articles, organize conferences, even give speeches, and that is very flattering (more flattering than remunerative, to be sure). Several libraries have paid me money, and one continues to do so, for what they are pleased to consider my services in areas of interest to them. I work in an atmosphere that reeks of older books, and I get to do so in a setting—that is, in a library—with which I have been long enamored.

But almost none of what I do is what I had expected to do when I entered library school a bit more than a decade ago, nor does it bear much resemblance to what I thought I would be doing when, some eleven months later, I became the second boy on my block with four degrees.

How can I describe my ordinary day? Most readers of a journal such as this one already have ideas about rare books and what it is like to work with them; some may even have polite notions about the people who do so. I do not want to

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imply that these ideas are wrong, although I suspect that they may be inade­quate. Rare books, we know, are the sexy part of the library world, the stuff of scholarship. They are what research librarians work with, and require specialized knowledge, bibliographical expertise, historical sensibility, and high moral standards of their guardians. The status of rare books librarianship is high. Those of us who work in this field are perceived—though perhaps we merely perceive ourselves—as an elite breed. This is certainly the view I learned in library school. It seems to have spilled over into the larger world.

As for our colleagues who toil in the mire of circulation or general reference—well, surely their horizons extend no further than Choice cards and RLIN terminals. They expatiate nauseatingly upon 590 and 620 fields. They carefully weed from their collections older books—those that date from before the Vietnam War. They do not know tree calf from russia, have never heard of Jenson or Mardersteig, and think that Palatinos get forty-six miles to the gallon in E.P.A. highway driving tests. Some must never even see a book or a periodical—let alone read one; God forbid! No doubt they spend their days thinking about computers, systems, circulation tapes, acquisitions records, retrospective conversions (a concept that has always struck me as peculiarly Mormon), or other bits and pieces of the detritus of inventory control which differ not at all from whatever it is that happens in Filene’s basement or in the world of the stockboy at the neighborhood grocery. They work wholesale, down there in the trenches, with their seven thousand readers a day—most of whom are in the library for this week’s issue of Time or last month’s Harper’s.

Rare Book’s three thousand readers a year, by contrast, work with the raw materials from which new knowledge will derive. Surely, their research needs our expertise: our exquisitely refined knowledge of books and manuscripts, bindings, type faces, illustrative techniques—and our knowledge of what books and manuscripts are for. We read our books and study them. We create bibliographies of them. Recognizing the relatedness of all special collections, we seek tools to make their joint resources widely accessible—and we began doing this long before our colleagues in general collections tumbled to the advantages of cooperative interlibrary networks. We study and interpret the history of books and printing. We contribute to the history of libraries. We understand the role of books in the cumulative augmentation of knowledge upon which scholarly progress is founded—and we know in our hearts that it is in our part of the library that the books and manuscripts which support this augmentation are found. These views of our trade are fostered not only by our library school education but also urged on us by such great librarians as Ian Willison of The British Library and Paul Raabe of Wolfenbüttel’s Herzog August Bibliothek.

We patiently gather our books and manuscripts, buying them or cajoling donors into giving them to us; we see them catalogued; we try to publicize their
presence in our institutions; and we love them. We love them, as we love our readers, retail, not wholesale. Our library may have three and a half million volumes and serve seven thousand readers a day, but we care for only a hundred and fifty thousand volumes and serve five readers a day—and we try to learn as much about all of them as we can.

We read and write about our incunabula, our renaissance bookbindings, Shakespeare’s First Folio, Elzevier imprints, Jonathan Swift’s publications, nineteenth-century American publishing or book illustration, the first editions of William Carlos Williams; we caress each lovely book. We calendar, catalogue, list, encapsulate, or otherwise massage our medieval manuscripts, our Lope de Vega holographs, our eighteenth-century account books, our Benjamin Franklin papers, our nineteenth-century diaries, our twentieth-century literary papers. We swim in a sea absolutely gelatinous with primary sources.

No Time for us. Nor Time readers, either: our readers are bibliographical sophisticates, adding to the sum of knowledge. They edit reliable texts, the basis of all work in the historical humanities, or seek new information from forgotten books of the past which we have worked hard to preserve and to make available. Rare book librarians are guardians of an old scholarly tradition, philology—as defined by such people as Curtius, Spitzer, and Auerbach—and our readers are practitioners of that most venerable of scholarly crafts. We work closely with them, one on one, trying to meet or to anticipate their needs, interpreting to them both our own closed collections and those collections for which our colleagues at other institutions care. Together, we and our readers walk hand in hand toward Scholar’s Heaven, the great British Library in the sky.

Or so one might suppose. And yet, for reasons I do not entirely understand, my days are not spent in philological or bibliographical trailblazing. Several of the booksellers I am privileged to know do much more such bibliographical work than I manage.

Maybe it should astonish or distress me that my readers, when they call upon me at all, usually do so to ask what the funny little letters at the bottom of the page mean—I’m talking about Ph.D’s in literature who teach at serious universities but have never learned what a signature is, by the way, and (as Anna Russell once remarked) I’m not making this up, you know.

Or they want to know why some twit has just refused them permission to photocopy our exemplar of the first issue of Pope and Swift’s Letters (London, 1740–41; Teerink 1580), no other copy of which seems to exist anywhere.

Or they would be gratified if I sent a note to the National Endowment for the Humanities informing that august body that the X Papers will indeed be available for Y’s inspection during the summer of 1986, when Y hopes that NEH
will support his or her Philadelphia excursion. (I always do. Anyone foolhardy enough to want to spend a summer in Philadelphia deserves to.)

I do have a reader—one—who comes in to see me every so often to talk about his latest discovery in our sixteenth- and seventeenth-century classical texts, whose provenance among Mitteleuropa classicists of those centuries he investigates as a kind of hobby. Not once, however, has he asked me to assist him in his investigations. Since I know nothing about the subject, he has not hurt my feelings by this failure to acknowledge my expertise.

My doors are not beaten down by scholars who want to walk hand in hand with me towards a new learning. Only two scholars have even suggested that I buy a book for their use. One suggested something so breathtakingly impossible that I have politely pretended to forget all about it. The other appeared utterly astonished to learn that I actually bought one of the books he suggested (the other had already been sold when I reached the bookseller). It had not occurred to him that I might take his suggestion seriously. I hope he was pleased.

No one has ever seriously suggested that I do anything even approaching “research” in the collections for which I am responsible. The only people I have met silly enough to assume that I do such a thing on my own are disgruntled faculty members, my acquaintances at other institutions, who envy me my opportunity to pursue my own interests among miles of stacks filled with the books I love. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” as Jake Barnes remarks somewhere or other.

I don’t suppose that any of them ever believes me when I say that, during my first five years as a rare book librarian, I looked up exactly two references for my own scholarly use. In fact, they were the same reference, from John Harington’s 1591 translation of Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso. I looked it up once when I was writing whatever I was writing, and once again to check my reference when I was proofing the galleys. Fortunately: for, first time around, I’d got the reference wrong.

If my days are not spent dipping my head into the scholarly trough, what, then, do I do? This is a question I have often asked myself. I have chosen one day—October 24th, 1985—to recall, as best I can, for your edification.

II.

I woke up a bit before seven, shaved, showered, ate breakfast, and drove off to pick up some books from a suburban donor. I spent the time from 9:45 till a bit after noon choosing from among the donor’s books. Then, with a chauffeur’s help, I loaded some of them into my car during a light rain.

Back at Penn, I parked in a borrowed space behind the Library and brought the books up to the sixth floor with the help of a colleague returning from lunch.
as I arrived. Because I had to thank the donor and arrange for appraisal of the
gift, I asked a student assistant to begin listing the books. I would then have for­
gotten about them but for the unanticipated arrival of the Chair of my Library’s
Friends group, a friend of the donor’s family. She wanted to see the books; she
also wanted to go to lunch. I hadn’t planned on such a lunch. But I am a good
boy, and so I went, taking along a member of my staff who had not yet met our
Friends’s Chair socially.

Lunch took about an hour longer than the sandwich I’d have sent out for.
Back at my office, I found my door littered with little pink message slips: I had
received phone calls while away. I had, for instance, to call the librarian at The
Lewis Walpole Library in Farmington, Connecticut—a branch of the Yale Uni­
versity Libraries—about some ex-Walpoles that had turned up at Penn. We
were on the verge of trading them to Farmington for non-Walpole copies of the
same books, and I had to make arrangements to get them to Yale, along with a
supposed ex-Walpole book from a neighboring library, whose Curator I also had
to call.

There were other messages and mail, as well. I shuffled through them as
best I could. Most I did not get to. The building supervisor showed up—twice—
to talk about one thing or another. I got to ponder a budget which we were writ­
ing as part of a grant application. I spent about five minutes typing an expense
account and enclosing receipts to cover reimbursement for a trip to New York. I
got a call from a colleague at Brown asking when I could meet with him and two
other colleagues in New York about a conference the four of us are planning for
1987. None of us was going to be free for the better part of the coming month.

Finished with him, I spoke with another person on his staff about the needs
of a genealogist who had approached Brown for an early American manuscript
which Penn owns. I agreed that she could use our manuscript, and he promised
to tell her so.

Most of the letters in my mail that afternoon didn’t get read; most of the
junk didn’t get tossed. I did manage to distribute that day’s batch of booksellers’
catalogues to my colleagues: it is useful to have someone read them while they
are still fresh.

It was now 4:30. I left to attend the opening at a neighboring institution of
an exhibition to which we had loaned several items. I took a colleague with me.
At the exhibition I met several people from our own Friends group, including
several donors, and I spoke with as many of them as I could, while trying not to
neglect the people who had mounted the show, other librarians who, like me,
were visitors from neighboring institutions, or my own colleague. The opening
lasted till eight, but my colleague and I lasted only till six. We returned to “my”
parking spot behind our Library, for we, too, had an event that night.

The Philadelphia area Penn alumnae held their monthly meeting that eve-
ning at the Library. One of its attractions was to be a visit to Special Collections. While I had visited our suburban donor and the neighboring institution’s exhibition, my colleagues had pulled a number of obvious objects for us to speak about: a Shakespeare First Folio; Audubon’s *Birds of America*; a copy of Martyn’s *English Entomologist* lacking all of the plates but noteworthy nonetheless since it comes from the library of William Beckford and contains, instead of the plates, the original watercolors from which the plates were allegedly made; a letter from Thomas Jefferson on the occasion of Benjamin Franklin’s death; a manuscript poem on women by Elizabeth Barrett Browning; and other more or less similar stuff. We had to set it all up in preparation for the group’s scheduled seven o’clock arrival.

However, they didn’t arrive at seven. They were half an hour late and arrived bearing food which they insisted on eating before their tour. Their delay gave us a chance to pull some additional materials which seemed likely to interest the people whom we were now seeing for the first time. But their delay also forced my colleague, who had a train to catch, to leave before she got to speak; she had cancelled a dinner invitation in order to stay at Penn that evening. I spoke for her as well as for myself. And then, after the group had left, put the books away and cleaned up the space in which it had met.

I got home towards eleven. I looked at the *Times* and, since it had recently resumed publication following a strike, the *Inquirer*. I ate some sopressata and a yogurt; I’d had no supper, and this was it. I peeked at my children. They were sleeping. I spoke with my wife. Somewhere around midnight, I went to sleep.

Let me make a few quick points about the day I’ve just described. One thing that may not be obvious is that my attendance at both the donor’s home and the exhibition represents work. These are not occasions when one walks up to a bookcase and sweeps everything in sight into a large sack, or says hello to a few folk and runs for the hors d’oeuvres and bourbon. Along with the donor were a daughter-in-law, who is a member of the Council of my Library’s Friends group, a grandson, and a sister. At the opening, I met both our Friends and people who might become my Library’s Friends. One person I saw is already one of our donors, as well as an eminent member of Penn’s faculty. He remarked that he’d expected to see me there. If Woody Allen is right that ninety percent of success consists in just showing up, then I am glad he did see me: he thinks of me as “active,” which he clearly values, and it is therefore important for my Library that I live up to his expectations. One must always be ready to talk graciously—and, if possible, amusingly—about topics that may or may not be of interest, to people whom one may or may not ever see again. This is not the sort of work for which a library school education prepares one.
When I parked behind my Library after returning from the donor and, later, from the exhibition, I was parking illegally in a space that is not mine. Here is another small lesson that no one ever taught me in library school: make friends with your building administrator. If it is raining, and you want to park in a space that is not yours, and will need help in getting cartons of books upstairs—or if you just need lightbulbs changed, or toilet paper for the restrooms on your floor—a friendly staff may be more valuable than a foundation grant.

I involved several colleagues in most of my activities on the day I have described. Development and promotion of one's staff is the ongoing responsibility of any librarian. Today's employee may be tomorrow's opposite number—and should be, if you have done your hiring well—and she will remember if you have helped or hindered her advancement. Better, then, to help. Better for you right now, in fact: the better your staff look, the better you look. My staff all look better than I do. As much as possible, I want them participating in the meetings I go to: they keep more details in their heads than I can, and always save me from my own vast ignorance.

The matter of a trade of books with Farmington deserves special mention. While it is worthwhile to cooperate with one's colleagues, it is worth remembering that cooperation with other institutions is also not a bad idea. A bookseller has privately berated me for letting Yale have Penn books that, because of their provenance, are worth more than the books we got in exchange. I have, he thinks, failed in my fiduciary responsibilities to my institution. But in fact our books belong at Farmington, where Walpole's library is, as far as possible, being reconstructed; Penn needs the texts, but not this particular provenance. My directors had the option of asking Yale to pay for the difference between our ex-Walpole and their non-Walpole copies of these books, and to pay for their respective appraisals, as well; I am glad they didn't take that option. It might have made the matter so complicated that Yale would merely have marked its copy of Hazen to indicate that these books were at Penn, and that would have been that.

Libraries are not booksellers. We support serious scholarship, generally at our own expense. It is not our role in life to turn a profit. All this, by the way, is an issue that had been considered for a long time before my October 24th phone call to Farmington—since 1982, in fact. Libraries move with a kind of ponderous grace when they move at all; the events of any one day are more often than not the results of events on many other days.

One last point. After the alumnae group finished its visit, who put back the Audubon by himself? Lugging Audubons around is a fine substitute for visiting a Nautilus exercise machine. And who returned the reading room chairs and tables to their proper positions for the next day's readers? And who was never told in library school about the work-related benefits of a strong back?
And that's it. A Day in the Life. The bulk of my work on October 24th had nothing to do with what most people may suppose rare book librarians do, and bore almost no resemblance to what my library school education had led me to expect of a career in rare book librarianship. My day certainly included nothing that could be called “research” by even the most generous of definitions.

Of course, everybody has such days on occasion. Surely this one was not typical.

But my point is that this day was precisely typical—except for the fact that, during it, I got to look at some books when I was at our donor’s house. Precious little of most of my days has anything to do with books.

My day was spent, in case I have to make this explicit, talking to people, in person, over the phone, or in writing, while trying to keep my staff as unencumbered as possible so that some of my department’s work might get done. It’s dirty work, there’s a lot of it, and somebody has to do it. My job is administration, making a place work—or, if not that, then at least making a place give the impression that it works.

That is my job. I get paid to talk. To talk, to impress, to let my staff work with our books, our manuscripts, and our readers (all tasks I used to love doing myself) without being burdened by the demands of all the people to whom I talk for them. Make us look respectable. Give the world—or that stunningly tiny portion of it which might, for a brief moment, care—the feeling that, at Penn, those folks in rare books know what they’re doing.

It’s not quite so simple as it sounds. To be fair, my job does involve something more than just the talk to which I referred exaggeratedly above. But for most of it, nothing in my library schooling prepared me, any more than it prepared me for the reality of my typical day.

Do we know what we’re doing? Beats me. We collect books and manuscripts in a variety of areas. We hope they’re appropriate, although they get such little use that, nine cases out of ten, we never find out. We try to make them as accessible as possible. We encourage readers to come make use of them. Our rule of thumb is simple: if it walks, talks, and doesn’t smell too bad, it can be issued a book or a manuscript. This laxity doesn’t help much: we still don’t get many readers. Maybe that’s not so bad. In a world in which all of the historical humanities are in trouble, it’s surely not our fault.

But while it’s not our fault, it is our problem. In fact, it’s my problem. For better or worse, I care about my institution’s books, about collecting and caring for the materials with which scholars may advance knowledge in a variety of
disciplines, and about seeing that they get used in ways that will justify our expensive existence to the people who pay for my department and its bills. These are all matters I learned to care about in library school, matters that my background had already prepared me to care about. They’re what make my job different from managing the inventory in Filene’s basement, apart from being less well paid.

But it’s a problem about which I do almost nothing. What I do do isn’t too terribly different from managing the inventory in Filene’s basement. I worry about what—and what not—to purchase for our collections. And how to pay for what we buy. Or I worry about dealing with donors.

I worry about staff members. They get colds, retire, have accidents or family problems. I have to worry about them, if for no other reason than that our work and their vacation schedules may be affected. My job demands no more by way of human concern, though if I feel that, too, then maybe I collect points with Heaven.

I worry about water leaks; the possibility that use of my department’s facilities for luncheons or dinners will bring us vermin who like to eat what we like to eat but who will settle, in extremis, for books and papers; payroll forms; new online catalogues and the ways in which our collections are represented in them; publication projects that involve our holdings; new shelving; organizing manuscript collection data; staff development, evaluation, raises, promotions; supervision of student assistants; reading room regulations; photocopying prices and restrictions; conservation; exhibitions and the reconstruction of exhibition space; annual reports; Friends of the Library newsletters, events, and fundraising appeals; an annual series of bibliographical lectures run by my Library; book funds; insurance; security installations; and departmental and library-wide meetings on a variety of issues.

Of course, I don’t do most of these things. My life is spent in avoiding work. My staff does them. But I do worry about them. Occasionally, I even have to lift, carry, hew, and haul, or stand back as my four female colleagues do these things, living in hope that ruptures are a sex-linked health hazard.

I worry, in short, about keeping the collections for which I am responsible running for the benefit of the scholars whose research and publications justify the enterprise. Not my research—theirs. It’s a service profession, as the name of the library school I attended—Columbia University’s School of Library Service—reminds us.

And these are the matters that occupy my days. There are other librarians, in and out of special collections, who must dispose of twenty-four hours more cleverly than I. I admire my colleague, at another institution, who writes about paper history. Another has made herself expert on the history of book illustration techniques. A third is a leading incunabulist. A fourth knows more about early
American bookbinding than anyone. A fifth studies Mathew Carey. A sixth thinks Very Big Thoughts about the nature of The Book.

I don't do these things. I think small thoughts. When I have time to think. That's not as frequent as I wish. But my guess is that, for most people in this field, thought and the time it requires are luxuries beyond price. One result is that not enough people know about the resources in our care.

My staff and I care for approximately a hundred and fifty thousand printed books, many hundred of thousands (if not millions) of pieces of paper, and about four to five thousand readers a year. We are four-and-one-half professionals, assisted by two-fifths of a secretary and approximately two FTE student assistants during the fall and spring semesters and an additional two or so FTE students during the summer. I wish we did research. But the amount of work we have just keeping up—or trying to keep up—with what must be done day in and day out to keep abreast of our readers and the requirements of our collections for improved access, improved environment, improved security, and continued growth precludes much by way of spare time for research. We may receive relatively few readers—but even though I didn't see one of them on October 24th, my day was more than filled by work intended to serve readers.

Rare books librarianship—“research librarianship,” as popularly conceived—sounds like a fine field and an exciting one. I admire my colleagues in it, and I remain grateful both for the training I received which prepared me to enter this field and for the generosity of spirit which has permitted several people to think me fit to romp in it, too. But, on many days, I am far from certain that it is the field I am in. Or even one that exists.

IV.

In 1954, J. H. Hexter's essay, "The Historian and His Day," appeared in the Political Science Quarterly, later to be reprinted in his book, Reappraisals in History, first published in 1961. In preparing this essay, I have borne Hexter's in mind. From it, I have taken my title, slightly modified to rid it of the stench—unconscious, I devoutly hope—of sexism with which it was originally tainted.

Hexter contrasts two schools of thought about history prevalent when he wrote. The first he called "present-minded." Its advocates are "realists" who "recognize that every generation reinterprets the past in terms of the exigencies of its own day." The second school he called "history-minded": "idealists," they argue that we ought "not to intrude our contemporary value systems and preconceptions and notions into our reconstruction of the past" and that is the historian's duty "to understand the past in its terms, not our own."

Just as Hexter contrasted two views of historiography in his essay, I have
been contrasting two views of rare books librarianship, less explicitly than he, I confess. One view is “idealistic.” It is the view of the high calling that special collections, or research, librarianship represents, and it has a generally unarticulated corollary that the practice of special collections librarianship reflects the high nature of the calling. The other view is “realistic” and it is the view implicit in the description I have offered of my job and its typical day.

Hexter ends his essay by pointing out that neither the present- nor the history-minded view of the historian’s calling is adequate. Both viewpoints reflect aspects of historical practice that any historian who takes seriously what he or she is about must engage. I fear that I have no similar reconciliation to propose, even though I value the calling of special collections librarianship highly while also understanding the compelling necessities that underlie at least my own experience of its daily practice.

It may not be true at all research libraries, but it is, I think, true at most that special collections are understaffed as well as underfinanced. They must be, if libraries are to pay for the services which the vast majority of their users require. There is no parity between a few thousand readers a year and several thousand readers a day. No arguments based on a notion of the relative “quality” of readership—a quality I for one would hesitate to measure, having experienced more than my share of lousy scholarship, and written some of it, too—will make this disparity disappear.

Understaffing and underfinancing mean more work per person for the people who staff special collections. If these people believe (as my colleagues and I believe) in the importance of their collections to scholars seeking to advance knowledge, and if they take their work to mean keeping their institutions open, growing, and reasonably well-administered, then the amount of research they do is going to be pretty small.

This is true at Penn, whose collections are much more important, much richer, and, so far as I can tell, much less well-studied than most people realize, and where my colleagues, at least, are well-prepared properly to value and study our holdings. The four of them hold at least eleven degrees, with one more of which I am aware in progress, and it is my well-founded impression that, between them, my colleagues know something about a large number of topics. But they don’t do much research even in our own holdings or on topics in their areas of special expertise: mostly, they try to keep their heads (and mine) above water. That alone proves to be a moderately time-consuming task; I certainly hope that our readers would agree that it is an important one.

Moreover, librarianship is, at all levels, an administrative field. Because its salaries are notoriously inadequate, it forces people to seek increasingly responsible (and therefore time-consuming) administrative positions simply so that they may feed themselves and their families without too much deprivation. Most li-
library administrators I know do not have the time to add to the history of books, printing, and libraries or to create bibliographies that open up new fields of study; these are not issues we think about. Nor, quite simply, are they our jobs. The decent administration of a library is an important job: it is worth doing well. I know very few people who have taken on administrative duties who do not feel strongly that, however distant such duties may be from what they set out to accomplish in a field, administration both deserves and requires one's whole-hearted attention.

Yet both traditional bibliography (in the manner of Greg, McKerrow, Bowers, and Tanselle) and the new histoire du livre (Martin, Darnton, and Eisenstein) will suffer if practicing librarians do not contribute the expertise gained in their quotidian workaday experience with older books and manuscripts. And those scholars who require the resources of special collections will suffer if not served by staff able to interpret complex, closed-stack collections on the basis of extensive knowledge of and familiarity with their collections—knowledge which current conditions rarely permit them to acquire. The kind of person most attracted to and best prepared for work in a special collection will chafe if this sort of research is impossible. I suspect that it very nearly is.

Not quite. But very nearly. Some institutions are so rich that they have staffs numerous enough for some to pursue scholarly investigation of their own collections. Others are so terrifyingly underutilized that their staff do research because they face few other demands for their attention. People need and like to work, as well as to love, as Freud knew.

But most institutions are neither rich nor terribly underutilized. They are used just heavily enough to keep staff hopping, and financed just badly enough so that any research which staff manages is minute—or done in whatever passes for "free time." This is a loss not only of the talents of the staff. It is also damaging, finally, to the morale of a good staff. And, perhaps most important, it puts an effective damper on the investigation and dissemination of important and useful information about books, publishers, libraries, and collections from which the entire world of historical scholarship might benefit—and benefit in a very high degree.

I wrote about this matter in a different context some years ago, querying a few so-called "research librarians" about the amount of research they actually do, and then counting, as well, the contributions published by librarians in several bibliographical journals. The results of that informal survey were not encouraging. By most measures, American rare book and manuscript collections present an impressive picture. Well-stocked, increasingly well-staffed, and well-administered, they are far easier to use and far more responsive to their society and its needs than many of their European counterparts. They are not for these reasons altogether happy places, however.
I may be wrong, but it seems to me that both scholars and rare book libraries need “research librarians.” Libraries like Penn’s—like many of Philadelphia’s libraries, for that matter, which together constitute one of the great unknown scholarly resources of this country—deserve the public attention which the studies of research-oriented staff could bring them. Right now, several Philadelphia area libraries, supported by an imaginative grant from The Pew Memorial Trust, are preparing an exhibition scheduled for 1988 of this region’s rare books and manuscripts. Such exhibitions are welcome. But they will not be enough. Flash is better than nothing, to be sure. But despite the endeavors of one of the flashiest librarians in Philadelphia’s history, and numerous brilliant exhibitions, one of the greatest American research libraries remains underutilized and underappreciated in its own hometown; even Edwin Wolf could, more or less singlehandedly, do only so much to spread the news of The Library Company—just as, a bit further west, Rudolf Hirsch could, more or less singlehandedly, do only so much to spread the news of Penn.

One could conclude by remarking that rare book librarianship is, after all, not a field of high romance; it is a job. It is not a field which requires scholarship, and obviously it does not always, within working hours, leave scholarship much scope—though, goodness knows, scholarship will never hurt. It is a job in which one performs crucial services for other scholars—and for very few even of them.

But our great libraries will never be as well-used as their resources cry out for them to be till we return a bit of high romance to their staffing. That means, I think, finding ways to support staff research in their collections. Training for special collections librarians needs a clearer definition of “research librarianship.” The expectations of those who enter the field will be constantly disappointed by reality if its daily necessities are not more realistically emphasized.

Not until I started to work in a research library did anyone breathe a word of that reality to me. Ninety percent of librarianship, I was told by a man who gave me a drawer full of catalogue cards, involves filing. You might as well find out now if you like it.·

*This essay was originally presented in somewhat different form before audiences at Columbia University’s School of Library Service (1985) and the Franklin Inn Club, Philadelphia (1986). I am grateful to Terry Belanger and David Holmes for the invitations which gave me the occasion to write it. I have not tried completely to efface the evidence of its original oral delivery. I want to thank my colleague, Kathleen Reed (Special Collections, Van Pelt Library), for the critical care with which she read earlier versions of this text.
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