Collectors and Libraries: Some Studies in Symbiosis

NICHOLAS A. BASBANES

On May 17, 1904, a four-year-old boy stood quietly at the dedication of a library his late father had decreed should be built and turned over to Brown University in Rhode Island. “A child bearing the name of his honored father has presented to you the keys of this building,” Robert Hale Ives Goddard declared on the youngster’s behalf: “No words of mine can add to the dignity or to the pathos with which this simple ceremony is invested. Enclosed within these walls is a matchless collection—the harvest of centuries of learning and of historical research. The books which here have their abiding home will be an enduring monument to the patience, the scholarship and the enthusiasm for historical study of John Carter Brown and John Nicholas Brown—father and son. To the venerable University over which you preside, we entrust the treasures garnered around us.”

The John Carter Brown Library was a gift from Rhode Island’s most prominent family, though much more than old Yankee money was required to make it a reality, as Frederick Jackson Turner emphasized later that morning in his dedication address. “No one but the collector who sends his agents far and wide with eager eye for the spoils of famous libraries brought to the auction-block and for stray wanderers in old shops, and who knows how keen and sharp was the contest for possession of each of these gems, can appreciate what it meant to bring together into such a noble assembly this elite of the original sources with all the dignity upon them.”

Two men, in short, a father and his son, had collected wisely and well, and posterity was served in the process. When Theodore C. Blegen spoke at the dedication of the James Ford Bell Collection at the University of Minnesota in 1953, he paid special tribute to “the zeal and knowledge of private collectors who, looking to horizons beyond the rewarding personal satisfactions of collecting, have made contributions of inestimable value to scholarship.” One of the major issues facing special collection librarians is the relationship of their libraries with private collectors, especially ones who have amassed major holdings on particular subjects. These collections existed originally to satisfy the passions of those who assembled them. But the collectors are mortal, and many of them see their holdings as their way to achieve one measure of immortality.

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Some collections, like those of Hoe and Streeter, Manney, and Doheny, while main­tained for a time as unified entities, may eventually make their way to the auction market, to be dispersed like gold beat to airy thinness. Others are destined to be kept together for a variety of reasons, and will wind up in institutions, either through the generosity of the collector or his heirs, or through purchase.

Over a four-year period I have done extensive research, traveling throughout the country interviewing booksellers, collectors, and librarians to learn about the collecting habits of the country’s more prominent collectors and the relationships they had with libraries. My book forthcoming, A Gentle Madness, based on these interviews and my research at public and private libraries, documents the symbiosis between these two parties. The following case histories, most appearing for the first time in print, may serve as models for this symbiosis. What do collectors want to do with their lovingly gathered libraries? How may special collections and development librarians deal with collectors to help them build their collections, and to show them the utility, the practicality, the social benefit inherent in giving their collections to institutions—or at least selling them intact to institutions with no strings attached? This last issue is worth dealing with separately. Too often a library, to acquire a choice collection, must give in to the whims of a donor. The whims may be as innocuous as keeping the collection together as a unit, which could pose a problem, but not an insurmountable one; they may be somewhat more stringent, such as keeping the collection sealed for 25 years; or they may be practically unreasonable, like keeping fresh flowers and the collector’s portrait in front of the collection to perpetuity. At what point does a library accept such strings? At what point does it let the collection go?

The illustration I began this essay with, however, benefitted Brown University immeasurably. It was a case of keen and affluent collectors amassing remarkable libraries and, with their generosity, foresight, and appreciation of education, helping an institution to perform its didactic function.

Time and time again, the pattern has been repeated, and each time an institutional library has been the beneficiary. More often than not, what prospective donors seek is not money, but a secure place to deposit their treasures. In some instances, a bit of coaxing is necessary—the University of Texas at Austin has named nineteen rooms for benefactors who chose the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center as permanent home for their treasures—but such a cost seems modest for what is received in return. Even though special attention like this often is required, more significant, it seems, is the sense of validation collectors secure for their achievement, recognition that their often frenzied efforts have been worthy of eternal preservation. It is for this reason that it is incumbent on special collections librarians to let potential donors know of the significant impact the collectors’ libraries will have on the institutional holdings. And institutions should be willing to flex to accommodate a donor. Simply by putting a name on a room, putting a plaque up on a wall, or somehow keeping the donated collection intact (though possibly a problem) might be all that is needed to secure the donation.
John Hill Burton perceived a basic trait among collectors in his classic nineteenth-century work, *The Book-Hunter*: “It is the general ambition of the class to find value where there seems to be none, and this develops a certain skill and subtlety, enabling the operator, in the midst of a heap of rubbish, to put his finger on those things which have in them the latent capacity to become valuable and curious.”

The late A.S.W. Rosenbach of Philadelphia, the twentieth century’s best known bookseller and a noted collector in his own right, described the symbiosis that exists between libraries and collectors more pointedly: “It is a wonderful and magnificent thing that the gathering of books in this country is in the hands of leaders of her industries, the so-called business kings, and not in the hands of college professors and great scholars,” he wrote in *Books and Bidders*. “It is paradoxical, but true, that not a single great library in the world has been formed by a great scholar.”

While preservation and the service of scholarship are happy consequences of collecting, they by no means are the only driving forces. Other factors are involved, and because so many of them involve human nature, they defy a simple explanation. “I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is a rebirth,” the German critic Walter Benjamin wrote. “This is the childlike element which in a collector mingles with the element of old age.” One of the greatest incentives that a collector can have in deciding to give his books to an institution is seeing that the library (specifically the special collections librarian) has the same enthusiasm and appreciation for the collection that the collector has.

Clifton Waller Barrett, builder of an extraordinary collection of American literature now at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, described in a 1950 speech to the Bibliographical Society of America the nature of what he called *genus Collector*: “First of all, he must be distinguished by his rapacity. If he does not covet and is not prepared to seize and fight for every binding, every issue and every state of every book that falls even remotely within the range of his particular bibliomania, treat him as the lawful fisherman treats a nine-inch bass; throw him back—he is only an insignificant and colorless offshoot of the true parent stock.” If the librarians seeking the donation can show that their own sense of rapacity matches that of the rapacious collectors, the latter will know that their books and manuscripts will be in covetous and protective hands. But the librarian must be tactful and be careful not to offend by seeming to be ravenous at the expense of the collectors’ feelings.

Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis was once described in a *New Yorker* profile as an American country squire “with chiseled features, English clothes, an authoritative air, an inquiring, skeptical eye, a cultivated and witty conversational style, a collector’s mania, a flawless worldly charm, independent means, and a strong sense of scholarship.” Lewis devoted his adult life to securing every available scrap of material and artifact even remotely related to the eighteenth-century writer Horace Walpole, youngest son of Robert Walpole and the author of thousands of diverting letters. Ultimately he claimed ownership of 2,500 letters written by his life-long hero.
“Lefty” Lewis assimilated his subject so completely that he named his house in Farmington, Connecticut, the Lewis-Walpole Library, and furnished it with tableware, lamps, artwork, and jewelry that once graced Walpole’s Strawberry Hill home in England. He also underwrote and edited the Yale edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence, a mammoth project that consumed 47 years of his life and filled 48 volumes. When Lewis died in 1979, his large colonial home was given to Yale, with the stipulation that his library be maintained there intact. Maintaining a separate building could be something of a financial burden on the library. Curators should encourage such donors to accompany the gift with a cash endowment to maintain the collection. Keeping a large gift separate within the larger library holdings could pose a serious problem, one that the donor and curator should work out thoroughly before the institution accepts the gift.

In books with such titles as Collector’s Progress, One Man’s Education, and Horace Walpole’s Library, Lewis wrote about his obsession, yet his most penetrating statement of purpose came in a passage he wrote for a speech that was never delivered. It is preserved among his papers, and includes this observation: “The loyalty of collectors draws them to each other; they are a fraternity joined by bonds stronger than their vows, the bonds of shared vanity and the ridicule of non-collectors. Collectors appear to non-collectors as selfish, rapacious, and half-mad, which is what collectors frequently are, but they may also be enlightened, generous, and benefactors of society, which is the way they like to see themselves. Mad or sane, they salvage civilization.” Librarians should let their benefactors know they understand this.

David Kirschenbaum, founder of the Carnegie Book Shop in 1926, claims to have attended every major New York book auction over an 80-year period, starting with the concluding sessions of the Robert Hoe sale in 1912 where he worked as a runner, and continuing without interruption through the Richard Manney sale in October of 1991, where, at the age of 98, he bid on a number of small lots. Since founding the Carnegie Book Shop, Kirschenbaum has served many notable collectors and institutions. I talked with him at length one day about his eight decades in the book trade. At one point, he recalled a morning in the late 1950s when one of his best customers asked him to find a new home for an exceptional library he had spent many years building.

“The man’s name was DeCoursey Fales and he was the president of a big bank here in New York,” Kirschenbaum said. “He had a great collection of English literature, just wonderful material. He collected everything—first editions, translations, criticism, pamphlets, broadsides, hundreds of letters—if something had anything at all to do with the people he liked, he bought it. And he loved the stuff, he was nuts about it. So one day he comes into my office and says he needs to talk to me. You have to understand that he had thousands of things in his house, thousands and thousands, the place was just splitting apart. And he says, ‘Dave, I have a problem; my wife tells me she can’t take it anymore. Either the books go or I go. What am I going to do?’”
The problem was that while Fales wanted to satisfy his wife's demand for uncluttered living space, he also wanted to maintain continued access to his beloved material. Kirschenbaum proposed finding a local institution willing to accept his collection with the stipulation that adequate quarters be provided to keep it intact. "Everybody in New York wanted the collection, but nobody wanted to give him a room of his own," Kirschenbaum said. "I finally went over to New York University and the president there told me on the spot that he wanted the collection. 'I think we can do something,' he said. We got three rooms on Fifth Avenue and 8th Street. We moved the stuff in there, and later we moved it to a bigger place in Washington Square. Ask them over at NYU what they had in special collections before DeCoursey Fales came along. They didn't have anything." 10

Frank Walker, curator of rare books at the Fales Library at New York University, confirmed Kirschenbaum's story in every respect. "DeCoursey Fales is remembered as a totally selfless man around here," Walker said. "He named the library in memory of his father, Haliburton Fales, not himself, and when he gave us the books, he came along with them as the unpaid librarian. He worked here without compensation until he died in 1966, and he single-handedly built the collection up to where it was four times larger than when he brought it in. And once the Fales material was here, other people began giving us material. Before he came along, NYU did not have much of anything in special collections. We were never able to compete with the New York Public Library or the Pierpont Morgan or Columbia or the New York Historical Society. A university could not ask for a better benefactor than DeCoursey Fales." 11 Great collections, for obvious reasons, draw to themselves gifts to magnify their holdings. Not only did Fales give NYU a great collection, he also gave them a patina, a reputation, which will help potential donors to show their own generosity to the institution. This might be a factor for curators when they are deciding to accept or reject a gift.

Carlton Lake has held the title of executive curator at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC) at the University of Texas since 1980, a position that pays him a respectable salary and confers considerable stature in the academic world. But when he moved to Austin from Massachusetts in 1969, he did so on a pro bono basis. "Actually, I got paid a dollar a year back then," Lake said one February morning in his office, a cozy cubicle dominated by a large bronze head of Picasso.

Though he had pursued a number of promising careers—from 1950 to 1965 he was the Paris art critic for the Christian Science Monitor and wrote for several magazines, including the New Yorker and the Atlantic Monthly—Lake's primary interest was always his collecting. "You enter that world, and once you're in it, you can't get out," he said. "The truth of the matter is that you don't want to get out. I am convinced that it gets into your bloodstream." 12

Born, as he described it, into a family of New England merchants, Lake graduated from Boston University in 1936 with the idea of teaching romance languages and literature at some small, respectable college. Lake began by collecting modern poets,
essayists, and novelists, but he quickly developed a particular enthusiasm for the nineteenth-century French writers, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé among them.

After more than thirty years of purposeful collecting, Lake found himself in a quandary. “I gradually came to the idea that because so much of my material was unique—the volume of correspondence and manuscripts was just tremendous—that it should be kept together somewhere as a resource for scholars.” At the same time, he continued, “the sheer quantity of the whole thing was becoming impossible to deal with. Not only was my apartment in Paris full, I had a large safe at the Place Vendôme where I kept some of the more precious pieces. And it was no different back in Massachusetts. My house in Chestnut Hill had every room overflowing, and I had a walk-in vault in Boston.”

Stories about the Humanities Research Center, meanwhile, continued to be the talk of book circles, and even though Lake was a Massachusetts native, Boston University graduate, and admitted “Eastern snob,” he looked toward Austin as a possible home for his collection of a quarter-million pieces. “Texas was very strong in modern British and American material, but their French holdings for the same period were nothing to shout about,” he said. “It seemed like a natural place for my collection to go.”

A friend then teaching at Texas put Lake in touch with Harry H. Ransom, chancellor of the university, and an agreement was quickly reached in 1969. Money was involved, but Lake said he agreed to sell the collection for a fraction of its market value because he was happy to see it get a permanent home.

Once Lake agreed to the deal, Ransom presented him with another offer. “I hope you will not consider my further suggestion either as an impertinence or an imposition,” he wrote. “I should like to nominate you as lifetime Curator of these collections,” and concluded his proposition with the most seductive compliment of all: “More important, perhaps, is the fact that visibility of a wise and agile collector is educative among both young students and mature scholars who use the Center.”

For six years Lake worked as a “dollar-a-year” consultant, and in 1975 he assumed the position of “Lifetime Executive Curator” at the HRC. “The job was not part of the agreement,” he said. “I had made no stipulations. I was trusting. I did not even demand that it be called the Carlton Lake Collection. I just wanted it to be kept together. At the same time, I must say in all candor that Harry Ransom was like nobody else. He could charm a bird right off the branch. He made people feel wonderful. If you want the truth, he made people feel greater than they really were.”

Beyond securing the inestimable services of the person who knew the collection best—the collector himself—Ransom also insured that there would be continued growth. “I have been accused of acting as if the collection is still mine,” Lake said, partly because he kept adding to it at his own expense long after he had turned it over to the University of Texas. A good library director or curator, sensitive to the psychological needs of donors, can make attractive offers, create appealing administrative titles (Lifetime Executive Curator, for example), and show respect for a collection, all of which will convince donors that their books and manuscripts are going to the right place.
On June 1, 1983, the New York Times reported the “discovery” of an obscure but significant narrative written around 1925 by William Faulkner, a fragment of fiction that is believed to have shaped themes and characters later embodied in the Snopes Family Trilogy. Described by textual editor James B. Meriwether as “the brilliant beginning” of an unfinished novel, the 24 pages of holograph manuscript had been overlooked by literary scholars for years, largely because it was not in any of the primary Faulkner repositories maintained at several American universities, nor owned by any of the leading private collectors who specialize in the life and works of the great Mississippi writer.

Instead, Father Abraham had turned up in the Arents Collection at the New York Public Library, and it was there because of one passage which appears early in the manuscript; Faulkner describe’s Uncle Flem as a man who “chews tobacco constantly and steadily and slowly, and no one ever saw his eyelids closed.”

George Arents, Jr. was a prominent New Yorker whose personal fortune derived, not surprisingly, from the tobacco industry. The Arents’s family business was merged with the American Tobacco Company, and George Jr. founded the American Machinery and Foundry Company—now AMF—which developed systems for the mass production of cigars. As a collector, Arents sought to document every conceivable aspect of his lucrative livelihood, including the history, folklore, and literature of the tobacco plant. He gathered material that detailed cultivation of the crop and the marketing of its products, and he included every published argument he could find that favored or opposed its use. In addition to books, manuscripts, periodicals, pamphlets, drawings, prints, and sketches, Arents also acquired more than 125,000 cigarette cards, all of which he turned over to the New York Public Library in 1943, along with a generous endowment that provided for special rooms, a permanent staff, preparation of bibliographies, and continued additions to the holdings. The Father Abraham manuscript, in fact, was purchased by the fund from New York bookseller Philip C. Duschenes in 1953, ten years after Arents deposited the collection.

Bernard McTigue, former Keeper of Rare Books at the New York Public Library and now Chairman of the Department of Special Collections at the University of Florida, said the Arents Collection is something that “only an obsessed amateur” could ever possibly have imagined, let alone assembled. “Institutional libraries would not exist as we know them if it were not for private collectors like George Arents, James Lenox, the Berg brothers, Arthur Alfonso Schomburg, Mary Stillman Harkness, Florence Blumenthal, and all the others you see represented here,” McTigue explained one afternoon as he guided me through an exhibition he curated in the fall of 1990 called “In Praise of Collectors: Historic Gifts to the New York Public Library.”

“Private collectors have always been the people who put the pieces together,” McTigue explained. “It is their passion that builds these collections, along with their energy, their resources, and their expertise. They do all the work, and when everything is complete—and if we’re lucky—they turn it over to us intact.”
Shortly after observing his seventieth birthday in 1989, Chef Louis I. Szathmary II closed his popular restaurant on Chicago's Near North Side. The time had come, he decided, to "take care of the books." Since several hundred thousand items were involved, completing the massive series of benefactions he had started a few years earlier to half-a-dozen institutions scattered throughout the United States was a task that demanded his full attention.

For 26 years, Szathmary owned the Bakery Restaurant, an unpretentious storefront eatery near Lincoln Park that Gourmet magazine declared a "gastronomic landmark" when it closed for good.19 A heavy-set man with a generous face and large bushy mustache, Chef Louis, as he prefers to be called, speaks in heavily accented but precisely phrased English. When I first met the man, he was puttering about a cavernous warehouse in Providence, Rhode Island, completely at ease and very much at home. Sitting behind the same old wooden desk he used in Chicago, and surrounded by many familiar books and trinkets, Szathmary was supervising the installation of 200,000 assorted items from a collection he recently had shipped to Johnson & Wales University, which claims to be the world's largest school devoted to the food and service industry, and where he enjoys the unofficial title of Chef Laureate. "This will be a museum," he said with pride. "And it will be the best of its kind anywhere."20

Thirteen hundred miles away, meanwhile, another segment of his collection, some 22,000 items comprising rare cookbooks, scarce pamphlets, and unique manuscripts spanning five centuries of culinary art already was installed at the University of Iowa Library, while in his adopted city, 12,000 volumes devoted entirely to what is called Hungarology were being accessioned at the University of Chicago's Joseph Regenstein Library. Gifts to other institutions were being finalized as well: a collection of several thousand menus to the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, 10,000 books of Hungarian literature to Indiana University, and a small but precious collection of Franz Liszt letters to Boston University.

I learned about this unusual man indirectly. Shortly after Stephen Blumberg was arrested in 1990 for plundering more than 340 institutions of rare books over a twenty-year spree, I talked to David Schoonover of the University of Iowa, the first rare book specialist asked by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to look at the cache of books in the Ottumwa, Iowa, house where they had been kept.

After telling me what he knew about Blumberg, Schoonover mentioned an "amazing collector from Chicago" who recently had presented the University of Iowa Library with what "is one of the very finest cookbook collections you are going to find anywhere. Overnight we have become a major research center in the culinary arts." The collection had many "wonderful things," Schoonover continued, some of them going back several centuries. He cited the first printed tableside "trencherbooks," or guides to cutting meat, in Spanish, Italian, German, and French as four examples. There was, moreover, a cookbook in typescript that Nelson Algren had written for the Federal Writers Project during the Depression, which the University of Iowa Press published in 1992 as part of a project called the Iowa Szathmary Culinary Series.
“The archive has so many scholarly applications,” Schoonover said. The evolution of food and culture, for instance, is anthropology; types of foods and where they are grown is agriculture; the importing and exporting of foodstuffs is economic history; how people have perceived food in society is folklore; how food is dealt with by artists and composers is cultural history; food as remedies is history of medicine. “The Szathmary Collection of Culinary Arts provides excellent source material in all of these areas,” he said. “And it came to us as a one hundred percent gift.”

Schoonover’s awareness of the many uses to which the cookbooks could be put is an essential element in the acquisition of such collections. By showing donors that they not only appreciate the books, but that they also know the scholarly and research value of them, curators legitimize the collectors’ efforts.

Staff members at the University of Florida recall a warm spring day in 1990 when a nervous undergraduate appeared at the Rare Book Room on the second floor of the main library and asked to speak with Ruth M. Baldwin, the all-business academician who had built an enormous collection of children’s literature that was named in her honor. When told that the woman recently had died, the student expressed profound relief, not sadness, a peculiar reaction that warranted an explanation. It turned out that as part of his initiation into a fraternity, the young man had been required to ask Dr. Baldwin if he could borrow some of her books.

“Her reputation was legendary on campus,” Rita Smith, the project cataloger for the Baldwin Library, said a few months later during an interview. “Ruth Baldwin controlled her collection with an iron hand, and if she didn’t think your reason for wanting to see something was good enough, you were gone. She even got angry with professors who sent students over here for what she thought were frivolous requests to use her books. She had her desk right by the entrance over there. She wanted to see everyone who came in, and everyone who went out, and when she wasn’t at her desk, there was an alarm on the door that let out a high-pitched scream whenever it was opened. She may have turned the books over to the university in 1978, but she came along as the curator, and she watched over her collection right up until the day she died.”

Barely five feet tall, stout but by no means overweight, and gray-haired with glasses, Ruth Baldwin did not project a stereotypical image of intimidation, but her books had become the guiding force in her life, and since possessiveness is not uncommon among book collectors, her unyielding attitude was accepted as part of the agreement she had struck with school officials. She had, after all, put the University of Florida on the map as far as special collections are concerned, and if it took 22 years from the time she gave the books to the time she let them loose, that was all right too, because when she died in 1990 at the age of 72, her distinguished collection of 100,000 nineteenth- and twentieth-century children’s books became a full-service library, ready, at last, to serve the interests of scholarship.
“It’s extraordinary,” Bernard McTigue said shortly after moving to Gainesville from New York to become director of special collections at the University of Florida in 1990. “I really am in awe of what this woman did. In some areas the collection has no equal. What makes it very special is that Ruth Baldwin wanted books that children had used. She liked the fact that these specific books—these actual objects—had touched children’s lives.”

Ruth Baldwin began collecting children’s books in her mid-thirties almost as a challenge from her father, a professor of English at the University of Illinois who was renowned for his own collection of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century books. In 1953, during one of many periodic book-hunting trips to England, Dr. Thomas W. Baldwin and his wife Elisabeth bought about twenty old chapbooks and sent them to their daughter in Urbana, Illinois, where she was working toward her doctorate in library science. Along with the gift went the suggestion that children’s books “might be a nice little hobby for a woman to pursue.”

A succession of interesting jobs followed in various sections of the country, leading finally to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge in 1956, where Baldwin remained for two decades, retiring in 1977 as a professor emeritus. At that point, barely a year shy of her sixtieth birthday, the pivotal moment in her life as a book collector developed when a visiting professor from the University of Florida happened to see the enormous library maintained in the woman’s home. A Florida delegation visited her shortly thereafter, and an invitation to move everything to Gainesville was accepted, with the understanding that Dr. Baldwin would go along with it. Not only would her books have a permanent home, she would be the full-time curator, and she would have a free hand in shaping its future. Retiring as Professor Emeritus at one university, Dr. Baldwin assumed an exciting new position at another, and in 1988, at the age of seventy, she retired once again, this time with the title University Librarian Emeritus.

Though Dr. Baldwin “never went for rarities,” and did not issue want lists for specific titles, New York bookseller and noted authority of children’s literature Justin G. Schiller said, a number of extremely valuable books came her way nonetheless. “The value of her collection is in the collection itself, in assembling this library of books that were published for people who were just learning to read and could not afford expensive books.” As I mentioned earlier, some gifts come with strings. The Baldwin gift came with a major string: Ruth Baldwin. Some librarians and scholars have mentioned to me that Dr. Baldwin was not the easiest person in the world to get along with. But the collection was worth the drawbacks (which included not only the donor, but also the condition of many of the books, requiring conservation, and the sheer size of the library). These are the things an institution must weigh before accepting a donor’s largesse.

The Beinecke Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts at Yale University is built around a central core of several hundred thousand volumes, a spire of collected wisdom that rises six tiers above the ground to make a dramatic statement about the majesty of the
written word. Shelved behind glass walls and illuminated softly by diffused light, the rarities provide a striking background for periodic exhibitions, especially one mounted in 1991 featuring American children’s literature invitingly titled “Read Me a Story, Show Me a Book.” If books are beautiful objects to behold—and so many of them, of course, are exquisite—it is only coincidental to their purpose, which is to instruct, inform, inspire, and entertain. Not only does children’s literature perform these tasks admirably, it involves the added dimensions of innocence, joy, and wonder.

“The love of books runs in the family,” Betsy Beinecke Shirley admitted one summer afternoon in the course of an enchanting introduction to her private collection, which had been showcased the year before in the Yale exhibition. Mrs. Shirley’s father, the late Walter Beinecke, and his two brothers, Edwin and Frederick Beinecke, funded the rare books and manuscript library at Yale which opened in 1963, and which bears their name. “But the truth is that I actually started to collect when our daughters were grown up and I was bored,” Mrs. Shirley added. “My husband was busy making Kentucky rifles in the cellar, and I wanted to find something worthwhile to do with my spare time.” Carl Shirley, who had been following the discussion closely, left the living room and returned with a long flintlock rifle, intricately carved and decorated on the stock, an impressive example of the handicraft he mastered more than 25 years earlier. “I thought it would be fun to find an illustrated book about Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett for Carl that had pictures of Kentucky flintlock rifles,” Mrs. Shirley said, “and that is how I happened to go into Justin Schiller’s shop in New York sometime around 1970, and that is how I became fascinated with the world of children’s books. Carl got his Daniel Boone, but I got hopelessly involved as a book collector.”

Like virtually every other university in the United States, Yale never mindfully collected children’s literature, partly because the subject was not taken seriously by scholars until well into the present century. Mrs. Shirley’s decision, then, to place her collection in the Beinecke Library has filled that void with a single gesture. The Betsy B. Shirley Collection is noteworthy for its exclusive emphasis on American children’s literature, and the tradition of illustration that is so fundamentally related to its history over the past three centuries. The collection that she has been turning over to Yale covers the full thrust of the American experience, as reflected by the books that children read and enjoyed.

“What Mrs. Shirley has done is extend the limits of a children’s books collection,” Vincent Giroud, Curator of Modern Books at the Beinecke Library, explained. “The Shirley Collection is an extraordinary record of the production of children’s books from their origins in this country. In some cases she was able to acquire the only known copies of certain books. She acquired variant issues which are extremely important, but she also went beyond the books. Her collection includes original art, manuscripts, and letters. She has a remarkable command of the field.” Giroud said that a popular course of children’s literature is taught in the English Department, “so the collection already supports the curriculum. But it is so rich, there are limitless possibilities for research.”
This is the very point that curators must emphasize when courting potential donors. The books and manuscripts are sources of knowledge for a wide range of audiences. They must not be hoarded up in private vaults or homes. The donors will be doing a great service to all who need the materials they donate. Private collectors will continue to have a major impact on the world of rare books, manuscripts, and archives, and a prepared curator could be the catalyst and facilitator.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 41.
14. Lake interview.
16. Lake interview.
20. Author’s interview with Louis Szathmary, Providence, Rhode Island, Sept. 6, 1990.
23. McTigue interview.
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This may seem a strange thing to have to say, but with all the babble about the demise of books and the onslaught of the information age (too often reflected in draconian budget cuts for libraries), we thought it was worth stressing. After twenty years of antiquarian bookselling, and a decade of designing and printing, we retain an undiminished affection and enthusiasm for rare books and the libraries that preserve them.

We have produced books, exhibition catalogues, fundraising brochures, bookplates – virtually every kind of printing a library requires – for the Library of Congress, Duke University, Southern Methodist University, the University of Texas, Baylor University, and many others. Our long experience with rare books, combined with a bibliographic reference library of over 7,000 volumes, allows us to assist with accurate editing and proofreading. Our design and production standards ensure a piece of printing that will satisfy a discriminating eye.

If you have a project that would benefit from the care and attention it is our pleasure to provide, please get in touch.

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