

# Aiding the Scholar in Using Manuscript Collections

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THE topic assigned for discussion at this session implies that all is not satisfactory in the relationship of scholars to curators, or of scholars to manuscripts. Perhaps this is overstating the case. Possibly only questions are implied: Should a scholar be helped in using manuscripts? Does he expect help? How much help and what kind?

Before I offer my views on this topic, I should indicate the ground on which I stand. It is not fair to plunge into particulars without submitting some generalizations about librarianship, research, and scholarship. I am tempted to say first of all that librarianship is not what it used to be, but you might well retort that neither is anything else. What I mean to say is that in recent years the librarian, particularly the public librarian, has developed a new concept of his job and has thereby influenced library users to take a different view of libraries in general.

Time was when the librarian was almost a miser. Exercising a broad knowledge and refined taste, he decided what printed and manuscript matter was worth preserving, he went out and collected it, and he arranged it according to some system, simple or complex. He was a learned man, a guardian of culture, and he wasn't enthusiastic about the "intruders" who kept borrowing *his* books.

Colleges required libraries, of course, but our public libraries grew out of subscription or society libraries and occasional private libraries opened up by philanthropic collectors. Support of public libraries by tax monies was a development of the democratic idea that the state should provide free education for its citizens. Indifference to this idea allowed libraries to remain the poor stepbrother of the school system until within our own memories.

In recent years public librarians have grown more aggressive and more sensitive to public reaction in appealing for funds and have learned to emphasize service as the justification for larger budgets.

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The successful librarian today is usually an extrovert, a business administrator, a salesman of services. He not only wants more people to read more books, but he has sought new means of attracting nonreaders through enlarged reference services, story hours for children, recordings for the blind, musical records, movie films, and art prints. He delivers books on bookmobiles, makes inter-library loans, and procures microfilm copies. He offers his building for classes, discussion groups, and various kinds of meetings. In demonstrating the many services a library can provide he has convinced the public, including scholars, that he is their servant. They have only to name what they want, and Aladdin will rub his lamp and provide it. This effort to become indispensable in research also has its aspect of conceit and reflected glory, but the library patron is being assured that he can get anything he wants for use in his own home.

This change in emphasis, this growth of service, this dynamic program may be healthy for a public library. I am not prepared to say, and the point is irrelevant. But its effect on scholars and on research librarians, I feel, has not been entirely beneficial. To be candid, I fear that librarians have spoiled scholars by waiting on them too much. Research, and here we are thinking of historical research, is still a painstaking business. It requires both industry and patience. Yet it has been my observation over the past 20 years that the number of zealous young scholars who ask only to be turned loose in a roomful of manuscripts is diminishing as the number increases of these who wish to have laid before them only the documents relevant to their particular topic, and no extraneous matter, please. I should not say that the latter group is making unreasonable demands of the librarian — I am sure many librarians are flattered by such requests — but I question whether such scholars are pursuing research. They are leaning too heavily on another person's judgment. They are not sharpening their own judgment in selecting what is important. They are missing the thrill of discovery. And they are failing to perceive the tangential relations that are often illuminated by a chance remark buried in an inconsequential paper.

I well remember an anecdote by J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, of the University of North Carolina. He was the kind of scholar who liked to burrow for himself and he had no faith in catalogs, indexes, or calendars. He said he once used a large collection of manuscripts, half of which were carefully indexed. From this half he obtained something like 50 references to Felix Grundy, on whom

he was then doing research. Later he was allowed to use the uncataloged half of the collection, and he found there more than 400 relevant references. This discovery prompted him to go back over the first half of the collection piece by piece. The search was rewarding, for he found something like 200 additional references to Grundy. The point of the anecdote was that Dr. Hamilton was disgusted with himself for having accepted the judgment of a librarian who had cataloged a group of manuscripts to bring out what she thought was significant.

I am equally concerned, however, about the effect of the newer attitudes and efforts of librarians on themselves. The old librarian had his faults, but he recognized that he had a duty to his material, a mission: namely, to care for it. Without always realizing it, he was a conservationist. He was preserving the records of our culture, not merely for his generation to consult but for future generations also. This concern may not be important to the public librarian. It doesn't matter if his books wear out from use or are lost. He has two remedies: he can order more copies to begin with or he can reorder. But the head of a research library and particularly the curator of a manuscript collection has no such recourse. His materials are either unique and irreplaceable or are replaceable only at a prohibitive cost after indefinite delay.

Moreover, the fact remains that no librarian has yet won immortality for the services he provided. The librarians who are remembered are those who gave their attention to building up great collections. Those are their monuments. And in the last analysis it is the building up of the great collections that has proved to be the greatest service the librarians could have rendered to scholarship. As Lawrence S. Thompson, director of libraries at the University of Kentucky, said a couple of years ago:

Future generations will not remember present day librarians for their organizational charts, their surveys, their classification and pay plans, their ingenious fanfold forms — however necessary they may be for day-by-day operations. Scholars of the twenty-first century will measure the accomplishments of the librarian not so much by his techniques in dealing with the twentieth century public but by the collections he built.

Against this background, I think we shall see that a meeting of minds is necessary between scholars and librarians. I would not go so far as to say that readers in a manuscript collection or library of rare books have no rights — only privileges — but I submit that there ought to be a balancing of duties against rights. In other words, if the library owes the scholar certain rights, then the scholar

owes the library certain duties. It would perhaps clear the air if we could define these reciprocal obligations. Let me try to be more explicit.

Research libraries must be distinguished from public libraries. They cannot follow the lead of the latter. Research libraries have the following duties, I believe, which in sum define their services. First of all they ought to be imaginative and aggressive in seeking out and acquiring manuscript collections in private hands so as to make them available to scholars. They cannot sit back and wait for such collections to be offered to them without shirking their duty. This search should occupy a good portion of the time of the librarian because it is his chief mission. Once libraries get manuscript collections they ought to put them in some usable arrangement, even if they are unable to proceed at once with cataloging or listing them. Shortages of staff may impose a little delay, but the work should not be neglected year after year. Research libraries should admit without restriction those scholars who identify themselves properly and indicate their competence to use manuscripts. Nothing should be withheld from them except as someone else may be preparing a manuscript for publication. Personally I do not favor holding manuscript collections for use first by local faculty members, but I recognize that university policy in some institutions may dictate such priority. The librarian or curator has further duties to the reader. He should inform him of other relevant collections in his library or elsewhere. He should suggest other types of sources, such as books, maps, newspapers, broadsides, and prints, which may contain relevant data. He should inform the reader of other persons who are working in the same field. And finally he should allow the filming or photostating of material which the reader lacks time to take notes on or which he wishes to study over later or even reproduce.

Now the research library also has certain duties it owes to its collections, and this idea is sometimes difficult to get across. I have mentioned the obligation the library has to put its holdings in usable order. It must also safeguard that material from physical hazards and even human dangers. If it should open its doors to competent scholars, then it should close them to those who are not competent. By that I mean those who have not read the secondary works in their field and consequently are not ready to use sources. In general, a research library is not a place where research is begun, but rather where it is carried on. I think this is obvious, yet every once in a while we encounter a scholar with a curiosity in a field new

to him who wants to plunge into primary sources without knowing the *dramatis personae*, the extent of the event, or other general aspects of his subject. We even meet Ph.D. candidates who wish to have a thesis topic suggested and outlined to them. Such applicants ought to be deferred. I would go further and say that the librarian also has the right to exclude those whose researches he believes will be superficial or of no real significance. I am thinking of the newspaper feature writer who is looking for some dramatic or sensational incident that he can embroider into a story for the Sunday newspaper, or the genealogist who wants family data which will be of interest only to her children and a few relatives.

You may object that the librarian has no right to pass judgment on those who wish to use the manuscript collections. You may even object to the concept that the reader must apply for admission. If a library intends to protect its materials, however, somebody has got to exercise that authority. It goes without saying that kleptomaniacs must be excluded, and so must anyone who is careless or destructive in handling manuscripts. I am sure no one can object to the exercise of precautions in this regard. The passing of judgment on the competence of researchers is but a justifiable extension of the librarian's duty to protect and preserve the collections with which he is entrusted.

Now let us turn the coin over and look at the other side. If the librarian's duties are the scholar's rights, then the latter has some duties to perform in return. Obviously he must handle manuscripts carefully and abide by the regulations of the institution in this regard. Even though he disagrees with the precautions and rules of the institution, he ought to respect them. He should ask permission before publishing anything as an illustration and should insert a credit line. He should also ask permission before quoting from manuscripts. When he publishes, he should acknowledge his sources in the preface and the bibliography, and courtesy would suggest that he send the library a copy of his book or article. Further, he should not reproduce films or photostats of manuscripts in one library or deposit such reproductions in another library without first seeking the permission of the institution owning the originals. There is a sound reason for this.

I have just been speaking about the right of a library to control the use of its manuscript material. It loses that control if photocopies are deposited in another library. One of the important services a library renders to a scholar is to inform him if manuscripts of interest to him are being used by others. Obviously, it can no

longer perform this service when another library has photocopies of its material. The whole problem of the distribution of photocopies between libraries is still a thorny one. It is distinct from the question of providing reproductions for a scholar or from acquiring photocopies of a collection in private hands in cases where the owner cannot allow scholars to use the collection in his home but has no objection to the use of copies in a library. I think service is carried to an unfortunate extreme when libraries willingly or in response to a request reproduce a complete collection of manuscripts for deposit in another library. In the first place, I believe that the library that makes such a request exhibits extraordinary gall, and secondly I think the owner institution has every right not to comply with it. A prime example of what I mean occurred a few years ago.

A book dealer turned up an almost complete file of a rare New Orleans newspaper. No library had anything approaching a complete file. The dealer naturally put a high price on the newspaper although not an excessive one in view of its rarity. He offered it to three institutions in succession. Institutions *A* and *B* declined the purchase, but institution *C* put forth some effort and scraped up the money to buy the newspaper. It might even be argued that *C* recognized the value of this source material more clearly than *A* or *B*. As soon as the announcement of *C*'s achievement was made, institutions *A* and *B* wrote and requested a microfilm of the paper. However lofty the motives of *A* and *B*, I do not think their requests were ethical. There is such a thing, it seems to me, as a right of exclusive possession as a reward for diligence, enterprise, imagination, and self-sacrifice. The scholar may object to the cost of traveling some distance to consult the newspaper in question when his own library is willing to purchase for him a microfilm copy. But that scholar is overlooking the primary fact that the institution which bought the newspaper performed a signal service to all scholarship by bringing the paper out of private hands and making it available in one place. I do not think the scholar has a right to object because it is not available in five or ten places.

Furthermore, as one who is connected with a publicly supported institution in Michigan, I have noticed that the people of that State are proud of the library I represent not only because it contains certain material that can be found nowhere else but also because it attracts scholars from all over the world. Now this pride of possession may not be the highest public virtue, but neither is it reprehensible. It encourages support of the library and of the university



by the people, and frankly that is more important in the long run than any scholar's inconvenience.

I am glad to say that the governing board of my library has taken the stand that it will spend no money on photostats of material in other institutions. It prefers to use its funds to purchase originals. By taking this stand I think it is performing a greater service to scholarship. I recommend the policy to other libraries. There may be good reason for microfilming the contents of the Vatican Library and depositing the films in St. Louis, Missouri. The argument of safety in a world afflicted with war is a powerful one. But the situation is different among libraries within our own country. If safety is sought in microfilm, then the film negatives should be deposited in a remote vault.

But let us return to the original proposition of the library's duty to provide films or photostats upon the request of a scholar. These requests are of two kinds: first, those from the scholar who has worked at the institution and drawn up a list of selected items for copying; and second, those from the scholar who does not visit the institution at all but simply writes a request for copies of all manuscripts relating to his topic. The second scholar is not doing his own research; he is expecting and relying on the librarian to do it for him. Moreover, he is going to miss a number of references because his knowledge of what is relevant to his inquiry is naturally much greater than that of the librarian. Thirdly, he is being satisfied with selected letters and documents whose meaning would be much enhanced if used with the surrounding documentation and with books and maps and other materials relating to the subject. Fourthly, he is losing something else, an intangible something which the collector A. Edward Newton once explained in blunt terms. He said a scholar who is satisfied to use photostats would be satisfied to kiss a pretty girl through a glass window. An English scholar has phrased it more delicately but just as insistently in this remark: "It is admitted that literature and history cannot be adequately studied in modern books alone. Even if modern editions were adequate in the information they furnish — and notoriously they are not — they do not satisfy that Sense of the Past without which the study of literature and history is unimaginative and formal. That the student should have some access to originals is necessary for practical purposes, and necessary for his spiritual health." I will not enlarge on this feeling for originals because either you have it or you haven't, and I do not know how you acquire it.

As for the first type of scholar, who requests microfilms or photo-

stats to supplement or complete the investigation he has been making, his wants should be fulfilled. Therein lies the great convenience and economy of photocopies.

There is one other point that needs to be mentioned. Scholars sometimes object to restrictions that have been laid on the use of certain manuscript collections. Those usually involve gift collections on which donors have imposed some limitations affecting their use or publication. The scholar has a right to object. I should like to say that the librarian usually agrees with him. He does not like a gift with strings on it either. But when he is faced with the alternatives of not getting a valuable collection or accepting it as a gift and under restrictions, I think it is wiser to accept the collection under restrictions, which time usually will remove, than to lose it altogether.

I would not leave you with the impression that there is any basic antagonism between the scholar and the librarian. In the vast majority of instances, probably 95 percent of the time, scholars are grateful to research libraries for the source material they provide, and librarians are happy to accommodate earnest scholars to the point of relaxing their own rules. It is the rare research worker who grows demanding and fault-finding, and I suspect he carries over these traits from other aspects of his personality. I will not deny that there may be a few cantankerous librarians around. The latter need to remember that collecting is only a means to an end. The former should not forget that rare books and manuscripts have not been laboriously and expensively gathered solely for his use. There are rising generations behind him. The records of our heritage deserve the devotion of both custodians and users.