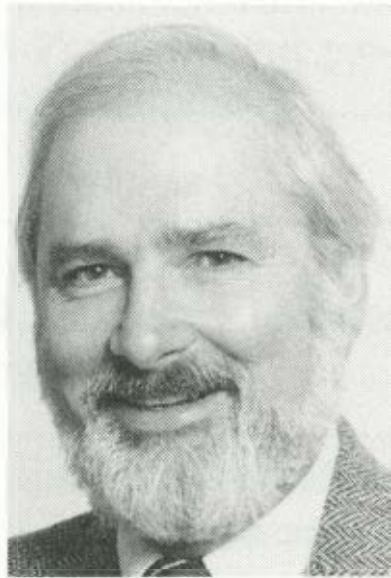# ACRL President's letter

1989–1990—An age of transition.

Dear ACRL Colleagues:
Do you recall seeing a cartoon showing Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden? It had Adam remarking: "It would appear, my dear, that we are living in an age of transition."

I suspect that most of us have come to regard the entire story of humankind as one long saga of change. For all the continuities, it is interruption and innovation that we celebrate in history. Indeed, we've grown accustomed, in

William A. Moffett

looking back at the past, to thinking in terms of a series of great fundamental changes—transitions in technology, in political attitudes, in esthetic sensibilities and cultural values so sweeping that we have been led, somewhat simplistically, to call them "revolutions." Thus the neolithic revolution, the industrial revolution, the French revolution, the sexual revolution. . .

In contemplating a thematic emphasis for ACRL in 1990, I've been drawn more than once to two essays which have applied the term "revolution" to the world of books and learning. A few years ago Elizabeth Eisenstein's classic study, *The Printing Press As an Agent of Change* (in its abridged version entitled *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*), persuasively showed how the fifteenth-century shift from script to print changed the world. Even if it was, as she said, "an unacknowledged revolution," it was no less fundamental in its nature and sweeping in its effects. And last year Barbara Moran's fiftieth anniversary feature article in *College & Research Libraries* de-

scribed the past half-century of developments in academic libraries as an "unintended revolution" and hinted at still greater changes on the way.[1]

Indeed, in our own time, as librarians have special reason to know, the world is again undergoing so basic a change in the way in which communication is carried out that not only libraries but society itself will surely be transformed. As pervasive and basic as the shift from script to print, a profound shift from print to a digital environment is already reflected in the new ways in which knowledge is created, transmitted, and preserved. It appears that we, too, live in an age of transition, and one to which the term "revolution" may appropriately be applied.

In 1990 two circumstances make the social response to the agencies of change different: the rapidity with which the digital shift is occurring, and the fact that so many of us are aware of it. The cartoonist's Adam and Eve notwithstanding, it wasn't given to most of our forbears to be quite so self-consciously aware of their place in the shifting matrix of cultural history. Change crept up on them, overcoming them, as it were, while they slept. We, on the other hand, can hardly have failed to hear the shrill alarms of futurists.

What has been our response as a profession? Nowhere in higher education has there been greater awareness of the digital shift than in librarianship, where we've not only worried for years about the future of the book, but the future of the profession itself. We have shown ourselves eager to repudiate a persistent myth that we are inherently

[1]Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1983); Barbara B. Moran, "The Unintended Revolution in Academic Libraries: 1939 to 1989 and Beyond," *College & Research Libraries* (January 1989): 25–41.

a conservative lot by embracing computer technology with imagination and enthusiasm. In anticipating the impact of hypermedia, optical storage, electronic books, neural networks and smart machines, we seem determined to control change itself, to steer the revolution our way. Every conference, every new issue of our journals reflects a growing confidence in our ability to master not only technology, but the way in which it will be applied to our workplace. Gloomy prognostication has even given way in some quarters to the belief that a golden age of librarianship may be at hand. In post-industrial American society, the reasoning goes, a society in which access to information will be of paramount importance, in which educated and well-informed men and women will be one of our most important national assets, the role of those experts who mediate access to information will be an honored one. Librarians will no longer squat near the bottom of the academic totem pole.

Unfortunately too few of us, I guess, will be able to recall the weekly plight of radio's Chester Riley, the William Bendix character who would invariably muse, when his plans misfired and events rounded on him: "What a revoltin' development dis is!" For all our own determination, librarians have little assurance that the "digital revolution" will not prove to be merely a "revoltin' development" for us and our professional heirs.

Something more than determination is required. One of our greatest challenges is to develop a clearer vision of our role, now and in a fully digitized environment, and to convey it persuasively to others—to our faculty colleagues, senior administrators, state legislators, state regents, and the bureau of the budget. There's the rub. We are awfully good, as a profession, in talking to ourselves; we don't have any trouble determining what our priorities ought to be, or in assuring ourselves of our contribution to research and higher education. We've been less successful in articulating these for others, including those who control the resources upon which our mission of service depends. In a time of unsettling change, it is perhaps even more important than ever that we succeed in sharing our vision effectually. As Professor Moran warns, if we do not define the roles we want libraries and librarians to play, others will define those roles for us.

Already, she points out, we should be at the forefront in planning the use of electronic technologies within our institutions, working collaboratively with the computing center, the telecommunications center, and other campus units; we should be already discussing with senior administrators how to secure the necessary funding, both for capital costs and maintenance of the new services that technology will support, as well as the traditional services we'll still be called upon to provide for some time to come.

But what should we be doing at the association level? Goal III of the ACRL strategic plan calls on us to promote the interests of academic and research librarianship by enhancing the awareness of our role among non-library professionals and by influencing government and private sector activities likely to affect financial and political support. But how is that to be done? And how can we help attract outstanding recruits and improve library education programs for a field undergoing gradual but fundamental change? How, in other words, do we communicate with others to greater effect, and with a revolution underway?

George Bobinski (dean of the School of Information and Library Studies at SUNY/Buffalo), who issued a spirited call for professional reform in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* last June, suggests that our associations should concentrate on providing continuing education and lobbying for better political and funding support for libraries "rather than on the conference frivolities of show-and-tell programs and professional politics and factions." He calls on us to exert our efforts serving on lay committees in academic, government, cultural and civic groups.[2]

The 1991 White House Conference affords one of the most obvious opportunities. WHCLIS I proved largely irrelevant to academic and research librarians, partly, I think, because of the process by which delegates were selected. For whatever reason, too few academic librarians were actively involved in shaping the agenda and the outcome. That is much less likely to happen this time. Not only is it clearer that we have a stake in fostering a more enlightened national information policy, but a responsibility for promoting information literacy, in expediting the development of a national research and education network, and in assuring access to information technologies. We know that state conferences will be seeking a greater number of participants from among our ranks. It is up to us to see that our ablest, most vigorous and most thoughtful colleagues get involved at the very outset. I have appointed a special task force, chaired by Patricia A. Wand (university librarian at American University), to coordinate the ACRL response. One of our challenges is to recruit non-library delegates from the academic community to participate, an undertaking that will require considerable grassroots effort.

Looking beyond 1991, the ACRL Legislation Committee, chaired by Ruth Patrick (University of Montana), has designed a communications network (patterned after that of the League of Women Voters) that will expedite efforts to make ACRL

[2]"A call for professional reform," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, June 1989, 55.

members more aware of political developments affecting our environment and to mobilize the academic community for a more effective response.

On another front, our Professional Association Liaison Committee is attempting to promote collaborative efforts with other groups in higher education: the Modern Language Association, the American Chemical Society, the American Council on Education, the American Association for Higher Education, the Association of American Colleges, and others. We are becoming more active in EDUCOM. We have encouraged our executive director to extend her efforts to identify opportunities for interacting with a variety of non-library agencies with whom we have mutual interests.

In short, a number of efforts are already underway. The ACRL President's Program in Chicago this summer will be devoted to extending these initiatives. I invite all members to forward their suggestions to me or the program chair, Patricia Breivik (associate vice president for information resources, Towson State University). As long as we're in the process of transition, we have excellent opportunities—now—to transform the Association from a group that spends too much time talking to itself into one that is both visible and heard by other members of the academic community.

William A. Moffett
ACRL President
■ ■

Automating reserve activities at Northwestern University

By James S. Aagaard

*Director of Information Systems
Development
Northwestern University*

and Elizabeth J. Furlong

*Coordinator of Library Automation
Procedures
Northwestern University*

A modification of the NOTIS circulation system adds flexibility to Reserve Room record maintenance.

During the 1985–86 academic year, following successful implementation of a new circulation system in NOTIS, there was increased demand at the Northwestern University Library to provide some automated capabilities for the Reserve Room. The main Library's Reserve Room has a small, active collection of roughly 5,000 titles, including cataloged works, photocopies of journal articles, an exam file, and faculty-owned items. Well over half of the 8,000 items processed for Reserve each year are uncataloged. There are three separate loan periods: 2-hour, 2-hour or overnight, and 3-day. The average annual circulation over the past five years is nearly 70,000.

Northwestern Library staff reviewed the specifications for the Course Reserve module being designed for the commercial version of NOTIS, but decided not to implement it for several reasons:

1. The initial release would not provide several features which were felt to be essential: bibliographic access in public mode (LUIS), dynamic maintenance of all indexes, and an online list of