The Need

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I HAVE been asked to speak to you on the subject of the need for rare book rooms in the libraries of the universities of today. The question is simple enough: *Why a Rare Book Room?* And I do you the courtesy of supposing that you really want to hear the answer stated as well as I can state it from both your own point of view (if that happens to be different from mine) and as fully as I can from my own.

Just as a mathematician will sometimes stumble when you ask him why two minuses multiplied make a plus, just so I have trouble answering this basic question. How can I tell you if you don't know, I ask myself. The gap, of course, between the corporate A.L.A. member and the bibliophile is very wide, and I am not sure that I would know how to bridge it if I tried. If this were a general session of the A.L.A., you could imagine the situation somewhat more readily by picturing someone addressing the W.P.A. on the virtues of the Guggenheim or the Rockefeller Foundation, or by imagining a schoolmarm addressing the teamsters union on kindness to animals.

But since this is not a general session, I am inclined to dilate for a moment on the wideness of this gap between the A.L.A. member and the professional bibliophile. Let me, for example, name you some of the best known curators of rare books in this country: Clarence Brigham of the American Antiquarian Society, Zoltán Haraszti of the Boston Public, Bob Brown of the Clements, Curt Bühler of the Morgan, Gertrude Woodward of the Newberry, Giles Dawson of the Folger, Herman Mead of Huntington, Goff of the Library of Congress, Jackson of Harvard, and Emily Hall of Yale. Can you guess the percentage of A.L.A. members among these curators of some of America's most famous collections? Sure you can; it is zero. Not one of them belongs. And why should they? It has been ten years since the subject of rare books has appeared on an A.L.A. program, and then only because a joint session of the Bibliographical Society of America was being held. The great university libraries may appropriate a third or a half of their book funds to the purchase of rare books, but this percentage falls to an imperceptible fraction when it is diluted with the town and country libraries, the public and the sectarian, the high school and the grade school. If, therefore, it were necessary for me to address a general assembly of the A.L.A., I am afraid that the sum of my own feelings would be those of a missionary among headhunters, full of apprehension and low cunning, momentarily more concerned with saving my own head than in preserving the unregenerate souls of my listeners.

Since, however, this is the universities section, I think I may properly assume that our administrative problems fall into one general pattern, that the divergences between us come from differences in solutions, and that at least one can find the professionally trained librarian and the bibliophile as thoroughly mixed

in this group as they can be found anywhere in the world. This mixture that still exists today of the librarian and the bibliophile is unfortunately a dying phenomenon, largely I suppose because it is a hybrid which (by laws of accreditation rather than, as with other mulish hybrids, by the law of nature) is unable to reproduce its kind. We can console ourselves in the end only with the reflection that at least in some respects we have been superior to both the jackass and the jenny.

As the profession has dwindled into a trade, though, we see the bibliophile being replaced by the production shop manager, the scholar by the personnel officer, the student of bibliography by the engineer. It is to such diverse groups, all I am sure represented here, that I want to address my answer to the question of *Why a Rare Book Room.*

I forego the opportunity of answering the even more common question of what is a rare book, because it would require a separate essay to show why a rare book is not always rare and is sometimes not even a book. This fact annoys many people, especially those who are inclined to be annoyed when their Niger comes from Morocco or their Morocco comes from Algiers, or when they first learn that there is no ham in their hamburger.

I must assume either that you know what rare books are or that you will accept the inadequate thumbnail definition of them as the unexpendable parts of a library's collection: the 79 copies of the first folio of Shakespeare in Folger, the Gutenberg Bibles scattered in several of our collections, the association copies of sometimes common books, the broadside declarations of independence, and the proclamations of emancipation. The essential fact about each of these is that in the form in which it exists in the particular collection, it is unexpendable, even when there are 79 copies in one place.

One of the chief reasons for the need of rare book rooms in our university libraries today is the locust-like descent of great swarms of people on our collections. The locusts fall into two general categories: the student and the so-called trained librarian. Out of deference to the stated objectives of this association I pass over one of these categories lightly, but I will not forbear lamenting to this select group the wretched state of a profession, formerly one of dignity and character, which has so far fallen from the graces of the liberal arts and the natural sciences as to set up what can only be called trade schools. It is a dirty bird that fouls its own nest. You will forgive my bitterness if you have ever seen a class mark on a Ratcliffe binding, or if you have seen the Gaylord brand on a Zaehnsdorf inlay, or a punched page of an illuminated manuscript. Here surely are the marks of the beast.

The students are quite another problem, and here it is necessary for the librarian to protect one class of them from another. Remember that our students and scholars are increasing daily in number as the general level of our literacy rises higher and higher and as our colleges dig deeper and deeper into the secondary level of education. Take any book that you think every college student should read. Assume that each student will read this given book in the course of his four years; if you have a two weeks' charge system and average ten days per charge,

one book will handle 108 students if it doesn't wear out. A student body of 5,000 like ours at the University of Virginia will require 47 copies if the student may read it at any time in his undergraduate career, or 188 copies if he must read it in a given year, or 376 copies if he must read it in a given semester. Now there is no book in our collections of which there are 47 copies of a currently procurable edition. There are finely printed editions, or early editions, or association copies, let us say, of this book, and some of these must be protected from the all-devouring maw of the undergraduate, the object being not to keep them from someone, but to make them readily available to the people who need these very editions, as opposed to the currently procurable or the expendable ones. Here is another reason for a rare book room.

Most members of an academic faculty will follow me this far without demurrer, but I shift now to the level of so-called productive scholarship, and on the happy chance that some of you do not share the opinions of my friends and colleagues, the heads of our schools of history and philosophy, both distinguished men in their fields, I quote them on the subject of rare books. They say that a rare book is only a misfortune to them; that the function of a book is to be read and nothing more; that a book useful in research is needed, be it rare or otherwise (and preferably let it be otherwise); that they prefer Modern Library books to Aldines; that they do not care about having the manuscript of Rolfe's *Relation of Virginia,* since it has been published.

These attitudes can one by one be demolished from my own point of view, and I shall run you a sample or two in a moment. But the only acceptable answers to these statements from the point of view of the Professors of Philosophy and History themselves are these: (first) that showing a class of undergraduates an Aldine Lucretius or an original Hakluyt does something to a measurable percentage of them that arouses them from their intellectual inertia. It strikes the spark of interest that sometimes turns an indifferent student into a scholar. The Professors of History and Philosophy think that this is good, and worth an investment; (second, and vastly more important to them) that the existence at a university of a rare book room demonstrably attracts the gifts of specialized collections of research materials assembled by wealthy and generous patrons. The great collections go only where there are facilities for caring for them. The Professors of History and Philosophy, to put it figuratively, are willing to have some embroidery bought for the guest room when the guest is important.

You see, though, that I am talking from outside myself. These are the reasons for a rare book room that have meaning to the fellaheen. To me a rose can be good in its own right, quite aside from its attracting the bee which makes the honey which maintains the carbon cycle in the professors of philosophy and history. Perhaps I can show you why most easily by going back to their statement that a book is only for reading. I am not trying to persuade you to my own point of view now; rather simply telling you what it is. Remember that I am not talking about any book, but that loose thing called a rare book that I have carefully avoided defining. Most books, it is quite true, find their chief end in the noble function of being read, but the man who says that a book is only for

reading is to me a pervert of the same order and only of a different kind as a man who says that a woman is only for sleeping with. Of course there are a great many books that are good only for reading, and some that are not good even for that, just as I dare say there are all kinds of women, but there is something in seeing a Gutenberg Bible or a first folio of Shakespeare or a Grolier binding or a Kelmscott Chaucer that has nothing at all to do with reading a book.

The frequent tooting of the tin horn of productive research is nothing more than the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual degeneration. I know of no more depressing sight than what seems the hundreds of yards of our general stack devoted to shelving the products of the research of a single school of Columbia University. I select Columbia (of which incidentally I am an admirer) only because it has done better and more of it what we are all presumably trying. It has at least had the sense to show on a Euclidean scale that the thing is absurd.

I want to revert finally to the Rolfe manuscript which has recently been bought by a Manhattan bibliophile. I tried hard to get the State of Virginia to buy this on the grounds that as an historical document it was of the first importance. I was told that since it had already been published, its value to productive research was nil, or at best indirect, that it could not be purchased because it had value as a bibliographical show piece only. This is, of course, the same attitude that calls the original text of the Declaration of Independence or of the Magna Carta a bibliographical show piece. I can understand the attitude, but it never fails to shock and offend me. My defense against it, as I have already indicated to you, was to point out the very apparent fact that the exhibition pieces are the things that draw the gifts of materials for productive research. But I reiterate to you now my real opinion that this productive research is not really any great shakes. If the value of history lies in the monographs that we knock off to perpetuate our names and to demonstrate our learning, then I am wrong. History can teach me a few practical lessons (though I am not likely to heed them), but in the main and all the time, history's chief value to me lies in the sense of dignity and continuity it gives me personally. I am persuaded that most people other than productive scholars feel this way, that they find a comfortable non-mythological reality in the glimpses they get of the grandeur and the misery of their forbears—the kind of thing that makes me imagine that I am Captain John Smith when I cross on the Norfolk-Portsmouth ferry.

Seeing a first edition of John Smith's *General History* gives me this feeling. And to tell me that a Rolfe manuscript is of no importance because it has been published is the same kind of *non sequitur* as telling me that the manuscript is of no importance because yesterday was Thursday, or that a Gutenberg Bible is of no use because people won't read it.

I hope that the answer to the question of *Why a Rare Book Room* is implicit in these statements. There are plenty of appealing reasons for having rare book rooms that are to me wrong reasons, but I have tried to give them none the less, Jesuitical as this rehearsal may be. I suppose that the chief thing to remember in all this library business is the fact (as Gide puts it) that it is a rule of nature for the common to triumph over the exquisite.