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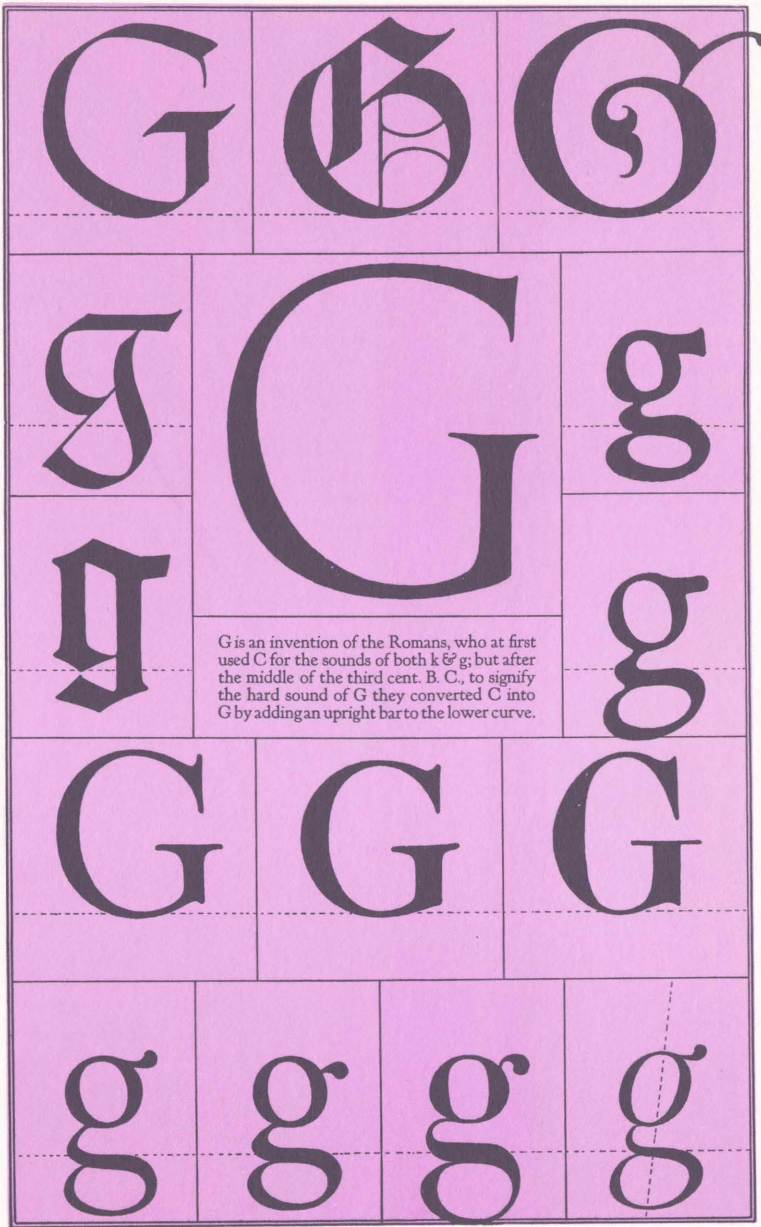


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The "G" page from Frederic W. Goudy's *The Alphabet*, 1936.

THE COURIER

The Role of Rare Books in a University Library

by Charles W. Mann

Mr. C. Waller Barrett has said as recently as last spring, in an address honoring the accession of the millionth book at Temple University, "If the library is the heart of the university, the rare book area is the heart of the library." There are a couple of responses to this statement. In the not-so-dim past, in many libraries, it was questionable whether that particular heart of the library was living or dead, and if indeed the rare book area could be called the heart, the patient showed remarkable resilience in surviving. Also, Mr. Barrett was speaking from the privileged and essential position of the collector. I share his feeling that the collector does point the way for rare book collections and that his foresight and fortitude are much appreciated by those librarians who eventually must administer and care for what he brings together. But looking at his statement from the inside and speaking as a rare book curator, while I can agree with the sentiment expressed, I can not agree with the implication that all things must permeate through the library system from a given center. A library is a curious amalgam of its collections, housing and staff, all of which taken together make up a personality which in many cases becomes strangely vivid and real. It is very hard to say which portion is more important than another.

Special collections are fortunate in this regard because they carry with them a certain prestige, and often a recognizable identifying quality that imbues personality. For instance, because of its fine author collections, the Amherst Library has a deep association with Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost which projects an ambience of value both on and beyond Amherst's particular campus. Such readily apparent relationships go a long way toward developing a library's personality, which is really a more attractive idea than the often used analogy to the physical parts of the body. It is a truism that the personality of a library is a sum total of its parts, all of which are vital: undergraduate reading rooms, reference areas, documents, maps, microforms, photoservices, interlibrary loan, technical processes, and so on.

All of these divisions and subdivisions must work and work well with each other to keep the personality of a library vital. Cooperation and

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exchange of knowledge between divisions are an absolute necessity. Use whatever chain analogies you like, but a large research library serving a resident, and in these days of branch campuses, a non-resident faculty and student clientele, plus the vast world of scholarship and learning without, must live or die on the interaction of its staff and collections. Like all divisions in a university, rare book rooms exist to support the teaching program, and that teaching program is built upon cooperation.

But let us consider rare book rooms and begin with the two basics: collections and staff. As to collections, there must be principles of selection, growth and service in order to produce the best that the budget and the skill of the staff can sustain. A purchase budget is a mixed blessing. Rare book librarians have learned to live with one and, surprisingly to some, without one. Funds for building collections are wonderful to have, but funds to support the morale and energy of a dedicated rare book staff are even more important. Sometimes I think a smaller collection with an energetic staff making the most of what is available can become more effective than a larger one forced by rising costs and lack of staff to curtail services. We are familiar with the recent desperate situation facing the New York Public Library. For some months the theater collections at Lincoln Center have been out of public reach and, despite sturdy efforts to improve the situation, may conceivably remain so for some time to come. Those of us who used the collection in its low-ceilinged former home in the Forty-Second Street stacks would now wish it back there. As one more drawback, many large institutions have vast piles of storage material unsorted and uncataloged, therefore exercising only a potential value. The scale and emphasis of acquisition in a special collection should reflect the available staff and housing to handle it. This does not mean that I am against adequate budgets or large collections. Far from it! A large collection means lots of information, and a good rare book collection must be laden with information in depth, not just with splendid relics of the past.

This need for maintaining sometimes strange and curious areas of information in depth is a point most difficult to make when describing a research or rare book library to the uninitiated. There are those who feel that the library is a tool and not a resource, who feel that making provision for a good sprinkling of new books and a strong discard program alone will keep a collection healthy and moderately wealthy, although we must add that such a policy would be somewhat less than wise. Rare book and special collection librarians should develop collecting codes which reflect the tradition of learning and the local history of the area of their institutions, which means building to existing strengths and supporting existing programs; yet at the same time the codes must be flexible and must provide means to break new ground in meaningful and realizable ways. Rare books and special collections demand a super-selective yet in some cases exhaustive approach to retrospective and current publications, whether by purchase if they are fortunate

enough to have a budget or endowment funds, or by a careful and choosy solicitation for support from donors if they do not. In the end, careful selection becomes an economical process; a solid scholarly item or a beautifully printed book is often worth more, both as an artifact and as a book to read, after twenty-five years of service than it was when it first saw print. We could all note examples of facsimiles, special editions of historical texts, and literary works which appeared and were available either in trade or subscription lists for a while and then disappeared from sight, only to surface at prices which are the despair of the present book trade. This problem cannot really be licked. We are not all-knowing, and a good work is not always immediately recognizable. Also, costs for certain kinds of fine books, such as text facsimiles and art catalogs, continue to rise. Picking and choosing is a hard business and only time supports or condemns our choices. Once, with limited funds to draw upon, I had a choice between facsimiles of *The Douce Apocalypse* and *The Canterbury Psalter* and took the *Douce* under the delusion that it was the less common. Twelve years passed before I found another copy of the *Canterbury Psalter* facsimile.

Somehow standards of purchase need to be developed and the incredible flood of dealers' and auction catalogs must be perused and digested. Even if one does not buy many of the books listed in a catalog, he must be aware of what is available and what the cost factors have become, and somehow merge the present demands from students and faculty with the less pressing demands of the future. To build a collection continually only in response to demand is to risk winding up with a collection of lesser significance or ephemeral interest. In a way, such "responsive" purchasing can sometimes be justified on an item-by-item basis, by considering books and papers as raw material. If the library is the laboratory of the Liberal Arts as I have heard it said, one could fancifully work out an equation. If six letters of Henry James for \$550 produce one article, if seven letters of Richard Henry Stoddard for \$125 make one thesis paper, then supposedly the material has paid its initial cost, and it can remain on the shelves with its rent paid in the hope that a collateral use for it will come up some time later. I say this is a fanciful exercise, for one can get caught in a net seeking tangible returns in these areas. A vast collection on American sociology at Penn State has resulted in a couple of Ph.D.'s, and on top of that was a gift. Yet it took twelve years of shifting and moving about and a year of staff time to put it in order before it was ready for use. Try to work out an equation for something of that nature; cost figures would be shocking.

The concern with retrospective acquiring of rare books has been accented recently by the burgeoning reprint industry, which may seem to render the original book unnecessary. But reprints too are scarce and expensive; many depend upon an advance subscription before they even see print. Another curious thing is that many rare books have been reprinted or

issued in a new edition several times but somehow the reprint evaporates and in some cases becomes harder to find than the original.

Faddishness is one of the derogatory words directed at special collections, and who can deny that the wish to be “with it” pervades even rare book rooms? I admit without shame that Penn State has the papers of our local SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and happily cheer the fact that we have the papers of the former Federal Commissioner of Narcotics and a stack of Black Panther comic books. The narcotics material came with little ceremony years ago, along with a gift of five hundred dollars to make it possible for a student to work with the collection. Yet ten years ago we could not find a student who was interested enough to work in narcotics and had to go searching for a recipient for the grant. But is the fact that we have already started a new collection of Women’s Lib materials really a reflection of a considered policy, or just a sign that the subject is currently popular with staff and faculty?

Special collections staffs are in eternal search of a balance in retrospective collecting. The American Antiquarian Society in recent years has redefined its collections rather severely because of space limitations. Its cut-off date for American material is now the centennial year of 1876, and it intends to maintain this policy strictly. To this end it has divested itself of its South American books and has stopped collecting in other areas. University libraries perforce must be more catholic. Norman Mailer in paperback on the Frazier-Ali fight, Giraldi Cinthio on Renaissance poetic theory, Frank Harris and the Little Blue Books may come up in a single hour of rare book room time. The range is as wide as that of the reference desk. Always we are plagued or delighted by the unexpected. In some cases the foresight of our predecessors comes to our aid; this should underline our collecting codes. As rare book librarians we must be aware constantly that much of what we do is for the benefit of people who are not even born as yet. For instance, long before Penn State had a rare book room, it had some rare books. Thanks to the efforts of a little known Pittsburgh preacher named Hay who collected Hawthorne in the 1920’s, Penn State today is a friend to the Hawthorne Project at Ohio State. In the 1930’s Penn State librarian Willard Lewis put bookseller Karl Goedecke to work scouting the hillsides for Pennsylvania imprints which came in by the hundreds, many costing as little as seventy-five cents or a dollar and a half. The resulting Pennsylvania imprint collection, arranged by place and date, is a joy to work with and is in constant use for every purpose from city planning to astrology. We cannot predict whether the collections we are building now will be useful; we hope they will be but we may never know.

What about housing and accessibility? Let me put the ugliest face on this aspect of rare book room administration for the moment. Somehow, commensurate with security, special handling and limited staff, the university rare book room must open its doors to allow smooth and free access. It must

avoid at all costs becoming a last bastion of class differences in the shape of a quiet museum at the top of a stairwell. A warm, attractive and open reading room is a necessity; rare book housings should convey a delicate balance of care, protection, good humor *and* accessibility. We must avoid the implied idea that because a book is worthwhile, we have put it somewhere where it can not be used. We must take care not to overemphasize, under the guise of protecting books, the curatorial nature of our profession and forget that we are librarians. I hope the situation in which the librarian becomes an unwarranted interference between the scholar and his books rarely arises any more.

Today, I think the really sad state of affairs is that in which rare book collections go untended, where memorial, archival, stored or other materials subsist inside a library, yet are without librarians to look after them. Several times recently I have been taken into hot and dusty side rooms with drawn shades or into remote caged stacks to find good materials unused and in the worst circumstances, suffering from neglect. A rare book collection with a librarian, even if only on a part-time basis, is an altogether different thing. One can sense a good conductor when listening to an orchestra; so too, one can sense whether things are going well in a rare book division. The old appellation of "an island of reserve" is fast fading. How many harassed and busy rare book librarians must wince when they are complimented wistfully on being above the battle and free from the stress and imbroglia engaging their colleagues.

Throughout any library there exists a marvelous array of resources which constantly relate to one another. Take microforms for instance, which might be considered the enemy of rare books. Who with a good microfilm at hand needs originals? However, much of our work with rare books depends upon establishing texts, discovering variants and recording censuses of copies; the microforms are of immeasurable help in this regard. An example of my own faith in and concern with microforms has been that I have constantly aided series purchases such as the Yale Baroque German Literature publications with rare book funds. Such great series as the Short Title Catalog on microfilm or the Readex Microprint forms enhance the value of the material on our shelves; they do not conflict with it. Questions on selection and cataloging of microforms are a matter of constant discussion among the acquisitions, microforms *and* rare book departments at Penn State.

We also maintain very close ties with the reference division, and the recent trend toward subject specialists in reference such as in romance languages and Slavic languages has only added to the harmonious relationship. Every large collection acquired by the library is vetted for rare materials by a representative from acquisitions, a subject bibliographer, faculty members and rare book personnel. It is amazing how many librarians are really book scouts at heart. In turn, I have spent my time fielding questions at an information desk and have learned much from the experience. In particular, I

have learned of what real importance good reference people can be to a rare book program. There is a vast literature of books about books, much of which is essential to the proper use of a rare book collection. A few libraries have tried to house these in special collections reading rooms but, aside from the basic sets of some works, they only scratch the surface. We must depend upon the reference division to maintain and service many of our most useful tools. Also, I teach a rare-books-oriented graduate course in bibliography, and without the willing assistance of the reference staff, who ungrudgingly absorb the torrent of questions my students bring them, the course would be much the poorer.

All of this interaction seems somehow obvious to me. Interlibrary loan, acquisitions and rare books seem to merge as a matter of course when discussing locations of texts available either in microform on request or in the stocks of antiquarian book dealers. In recent years our maps, photoservices and documents departments, the Arts Library, the local county library, and the university departments of arts, history and economics all have been involved in the planning of shopping malls and the restoring of buildings in our local communities. The rare book collection had much information in the way of histories, maps, plans and photographs but to make them truly useful, cooperation with the rest of the library was necessary at every turn. I find that I cannot live without any of the departmental divisions in our library; even the computer and I are wary if disillusioned friends. Penn State has a large network of tiny but related campuses and these draw upon special collections more than one might think; in order to get information to them, computer-produced printouts can be quite useful.

In considering the university community which uses the library, a rare book staff must always be on the alert so that possible working materials in a collection are not overlooked. This means scanning the publications list of the faculty and the university catalog, noting the courses taught. It means checking out the specialties of new professors and keeping track of the changing work of the older ones. It means, above all, taking an active and cooperative share in the planning and programs of the departments and the interdepartmental institutes of arts and humanities, medieval area programs and Renaissance studies which have proliferated in recent years. By the process of researching a university faculty, some unusual angles can be recognized and taken advantage of. One of my great surprises was to find that Penn State offers a course in imaginary geography. When I called up the instructor, he mirrored my own astonishment when I told him we had an extensive collection of imaginary voyages and utopian fiction. What I am emphasizing here is that rare book divisions have every obligation to be active in directly promoting the use of their research facilities and materials by students and faculty. Such activity can be supported by the use of exhibits, by classroom presentations, applications of funds and the provision of a forum or room for special events and special teaching programs. This does not

mean that an event is held in a rare book room because there is a carpet on the floor and not too many people are displaced. Far from it. The event should be related to books, whether celebrating the accession of a gift collection or the visit of a distinguished writer to the campus. The event should, whenever possible, be underlined by a related exhibit or address stressing the importance of books and libraries.

I have not said much about the vital and exhilarating area of rare book cooperation, which extends beyond the bounds of the university campus. In this age of interest in things antiquarian, the importance of rare books for community, state and national use is becoming ever plainer. Also, as all rare book people are aware, the age of miracles in bibliography is now and not in the past. Scores of important editions, checklists, inventories, census listings and cooperative projects are currently underway. One need only cite the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*, the editions coming out under the stamp of the Modern Language Association's Center for Editions of American Authors, the revision of *American Literary Manuscripts*, Jacob Blanck's *Bibliography of American Literature*, and the revision of short title catalogs as a few examples. All of these projects have been enormously dependent, not only on the scholarly staff designated to implement them, but also on rare book librarians.

Rare book librarians are, in a sense, made by accident. Certainly they are made not by library schools but by books and people; they should know as many as possible of both. We don't ask our rare book employees much about conservation or how to run down a price in *American Book Prices Current*. We ask them what their special interests have been, where they have worked, what they have done. We look for people who know about books in their fields, who will fall into the special routine of looking after rare ones with great naturalness. Training of course would be good to have, but aside from actually working in a rare book library, it is not generally available. In these changing times most library schools have so much material that must be presented that only a few courses in analytical bibliography and the history of the book can be included in the curricula. However, in whatever manner people may find their way into working with rare books, they should be encouraged to do so. Here and there in this country we have collections which are in sore need of curators who can give the collections their due, in order that their true functions may be realized. Too often special collections are neglected, and thus gain a poor reputation which is no fault of the books.

Let me conclude by restating that a rare book department is not maintained just for its own sake, nor is it a form of invested capital. It is as essential to the climate of learning of a university as all the other functioning units in the library of which it is an equal part.