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Research Libraries: Their Function, Friends, Funding and Future

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Chancellor Emeritus William Pearson Tolley presents
the Dedication Address

THE COURIER

A COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE
on the
DEDICATION OF THE ERNEST S. BIRD LIBRARY

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Research Libraries: Their Function, Friends, Funding and Future

by Richard W. Couper

It would be customary, ritualistic, expected, and facile of me to say it is a pleasure to be here with you. So I shall not do the unexpected; it is a pleasure to be here, indeed, a very special pleasure and for a host of reasons. Let me be specific:

This is the day of dedication of the Ernest S. Bird Library at Syracuse University. What greater and more delightful exercise than to mark this day for a university library! Since I spend my time and life with a library, I can conceive of no greater event.

This dedication is in upstate New York; being by birth, inclination and affection an upstate New Yorker, I have special interest in all significant activity in this part of the country.

People are more important than books, though there are days when this statement is difficult to make emphatically. There are four people among us with whom I have had rewarding ties, and for whom I have particular regard:

Chancellor William Pearson Tolley whom I have known and admired most of my lifetime. His competences run alpha to omega; I particularly single out his prowess on the tennis court.

The Reverend Ben Lake whose capacities are many, who serves as chairman of the Syracuse University Library Associates. Ben and I were contemporaries as undergraduates: I had regard for him then, but I must say that regard was increased and intensified when he had the good sense and good fortune to marry Cynthia.

Chancellor Mel Eggers and I had tenuous associations when he was an administrator here at Syracuse and when I was Deputy Commissioner for Higher Education of New York State. There may be a glut of Ph.D.'s, but there is no glut of competent, dedicated top administrators in academia. The University is fortunate in having Mel at the helm.

Similarly, Warren Boes and I have known each other from a time back, and currently have particular ties through the Association of Research Libraries, and because of the fact that we both work for major libraries in this state. The

Bird is in hand, I'd say.

Finally, and still under the heading Glad to Be Here, let me say that the library *is* the university. Occasionally the faculty and students – even a stray trustee – may disagree. But it is the university. Of course I am glad Mr. Schwartzwalder will continue to be around for a bit, but the library is the university.

Physical plant has much to do with function and inspiration, especially in libraries and museums. I am always mindful of Frank Lloyd Wright's comment about the Soldiers/Sailors Monument building: "You can't touch a molding on this building without improving it." This new structure is appropriately fitting and inspiring.

Before I make it blunderingly and totally obvious, let me say I am not a librarian. My father at age fifty-four became a banker by profession for the first time. He has remarked to me that he did not know much of the nitty-gritty of detailed banking operations, but he knew a fair amount of the process of negotiation and merger (he led five of these), and he knew something of the mystery of the ways in which people are molded and melded for the running of an enterprise. I know little of true librarianship. I could do little for you by attempting to discourse on preparation services, conservation or subject matter of one of the New York Public Library's twenty-three research divisions. I do, however, have an ever increasing knowledge of the broad policy issues facing major libraries, relationships among similar institutions, of the need for intense gospeling among foundations, city, state, and federal governments, of the care and nurture of trustees, of general issues of administration. It is in these areas that I shall try to say a word about our common concerns.

So I am not a librarian. I am a sciolist. A sciolist is a person who knows a lot of things and knows them all badly. As Simeon Stylites observed in the *Christian Century* some thirteen years ago: "If a man knows a lot of things badly, he will have a lot more fun than the timid soul who never strays beyond the confines of what he knows perfectly. A man who does a lot of things badly is well rounded, in contrast to the specialist who is sharp as a needle, and just as narrow." So I am a sciolist, and a happy one.

It is happy for all of us to assemble at the University when a true university purpose is being celebrated. It is happy and appropriate that there are no special distresses of the likes of two, three and four years back. Of course, not all of our university friends suffered those pangs and throes. You perhaps know the story of one of the women's colleges at Oxford. It seems that at a faculty tea the subject of campus unrest in the United States came up. The question was asked, were there any similar signs at Oxford? One Senior Fellow responded: "I find many of our students cutting across the grass instead of using the paths."

We really should say a word about libraries. My references must needs

be substantially in terms of the New York Public Library, not just to toot its horn, but because it is what I know. I cannot attempt to give you a complete description, but let me offer a quantitative glimpse:

Some 3,000 people employed
Some 83 branches, 26 research divisions
Budgets of \$33,000,000 +
Entries in some 3,000 languages and dialects
17,000,000 cataloged and processed entries in the research
divisions

In Guinness record book fashion I could continue for some time, in fact, let me give you a Guinness entry: “The largest non-statutory library in the world is the New York Public Library (founded 1895) on Fifth Avenue, New York City, with a floor area of 525,276 square feet. The main part of the collection is in a private research library which has 4,666,326 volumes on eighty miles of shelves, 9,000,000 manuscripts, 120,000 prints, 150,000 phonograph records and 275,000 maps. There are also 81 tax-supported branch libraries with more than 3,231,696 books and 4,000,000 pictures.” The statistics aren’t quite correct, but they are indicative.

So I preside over a grand bureaucracy. With some frequency I think fondly of James Boren, founder of the National Association of Professional Bureaucrats. Boren is the father of creative bureaucracy. His advice, when facing big policy decisions, is “When in charge, ponder. When in trouble, delegate. When in doubt, mumble. Then refer the whole problem to a coordinating committee for review.”

The attention span of most human beings is measured in seconds, not even minutes, so by the numbers and not yet having said anything, I have lost most of you. So I repeat the fact that I am not a professional librarian, yet I am associated with a library which has local, state, regional, national and international functions and participations. Why am I associated with such a library? Our trustees have established a counterpart of the structure now used by many universities. I speak of the chancellor-president structure of, for example, New York University and the University of Rochester right here in New York State. We have a president and a director. This allows us a form of Davis-Blanchard approach, *i.e.*, Mr. Outside and Mr. Inside. For purposes of real function and of ritual, it allows us two principals. All this can look lovely on paper, but that matters little if the chemistry of the people is too reactive. In our instance it works, or at least I think so. Mr. Cory, the Director of the Library, might have a different version.

I spoke of this structural parallel to the university. In one way we far outdistanced our university friends. We were far ahead of them in the development of operating deficits too large to conceal or eradicate. So we have been coping with plunging dollar problems for a far longer period, and

with about as much success. In fact, I remain humbly conscious of the comment which appeared in a piece about Erik Erikson: "That people do not know how to succeed is bad enough, but the worst is that they do not know how to fail."

Many of you know, I dare say, of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science. As I have read and pondered the panoply facing this commission, I am stunned, for the word library is no longer a generic word. It has become very imprecise, for the range legitimately contemplated under libraries is wide and incredible, and not at all well known. The word is as imprecise as that lovely and much used descriptive, post-secondary, as in post-secondary education. Today I emphasize the fact that we are dedicating a special kind of library; a university library which must serve undergraduate and research constituencies. Libraries in the very general sense are related, but I emphasize that in shapes and varieties they exceed Mr. Heinz's 57. Research libraries are quite special and apart, and there are wide differences among them. The New York Public Library, for example, has varieties of special descriptions attaching to it: noncirculation of materials in the research libraries; single copies of all of its entries, no multiple copies; a special classification system; and very special definitions, for example, we describe rare books as those published on the Continent before 1600, in the British Isles before 1620, and in the United States before 1820. This is a bit unusual.

In the body of these remarks I am mindful that a good Calvinist typically makes three points in his exposition. Since this university was Methodist by extraction, and since I am an Episcopalian by conviction, I choose to do violence to the trinitarian approach – I elect four points. I am mindful we have been in a vogue of pass/fail, that in earlier days F had a distinct and unpleasant connotation, despite which fact my four points are F-associated. I am also aware that 4F had a special connotation, albeit less now that we are by definition, if not in practice, shut of a draft army and Southeast Asia involvements.

My points as they relate to research libraries are these:

Function
Friends
Funding
Future

As to function, it strikes me that much is clear even to the layman. Particularly in a university context, the primary function must be to relate to curricular needs and to defined research needs of the faculty. Guidelines are essential, just as is review of guidelines. Access is of the essence, not necessarily always possession. Distinctly in a research library, certain collections must be special, unique, comprehensive. In these times the squirrel instinct must be shunned. Intelligent turndowns are as important as gladsome acceptances, with respect to gifts and materials.

I think all of us are acutely aware that in the instance of substantial

libraries, whether they be university associated or independent, full and regular disclosure is mandatory, very particularly so in the instance of institutions with any depository aspects, in the instance where any public dollars are involved, in the instance where private constituencies are importuned for dollars. Concealment, or as we should currently call it, Watergating, is simply not tolerable.

I have emphasized the need of guidelines and review of guidelines. It is well to bear in mind the words of Sidney Smith: "All establishments die of dignity. They are too proud to think themselves ill or take a little physic." And I have the feeling that Mel Eggers, Warren Boes and I, along with a good company, must remember Brand Blanshard's adage, that there is enormous drudgery in everything worthwhile. Similarly, we can do worse than to recall the remarks of the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass* as she was speaking to Alice: "Now here you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that."

Function, I suggest, is a present and continuing concern.

The F number two – Friends, especially the capital F kind of Friends. I am especially glad today that our audience is lay, not professional, so I can be reasonably certain I am among friends.

Certain words, friends being one of these, quickly suggest opposites, as in friends-hostiles, peace-war, plenty-scarcity, civil liberty-constraint, wealth-poverty. Hostility does spring all too quickly to mind, for libraries do have hostiles: the harmful environment, dollar lacks, anti-intellectual hard-noses. But we are today among friends, and friends who can be and must be advocates, supporters, proponents of libraries.

The bulk of major research libraries has some form of friends organization, but the variations are wide. Whatever the form or organization, the need is there. Obviously there is a nexus between friends and funding levels, although funding is by no means the sole function of friends groups. The funding picture among research libraries is mixed – some cuts, some level (which with inflation means cuts), some increase. Over-all in 1970/71, members of the Association of Research Libraries suffered a gross drop of two million dollars in acquisition funds, in percentage terms two and one-half, this arrayed against an aggregate figure of some eighty millions of dollars.

The New York Public Library has had some form of friends organization since the thirties. In fits and starts, friends have made considerable difference in the quality of our library. Indeed, one of our greatest friends made one of our best collections available with funds to sustain it. George Arents was as great a friend of the New York Public Library as he was of Syracuse University. And in the past two years we have gone from about three thousand annual givers to more than eight thousand, while the annual contribution amount has moved from about \$750,000 to approximately \$3,000,000.

When Mary Hyde delivered a talk before the Friends of the Columbia Library on the occasion of their twentieth anniversary in 1971, she recorded the fact that more than one thousand friends groups exist in this country. Mrs. Hyde goes on to give a fascinating exposition on the subject of friends, the essence of which is that amorphous friends groups date from Oxford of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, while more formalized groups began in the twentieth century, the first clear identification being that of the Bibliotheque Nationale just before World War I.

There is much flowering which can, indeed, must occur. There is no better way to marry amateur bibliophiles and concerned citizens to libraries than through friends groups.

Now we must speak of life blood, and hope it is always red and life-giving: Funding. I suppose we can begin with two flip but cutting remarks. First, as some wag has remarked, the situation is critical, but not serious; and second, a non-profit institution is an organized appetite for expenditure. I am sure we all remember Samuel Gompers's comment in 1898 when he was asked what it was that Labor wanted: "More."

Our observations on funding might be divided into two parts. First costs; then sources of funding, both public or tax dollar and private.

As to costs, the problem is no different from that of your grocery bill. To stay level, acquisition costs gallup at annual rates exceeding ten percent. Serials are undoubtedly the worst acquisition problem in this sense. Additionally, research libraries tend to get quantities of materials from overseas; two devaluations have scarcely been helpful. My favorite illustrative example has to do with *Chemical Abstracts*, a *sine qua non* for any science collection. The cost of these rose 3,250 percent in the period of 1951 to 1971. In our library, for entirely valid and supportable reasons, it costs more to process a book than it does to acquire it.

Costs, then, have risen preposterously, so administrators have had to take steps, some already mentioned. The University of Minnesota recently asked all departments to come in with budgets at ninety-four percent of the previous year. Some institutions have imposed job freezes, others have mandated pay raises of no more than four percent as against a more ordinary six to eight percent. The point is, the crunch is real and here.

What about the income side? First, the public dollar. In the instance of our library there are city, state and national considerations, while in university libraries there are state and federal components. We must face realistically the budget lock-ins and constraints of each of the three public entities. As John Lindsay wrote in *Saturday Review*, welfare, debt service, salaries, and pensions comprise eighty-two percent of the New York City budget, and it is difficult to move any of these factors significantly.

When having a look at the public dollars, one must bear in mind the reality that politicians are not notorious for reading. You've heard the Al Smith story. A letter went to Albany when he was Governor, asking whether he had ever read the Horatio Alger books. A response came back from his

secretary, reading, "Governor Smith asked me to tell you that he never reads any books, and Alger's was among them." New York State has given reasonable support to local libraries, to systems, to the nine reference and research organizations, and as I write this, I think it fair to say there may be modest increases both this year and next.

Federal support to libraries, to cultural institutions in general, has been comparatively nonexistent. In the instance of the Arts, our government spends fifteen cents per capita as compared with two dollars and forty-two cents in West Germany, and two dollars per capita in both Austria and Sweden. Taxes are never a popular subject, but it is the case that in toto we are taxed less than any Western European people. Granted, of course, there are inequities. One is mindful of Colbert's comment: taxation is "the art of plucking the goose in such a way as to produce the largest amount of feathers, with the least possible squawking."

A comment about federal attitudes and libraries appeared in a piece by Walter Terry in which he was referring to the dance collection of the New York Public Library and the fact that it very nearly closed down. A writer from abroad commented, according to Terry, "Surely your government would not permit that to happen. Ah, but then, you don't have a king who cares, do you?"

I find the federal attitude and approach impossible and entirely troublesome under the current national leadership. There is proposed a preposterous cutback in federal funds for libraries and higher education, effective July 1, 1973. The proposed increases for the National Endowment for the Humanities and for the National Endowment for the Arts are praiseworthy, but the two actions are not equitable, that is, the cutting back on the one hand and the increasing on the other. One does have a bit of trouble with the flim-flam of a federal challenge grant of \$750,000, in return for which the recipient guarantees to raise \$1,500,000 by his own efforts, the federal announcement being a grant of \$2,250,000. *The New York Times* headline of March 21st is relevant: "Nixon's men: All work and no frills."

Once again, I believe friends and their influences are important. Perhaps we can combine these influences with judicious usages of the new technique of psycho-surgery which calls for destruction or removal of brain tissue to alter behavior. Richard Rovere wrote recently, in referring to the danger of the American conscience: "Some of this danger may recede when we have left Vietnam, but only if we direct our energies to the betterment of our own social order. As of now there is little evidence that we will do anything of the sort."

As to private fund sources, the comments are obvious and little needs saying. We all must cease our diffidence, and in the proportion to which we succeed, additional dollars will flow. Particularly in a university setting, one must remember the advice of a Yale president: "Be kind to your A and B students. Someday one of them will return to your campus and be a good

professor. Also be kind to your C students. Someday one of them will build you a library.” (The story, as I originally heard it, said science laboratory – I have taken poetic license.)

In concluding this third F, Funding, and in considering the times, I have come to pay considerable attention to the epitaph on the hypochondriac’s tombstone: “I told you I was sick.”

Fourthly, and finally, then, the Future, some considerable share of which I have already consumed.

There are quantities of ifs, but given considerable effort and reasonable dollops of the X factor which most of us call luck, there is a great future. Some of the identifiable factors are these:

1. The federal situation just now mentioned.

2. Institutional change. This is a quintessential factor. I suppose it is illustrated by the story of the lady who said, “You know, I have come to think it is perfectly all right to drink white wine with beef.” This factor involves abandonment of that cardinal sin, institutional pride. In a library sense, possession is increasingly inconsequential: access is the key. Thus the relationship of and the essential integration of major libraries is an absolute.

3. The employment and control of technology as it relates to libraries. This has to do with the factors of access, retrievability, integration of collections, collection guidelines, common bibliographic bases. There is already considerable involvement in this area. Your library is already enmeshed. The New York Public Library, to cite an example, has not had any catalog card entries for research library acquisition since January of 1972. All is contained in a dictionary book catalog produced by a computer, monthly, cumulatively. One of the “beware’s” in this complicated area is glossalalia—speaking in tongues. English is preferable.

In concluding, let me say just two things in addition to reiterating my pleasure at being among you.

First, the individual – you and I – does count. Our influences can be felt. As James Reston pointed out not long ago, the eighteen-year franchise and the extensive legal changes relating to ecology and the environment have come about largely because individuals cared and translated their concerns. Indeed, I say we must.

Second, and finally, I can do no better than quote a great American educational leader who has perceptively aided libraries:

In an imperfect world, peopled by imperfect men, our universities still remain the most hopeful of human institutions. They bridge the gap of years, joining young and old together in the enterprise of teaching and learning, receiving knowledge, sifting it, retaining what seems true, discarding what is false, and sending out year after year into the world a new breed to serve it and later to learn their turn from ‘the generations yet unborn.’

The writer is Nathan Pusey, sometime Harvard president, now head of the Mellon Foundation.