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The George Arents Library Award: A Recollection

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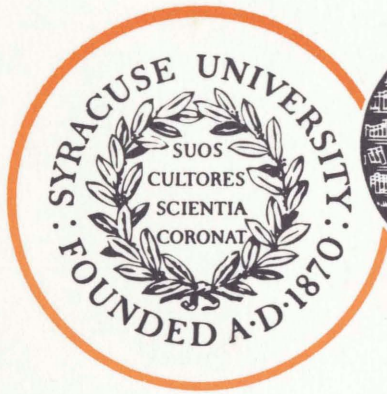
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The George Arents Library Award: A Recollection

by Thomas E. Bird

My fiancée called my attention to the note in the *Daily Orange*:

Applications for the George Arents Library Award for the student with the best personal library should be submitted by Thursday.

She was familiar with my trips to the University Book Store placing orders, picking up packages, and gleefully “filling in gaps.” What was required, the note said, was an essay telling about the focus and intent of the student’s book collection, and a description of the criteria which had been used in assembling it. A panel of judges, chosen from members of the faculty, would inspect the finalists’ submissions *in situ*. At the time I was a lower senior, a major in Russian/Soviet Area Studies, with materials on Russian history in my library numbering about five hundred titles.

What the core faculty of my interdisciplinary major shared in common was a penchant for providing their classes with rich bibliographies. Kenneth I. Dailey, Sophia Gourevitch, W. W. Kulski, Albert Menut, Warren B. Walsh — all saw to it that we were plied with lists of reference tools and standard titles necessary for serious research. (For the most part, these were superior in selection and utility to the reading lists I was given in graduate school.)

One blustery afternoon in early March, Professor William Hotchkiss of the History Department rang the doorbell of our home in Oneida, came in with a diffident murmur, and proceeded to examine the titles of the books in the cases with which my father had lined our living room. My library at that time consisted of a classical repertory of Russian histories.

I heard nothing more about the panel’s deliberations. Later, an invitation arrived at the Tau Delta Phi house informing me of the annual scholastic achievement dinner scheduled for Watson Dining Hall. Even then, the thought did not strike me that the invitation represented anything more than another end-of-senior-year function to which, I assumed, I was being invited as a member of the Men’s

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Student Government cabinet. My puzzlement increased during the awards presentation segment of the evening when Chancellor Tolley called me to the podium. Only when he handed me the medal and an envelope did my application of several months before, Professor Hotchkiss' visit, and the award fall into place. (The envelope, incidentally, contained a check for \$100 which I took to the University Book Store the next day and applied on my book bill!)

The Arents medal is one of my favorite possessions because of the several people with whom it is associated in my memory:

Ivan Mestrovic, who designed it during his tenure at Syracuse University, as artist-in-residence, and whom I had come to know through my dear friends, Professor and Mrs. W. W. Kulski. Last November I fulfilled an ambition of many years by stopping at Mestrovic's home-studio-museum in Split, Yugoslavia on my way home from testifying at the Conference on Cooperation and Security in Europe at Belgrade.

A. E. Johnson, Syracuse's poet-in-residence, who penned the inscription on the medal, "Books — the Soil of the Spirit." Dean Charles C. Noble had introduced me to Professor Johnson at the end of my freshman year and we had become fast friends.

William P. Hotchkiss, historian and raconteur extraordinaire, under whom I was privileged to study European history and with whom I shared a passion for the railroads of Central New York.

And finally, *Dr. William P. Tolley*, during whose administration I served for three years as a member of the loyal opposition in the M.S.G. cabinet.

Since graduation I have continued to add to my holdings, abetted by stints in two graduate schools and by teaching at three universities. My working library is now in the fields of Russian literature and Slavic linguistics, but what sustains my claim to the titles of bibliophile and "small" collector are two amassments of Festschriften, one honoring eminent Slavic philologists and a second, dedicated to religious figures in the Byelorussian, Russian, and Ukrainian communities.

Our children are both infected with the dangerous virus of bibliophilia — Matthew David collects *sets* — especially those relating to arms, armor, and military history; Lisa Bronwen collects *authors* — particularly of American and British historical novels. My wife, Mary Lynne, who sings with the Bel Canto Opera Company, has staked a claim to the bookcases in our living room and adds regularly to her collection of libretti and opera history.

We have moved twice in the past ten years, each time, in the final analysis, because our books needed more room. I have often reflected that my beloved wife, patient, but perhaps somewhat less of a bibliophile than her husband, may occasionally have twinges of regret at having called my attention to that notice about a prize for book collecting in the *Daily Orange* in the autumn of 1955.