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# AGAINST THE GRAIN[1]

Six or seven years ago, I began a quiet campaign to alert the trustees of the Folger Library that their eminent collection of special collections was well on the way to becoming what I called "road kill on the information highway." Until that time, I had stood back and watched my colleagues in the independent research libraries invest large numbers of very scarce dollars in online cataloging, the attendant costs of retrospective conversion, and the cascading expenses of hardware and software purchases and upgrades. For quite a while, it had been clear to me that it was not in our institution's best interests to try to be a frontline player in this exhausting and expensive game. On the other hand, I recognized that a time would come when there would be a meeting point between the escalating expectations of our readers and the improving quality and declining costs of the inescapable technology.

Folger's librarians and I had been keeping our heads well down in the sands blowing around this issue for a long time. Ostriches are not stupid, merely peculiar. Once in a while, we stole a peek at what was going on and realized we were not ready to play. But we also saw the rest of the flock moving toward an ever-receding horizon. The nice thing about being an ostrich is that after you have decided to go someplace, you can move along at a good clip. That, I believe, is the main difference between the ostrich and the dodo. For us, the moment of convergence came in about 1994, when several

1. Keynote address presented to the semiannual meeting of the American Research Libraries Association in Kansas City, Missouri, on May 13, 1999. Thanks to Karen Gundersheimer, Richard Kuhta, and Anne E.B. Coldiron for helpful comments.

tendencies became unmistakable: It became clear that (1) our younger readers and research fellows were no longer accustomed to, let alone adept at, using a card catalog; (2) the cost of buying, making, checking, and filing catalog cards was escalating, whereas the cost of computer-based processing had plummeted; and (3) as the large library software market was nearing saturation, software manufacturers were discovering a new niche in smaller, special collections institutions and were competing for market share.

At that point, we lifted up our heads, shook off the sand, and started running. Some of the older birds in our aviary, looking at what seemed to be a mirage shimmering in the distance, realized that the journey would be too long and hard and decided to step aside in favor of younger ones. The new generation, together with some holdovers, decided to move along together in a collective and collaborative process and began to plan for the trip. The goal was to introduce huge changes in the way the Folger worked while preserving its traditional culture of attentive reader services, great civility, and extraordinary care of the objects entrusted to us. The transition from paper to OPAC and from old-fashioned rare books librarianship to integrated, state-of-the-art collections management has been rapid and practically seamless. Staff and readers alike appear to be very happy with the new technologies, anticipate further change without apprehension, and express no nostalgia for the good old days.

Why, then, are we worried? The answer is that in relation to technological change in the internal library environment, we are not worried. Or at least we are not particularly worried about the kinds of things that would be on our minds if Folger were part of a larger research library, rather than a freestanding institution. We sometimes become anxious about how we will manage to pay for things we need to do, but that is universal. Places such as the Folger, the Newberry, the Morgan, and the Huntington do not have alumni to turn to; our donor bases are not replenished annually by a new crop of real or potential loyalists. But we also do not have to answer to a central development office or take our place on somebody else's list of priorities. Therefore, independent research libraries tend to be less agitated by all of the issues that university-based special collections people pose in their internal deliberations. For many of these are, by and large, pecking-order issues. That is to say, there is a special kind of double bind in the big academic research libraries that we in the independent research library community do not share. On the one hand, special collections staff members in university libraries tend to feel out of the loop, marginalized in all sorts of ways. At the same time, they tend to be perceived by regular staff as especially privileged souls, living in elegant enclaves and largely freed from the pressures of day-to-day librarianship. To change these perceptions would be a worthy goal, but I think that in many institutions, it also would require changing some of the underlying realities. From a special collections perspective, I might put it this way: If my library were, by some quirk of fate, to be part of one of your libraries, I would indeed have some worries not similar to my normal range of problems.

I have been in academic life for forty years and have spent a large portion of that time in special collections, here and abroad. I have worked in a few sumptuous places, where readers are pampered and nurtured. But I also have worked in places where you could only find a book by searching through handwritten catalogs compiled in the eighteenth century, where the guy with the key was not going to be around for two or three days, and where you could look at only two or three items per day (and if they did not pan out, you would be out on the street at 9:30 a.m. with the rest of the day at leisure). Aside from a few professorial prima donnas, people who use special collections are not spoiled. They adapt well to unusual hours, quirky catalogs, below-par light and heat, and all sorts of security measures. For them, such collections provide unique opportunities for learning and discovery. But I realize that we who use and staff these collections are a minority within a minority. To preserve and enhance such enterprises—to invest seriously in them—must seem to require, in the eyes of beleaguered university librarians, an act of faith rather than rational policy.

I would argue against that view because I am totally convinced that America's major research libraries, the great and the not-so-great, can only benefit—and benefit substantially—from a serious, ongoing investment in their special collections. I do not claim that the benefits would be apparent in the short term; but so far, most university managers have not had to adhere to the quarterly time lines of corporate America. We all know that the special enclaves of big university libraries have a unique sort of cachet. The trustees are in town and it is time they looked at the library after a few years of neglect, so toward the end of their day they get the tour of the new wing, a peek at the latest servers with the IT team, the recently named student computer facility. Then it is time for the reception. Off they go to special collections, where cocktails and hors d'oeuvres are laid out at one end. At the other, a few nervous curators huddle to show off some of the high spots and make sure the drinks are parked at a safe distance from the treasures. As the conviviality grows, the provost or maybe even the president stops by and brief words are spoken. The director of libraries or even the head of special collections may get to make a cameo presentation, and then the whole gang is off to the dinner, where the trustees congratulate one another on their library's unique blend of high technology and bibliophilic riches. "I wish I had the time … ," one of them says ruefully, the phrase trailing off, and heads nod around the table.

This tableau can be found all over the land. It signifies the special collection as an emblem—or, to revert to the outmoded seventies' term, a signifier—of a library's (and a university's) distinction; but it also is, in its way, dismissive. This is the special collection as skybox. The playing field, where the real action is, is elsewhere. That assumption spreads very quickly in an institution and can even be unconsciously appropriated into the self-perception of librarians. Consider, for example, the terms in which funding for special collections are presented in some of the working papers for this meeting:

"How does one justify the continued growth of a rare books collection when enough money is not available for critical science periodicals." Ah yes, the science journal is critical; the missing letter from Roethke to Lowell, that nice illuminated Book of Hours, or the journal of an early Swedish settler, maybe they should wait. A more neutral way of putting the same question might be: "What can we do to limit our costs for scientific journals, with their three- to six-month shelf life and their extortionate profits, so that we can continue to build that part of our holdings that will serve as a resource for generations to come?" Why should anyone have to justify collection building? That is a core purpose of any library worthy of the name. Special collections are easy to patronize and easy to marginalize, especially when choosing between a multitude of needs and goals.

Over the past few years, the research library community has become acutely aware of some of the implications of the information revolution that were quite unclear at the beginning. Perhaps the most profound of these implications is the democratization of access to printed materials through digitization and the downloading potential of the Internet. That process has in theory, and increasingly in practice, leveled the playing field of research libraries. In the interesting report entitled *Scholarship, Instruction, and Libraries at the Turn of the Century,* published by the Council on Library and Information Resources this past January, the five reporting task forces noted: "The trend towards collections which resemble one another to the detriment of amassing collections of unique material, manuscripts, archives, and rare books, was recognized as a threat to the continued success and growth of scholarship and teaching in North America."[2] The report calls for a reduction in duplication, or "overlap." This argument has its analog in policy debates that rage from time to time in the hospital world, as to how many scanners or trauma centers are needed within a given region; and it is an equally important issue for librarians to resolve. What

2. See especially pp. 2–3, 14–16, and 28–29.

we are seeing, and what I believe we should plan assiduously to avoid, is the creation of what might be termed "MacLibraries," institutions so naturally inclined to replicate one another's holdings that in the end there remains no significant difference between them.

Every library director wants her or his library to be great and preferably better than most, if not all, of the others. But that is both a practical and logical impossibility. It moves from impossibility to nightmare when one adds in the demands and purported "needs" of faculty. In my experience, which includes seventeen years as a professor and fifteen years of directing a research library, I have often seen how both helpful and narrowly self-serving the suggestions and/or demands of my faculty colleagues can be. (I do not necessarily exclude myself from the charge of misdirected acquisitiveness). My conclusion is that though faculty interests and ideas should always be considered, a knowledgeable librarian will almost invariably be there first and have made a more judicious selection. Moreover, although I have known dozens of professors who moved to new places for reasons relating to salary, teaching load, leave policy, availability of graduate students, research support, quality of life, partner's employment, and other factors, I have known only one who left her university because of dissatisfaction with the library's collecting policy. That library, I hasten to add, was not one of the nifty fifty or sixty members of the American Research Libraries Association.[3]

That does not mean, however, that the issue does not affect the quality of life in important ways for students and faculty. For humanists, the presence of a vigorous special collections program may provide the same kind of attractions that lab space may hold for scientists. It can certainly make a difference in recruiting the best available faculty and graduate students. The existence of, and continuing investment in, special collections says, in

3. In the discussion following this talk, a librarian reported another case, this time from an ARL institution. The phenomenon still appears rare, although it may be more common and less frequently reported than I had assumed.

effect: "This institution cares about the discrete, the unique object of study. It honors and seeks to support basic research in fields other than the laboratory sciences. We have identified certain subjects in which we intend to amass deep resources for study. We understand, and we value, the kinds of intellectual effort that students and faculty may commit to investigating these materials. For our part, we are committed to preserving them, adding to them from time to time as opportunities arise and making them available to those who wish to consult them." If a library can take that position, and mean it, it can and will build a special collections program that enhances the quality of the entire institution.

Of course, special collections present special problems. Certainly one problem is quality control. This difficulty often presents itself when items or entire collections are offered by way of gift or bequest. It is very easy to accumulate a great deal of unique, but apparently trivial, material in this way and thus to incur curatorial and other obligations and costs that can encumber an institution well into the future. This hazard can be easily avoided by having in place an accessions policy with explicit criteria and then sticking to it. Proposed gifts also should be scrutinized for conditions. Restrictions on use, limits on disposal, and requirements that gifts be exhibited or maintained in certain ways should almost never be accepted. Generally speaking, a good gift is an unrestricted gift, but all gifts should undergo a rigorous costs-benefits analysis.

A second problem is adequate staffing. This means, in the first instance, that a special collections director must be not just a well-trained librarian and an effective administrator, but also an accomplished practitioner of donor relations able to articulate the mission of the collection and to attract people to its support. University development offices can become rather territorial in these matters. They need to be taught—probably by directors of library systems—that a prospective donor who finds himself drawn to an acquisitions endowment or a major manuscript purchase is unlikely to underwrite the new chair in gender theory or applied ergonomics, let alone the electronic scoreboard or the next coat of astro turf.

A third problem of special collections is conservation. You can read the recent reports of all sorts of library-related committees and task forces without finding a word about the massive task of saving deteriorating rare books and manuscripts. I am not speaking here about preservation, a laudable and needed enterprise to which much (but probably not enough) time, money, and effort are devoted. My concern is what librarians call "item-level conservation," an activity that was characterized somewhat dismissively in a recent report as "often based on the model used by museums."[4] But, whether we like it or not, libraries with special collections are, in fact, museums. The unquestionable need to find ways and means of preserving entire classes of material—embrittled paper, film, audio material—in no way absolves us of responsibility for conserving the unique object, and it is distressing that the pendulum has swung so far in the opposite direction in recent years. Think about the ethics, for want of a better word, of buying *new* old material if you are not doing all you can to maintain the *old* old material already in your possession. Most special collections in university research libraries enjoy acceptable temperature and humidity controls, but relatively few such institutions have a qualified conservator of a functioning conservation laboratory. Yet, when it comes to rare material, it is far easier and cheaper to conserve an existing collection than to build a new one.

A fourth problem, one that will be felt more keenly as time goes by, is the diminishing supply of appropriate materials to collect. Here, technology is the enemy, for we are fast moving into a time when there will be no more literary manuscripts; no drafts of poems; no letters between author and agent, editor, lover, friend, or spouse; no private musings by

4. Abby Smith, *The Future of the Past: Preservation in American Research Libraries* (City, state: Council on Library and Information Resources, Commission on Preservation and Access, 1999), 3.

diplomats; no scrawled journals chronicling voyages or diseases or transformative experiences of music or painting. Where have all the flowers gone? Into e-mail, everyone. This is sad, but inevitable. It poses a problem for the collective memory of our species, but also for the future of collecting. Still, as much as a half-century of fruitful collecting may lie ahead, and, as always, alert librarians will be competing with the savvy private collectors who are doing it. The wise institution will support this enterprise, and managers will think long and hard about the goals and purposes of their special collections. Moreover, they will take care to identify and set aside materials in their general collections that have become, or show the potential to become, more than normally worth preserving. We can all tell tales about such works wafting away, in whole or in part, from the open stacks that over the years have provided such magnificent hospitality to friends and foes of scholarship alike.

Now, you can have the best-laid accessions plan in the world, but this kind of collection building is by its very nature somewhat unsystematic and thus may seem frustrating or even dilettantish in comparison to the kind of methodical effort that can be applied to the accumulation of modern reference materials. Special collection building is of necessity opportunistic and sporadic. Dealers and donors suggest items or whole collections, bequests appear to be rejected or accepted, and curators scan catalogs, review faxes, prowl the aisles at book fairs. Once in a while, you find something. But that something, which may be of very slender monetary value, may end up turning the lights on for a student doing an undergraduate thesis or may provide the keystone for an exhibition.

Here is a modest example. Not long ago, I received a package in the mail containing a number of documents and books that belonged to a man named Alfred Hiller. As a child, I had met this man a few times and admired him very much. Our meetings took place because when he was already in his fifties, he married my aunt Lotte, who also was middle-aged.

They lived in San Francisco, and we were in Philadelphia, so we saw each other only on a few special occasions. After a few years, Lotte died, and some time thereafter, Uncle Alfred remarried. The package came from his stepson from that marriage, an eminent professor at Brown University, who remembered my early relationship with Alfred.

The box contained a number of items that might be of some interest to a historian working on twentieth-century German history up through the 1930s, including a birth certificate showing that Alfred was born in Mussbach on April 28, 1895; his military passes from the First World War; a bound copy of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Würzberg; family prayer books and other volumes; a certificate dated 1935 and issued in the name of the Führer, accompanying a medal for Alfred's service in the war; and from the following year, his Certificate of Registration as an alien in Britain, indicating the dates of his arrival and eventual departure for the United States. Most of this was the stuff of a family archive, or perhaps a museum or library documenting the migrations of the Nazi era; but one or two items were of broader interest. One was a pamphlet, the size and shape of a passport, bound in plain black cloth. I opened it with no particular sense of anticipation and found it to be a German and Hebrew prayer book published in 1914 for the use of Jewish soldiers in the field.[5] Alfred, who, according to his military documents, had been at Metz and Verdun, had carried this little volume throughout the war. He then had kept it carefully during the year of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era, and still later during his life as a refugee and, finally, a naturalized citizen of the United States.

Given its ephemeral and situational character, I think it is safe to say that this is a fairly scarce book, especially as it is in what a bookseller might call "near-mint" condition. From the point of view of preservation, one could see an argument for reproducing it in a different format because the pages show signs of acidic discoloration and early-stage embrittlement. But the text

5. *Feldgebetbuch fur die judischen Mannschaften des heeres* (Berlin, 1914).

itself is commonplace, with standard prayers for daily life, the Sabbath, and the festivals; and it is difficult to imagine a research enterprise that would be damaged by not having this particular version of those texts. It is the object itself that is of interest because it represents and objectifies one of our century's great ironies: the decorated Jewish veteran of the German army who survived the trenches and was subsequently lucky to escape with his life from the nation for which he had put that life on the line. No microfilm or fiche or card, no digitized version, nor online facsimile conveys the power of the authentic object. And increasingly, in a world of virtual reality, our students and we ourselves will need that contact with what is left to us of irreducible authenticity.

Years ago, I used to take the students in my undergraduate seminars over to the rare book room in the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania to show them a few early modern sources and give them a sense of what historians actually see and use. It made a big impression on them to be able to hold in their hands a letter by a fifteenth-century Florentine notary recording some minor real estate transaction or a printed letter of indulgence issued to a German Catholic—probably soon to be a Protestant—on the eve of the Reformation. There is no way this experience can be genuinely replicated in virtual reality. Nowadays, when I take visitors into the rare book vaults at the Folger, I generally show them a printed Cicero that belonged to King Henry VIII. When I open it to the page where the young prince scrawled "This boke is mine. Prince Henry," people tend to be moved. They report the same kind of reaction when we let them touch and hold the charming little prayer book given him by one of his unfortunate wives, Anne of Cleves. This is something people do not forget. They will not derive that experience from the online version, if and when it appears.

Most people in the world of special collections librarianship are swept up in the dizzying whirl of technological change. They have seen the benefits of the great online bibliographical databases, the efficiencies attainable through OPACS, the utility of the MARC standards, the productive interactions available through the Web, and all the rest of it. Increasingly, too, they are attracted to—perhaps I should say seduced by—the potential of digitization. The attractions are obvious. Electronic surrogates paradoxically help us save fragile objects while at the same time enabling practically everyone to make use of them. For the first time, we can be protective without appearing to be possessive. Time and space disappear as limiting factors in the use of collections. Grants can be had for attractive digitization projects. The means for transporting the images are in place.

None of the problems we face here—copyright, unauthorized and fair use, watermarking, controlling print options, permissions and fees, lack of standards, path of migration, issues of permanence—will turn out to be insurmountable. The attractions of the medium are too great for that. So the question becomes one of using these tools effectively as educators, now that it seems that we can have it all. What happens when there are not just one or two physical doors into a library, but thousands or millions of virtual doors as well? The research library must surely face the challenge of deciding what to do about the public, defined as potential users outside the relatively private circle of enrolled students and employed faculty and staff. Will we recognize a mission to provide access to the larger community, and if so, under what conditions and with what limits? These are large policy issues, and I offer no firm views about them except to notice them looming ever larger on the horizon.

I want to conclude this essay with some reflections about how great libraries might use their resources more effectively to support students in their research. Here, the potential of electronic surrogates seems vast. Faculty leadership (and collaboration with librarians) is critical in introducing electronic surrogates to students not as the end source but, rather, as first exposure. That is to say, we should take full advantage of the opportunity to provide browsing without handling as the initial stage of a research effort. The new media also provide efficient means for introducing students to different formats—maps, manuscripts, painting and sculpture, letters, diaries, account books (although the fifteen-inch screen with its multiple pixels fails to convey the essential differences between these classes of objects). Faculty as well as students may benefit from bringing librarians more directly into the curriculum because few professors, especially among the older ones, are as current in their knowledge of technological developments as the information professionals on library staffs. Libraries also can promote collaboration between scholars and student assistants by providing electronic access to the data the faculty member is using. In all these ways, the printed or manuscript page can migrate to remote places in new formats. But we must never lose sight of the investment needed for conserving that page, nor of the desirability of fostering a reverse migration, that of the student eventually finding his or her way from the virtual to the actual reading room. If and when something better than that turns up, I trust someone will let me know.