George Pierson on Libraries and Oyster Shells

I am pleased to be asked to talk about my long association with the Yale Library. It gives me for the first time a chance to say thank you to all the librarians over the past 65 years who have been of personal and professional help to me here. In that time I have come to realize how important Yale’s librarians are in the nourishment of Yale scholarship.

I first encountered the Library as a freshman in the year 1922. I was innocent, in a hurry, a little brash, and I’d never seen such an enormous card catalogue, with its cards, its little (Dexter) half-cards, and the mysterious numbers. Presently a woman came to me, and the first thing she did was remind me of my manners. Then she heard my frustrations, gravely and courteously, and showed me what to do. I hope Yale’s librarians, like Mrs. Ingersoll, will always try to teach demanding freshmen to be polite.

Gradually I began to encounter other fascinating characters who were not librarians but who seemed addicted to frequenting the place: “Lefty” Lewis (baron Walpole) or the polymath scholar Fred Pottle, or Chauncey Brewster Tinker who was everywhere and all-seeing with his single eye and some treasure under his arm for the Rare Book Room he was developing. In fact, some of the most rewarding gifts of such a great library are the unique individuals one encounters there. In more recent years, one such for me was Alexis Rannit.

Inevitably, of course, I met Yale’s librarians. My first was Andrew Keogh, a cheerful, perky little Scot with a crisp dry humor. I can remember many hours lying on the floor of the room next to his office in Linsly. I was trying to piece together Alexis de Tocqueville’s travels and intellectual experiences in Jacksonian America, from his fourteen diaries and his letters home, by fitting the alphabetical and topical diaries into the log of his great journey as revealed by his chronological diaries and letters: all entered in parallel columns on a long roll of brown paper, the curly end weighted down, top and bottom, by books. It was a wonderful opportunity for a young instructor, made possible by a librarian’s generosity and understanding.

Another librarian whom I got to know very well indeed and was very fond of was James Tinkham Babb—Jim Babb, the tall cowboy from Idaho, a left-handed tennis player, a wonderful man’s man, gruff but with the warmest heart. It’s been well said that he was a collector of collectors who then gave their books to the Beinecke. He helped me—and Yale—enormously once when we discovered that the working manuscript of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America was for sale. I could not find anyone to help me buy it. He found his friend Rabinowitz willing, and it is now the jewel of Yale’s Tocqueville and Beaumont collection, which itself is the greatest in the world concerning their American trip.

Another thing I should like to mention is the gift of space. Since I was first appointed to write Yale’s history, I have been endowed with a succession of offices in Sterling Library which have enormously benefited my work. As a non-librarian, I suppose I’ve spent more time in the Yale Library than most. Too much of that time, I regret to say, has been spent in the elevators. I am myself guilty of inventing the story of the two visiting foreign scholars who died of starvation on their way between the second and third floors.

Thinking about living here, I came to the thought of what a library stands for. I don’t think it’s too much to say that a library is, for the modern world, a symbol of civilization. The Romans had their roads and their aqueducts and their great walls and a milestone now and again on the roads to show how far from Rome you were. Since the invention of printing, modern man has built his great houses of books. They have been as important as his microscopes and steam engines, for they have preserved the things man has found and prevented their being forgotten.
I am persuaded that the community, the city, the state that has a great library is in some measure protected from ignorance, from going backwards, from being provincial, from being too narrow, from being too dictatorial. There is such varied learning, so many discoveries about man and the world that are preserved in a library better than anywhere else. So the University Library—and a great university library such as ours—makes one humble and hopeful at the same time. For it is not a place of the dead. It is a place where the dead have stored their jewels, their great discoveries, their thoughts, where we can—if we are lucky and if we are humble and if we are intelligent—perhaps add something to that treasure we call civilization.

Now I would like to offer two little bits of intellectual discovery about Yale as a way of saying thank you. When John Davenport came to New Haven and tried to found a college, the town and the jurisdiction of New Haven kept promising that when he should get a college, it would be given the income from the oyster-shell field. I offer you two little bits of wampum from that oyster-shell field. The first is this. I had not fully realized that when Yale moved from being a collegiate school in Saybrook to being a college in New Haven in 1716, it moved partly because Saybrook was not very satisfactory but partly because there had been an enormous shipment of books sent by Jeremy Dummer from England. This forced the trustees to build a building to house the books. Where should they build it: in Saybrook, which was too remote and not very hospitable, or in Hartford, which was showing belated signs of interest, or in New Haven which wanted them? New Haven won the competition for the collegiate school and a serendipitous gift sent over by Elihu Yale helped them finish the building which turned Yale from a non-residential school into a real residential college—with a library on the second floor. So, the early Yale Library compelled Yale to become a real college and to come to New Haven.

My second bit of intellectual oyster-shell may surprise you. I have been trying to find out how Yale was founded—by act of the Connecticut Assembly in 1701, or by the ritual giving of books by the ten ministers in Branford perhaps a year earlier. And in trying to decipher the mystery from almost totally insufficient evidence, I have been led back to New Haven’s beginnings. Reverend John Davenport, as is well known, wanted a grammar school and college, for he believed that the ideal commonwealth—New Haven—needed church, state, and college: all three. He got pledges from the town and the neighboring towns in the New Haven jurisdiction, and he got a bequest from his old friend Edward Hopkins, former governor of the colony who had gone back to England. But not enough people in New Haven wanted the college as desperately as he did, and he made some political mistakes, and Connecticut jealously held up the Hopkins bequest. So finally only a grammar school was realized. The dream of a college had evaporated.

But not entirely. For in 1656, as Davenport was trying to start his college, his friend Governor Theophilus Eaton had given him for the college more than one hundred books. And when Connecticut absorbed New Haven, and John Davenport in discouragement and disappointment went back to Boston to die, he left the books, the town’s books, for what was to have been the University of New Haven. But the town had not yet built a library. So he left them in his own house with his son, who died. His son’s widow, Abigail Pierson Davenport, stayed on, and she kept the books until the town sent for them thirteen years after Davenport’s death in 1681. But the town still had no building or library, so they farmed the books out to two private parties. Then young James Pierpont came to New Haven to take Davenport’s pulpit; he boarded with Abigail Pierson Davenport in Davenport’s old house and heard from his landlady how the town had taken the books but still hadn’t done anything with them. So young James Pierpont, future leader of the founding ministers, bought the books back from the town in 1689, twelve years before the legislature authorized the Collegiate School. About half of those books can be found on our shelves today.

So my second bit of wampum—in return for a lifetime of welcome and friendly help—is that the Yale Library started in 1656; it is forty-five years older than Yale College. —GWP

"Jeremiah Dummer’s gift of books, 1714," is one of the panels from the nave of Sterling Memorial Library, representing scenes from the history of the Yale Library.
Undergraduates Win Collecting Prizes

This university’s existence is closely bound to the book, and each Spring the community celebrates that relationship in no small way by holding a competition. A prize is offered as an encouragement for undergraduates to collect books and to build libraries for their future pleasure and education.

The late Adrian Van Sinderen, ’10, a collector of some renown in his own right, established in 1957 two prizes: one of $350 for seniors and one of $250 for sophomores. The rules of competition are simple, rooted in a spirit meant to cultivate the classic aspects of book collecting, as well as tending to nurture the beginner. First consideration is given to discrimination and judgement in the selection of titles, rather than to numbers or their monetary value. An underlying purpose of the competition is to foster the idea of building collections characterized by unity of field or subject.

Any senior or sophomore who wishes to compete for these prizes is invited to submit an application listing their books with a one page statement explaining the nature and purpose of the collection and manner by which it was acquired.

The judging is carried out by a group which sounds more official than its purpose. It is called the “Van Sinderen Committee,” a mix from the Yale community of faculty, librarians, booksellers, collectors and students. The members bring to their service a long and varied experience of book collecting. They review the applications and do some preliminary grading in preparation for visits to the contestants’ rooms. The visits provide an opportunity to see the collections, ask some questions and possibly give some advice for future strategies.

A typical year’s competition will include collections of children’s books, science fiction, comic books, women’s studies and various aspects of the arts and sciences. Uncommon collections seen in recent years include books on Mormonism, cattle brands, the Olympics, Edward Gorey original drawings, antique maps and railroad time tables.

A motive not specifically stated in the contest literature, but often on the minds of the “Van Sinderen Committee” concerns the chance that their work will someday benefit the Yale libraries. As in the past, the book collecting experience and the encouragement given undergraduates during their college days can create new collectors. The Adrian Van Sinderen book collecting competition is part of the special link which connects books, collectors, and the library at Yale.

This year’s winners received their prizes at a lunch hosted by Mr. Richard Ballard of the Yale Co-op in mid-April. Gift certificates from the Co-op supplemented the Van Sinderen awards. The judges awarded the Sophomore Prize to Khristaan Villela (Morse College) for his collection of Meso-American anthropology, art history and archeology. Alexander Platt (Berkeley College) received the Senior Prize for his collection of modern American literature from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Senior William P. Connors (Morse College) received Honorable Mention for his collection of books on the history, doctrine, scripture and controversy of Mormonism. —HDK
New Data Bases Monitor Current Events

The Social Science Library has recently acquired access to two electronic information services which monitor current events. The Presidential Campaign Hotline monitors coverage of each day’s news from the presidential campaign. Coverage includes summaries of campaign news from newspapers throughout the nation such as the Boston Globe, the Los Angeles Times, the Des Moines Register, and the Orlando Sentinel as well as the more easily accessible New York Times. Campaign stories from network news programs are also summarized. The campaign offices of each candidate are allowed to issue brief stories, comments, and rebuttals, which are distributed unedited. Other important sections of the Hotline include summaries of the latest preference polls and discussions of issues by political analysts.

The Hotline maintains a database of its past releases so users can study coverage of candidates or issues retrospectively as well. The Hotline began coverage in November 1987 and plans to continue until March 1989 covering the campaign, the election and the transition to a new presidency.

Each morning a library staff member, using a personal computer, dials a local telephone number and connects to a computer in Virginia. That day’s Hotline is downloaded in about six minutes and stored on a diskette. The diskette is used to print a paper copy of the Hotline which is then filed at the Circulation Desk for public use. The electronic copy is kept as insurance against the loss or damage of the paper copy.

The Political Science Department has recognized the value of the Hotline by making a generous contribution to the subscription.

POLL, the Public Opinion Location Library, is another electronic information source for monitoring the attitudes of the American public. It has been developed by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research which is located at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. The Roper Center contains the results of more than 10,000 surveys conducted since 1936 including the Roper Polls, Gallup Polls, ABC News, Washington Post and other major surveys. Until POLL was developed access to this rich resource was limited. POLL now allows rapid retrieval of all questions on any topic and the responses of the public to those questions.

The database grows daily, both with very recent surveys and with progressive additions of older research. At the beginning of 1988, the database contained about 100,000 questions.

With a microcomputer, a modem and a telephone, the searcher calls a computer at the University of Connecticut. Using a simple search language, for example, “find word presidential and campaign” and “date after 12/31/87”, one quickly determines that there are 24 questions on the topic in the database. It is equally simple to display the questions on the screen or to download and print them. The cost of access to the database is included in the fee which the Social Science Library pays for membership in the Roper Center. — JLD

“Dr. Gall’s Lecture,” colored aquatint by Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827) in the exhibit on Medicine in British Caricature at the Medical Library. Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828) was an anatomist and physiologist whose ideas became the basis of phrenology, the “science” of determining mental faculties and character from the outer contours of the head.
Mellon Match for Preservation

University Librarian Millicent D. Abell recently announced that the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has given the Library $500,000 to match a portion of the grant given Yale by the National Endowment for the Humanities in January for the preservation of our European history collections. —SFR

Orbis Progress

Planning continues for Orbis, the Library’s automated system, which will provide an on-line catalog for Library users and support for the Library’s technical operations: acquisitions, cataloging, serials control and circulation. Provost William Nordhaus has given the system overall approval. In addition, he has appointed an Advisory Committee on Library Automation, chaired by Professor Jaroslav Pelikan, to provide broad policy advice on the implementation of Orbis.

The Library is working with staff from the Yale Computer Center and Management Information Services to make the online catalog available in early 1989. By that time 345 terminals will have been installed in Yale’s libraries. To support the terminals, electrical and telecommunications alterations to library facilities will begin soon. The software which forms the basis for all the automated functions is being tailored to serve the Yale community’s particular needs. Eventually readers will be able to search the Orbis on-line catalog from their offices and homes.

A group of librarians is preparing oral presentations and printed guides to introduce the users to the functions of the system and the enhanced opportunities for searching the catalog that Orbis will provide. Special training sessions for library staff will insure that users will be able to call upon knowledgeable people to assist them in using the system, just as they engage our librarians now when a catalog problem or information need arises.

When Orbis is available to the Yale community, there will be nearly 800,000 bibliographic records in the data base. Readers will be able to search for books by names, titles, subjects, words in titles and subjects, and shortened forms of words and names. The Library is committed to expanding this data base to include all of the books and serials in the Yale collections. The database will contain a record for every new book entering the stacks and eventually for the other 6,000,000 titles represented only in the various card catalogs. This transfer of older cataloging to the online catalog, known to li-

brarians as retrospective conversion, will take a considerable amount of time and money. Librarians have been planning what portions of Yale’s collections to convert in what order and what methods to use. The Pelikan Committee and the Library Advisory Committee will review these plans, and faculty members will have opportunities to advise the Library on the most effective course to take.

Just as 3" x 5" cards replaced the "half-sized" cards Professor Pierson mentions, Orbis will eventually supplant the paper catalog. The Library will not allow the card catalog to disappear, of course, until Orbis has proven itself to be at least as reliable as its predecessor.

—MARK

New Haven architect Henry Austin’s drawing of his gate for the Grove Street Cemetery appears in the exhibit in Sterling Library celebrating the 350th anniversary of the settlement of New Haven. The gate, in the Egyptian Revival style, was built in 1845.
Calendar of Exhibits

BEINECKE LIBRARY
Alexander Pope and His World
through August 5
The Medieval Book
August 15 through October 31

DIVINITY LIBRARY
Tracts and Catechisms
through May

MEDICAL LIBRARY
Patients, Practice, and the Profession: Medicine in British Caricature
through June

STERLING MEMORIAL LIBRARY
Celebrating New Haven's 350th (1638-1988)
through June
Art and the Wood Engravings of Bernard Brussel-Smith
July through September

NOTA BENE is published during the academic year to acquaint faculty, staff, and other users with the resources of the Yale libraries. Please direct comments and questions to Susanne Roberts, Editor, Bibliography Department, Sterling Memorial Library (432-1762).

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