

Towers

A newsletter for supporters of the University of Idaho Library

Spring 2005

Books on the Journey

With all the recent discussion about the viability of books and libraries, it is useful to observe that book publishers are weighing in on the discussion by printing more books. In 2003, the last year for which numbers are available, total U.S. book output jumped 19%, with 175,000 new titles and editions published. During the previous decade book publication increased by about a third, even as electronic formats were proliferating. In particular, there have been a number of books published within the past five or so years on books and their place in the modern world. Books about books are part of an age-old tradition, but it is interesting to examine their appearance now, just after the turn of the millennium, in the midst of the swing from

actual to virtual, from reading to viewing, from print to Web.

The ascendancy of the internet and the availability of so many things on the World Wide Web have for some years seemed to threaten the existence of books, and by extension, libraries. In California, where they are building new universities to meet the state's growing need for an educated work force, it was thought, even a decade ago, that electronic resources would make libraries unneces-



Library reading room, 1917. #1-201-2. Historical Photographs Collection. Special Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho.

sary. After the first new university opened to much acclaim it was discovered that faculty and students demanded printed resources, in addition to the electronic texts. Current planning emphasizes the centrality of the university library on the new campuses.

Engineer Henry Petroski explores the historical construction and engineering of libraries in his *The Book on the Bookshelf*. He relates how the information carrier (the codex, folded and bound sheets of paper, successor to the scroll) influenced the development of its place of storage (the library). He also discusses how the use of books impacted the rooms where they were used. The design of bookshelves and the rooms they are in is shown to respond to the needs of readers as those readers and the books they read became more numerous. His discussion of early libraries makes clear why the sixteenth century Duke Humfrey's library in Oxford is broken up into little cubicles defined by bookcases. When I was there conducting research on British travelers I had

“An ordinary man can...surround himself with two thousand books... and thenceforward have at least one place in the world in which it is possible to be happy.”

~Augustine Birrell

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From the Dean

If you picked up on the subtle hint in the feature article, you'd know that Terry Abraham plans to retire this summer after twenty-one years of service to the University of Idaho Library. Terry came to us from Washington State University and is the first of our heads of Special Collections and Archives to have professional certification in archival science.

Terry is well known in the state, region and nation for blending traditional librarianship, as reflected in the feature article, with the adoption of the computer as a tool for achieving the objectives of his department. Early on, he moved the calendaring of collections to the computer, and as the Internet came along, initiated an on-line guide—*Repositories of Primary Sources*—that directs the researcher to over five thousand websites that describe primary resources. He also transitioned the card file index of historical photographs to a computer database with thumbnails, now containing over 90,000 records.

Terry was also responsible for acquiring some of our most important archival collections, among them the Bunker Hill and associated mining records, and the Idaho Wilderness Archive, reflecting the long campaigns surrounding designated wilderness in the state.

He initiated the publication, *Towers*, that you're reading and has facilitated the publishing of our *Northwest Historical Manuscript Series*.

We wish him well as he transitions into a new phase of life. We're currently searching for his successor—not his replacement—because someone with his broad knowledge of state and regional culture, history, and personalities as well as his in-depth technical understanding can't be replaced.



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to search for a place to plug in my laptop; eventually I found an unused microfilm reader that I could temporarily dispossess from its outlet. Petroski provides a perfect discussion of the library as a constructed space for reading, learning, and scholarship.

Harvard librarian Matthew Battles provides a wonderfully capsulized overview of libraries from ancient times to the present in his *Library: An Unquiet History*. It is also a profound meditation on the nature and changing purposes of a library. Battles notes the many libraries that developed as centers of intellectual and ultimately political and economic power, something like today's technology incubators. He notes that in more recent periods libraries have been seen as one of the foundations of an educated citizenry; as a crucial element in nation-building (and nation-destroying, as in Bosnia and Iraq); and as cultural and community centers.

Nicholas A. Basbanes is a newspaper journalist with a nationally syndicated column on books and authors. In recent years he has moved from ephemeral newspaper prose to the magnificent solidity of books. He writes about books as cultural objects, as preservers of culture, as objects of desire, and as the source of some great stories. His trilogy, *A Gentle Madness, Patience & Fortitude*, and *A Splendor of Letters*, has been augmented by the more recent *Among the Gently Mad*. The first of the three volumes, *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books*, is about those who love books, some wisely and some not well. Among those characterized are the noted book-thief Stephen Bloomberg, who attacked both the University of Idaho and Washington State University libraries in the late 1980s. *Patience & Fortitude: A Roving Chronicle of Book People, Book Places, and Book Culture* continues his presentation of bookish people and places. Many would recognize Patience and Fortitude as the names of the two magnificent marble lions at the entrance to the New York Public Library. The two lions have recently been refurbished, repointed, and renewed. *A Splendor of Letters: The Permanence of Books in an Impermanent World* addresses books as cultural transmitters and how the written word lasts. The final volume, *Among the Gently Mad: Perspectives and Strategies for the Book Hunter in the Twenty-First Century*, draws on the other three to introduce the incipient book-collector to available resources and tools.

Basbanes is one who is optimistic about the survival of books, even as he uses his named Web site <<http://www.nicholasbasbanes.com/>> to publicize his books and lectures. Each has a different role to play, he avers. We are a long way from replacing the physicality of books and the experience of reading them with the glowing pixels on a computer monitor.

Requiem or Renaissance?

Growing up with books and becoming a lifetime reader must be some combination of genetics and environment. I don't recall that my parents were such enthusiastic readers as I became, but they did introduce me to books and libraries. The impact of books on readers has prompted more than one author to review his life and influences.

Paul Collins' *Sixpence House: Lost in a Town of Books* is part of the recent genre of packing up one's life and moving to Provence or Tahiti, save that he takes his young family to Wales, specifically Hay-on-Wye. The village of Hay (on the Wye River at the border between England and Wales) has

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Original library, 1892-1906. #1-201-28. Historical Photographs Collection. Special Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho.

become that still rare phenomenon of a book-town. There are a couple in France; Larry McMurtry's in Archer City, Texas (now apparently closing); and Nevada City and Grass Valley, California, two small towns about halfway between Reno and Sacramento; and Wigtown, Scotland. First, and pre-eminent is Hay-on-Wye. Others are opening up, hoping to match the effect: economic development through cheap rents in small town coupled with lots of books for sale.

For a person who loves to wander in used, second-hand, and rare-book stores, a book town like Hay is a real treat. Forty bookstores are huddled in a small village with all of a small village's foibles and eccentrics. Hay's chief eccentric is its bookstore "king," Richard Booth, whose book selling activities attracted more booksellers and additional renown. The King of Hay once seceded from the United Kingdom and printed his own passports. Paul Collins described working for Booth in the ancient Hay castle while he and his wife seek to buy Sixpence House, once a pub on the high street, now a decrepit and crumbling shell. At the end, they decide it is too much for them, and return to America where Collins hopes to write more books.

Collins' description of Hay, of Booth, and of the many booksellers and the piles of books, is absolutely true to my brief visit in the late 1990s. My wife and I flitted from shop to shop picking up bargains until we had quite a pile of books. Fortunately, one of the dealers, accustomed to this urge, offered a shipping service, and several months after our return we found a plastic burlap sack imprinted with Her Majesty's Mail on the front porch; our purchases from Hay had arrived.

In Michael Dirda's memoir, *An Open Book*, he writes about the impact of books and libraries as he was growing

up. "[H]ere then, are reminiscences about books, family and school, an evocation of the 1950s and 1960s in a midwestern steel town and, tangentially, a little guidance toward good reading for young people. Most of all, I wanted these pages to celebrate the joy that books brought to my young self and to record how I discovered them, what I felt, and how they shaped my character."

He wonders, however, if his experience can be extended to today's youth:

Mine, it now seems, may be the last generation to value the traditional bound book as the engine of education, culture and personal advancement. The future belongs to screens and keyboards. Though that may sound direly elegiac, I know people will always need stories and that any era's external packaging of them hardly matters: Oral formulas, scrolls, codices, paperbacks, e-texts – they all get the narrative job done. Nonetheless, what follows may often appear a kind of memorial, a minor monument to a time of softly turned pages, when the young entered libraries hungry for books to devour rather than information to download, when printed matter still mattered and kids daydreamed more often of writing *The Great American Novel* than of working on their websites.

It may be that Dirda's anxiety about today's youth is unwarranted. A recent Fall 2004 survey of freshmen at the University of Idaho indicates that while half do little reading for pleasure, 45 percent read between one and ten hours per week, while four percent read more than that. Surprisingly, these numbers suggest slightly more interest in reading than

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in video games. I am sure Dirda's reading fell into the small percentage who were reading for more than ten hours a week. Now that television and other intrusions take substantially more time away from reading, that percentage may be even smaller today than it was when he was growing up.

Another indication that on-line reading has not yet reached escape velocity was recently reported in the February 11, 2005 *Chronicle of Higher Education*. It was reported there that publishers of on-line textbooks are finding that students have certain expectations for their textbooks that are not being met: portability, ease of use, and transferability chief among them. Although e-textbooks are ostensibly cheaper than printed textbooks, some students regret making that choice, although they appreciate the linking features the online versions provide. In the end, the publishers are hoping that the next generation, raised on pixels, will be more amenable to electronic books. They may be just whistling in the dark; one publisher is quoted as saying: "In the near future, there is no way you can get away from offering things online. Kids today are learning to read online, learning to interact online.... We're looking at where things are going." Another publisher expects a more subtle change: "You'll see a combination of classic print with digital resources. The real value of digitization is the interactivity, not the readability.... It's silly to think that the book, as a printed item, is going to go away."

In the recent British bestseller, now making a splash in the United States, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, author Lynne Truss argues that commas and apostrophes deserve our better attention. Her thesis is undermined slightly by the subtitle "The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation" which suggests that no punctuation will be tolerated. Not a book on grammar and proper punctuation, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (the title is based on a joke about Panda habits) nevertheless has a serious message about the use and misuse of punctuation; a message that has surprisingly attracted a widespread supportive audience.

Near the conclusion of her witty apostrophe to apostrophes, Truss hesitantly addresses "the future of books." Our punctuation system, she avers, is a product of five hundred years of printing and publishing, a long slow dance of accommodation between publishers and readers. It is all now threatened by instant messaging, email shortcuts, and do-it-yourself Web pages; all of which come at a juncture when "a period of abysmal undereducating in literacy has coincided with this unexpected explosion of global self-publishing. Thus people who don't know their apostrophe from their elbow are positively invited to disseminate their writings to anyone on the planet stupid enough to double-click and scroll."

In this brave new world, she notes:

Information is presented to us in a non-linear way, through an exponential series of lateral associations. The internet is a public "space" which you visit, and even inhabit; its product is inherently impersonal and disembodied. Scrolling documents is the opposite of reading: your eyes remain static, while the material flows past. Despite all the opportunities to "interact", we read material from the internet (or CD-ROMs, or whatever)

entirely passively because all the interesting associative thinking has already been done on our behalf. Electronic media are intrinsically ephemeral, are open to perpetual revision, and work quite strenuously against any sort of historical perception. The opposite of edited, the material on the internet is unmediated, except by the technology itself. And having no price, it has questionable value.

It might appear that in this kind of an environment the culture of the book is stolid and reactionary, not just old-fashioned but retrograde. Keep in mind, however, Abigail Van Buren's comment (usually attributed to Mark Twain) that, "The man who doesn't read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them." This echoes the fifteenth century bookseller Vespasiano's self-serving advice: "A military leader who knows Latin [i.e., humanistic letters] has a great advantage over one who does not." Old-fashioned reading, in books, may be the key to future success.

As Truss points out, the advantages of reading, over scrolling, are perhaps not self-evident. We need reminding:

The printed word is presented to us in a linear way, with syntax supreme in conveying the sense of words in their order. We read privately, mentally listening to the writer's voice and translating the writer's thoughts. The book remains static and fixed: the reader journeys through it. Picking up the book in the first place entails an active pursuit of understanding. Holding the book, we are aware of posterity and continuity. Knowing that the printed word is always edited, typeset and proof-read before it reaches us, we appreciate its literary authority. Having paid money for it (often), we have a sense of investment and a pride of ownership, not to mention a feeling of general virtue.

It is common to decry the passing of a golden age, to long for the half-remembered graces of earlier days, but we know that times change, and perceptions alter. Memory's errors, it might be remembered, were a major part of writing and printing's success. The evanescent nature of what has been recorded in digital form in the last decade or so is a part of the librarians' and archivists' ongoing nightmare. We are at risk of losing much of what has been digitally stored.

Millennium of the Book

Michael Dirda's concern is about books, in that we may be losing something important; but the world, he notes, is changing. If books do disappear, then this past 1000 years may be legitimately considered the "millennium of the book." More accurately, however, might be to call it the half-millennium, since the book as we know it has only been common for slightly more than five hundred years.

As a book reviewer for the *Washington Post*, Dirda has an almost perfect job for a person of his background and temperament. Yet even in the midst of his enthusiasms about books and readings, he can find just cause to be pessimistic:

Sorrows of book reviewer: when otherwise charming and obviously well-to-do Washington lawyers and bureaucrats admit they don't take the time to read books. Even worse:



Circulation desk, 1922. #1-201-5. Historical Photographs Collection. Special Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho.

when they ask you what you think of the latest John Grisham or Stephen King, as if the bestseller list were actually a guide to the best in contemporary fiction. Worse yet: when the same people haven't heard of any of the titles or authors you've actually reviewed recently. The pits: when you realize that nearly everything you care about is irrelevant or utterly unimportant to most of the people who open the *Washington Post*.

As I reach the end of my nearly four-decade involvement with books and libraries I can share much of Dirda's despair about one's life's work. Preserving the works of the past and making them available to students and the public is a worthwhile task, though not especially well recognized. It is disheartening to see the emphasis on electronic technologies used to push libraries and the book culture to the back end of the resource line. It is not that books will disappear or stop appearing; it is that those who love books and work with books (and with culture generally) will continue to be devalued. As Matthew Battles notes: "The loss of libraries is often enough the product of the fear, ignorance, and greed of their supposed benefactors and protectors." Then, he adds: "The willful ineptitude of bureaucracies throughout history plays its role as well." Today's libraries are not just about books, nor were those of previous eras. But what they are becoming – for the near future at least – will still have to accommodate books. Battles again: "In its custody of books and the words they contain, the library has confronted and tamed technology, the forces of change, and the power of princes time and time again." One way to continue that effort, of course, is for you to join me in supporting the library. Thanks again.

---Terry Abraham

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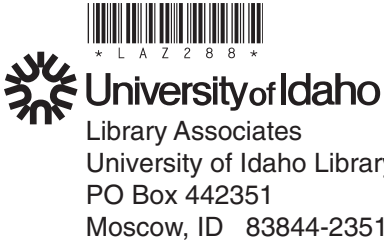
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News of the Library

Terry Abraham, Secretary-Treasurer of the Library Associates and Head, Special Collections and Archives since 1984, is retiring this summer. A member of the Library Associates since 1976, Abraham worked to revitalize the Associates and increase recognition for their support of the university library. Under his direction, *Towers* was started in 1996. In more recent years, he has partnered with the library's *Northwest Historical Manuscript Series* to distribute copies of these informative publications to the Associates.

His articles on library and archival practice, Idaho history, and overseas Chinese funerary practices have appeared in *Scholarly Publishing*, *Provenance*, *American Archivist*, *Serials Librarian*, *Idaho Yesterdays*, *Library Philosophy and Practice*, *PNLA Quarterly*, and *Australasian Historical Archaeology*. With Richard Davis, he compiled *Day to Day: A Guide to the Records of the Historic Day Mines Group in the University of Idaho Library* (1992). The University of Calgary Press is publishing his forthcoming book on British travelers in the North American West.