1999

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Recommended Citation
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3893

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Adventures in Librarianship: More from Wilberforce

by Ned Kraft (Order Librarian, Ralph J. Bunche Library) <kraftno@state.gov>

[Darkmouth University’s Prof. Stan Steel has released another set of entries from his upcoming Wilberforce Diaries in a transparent effort to influence the National Endowment for the Humanities toward funding his archival search for the missing (and still conjectural) second, third, and fourth diary volumes. Several of the entries included below suggest that as an acquisitions librarian and diarist, Dr. Harold Wilberforce found it difficult to subdue his animosity for his colleague, Melvil Dewey, referred to throughout as, simply, “MD” or the “gaseous bullfrog.” Whether his accusations against Dewey were based on fact or on Wilberforce’s subordinate resentments, perhaps Professor Steel’s upcoming monograph will hazard a theory. The Professor has never in the past shied from inventive theorymaking. -ed]

12 December 1892: Carl Hoffman of Kansas has published Mrs. Field’s nocturne, “Liebestraum.” Her work is popular among the local garden leagues, girdle societies and whatnot. I suppose I shall purchase a copy or two to satisfy the hoards but this new music is sickening with sugar and mindlessness.

28 December: Most of this day spent sorting order cards in my quiet, tombish office. Too sad to sit at home while all around the sounds of Yule-tide. My countrymen, I fear, are reared to sentimentality. Work should focus them, as it does me. Just now, in the final hour of light, a soft snow has begun beyond my window.

14 January 1893: MD has returned from his excursion to Pittsburg [sic] where he no doubt bored the local librarians to fits of narcolepsy. Could not the Pittsburgians have found some useful employment for him there, something involving dangerous amounts of molten steel? Could not the state militia have used to good effect his oratorical gift against the striking foundrymen, halting them with his great bombast?

3 February: Received a package today from Scribner. Will have to wire him about his clerks and their penmanship.

The bill appears to state that we owe five dollars! I will clip Scribner’s wings if he thinks I will pay five silver dollars for a single book!

25 March: The girth of President Cleveland will again be squeezed into Washington’s oval office. Not that I loved much the territory-grasping Harrison, but Cleveland ... egad!

2 April: From Boston, Bainard writes that one Sherlock Holmes will soon arrive from London in the port of New York. Mr. Holmes is apparently quite popular in his home country and wishes to make a go in ours, but CB neglects to describe the source of that popularity or why I should be concerned with such a thing. Something to do with books? Is he to visit us here in Albany? No matter. Any friend of Bainard’s is welcome to peruse our shelves.

[“Bainard” is Custis Bainard, of Boston’s Athenaeum, who met Wilberforce when they were both studying classics at St. Scrupulus College. Their bond grew from an incident during which the two young men lashed themselves to a sleeping mule to protest the Dean’s decision to drop Euphonia Linguisitics from the curriculum. Though the local paper refers to them only as two “rabblerousers,” their full names were used in the infirmary records listing the injuries each received when the mule awoke. -ed]

14 May: A bit of new technology for us in this century of constant unfathomable change—the card cabinets have arrived. Each drawer is now paved by an ingenious sort of spindle to hold the cards in place and discourage thievery. Remarkable, but it does raise two concerns. Will our less genteel patrons use the rods to impale one another? Must we now convert all of our old cabinets retrospectively to meet the new standard? And, yes, a third concern: what does the Almighty MD think of our new skewed cards? Is there still room enough to list his obsesively parsed subjects?

21 May: What was a beautiful spring day has become unbearable. At lunch Miss Henley strolled past in the garden with MD. She gazed into his beard as if it were the cleverest in all the world. She is lost to me.