Convictions -- Lessons for Library Benefactors

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Not Such a Big Deal
from page 67

Charles Feinberg

...through his generous provision a model and a warning for bookmen who desire to safeguard their personal libraries by placing them in institutional libraries. His books have their own library at Magdalen College, Cambridge University. But Trinity College never exercised its right to count them: his instructions were ignored. There are at least two morals in this history: You can’t run the world from the grave — although Pepys came close, and don’t trust librarians. Give your books to the library where you want them to be or where they ought to be. Then forget about them.

Charles Feinberg provides an exemplum. He came to America a poor immigrant and made his fortune — much of which he spent on Walt Whitman, who represented to him the spirit of America. Charlie wanted to express his gratitude to America by placing his monumental Whitman Collection in the Library of Congress through his generous gift-purchase arrangement. At the end of his life he was painfully unhappy about the mistreatment of his Whitman by the nation’s library. Among other betrayals, the Library of Congress failed to unpack and catalogue the entire collection.

Many other donors of great collections to libraries have had similarly bitter experiences. Libraries accept research collections they don’t know what to do with and may not really want, in order to avoid blame for rejecting them. Then they neglect the collections. A library benefactor who has doated a dozen major collections to a dozen libraries complains that none of these institutions has given proper attention to his books or to him. Admittedly he is a pain-in-the-ass; but he is a generous pain-in-the-ass who expected that his benefactions would be valued. He also expected gratitude — not systematic ingratitude. He is a slow learner: once or twice are bad luck; but twelve out of twelve are enemy action. The experienced benefactor understands that although it may be possible to make conditions or stipulations about cataloguing, shelving, and maintenance, they will not be honored. There is no such thing as a grateful institution.

8thly That my said Library be continued in its present form and noe other books mixt therewith Save what my Nephew may add to them of his own Collecting in distinct presses. That the said rooms and books so placed and adjusted be called by the name of Bibliotheca Pepsiana,... 12thly And that for a yet further Security herein the said two Colleges of Trinity and Magdalen have a Reciprocal Check upon one another. And that the College which shall be in present possession of the said Library be subject to an Annual visitation from the other and to the forfeiture thereof to the like possession and Use of the other upon Conviction of any breach of their said Covenants.

— From the Last Will and Testament of Samuel Pepys, 13 May 1703

Samuel Pepys provided a model and a warning for bookmen who desire to safeguard their personal libraries by placing them in institutional libraries. His books have their own library at Magdalen College, Cambridge University. But Trinity College never exercised its right to count them: his instructions were ignored. There are at least two morals in this history: You can’t run the world from the grave — although Pepys came close, and don’t trust librarians. Give your books to the library where you want them to be or where they ought to be. Then forget about them.

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Until recently I deprecated collectors who justified auctioning off their collections by claiming that they could not have acquired their books if other collectors hadn’t sold out. I have written articles insisting on the duty of a serious scholar-collector to keep his books together in an institutional library. Moreover, I have argued that the purpose of book-collecting is to build a collection that expresses the taste, courage, and knowledge of the collector; that a serious book collection is unduplicatable; and that the constituent elements enrich each other. Book collections beget books. I’m not so sure now. I’ve seen too many important collections mistreated by the book-dopes and book-enemies who are responsible for preserving and protecting them.

These are recommended policies for donors of books, manuscripts, and other literary research resources:

1. Give them while you’re alive so that they will not be honored. There is no such thing as a grateful institution.

— Matthew J. Bruccoli

Convictions — Lessons for Library Benefactors

by Matthew J. Bruccoli (President, Bruccoli Clark Layman; Phone: 803-771-4642; Fax: 803-799-6953)
2. Specify that nothing be discarded.
3. Specify that everything be maintained in the rare books/special collections department of the library: that the books are not to be scattered.
4. Tell librarians who express concern about duplication — the shibboleth that terrifies the products of schools of information science and librarianship who orgiastically and orgastically discard and destroy the precious objects they are charged with protecting and preserving — that a duplicate copy is not a duplicate until proven so. Even then, three copies are better than one. Bowdoin’s Hawthorne-Longfellow Library declined Frazer Clark’s magnificent Hawthorne Collection on the basis of putative duplication.
5. Provide money for the compilation and publication of a proper catalogue — on paper and on telly. Do this while you are alive and can attempt to supervise it.
6. Do not leave your money to a library for an acquisitions endowment. The book-dopes will mis-spend it because they won’t know how to spend it on books and will waste it on something else that is meaningful to them — like furniture.
7. Do not be conned into trusting the administrators’ statements of gratitude. No matter what they say, they resent you and your books because the books remind them of their exclusion from the things that you value. They also resent your money and the way you have spent it. There is a wide breach between those who spend their own money on books and those who do not: these constitute responses to life. What you spend your money on defines you. Never trust a bookless library administrator.

There are notable exceptions to the book-enemy librarians: I was trained by the great John Cook Wyllie. But the bad ones are in control on the administrative level. It is not a sound idea to select the institutional recipient of your cherished books on the basis of the curator or library director. The good ones die and are replaced by long-lived incompetents and frauds. The best attitude for a collector-benefactor is Dr. Johnson’s “frigid tranquility.”

Rumors.

Speaking of preconferences, we have NINE planned. Electronic Resource Management Systems: Learning from Experience with Kristen DeVoe <devoe@cofc.edu>, Evaluating Digital Repositories and Platforms: A Look at Projects and Products with Becky Lenzini <rlenzini@earthlink.net>, George Machovee <george@coalliance.org> and Bernie Reilly <reilly@cri.edu>, Negotiating with Vendors: Do’s and Don’ts with Buzzy Basch, Marketing for ROI: Branding and promoting your collections and services with Elisabeth Leonard <elisabeth@elisabethleonard.com>, Acquisitions Basics and Beyond with Paul Rittlemeyer <pvr3y@virginia.edu> and Dawn M. Waller <dwaller@virginia.edu>, Crime on the Coast with Ann Hamilton <ahamilton@georgiasouthern.edu>, Serials Resource Management with Buzzy Basch <buzzy@basch.com>, Creating the Capacity for Change: Transforming Library Workflows and Organizations with Rick Lugg and Ruth Fischer, and Are publisher licenses compatible with library technology? with Simon Inger, Tracy Gardner and Pinar Erzin <simon@sic.ox14.com>. Check out the descriptions www.katina.info/conference.

What did you do for Memorial Day? Becky Lenzini was in Southern Illinois visiting with her dad who is an incredible octogenarian! He is driving around the country like a thirty-