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Guest Editorial

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Guest Editorial

The Library Canon

by Murray S. Martin (Library Consultant)

As budgets are reduced and pressure to cut back grows, libraries are forced to reconsider their priorities. Most have cancelled serials to lessen their impact on the library materials budget, but, even so, few have been able to maintain the same level of expenditure on books and other formats. In these circumstances it seems natural for the library to concentrate its buying in those areas of highest use, thus achieving the greatest return on investment. In this editorial, I would like to explore some of the possible effects and to suggest that concentration on mainstream needs will not serve either the library's or the users' long-term interests.

Part of the problem that I see lies in our way of doing business. In applying an acquisition policy, libraries must also try to keep down costs. One way of doing that is to employ dealer services to supplement library or faculty selection. For sufficiently good business reasons standing orders and approval plans have always concentrated on the major publishing houses. [Please note that this is not a criticism of such plans as Baker and Taylor's excellent University Press plan, which can enable libraries to avoid missing short-run titles. It is meant only to underline the fact that general dealers cannot afford to stock publications from a wide range of presses which may or may not sell widely.]

Libraries have had to rely on individual selection for purchases outside that mainstream. While it is true that some of the larger trade and university presses support new areas of study such as women's studies and

include ethnic or marginal publications, and that some specialize in poetry or other less widely sought genres, most have to be sure that their books and series will sell enough to make a profit or at least recover costs. Even when a university press publishes a title because of its quality not its selling power, the edition is likely to be small, perhaps only 500 or 700 copies, less than the number of potential library buyers. Small presses, of which there are many, thank goodness, publish because of personal or social commitment. The problem is that they are usually able to produce only small editions. Moreover, they do not usually appear in the standard bibliographic aids, like *Choice*, *Publishers Weekly* or *Books in Print*, and their catalogs, if any, have to be sought with diligence. [I must add that despite disclaimers made by the publishers many people still regard such tools as *BIP* as all-inclusive. Moreover any reviewing journal can handle only a small proportion of the total U.S. publishing output. Even *Choice* can cover only about 6-7,000 titles per year, out of the 40-50,000 titles published in the U.S. alone. As the smaller presses generally do not send in copies for review, they will be under-represented.] The *Alternative Press Index* and similar bibliographic tools help to fill this gap, but they can only find the materials they include after publication, when they may no longer be available.

Some libraries, for example the University of Connecticut, Temple University, or Oakland University, have specialized in different kinds of minority literatures, but these special collections do not replace local availability, which is the cornerstone of library service. Resource-sharing, which has been seen as one

answer to the general budget crisis, only works if the materials to be shared are actually bought and available for use, not tucked away in special collections.

So far as I am aware, no general study of this problem has been undertaken, so I will have to rely on anecdotal evidence, in the hope that others will feel encouraged to undertake that research. [Some special groups have undertaken surveys for collection development purposes, for example the Research Libraries Group, where some of the bibliographers have surveyed under-collected literatures. These have, however, been internal to the groups in question, rather than directed to the library world at large.] It is important, because libraries are among the few institutions with a long-standing commitment to diversity, and any trends which work to the contrary will enfeeble that commitment. Without attention to that possibility, the selection techniques used, publishers' economic needs, and lack of concern by majority scholars may effectively eliminate from libraries whole blocks of materials which will only later be seen to have great social and historical importance. It has been claimed that most out of print titles are readily available through second-hand sources. While this is probably true, few libraries have the staff or the knowledge needed to find their way in that complex market.

In my alter ego, I pursue a less common scholarly interest — World Literature in English, mostly from New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific, but also from other areas, such as the Caribbean — and have found it difficult to secure the appropriate materials from libraries. Of course, there are those that collect in the area, but, if I were not in a position to travel regularly to Yale or to Penn State, I

would have to rely on interlibrary loan through my local public library. Willing as that library may be, since many of the needed materials are either in special collections, or in periodicals for which the needed bibliographic information is also in only a few libraries, the return is likely to be minimal. In support of this claim, I can cite the almost universal response I received from scholars attending the Northeast Modern Languages Association meeting in Hartford earlier this year. Of course I attended sessions dealing with colonial writing and minority writing, so it may be considered biased.

Everyone said that their own libraries were inadequate, that it was difficult to persuade selectors that attention should be paid to their needs, and that it was very difficult to find materials or to have them found through interlibrary loan. One specific case was given of a search for 11 publications by Black Canadian Women poets. Only one could be found in the whole of eastern Canada, yet all the writers came from that region and had established their reputations there. Another cited the fact that bibliographies and reference works, even on minorities, failed to include Chinese Canadian writers. I did some follow up checking and can report that those allegations were justified. By great good fortune, almost immediately thereafter, came news of two Canadian reference works in the area: *Native Literature in Canada from the Oral Tradition to the Present*, by Penny Petrone (Don Mills, Ont: Oxford University Press, 1990) and *Ethnic and Native Canadian Literature: A Bibliography*, by John Miska (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), which, despite imperfections, will help fill part of the bibliographic gap, if libraries purchase them. What they cannot do is find the actual publications so that libraries can retrospectively make up for past neglect.

That the neglect parallels that of the majority of scholars does not let

libraries off the hook. It has always been a source of pride to libraries that they have been able to anticipate scholarly need, but in cases like this they have seldom done so. As English (and other) department faculties debate the reformulation of the canon, with all its political implications, where will libraries and librarians be? Standing on the sidelines or participating actively in the discussion, as part of their commitment to diversity? The answers to such questions will say a great deal about our self-perceptions and our professional interests.

Other examples, closer to home, are the almost universal neglect of Hispanic publishing in the U.S. despite the fact that it is alive and well in New York and in many other places, and the startlingly poor selection of gay and lesbian publishing in most libraries, again despite the fact that there has been active publishing in the field for many years and a high proportion of library users are likely to be gay or lesbian. In both cases, a parallel production and distribution network has grown up totally outside the usual channels, and libraries have not usually been part of those networks.

In the latter case attention to the suggestions offered in *Gay and Lesbian Library Service*, edited by Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1990) should help librarians to find their way in a new era.

In a different sense, we have tended to discriminate against "popular" materials. Few academic libraries have collections of popular fiction, yet scholarship has been finding that they are wonderful sources for discovering prevailing social beliefs, and can be used in a wide variety of teaching and research. For example, detective stories provide fine sources for exploring prejudices, or class relationships, and, following a groundbreaking dissertation based on *Peyton Place*, by Emily Toth, many other scholars have looked to popular fiction to discover trends in society. In my own field, recent research has shown that the literature of the former

British Empire helps greatly in the interpretation of English literature itself, as well as illustrating graphically many of the social and political problems surrounding de-colonization. [See, for example, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1989. Routledge, by the way, is an excellent source for materials on new issues in literary criticism.] These studies include popular as well as standard fiction, since both are needed for the different perspectives they show, and few could have been undertaken using the collections of most American libraries, nor can their results be used in teaching without at least a representation of the literatures involved.

These scholarly needs apply to periodicals as well. In cancellation or "rationalization" projects, it is likely that minority concerns will fare badly, since they will be of interest only to limited numbers of teachers and students, yet the loss of "marginal" serials may well impoverish all. We have too often insisted on cutting lesser used titles, and insisted on having one title cancelled before a new one can be ordered. Doing so may make budgetary sense, but it preempts the proper representation of new or dissenting scholarship. A glance over most literary periodical shelves will show a severe under-representation of the newer critical approaches to literature, while the old mainstream periodicals sit there less used each day.

Scholarship is in a constant state of change. That is what keeps it healthy. Libraries should share the same excitement in the new. What I fear is that they will generally use the excuse of budget problems to stick with the tried and true. Cutting away at the margins may reduce the size of the thicket, but it is just possible that it is dead at the heart. Only renewed attention to the way our collecting reflects our frequently stated social goals and our knowledge of the scholarly future can ensure that this does not become true of libraries as well.