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Great Books are Beacons

by Mark Sexton

Ardent bibliophiles among the attendees at the 1991 Charleston Conference were moved by the speech of Richard Abel, publisher of Oregon's Timber Press and founder of Richard Abel Inc., the innovative wholesaler of academic books. Educated in medieval history, Abel decried the escalating proliferation of information and called for a return to the collection of "true knowledge" in libraries, rather than mere data.

Abel and his listeners would have been moved by the unusual poster seen at the ACRL meeting in Salt Lake City, quoting the distinguished Albert Schweitzer Professor emeritus, Robert Nisbet of Columbia, in his introduction to Hillaire Belloc's *The Servile State*. The poster, pictured here, says in full:

We do not measure classics by their power to effect major changes in governmental or economic policy. We do so, rather, by their perceived qualities of insight, wisdom, and idealism and their capacity to illuminate reality, to point out the difference between the vital and the ephemeral, and to save us from sophistical beliefs. Great books are beacons. Even though despotism in its many forms were to spread farther across the world than it has, we should still have in our libraries, I pray, those books which allow us to know the truth, to know what the requirements of a free society actually are.

(The poster is available from Liberty Fund, Inc., 7440 North Shadeland Avenue, Indianapolis, IN 46250. It publishes modern editions of classic works on liberty and individual responsibility.)



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Great books are beacons

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—Robert Nisbet
Professor Emeritus, Columbia University

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