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# Adventures in Librarianship-The Wilberforce Diaries

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# Adventures in Librarianship: The Wilberforce Diaries

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

[What follows are excerpts from the daily journals of **Dr. Harold Wilberforce**, Acquisitions Librarian for the **New York State Library** from 1889 until 1906, where he worked with **Melvil Dewey**. A total of five journal volumes were discovered three months ago by graduate student **Jerry Slacker**, **Darkmound University**, while searching for an alternative (unguarded) entrance to the closed-stacks area of the New York State Library. Darkmound's Professor **Stan Steel**, who is preparing the journals for publication by D.U. Press, believes there may be four more volumes still undiscovered. He has applied to the **National Endowment for the Humanities** for a grant to fund his search for the missing volumes. Prof. Steel released the following for the benefit of scholarship and as a gesture to the NEH application review committee.]

**20 October 1890:** Large crate arrived from France today. Could not get the blasted thing open short of calling the carpenter. Inside said shipment, books bruised by the sea's tossings. Consider recommending to French shipper that he cushion [sp] all parcels by using exploded kernels of corn.

**5 December:** Hired Miss Henley (of the Richfield Henleys) to transcribe orders. Quite a specimen. Hope MD does not spirit her away for one of his famous "special projects." Should I ask him how he would propose classifying "lechery?" Would that be Arts—Performing? Or would it be Philosophy—Corruption Thereof?

**17 January 1891:** This accursed explosion of information! Last year we purchased fifteen new texts—this year, almost twice that! Where will it end?

**2 March:** MD cannot be turned from his obsession with subject parsing. I expect he will parse me before a fortnight. Will explore the possibility of hiring hooligans to scatter his notes.

**4 March:** Purchased two copies of T. Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* to replace the two stolen last week. A sure sign that "fiction" is fast becoming the lair of layabouts, drunkards, and dope feends [sp]. Will we ever return to our ancient and rooted morals?

**25 April:** I believe it was I who said it best when I said: "If libraries were meant to serve the unwashed, the creator would certainly have given librarians infinite patience. He did not, hence, we should not."

**5 November:** Dreamt last night of MD addressing a mighty crowd, saying that libraries of the world were poised to join hands in a lattice of shared effort, shared texts, and great political clout. Statesmen, he said, would hear our cries and bow to our wims [sp] and no publisher would dare print a word without our imprimatur. The crowd roared for empire and simplified spelling. I woke in a swett [sp].

**17 January 1892:** For a

week now the ice has kept all patrons from our premises. Though indoors it is nearly too cold to dip ink, the quiet is ethereal. Hammerstein has sent word that a package from Philadelphia will have to wait in Schenectady until the roads thaw. His team cannot pass. Just as well. Blessed peace.

**16 February:** Publishers of *The Herald*, *The Evening Star*, and *The Post Gazette* claim that though their dailies have risen to eight cents per issue with delivery, this is a temporary measure. The price, they say, will recede to five cents once the current pulp-paper crisis has passed and will likely stay there for the foreseeable future. Librarians must surely hope so. Sustained at the current level, those prices will cripple the nation's libraries.

**25 March:** MD is on leave to address a conference in Baltimore. Concerning the "metric system," another of his peevish obsessions. Perhaps the denizens of that corrupt place will appreciate his tyranny [sp] as much as we do not. Such thoughts are uncharitable, I know, and would mark me as jealous of his fame. But I cannot moderate my disdain for that gaseous bullfrog.

[Albany police records show that on March 31st, shortly after  
*continued on page 61*



## Bits and Bytes from page 50

tance by fax, toll free phone or email. Pricing is varied and in flux. Right now, there is a special discount for owners of the print volumes set at \$1,000 for one year's subscription. Non-owners of the print volumes have to spring for a \$1,500 annual subscription. Both these prices are for 1-5 concurrent users. In addition, there is a single user, single-station price of \$500. There is also talk of selling access by the month and in ten-day bundles. Starting in September, individuals can also subscribe by the month or by convenient 10-day 'carnets' (ten 24-hour sessions).

### What To Do?

The price for the annual subscription to the online database may come as a relief to those librarians who blanch at the price of the original print set. If the need for the *Dictionary* is obvious, but the budget too tight to meet the \$8,800 asking price of the print set, the online version could be an affordable option. Although it comes without the full complement of figures and reproductions available in the print set, the online version compensates by offering links to

a number of outside image sources. However, keep in mind that the clarity of these images is still not as sharp as those available in print. Admittedly, the online images are improving, and are mostly in color while the majority of images in the print version are in black and white. As stated above, of deeper concern is the possible confusion caused by references in the text to images that are not available online. Another consideration is the need for user instruction. No matter how good the help, a database this complex is a challenge to the user. There is no satisfactory "easy search" and for full mastery the learning curve is steep, requiring more time and effort than the average patron may want to invest. Obviously, the print *Dictionary* is a lot easier to figure out.

Of course, the ideal solution is to have both the print and online version, provided the price is right. And if what I hear from Grove is true, it just might be. The combined price for the 34-volume print set, along with a one-year subscription to the online database is \$5,000. This is a great deal for those libraries that could not afford, or were unwilling to meet the original \$8,800 price tag. If you consider the online subscription being worth at least \$1,000 by itself,

that means these libraries are paying \$4,000 for the print set, a savings of \$4,800. That is remarkable. But what about those libraries that took the chance, made the commitment, and dug deep to find the initial asking price? They are getting a break on the price of the annual online subscription of \$500, but so are those who opt for the combination print-online deal. Many of those libraries may feel like they have been sucker-punched. Grove may owe them an explanation (or in the words of one collection development librarian, a refund).

In any case, most librarians with any interest in the arts will want to take a closer look. You can sign up for a 24-hour individual free trial or a 30-day institutional trial at: <http://www.groverefrence.com/tda/online/Freetrial.htm>. This page also links to information about the license agreement, how to order, and key features and specifications. It's worth a visit.

**NB:** For another review of the *Grove Dictionary of Art*, with ratings, visit [www.charlestonco.com](http://www.charlestonco.com). *The Charleston Advisor*, for October, 1999.—KS

<<http://www.against-the-grain.com>>



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## Handling Medusa from page 60

definition needs to be focused on broad portfolios of titles rather than a narrow content-based concept. Second, mergers involving relatively small companies can have substantial price effects (in 1991, **Pergamon** was not among the top five publishers in terms of portfolio size). Although antitrust policies in the U.S. and Europe have changed considerably over the past two decades in response to new developments in economics, the special case of academic publishing remains to be addressed. At least two options are available. On occasion, the DOJ and FTC have adopted

special antitrust guidelines for markets with unusual characteristics, e.g. for health care and intellectual property. In other instances, antitrust immunity has been granted to certain parties when important social objectives are threatened (access to scientific research certainly merits the label of an "important social objective"). For example, the DOJ (with congressional approval) could grant libraries permission to form a single nationwide buying consortium to counter the substantial market power of publishers.

In the meantime, this research project is still in its infancy. Important future objectives include (1) examining the impact of new journal entry on prices of incumbent journals, (2)

contrasting the behavior of non-profit and for-profit publishers, and (3) testing the robustness of this portfolio approach in other STM fields. Finally, I would like to thank the many libraries, librarians and their associations for their invaluable assistance over the past year and a half.

And one last thing. I'm glad I heard that knock on my office door.... 

## Adventures in Librarianship from page 52

Dewey's return from Baltimore, Wilberforce and Dewey were detained for "public altercation;" infirmary records concur.—ed]

**13 April:** The Macmillans will soon issue Tennyson's new drama, "The Forester Robin Hood and Maid Marian," and Mr. Knox's "History of Banking in the United States" will be pressed soon as well. Must decide. Cannot afford both. In this profession, some choices are heavy. The Tennyson would please my colleagues and my self: a bit of beauty for early summer. But the gentry will call for Knox. We know, of course, who butters the bred [sp]. Knox it will be.

[Further excerpts may follow as allowed by the publisher] 

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> According to the horizontal merger guidelines ([http://www.usdoj.gov/atr/public/guidelines/horiz\\_book/hmgl.html](http://www.usdoj.gov/atr/public/guidelines/horiz_book/hmgl.html)), antitrust authorities "will delineate the product market to be a product or group of products such that a hypothetical profit-maximizing firm that was the only present and future seller of those products ('monopolist') likely would impose at least a 'small but significant and nontransitory' increase in price."

<sup>2</sup> For example, suppose two publishers of economics titles were merging. If one owned a series of labor economics journals and the second firm specialized in industrial organization, it is not likely that antitrust concerns would be raised.

<sup>3</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this model, its predictions, etc., see my working paper entitled, "Academic Journal Pricing and Market Power: A Portfolio Approach," (July, 1999). This paper can be obtained in pdf format at <http://www.econ.gatech.edu/~mmccabe/journalWEA.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Note that these inflationary trends are not restricted to commercial publishers; in the case of biomedical journals, non-profits and university presses have raised prices nearly as fast.