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Fine and Private Places: An English Professor's Perspective on Evolving Library Collections

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Endnotes

1. **T. Scott Plutchak**, "Preservation [editorial]," *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 89 no. 4 (2001): 409-10.
2. **Nicholson Baker**, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (New York: Random House, 2001).
3. **Ellen McCrady**, "Double Cross: Nicholson Baker's Assault on Libraries," *Abbey Newsletter* 25 no. 2(2001). [Web document: <http://cool.conservation-us.org/byorg/abbey/an/an25/an25-2/an25-204.html> Accessed 5/30/11]
4. **Nicholson Baker**, "The Charms of Wikipedia," *The New York Review of Books* March 20, 2008. [Web document: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/mar/20/the-charms-of-wikipedia/> Accessed 5/30/11]
5. The **Chicago Collaborative**, Home. [Web document: <http://chicago-collaborative.org/index.htm> Accessed 5/30/11]
6. The **Chicago Collaborative**. Ensuring Persistent Access to the Scientific Record: Executive Summary. November 10, 2010. [Web document: <http://chicago-collaborative.org/pdf/cc-fall-Meeting%20-November-10-exec-sum.pdf> Accessed 5/30/11]
7. **James Gleick**, *The Information* (Pantheon Books, 2011). iTunes edition. 14.2.
8. **Andrew Pettigree**, *The Book in the Renaissance* (Yale University Press, 2010).

It's called *Wallis Budge: Magic and Mummies in London and Cairo*. What a great subject! Budge, Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities in the British Museum from 1894 to 1924, wrote *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (1895), *The Gods of Egypt* (1904), and *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (1920). Didn't I tell you **Matthew** was awesome! He says he will try to come to the Conference sometime soon! You go, **Matthew!**

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/images/1843822180/ref=dp_image_0?ie=UTF8&n=283155&s=books

Speaking of books! Heard the other day from **Maria (Fitzpatrick) Anderson (M.M. Anderson)** www.werewolfdreams.net, once with **Academic Press!** Remember her? It's been a long time since **Maria** was the Wholesale, Library, and Special Sales Manager for **Academic Press.** (Remember them?) Well, **Maria** now lives in Weston, Florida and is involved in publishing BUT as a YA author. Her first novel, *Werewolf Dreams* was released in 2009 and her next book, *Werewolf Love* is due out summer 2012. And to top it all off, **Maria** has made **Lyman Newlin** a newspaper reporter in her novel! Of course we all remember **Papa Lyman!** **Maria** decided to write me when she ran into an old *Against the Grain* and remembered the **Charleston Conferences!** And, luckily,

our great salesman, **John Laraway**, had **Lyman's** family's address! What a hoot! Wish I could get **Maria AND Lyman's** autographs! We knew her when, like **J.K. Rowling!** (Remember her?)

And speaking of books, heard from the irrepressible **Jack Walsdorf** who continues on his **William Morris** quest! An exhibit, "William Morris and the Art of the Book: The Private Library of Jack Walsdorf" is planned at the **University of Puget Sound** August 26-October 14. A beautiful brochure announces the event! <http://www.pugetsound.edu/news-and-events/events-calendar/>

Speaking of the **University of Puget Sound!** They were one of the very first — and I mean it! — subscribers to **ATG!**

Speaking of people in publishing, just saw an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (August 14, 2011) about the **University of California Press** and its new director — **ALISON MUDDITT!!!** (Remember when she was at **SAGE Publishing?**) **Alison** has concluded that the press has been publishing too many trade books. She has also canceled publication of a literary-studies series. Talk about *Against the Grain* and stirring the pot!! We are looking forward to interviewing **Alison** in a future issue of **ATG!** See "At the U. of California Press, A New Director Bucks Traditional Scholarly Advice by **Jennifer Howard.**" <http://chronicle.com/article/Hot-Type-At-U-of-California/128601/>

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Fine and Private Places: An English Professor's Perspective on Evolving Library Collections¹

by **Thomas Herron** (Associate Professor of English, East Carolina University)

But the fruit that can fall without shaking, / Indeed is too mellow for me.

— **Lady Mary Wortley Montagu**, *Letters and Works*

We live in a tired time of technological saturation, spoiled expectations, and not inconsiderable danger to our moral and political selves. According to techno-prophet **Marshall McLuhan**, writing well before the dawn of the Internet, if we do not attend to the moral implications of a hyperwired world, then "we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence."² How wonderful it is, then, to retreat to a library and read a book or journal issue on one's own! Our individuality would seem to depend on it.

Libraries, in truth, are not fine and private places, but very public ones. But, take a book or journal from a shelf and find a quiet corner or nook in the vast "temple" of campus (and civilization) that is the traditionally organized library, and you enter a little paradise that is shielded from daily cares, the *PATRIOT Act*, and prying eyes.³

Electronic databases of course have the angelic potential to bring flowers of learning to your door and to make collections yet more public, or (at least) accessible to people wide and far. All can now access library collections without entering the building or campus itself. Aren't we all happy when, in the middle of a cabin in the wilderness with our families, we can finally get that pesky footnoting done?

Thanks to off-campus access, we can read when and wherever we like and, if desired, *deshabillé*. By contrast, most libraries post a security guard at the gate to turn away the shirtless and the thieving. Issues of geographical proximity further restrict traditional patronage, as counted in real bodies entering real library doors.

Once in the library, however, these people are free to travel intellectually wherever they choose. Walled and chartered cities in the Middle Ages insulated the rights and pocketbooks of their citizens from royal depredations, thus

becoming cradles of today's democratic states. Libraries, similarly, can keep out encroachments of authoritarian tyranny prying into our intellectual (and other) habits; they can indeed become fine and private places. They are citadels protecting valuable and controversial ideas, in part because they protect our right to access a (*de facto* restricted because selective, but nonetheless widely varied and valuable) pool of information, unmolested and untracked by technology (including **Kindle**⁴) that monitors who accesses what and when. I murmur with secret pleasure whenever I reshelved a book instead of lying it on a cart to be counted.

Thanks to our truly astonishing electronic databases, books and journals are, of course, much more widely available, searched, and archived than ever before. But what if the web comes under central state control? So will books and ideas: there is already a great firewall of China. A "switch" turned off the internet in Egypt during the recent "Arab Spring" of revolution. And what do you do when a virus completely takes over your computer banks, or the power goes out in your city (as it does

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regularly in Baghdad), and your laptop batteries run down? Take your laptop to read it outside?⁵ In a famous *Twilight Zone* episode, Armageddon occurs (an H-bomb) and the last man on earth, a bookworm played by **Burgess Meredith**, consoles himself with unfettered access to the **New York Public Library**.⁶ Then he breaks his glasses and can't read. In a future scenario, he'd be left with nothing tangible to read in the first place.

One purpose of a library is to encourage people to read. The collective fear that people are reading less than they used to doesn't make sense; given our public and private schools and our collective addiction to email, texting, and twittering, we're reading all the time — we're reading now while *driving*, for goodness sake — but we should rightly fear that few people are reading quality creative literature anymore. I'm sure this has always been the case, that the time, education, and enthusiasm to appreciate intellectually difficult and verbally creative works has never been plentiful. It has always been difficult and rare to find golden worlds — or convincing and sensitive, intelligent human worlds — in fiction, until such works become classics.

Nor are we reading enough at a slow, thoughtful pace for the purpose of spiritual and/or intellectual pleasure and stimulation: slow reading to match the slow eating movement. Despite being an English professor, I am (like anyone) rushed to get work done. Graduate school and the tenure-track nearly destroyed my enjoyment of a good book for life. Recently, for the first time in a long time, I read a long classic, *The Divine Comedy*, at a leisurely — that is, thoughtful and intellectually rewarding — pace (I read it while sitting in on an undergraduate class and following the syllabus). I took the Greek root of leisure, or *school*, to heart.

Like many others, however, I have a worry, gnawing like hungry Ugolino at the back of my head, that books as physical, beautiful, skillfully typeset, raggy, musty, textured, leathered, finger-in-the-spine, library-stacked, illustrated, and scribbled-on objects are coming



to an end. Popular intellectual journals like *The New York Review of Books* or discussion pages on *The New York Times* Website are much interested in this topic lately, that is, the disappearance of hard copies in part or entirely from libraries and our lives. I know that this fear is overblown, that more books are published in the world than ever before, but hard-copy disappearance is a fact in many cases.

It is a growing trend in university libraries, including my own at **East Carolina University**. ECU has been steadily reducing its acquisitions of hard-copy books and is gradually turning its current journal collection into e-only format.⁷ This saddens me because a great intellectual pleasure in my life is browsing the journal stacks on a Friday afternoon, finding journals in and outside of my profession, including some with terrific production quality, design, and art spreads, like *Word and Image*. Now we're down to a couple of short aisles of journals, covering all disciplines. *Word and Image* vanished into the databases (back copies into the stacks) last year. I have less reason than ever to enter the library now, to gaze on hard-copy and to casually meet students and other faculty there. Strangely, I am becoming less social and collegial as a result of becoming less bookish in the library on Friday afternoons.

However slowly I read, I do not enjoy reading off of a computer screen; I do it because it's practical, not enjoyable. I wonder about long-term effects on my eyesight and health.

More and more novels and poems will presumably go straight to electronic readers like **Kindles** and **Nooks**. I fear this means that, sooner or later, in one form or another, especially in worst-case scenarios, many books will come with a permanent, renewable user fee.⁸ I am equally worried about the democratic pleasure principle: losing a sense of campus community focused on the library "temple" near many of our hearts.⁹ We will also lose the delight in the nature of books themselves, our clasp-able bosom buddies we can smell, take to the beach, stretch under trees, shake sand from, spill coffee on, and read on sultry evenings, or — like a ten-year-old — read half-upside-down in the backseat of a car; or, like the immortal lovers **Paolo** and **Francesca** in **Dante's Inferno**, first fall in love over when reading

aloud about **Lancelot** and **Guinevere**. I just don't see those two kindling anything with a **Kindle** between them. If they did, who would be watching?

Reader, enjoy your hard copy! 

Endnotes

1. Parts of this paper were first presented on 3/16/10 in Greenville, NC as prefatory remarks to the forum panel on "Reading the Humanities," part of **East Carolina University's Downtown Dialogues in the Humanities** series. The views expressed here are my own.
2. **Marshall McLuhan**, quoted in Pico Iyer, "The McLuhan Galaxy," *New York Review of Books* May 26, 2011: 32-4.
3. For the view of a university library and especially its rare books room as a "temple" and "citadel," see **Robert Darnton**, *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009): 32, 33, 41. According to **Darnton**, "Rare book rooms are a vital part of research libraries, the part that is most inaccessible to **Google**. But libraries also provide places for ordinary readers to immerse themselves in books, quiet places in comfortable settings, where the codex can be appreciated in all its individuality." (40) On the **PATRIOT Act** and **Google's** ability to gather information on its patrons, see **Darnton** page 46.
4. For information on the threats that **Kindles** pose to privacy, see **Sue Halpern**, "Mind Control & the Internet," *New York Review of Books* June 23, 2011: 34.
5. As **Darnton** writes, "The best preservation system ever invented was the old-fashioned, pre-modern book." *The Case for Books*: 38.
6. "Time Enough at Last," based on the Lyn Venable story (1953) of the same name. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time_Enough_at_Last.
7. The Dean of ECU's **Joyner Library**, **Dr. Larry Boyer**, has strongly advocated for the transition of periodical subscriptions from print to electronic formats: see, for example, **Allan Scherlen**, **Larry Boyer**, **Eleanor Cook** & **John P. Abbott**, "Courage of Our Convictions: Making Difficult Decisions about Serial Collections," *Serials Review* 30, no. 2 (2004): 117-121.
8. **Darnton**, *The Case for Books*: 47.
9. An admirable effort at recreating a temple atmosphere within the library temple, a *sacrum sanctorum* as it were, where computers (but not books, art, or lectures) are absent, is the "Atheneum" in the Gould Library, **Carleton College**, MN: <http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/library/about/atheneum/>.

Rumors
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Have y'all been visiting the **ATG NewsChannel**? Did you know that we are putting up a new book every week, along with new article links, questions of the week, stars of the week and hot topics of the week? Check it out! Even had an enterprising author thank us for listing her book! And listen up!

The Book of the Week of August 28th was *The Forgotten Founding Father: Noah Webster's Obsession and the Creation of an American Culture*. It so happens that the alert **James Marsh** <JM@thebookhouse.com> (**The Book House, Inc.**) noticed and told us about his daughter **Jessica** who followed her heart to Western Massachusetts to work on her boyfriend's family farm after both graduated from the **College of Wooster**. Farm owner **Mike Wissenmann** and artist **Will Sillin**

started a maze back in 2000 and each year there is a different subject! Just so happens that this year it's a corn maze in western MA and **Noah Webster** is the "subject"! Way cool! See — www.mikesmaze.com.

<http://www.against-the-grain.com/2011/09/noah-webster-corn-maze/>

The awesome keeping-us-informed **Ramune Kubilius** <r-kubilius@northwestern.edu> sends news of the death of **Dr. Martin M.**

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