
Readers who doubt the value of institutional histories will reverse their opinion upon encountering Merrill Distad’s history of the University of Alberta Library. It is a methodical and invaluable guide to one of the most endangered species of the academic landscape. If the university library is in crisis, knowledge of its past versatility and evolution will assist us in adapting its most important functions to the future.

The lead sentence from the rear blurb states that “at the heart of every great centre of higher learning is a great library; indeed, without a library no institution may presume to lay claim to the title of University.” That the library is the intellectual heart of the university, particularly from the perspective of the humanities, may not be in dispute, but it is increasingly subject to attack from internal and external factors, perhaps the most challenging consideration being the advent of the Internet. For most of the twentieth century, academic libraries were able to focus on two primary objectives—to build the monograph and journal collections and to develop unique special collections to support the institution’s teaching and research missions. Academic libraries were evaluated, simply, by the quantity of their physical collection. But over the last two decades, they have also had to wrestle with new problems created by the World Wide Web. On the one hand, electronic journals and e-books have visibly transformed the world of print. The seemingly perpetual increase in the annual costs of electronic journals has had a crippling effect on university libraries and their materials budget. On the other hand, the virtual library, as exciting a prospect as it is, remains difficult to implement and administer; it also undermines the concept of the library as a physical space. Is the bricks-and-mortar housing of a collection the essence of a library, or is it rather any social space or study hall where students sip coffee, surf the web, and download course-assigned PDFs? Then there is Google, which has in the opinion of many totally replaced libraries and librarians. Finally there is the promise of the digital—the gradual migration of analog materials (print, manuscripts, images) into digital format—which is making special collections remotely accessible and witnessing the reshaping of the humanities through Web 2.0 collaborative tools. These Internet-spawned developments amount to major new challenges: they are altering what libraries are and how they work.
Distad does not attempt to solve these problems of the present moment. (Google does not appear in his index.) He does, however, admirably prepare us to do so by giving us an excellent account of the past. His book provides a comprehensive history of the University of Alberta Library from its founding in 1908 to 2008. It is remarkably well documented and packed with details that will be of interest to library historians. My favourite is the running battle over library hours, which emerges as a theme: users always want hours to be extended; librarians hoping to cut costs invariably suggest reducing them. Distad deserves praise for identifying, filtering, and narrating a complex story that is intimately linked to the history of the University of Alberta (founded in 1906) and centred on the growing realization that the university’s reputation would depend on the quality of its library. The story comprises a number of phases: the slow evolution of the library during the years of growth in the 1920s, the devastating impact of the Depression, the opening of the long delayed central library building after the Second World War, the entrenched fifties, the exponential growth during the sixties and seventies, and finally what can only be described as the retrenchment of the eighties to the end of the century. Over this time the library grew from a humble origin into a major research library with more than three million items, including special collections such as the invaluable Bruce Peel Collection of Western Canadiana. The Peel Collection is the library’s jewel, and researchers around the world may more readily admire its lustre thanks to the library’s canny spotlighting of digital initiatives upon it.

This is an attentive administrative history. Readers will discover how power was divided between the university administration and the library committee, each developing a role in relation to the other. Distad also discusses the changing nature of the library profession in relation to important innovations such as the adoption of the Library of Congress cataloguing rules, the emergent need for trained library professionals who were able to understand the demands and requirements of the teaching faculty, the evolution of curriculum, and the advances of library automation. Personalities feature prominently, for Distad tells his story through the lenses of the library’s directors: Donald Cameron (1921–45), Marjorie Sherlock (1945–55), Bruce Peel (1955–82), Peter Freeman (1982–88), and Ernie Ingles (1989–). Cameron’s impact was lasting and he was memorialized with the naming of the Cameron Library of Science and Technology. Bruce Peel is remembered not only for his assiduous collecting of Western
Canadian imprints but also through the creation of the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library in his honour. Ernie Ingles has been a friend to Canadian bibliography for the past twenty years, and his impact has been national; members of the Bibliographical Society of Canada will be particularly cognizant of his *Bibliography of Canadian Bibliographies* (3rd edition, 1994).

By telling the story of the University of Alberta Libraries (today there are sixteen branches) through the careers of five distinguished librarians, Distad reminds us that great libraries are the work of visionary leaders. May the next generation take inspiration from their example.

DAVID MCKNIGHT  
*University of Pennsylvania*

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Receiving a copy of this catalogue for the University of Alberta’s exhibition of John H. Meier, Jr.’s collection of the Governor General’s Literary Award-winning English-language fiction books was reassuring. Meier has painstakingly developed his collection for more than a decade, running on manic energy and stubborn hope in the intrinsic merit of the pursuit. “I have asked myself, on several occasions over the past decade, whether I was committing financial suicide by investing my life’s savings, and over a decade of my time, to build this collection,” he writes in the catalogue’s introduction.

Vancouver writer Timothy Taylor offers a revealing glimpse of Meier’s determination to collect winners of what are colloquially known as the GGs, and to prepare a descriptive bibliography of the books, in a December 2007 article for the *Walrus*. With the single-minded focus those of us who prepare bibliographies display when given brief periods of access to important collections, Meier fends off a New York heat wave and makes the most of five hours he’s been given in a bookseller’s storeroom by locking the door and stripping buck naked. “I don’t mess around,” he told Taylor, hesitating as to whether or not he should disclose so much. “I realize I’m a bit