A Life with Books & Libraries: Past, Present, & Future

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Inspiration for a life with books and libraries comes from many sources. My personal journey of discovery began with a small town public library, and a family that appreciated reading and learning. In retrospect, I can now appreciate that circumstances and inclination have provided me with unique opportunities for living with books and libraries, and also for studying and theorizing about their role over time in society. The personal and academic have proceeded hand-in-hand as complementary sides of the same coin.

I grew up in the small, southwestern-Ontario town of Tillsonburg, five thousand people strong, after the Second World War. Standard diversions consisted of school, church, movies, radio, the newly emerging television, swimming pool in the summer, and skating rink in the winter. Only a few blocks from our home stood a small Carnegie Library, now sadly replaced by a larger, modern building. With steep stairs leading through columns and arches into the reading room and stacks, the old library was truly a home away from home. I read my way diligently through much of its collection, including all the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries, usually with a television blaring in the background! That my youthful enthusiasm for television has largely evaporated will surprise few people. I was particularly impressed with the library's regularly changing stock of British and American periodical titles, mostly disappeared, including the *Illustrated London News*, *Country Life*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Look*. They kept reminding me of the much wider world existing beyond our town. Mrs. Mason, the Librarian, widow of a local bank manager, may not have been technically the most proficient of librarians, but she did realize that there was no stopping a young adolescent from reading whatever he wanted, even if it veered occasionally into racy adult fiction by writers like Shellabarger,

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Sabatini, and Frank Yerby. Contemporary novelists like C.P. Snow would also catch my attention. Interestingly, it was usually historical fiction that captured my imagination. High school English and history courses inspired both fiction and non-fiction reading.

The town had no bookstore, and school library collections were rarely to my taste. Family collections yielded reading treasures, such as novels, picture books by the Scottish publisher, Blackie, and the *Book of Knowledge* encyclopedia that I read assiduously. Comic books were an important source of reading material, with “Classic” comics introducing me to serious literature! Vivid childhood memories persist of my mother, a teacher, encircled by my friends and me in our backyard on hot summer evenings reading aloud chapters from *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson* whose powerful narrative enthralled us all. Perhaps it augured a future career in research that I thought then of keeping a permanent record of my reading. I never followed through, but I did develop the habit of noting when and where I purchased a book.

As an undergraduate student at the nearby University of Western Ontario, I attended a required course on library use taught by future Tremaine Medal recipient, Olga Bishop, who graded my final assignment at 100% – surely a harbinger of my becoming a librarian. Years later, Olga and I would become good friends and collaborators. My academic career began in honours English and history but soon narrowed to honours history in recognition of my preference for the subject. Unlike many colleagues, I developed an interest in bibliography and book history through history, not literature. Indeed, I find my novel reading decreases with every passing year; I rarely if ever read poetry. Within history I felt myself drawn particularly to intellectual and institutional history – not normally paired together but again indicative of future directions. In London my love of books was constantly tempted by the city’s bookstores, which were mostly outlets of national chains. My love of libraries was reinforced prowling through the stacks at Western and London Public Library.

Montreal and McGill University, where I went expecting to spend a year or two but where I have remained ever since, have provided me with unique opportunities for which I shall always be grateful. Not only was my avid appetite for books fed, but my eyes were opened to studying books and libraries as academic subjects. The old stacks – subsequently gutted and rebuilt – of McGill’s Redpath Library provided my first exposure to a major research collection. The city offered more and better shops than London for new books, but also

provided a wonderful array of second-hand and antiquarian book dealers. My personal collecting of books and objects commemorating the royal family now began in earnest. At McGill I was able to develop a career in librarianship and cultivate further my love and interest in history, ultimately combining them together. In the mid 1960s, the Library School was revolutionizing library education not only in Canada, but worldwide, with the introduction of a two-year (four-academic-term) Master's program. I found myself uniquely situated in the last year of the old BLS and first year of the new MLS programs and thereby received both degrees. The school showed me how librarianship was both profession and academic field of study needing to be mastered as craft and intellectual discipline. It was, however, the combination of reference service and bibliography that would initially captivate my interest. Interacting with people, learning about sources of information, interviewing and determining real questions, and developing strategies for finding information became my major focus. Library classification schemes with their hierarchical structures resonated with my interest in intellectual history. Library history dovetailed with my interest in institutional history.

The 1960s and '70s were a dynamic period for Canadian libraries and higher education, a golden age of growth and expansion. During these years, a remarkable range of opportunities and challenges presented themselves to me. First, within a few short years, the McGill Libraries, supplemented by a summer position at Sir George Williams University (soon to become part of Concordia University), rotated me through almost every professional task then available in an academic library: cataloguing, reference, selection, acquisitions, systems, and rare book librarianship. Second, as the first librarian of the Lawrence Lande Canadiana Collection I was privileged to work intimately with this outstanding research collection tracking our country's historical development. I also had the opportunity of working closely with Dr. Lande, one of Canada's most colourful book collectors. Bibliography, I now came to appreciate, was more than a tool for answering reference queries; it was also a scholarly undertaking with profound implications for all academic work. While serving as Lande Librarian I was instrumental in founding the Canadian Studies Program, forerunner of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. Third, a Master's degree in history, in which I undertook an intellectual and bio-bibliographical analysis of a journal published at McGill University between 1901 and 1906 (*The McGill University Magazine*), plunged me into the depths of bibliographical

and institutional research and set me on the path of becoming a Canadianist and a historian of McGill University. Fourth, I accepted an invitation from the Graduate School of Library Science to give the course, "History of Books and Printing," to be taught in the Rare Book Department of McGill's McLennan Library. Students would have the privilege of working directly with primary material in the William Colgate Printing Collection, which is possibly the finest such collection in the country. Very quickly I developed an interest in and knowledge of the development of literacy, writing systems, calligraphy, type face and book design, printers, and presses both commercial and private. Fifth, completing this process of accelerated professional and academic development, I accepted an invitation in 1972 to join the school's full-time faculty, teaching reference service, bibliography, and the history of books and printing.

Elements of my career and professional life were converging by the early 1970s, but the question still remained as to which would predominate. That book and library history would emerge as my areas of concentration came as little surprise. In addition to publishing and lecturing in these fields, I became heavily involved with the Bibliographical Society of Canada / Société bibliographique du Canada and the Canadian Library Association / Association canadienne des bibliothèques – particularly its Library History Interest Group. I also participated in continuing editorial projects: *Fontanus: from the Collections of McGill University*, publishing research emerging from McGill's library, archival, and museum collections, and which I am currently co-editing; *Information & Culture: a Journal of History* (originally *The Journal of Library History*) and *Epilogue: Canadian Bulletin for the History of Books, Libraries, and Archives* on whose editorial boards I have served; and the Occasional Papers Series of McGill's School of Information Studies whose editor I was for many years. Most recently I served on the editorial committee of *History of the Book in Canada / Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada*.

Like that of most people, my working day now revolves to a considerable degree around digital media, whether I am word-processing, writing e-mail, searching via Google, building spreadsheets, perusing journal articles, or reading books – activities that blend unique and non-unique materials. I have so far resisted the temptations of computer games, downloading, and social media!

But what of the future of books, libraries and bibliography – and their scholarly and historical study – in our digital age? In the millennia preceding Gutenberg and the printing revolution of the

1450s, libraries and archives overlapped and were sometimes difficult to disentangle, as hand-copying meant that both types of repositories were equally concerned with unique texts. The intent of texts – administrative and private, or public and shared – rather than their uniqueness, determined whether they were placed in an archive or library. Listings and descriptions of archival collections along with codicological studies of manuscripts concentrate upon uniqueness and thus do not fall within the definition of bibliography. Bibliography was developed to describe duplicate texts produced mechanically by printing presses. Although descriptive, analytical, and textual bibliography have also developed for investigating unique qualities of printed materials, there remains a theoretical assumption that all copies of a printed text will be identical to one another unless proven otherwise. Printed books, libraries, and bibliography have existed in symbiotic relationship with one another for over five hundred years, dominating the field of textual communication and employing increasingly sophisticated techniques of bibliographical control for dealing with the deluge of printed material.

With the digital revolution, texts are now presenting a range of issues not easily reconciled with the distinctions between uniqueness and non-uniqueness characterizing traditional bibliographical theory. Two issues command particular attention: first, digital texts can be deliberately and easily created whereby all published copies are different and unique from one another; second, a digital text may be unique but be shared simultaneously by multiple users. Given these realities, are electronic texts amenable to bibliographical control? Can current definitions of bibliography encompass or be amended to encompass various anomalies? Are we in fact slipping back into a pre-Gutenberg world of unique texts whose relevance or suitability for libraries is determined by function rather than by mode of production?

In light of uncertainty now hovering over the definition of bibliography, what are the implications for books? I distinguish between book as physical object and book as intellectual entity. As physical objects, books have evolved and changed over thousands of years, from clay tablets to digital formats, and will continue doing so into the indefinite future. As intellectual entities, however, books will retain their role as long as there are literate beings concerned with creating and consuming extended texts of imagination, reflection, and information. As for the printed book, as opposed to the digital book, it shows no sign of disappearing, thanks to two factors: human love of the tactile; and a perception that the longevity and integrity

of texts may be better ensured in “hard copy” format. Some argue that digital texts represent the triumph of speed and ease over quality and accuracy!

Several concerns regarding digital/electronic texts come easily to mind:

- 1) The integrity of texts can be changed and altered seamlessly without trace (sometimes deliberately and sometimes inadvertently).
- 2) The longevity of texts is unknown: the textual life span may be placed in jeopardy by hardware, software, or natural deterioration.
- 3) Intellectual freedom and freedom of conscience are now called into question because of the perceived “conspiracy” of publishers to control access and reading, and by the growing loss of privacy in a digital world.
- 4) Universal access is threatened if information is limited to elites or those with financial resources.
- 5) The standardization and interchangeability of information technology decline as systems become increasingly unique.
- 6) Electrical energy is becoming more expensive and raising the cost of digital products.

Given the issues and concerns revolving around the definition and future of books and bibliography, where do libraries stand? I define a *library* as an institution for (i) collective ownership of, or access to, imaginative, reflective, and informative textual materials available in duplicate copy, (ii) providing service to a defined clientele, and (iii) functioning as a:

- literacy system:
 - providing texts that develop and maintain literacy
 - devising and employing indexing/descriptive systems that assume and promote literacy and access
- knowledge system:
 - developing collections that reflect human knowledge and encourage learning
 - adopting and developing classification schemes for collections that reflect human knowledge
- memory system:
 - supporting and extending memory through published texts that encapsulate human knowledge

- encouraging and maintaining memory through publication and reading
- cultural system:
 - preserving for posterity humanity's published textual heritage
 - encouraging and assisting use of the published textual heritage
- learning system:
 - providing services that promote self-learning, and assist access to published textual content
 - organizing collections to encourage exploration and discovery of published texts

Darnton's well-known schematization for the book cycle envisages four stages: creation, production, distribution, and reception. In the print world, libraries were largely defined by reception. In the digital world, libraries may also be involved in creation, production, and distribution. I would argue, however, that the five systems outlined above require substantial fulfillment for an institution or collection to be considered a library.

I am concerned by a range of issues facing today's academic research libraries, several of which I will briefly mention. First, the wholesale weeding of collections, without consideration of their unique qualities, destroys a crucial research tool for understanding the evolution of disciplines and professions. Second, mutilating unique information (such as benefactors, previous owners, and library-specific accession or classification markings) when a volume is repaired or bound removes another research tool. Third, replacing owned physical collections with leased electronic collections appears frequently to be done with little or no consideration of long term issues of access and longevity of texts. Fourth, taking away or severely limiting patrons' access to professional librarians runs the danger of libraries turning into digital warehouses.

Books and libraries are my joy and inspiration; their study is my intellectual and academic focus. That my personal and professional lives should be so complementary has been a privilege and blessing for which I shall always be grateful. This world has brought me into contact with a remarkable cross-section of people who have enriched my mind and imagination, and without whom my life would have been much poorer. Fellow book lovers and collectors from whom I am constantly learning are among my closest friends. My students claim to learn from me, but in truth I learn even more from them. Books, libraries, and people are my continuing legacy to the world.

SOMMAIRE

Cette histoire personnelle d'une vie passée dans les livres et les bibliothèques débute dans un village ontarien, se poursuit dans la ville de London pour finalement aboutir à Montréal. L'amour des livres et des bibliothèques se transforme peu à peu en travaux universitaires et érudits. La discussion jette la lumière sur les bases théoriques de la bibliographie et les défis que pose le texte numérique. En soulevant cette question, l'auteur souligne l'importance de préserver nos collections uniques de recherche à l'ère électronique. Il énonce en outre les principes et les postulats qui définissent la bibliothèque ainsi que les dangers potentiels auxquels font face de nos jours les collections de recherche, tels que leur conversion dans les dépôts de livres numériques.