

"IN THE PRESENCE OF THE SCHOLLARS"*

By DAVID C. MEARNs

It is good to be in North Carolina. It is thrice good to be in North Carolina because this State, a region of the muses, provides a convenient mailing address for that itinerant, our foremost poet; because this state, with its genius for incitement to derring-do, compels the discovery of the South by that itinerant, our foremost editorial-explorer; and finally, because this State, possessed of rich reserves of the ingredients of a compost-heap, offers asylum to, and is the retreat of, that itinerant, our foremost librarian. To

shelter, however precariously and momentarily, but simultaneously, a Sandburg, a Daniels, and a Lydenberg is to exalt a portion of the earth.



DAVID C. MEARNs

But this experience is the more memorable for me because in my remote and dissolute youth, I was ghost for a candidate for your highest office. The themes, as I remember them, were exclusively patriotic, which explains why, when he had misplaced the address for Labor Day, my patron fished out and repeated, without the audience being conscious of his duplicity, the stirring lines he had already intoned on the Fourth of July. His formula was commendably simple, for, whatever the subject, his single injunction would be: "include a paragraph on the wonders of Southern Womanhood." Looking back, it is strange that those juvenile effusions were not enough to prevent his election. I could write with more conviction now . . .

When selfishly, unfeelingly, gloatingly, I first accepted your now-repentant president's invitation to invade this austere and innocent front parlor, I was inclined to concoct a discourse along historical lines. If only the sources are obscure enough and the sentences sufficiently sententious, history provides an excellent mask for ignorance, and the opportunities for elaborate foot-notes are admirable and endless. With this laudable purpose in view, I spent several afternoons idly turning over manuscripts in great portfolios, lettered "The North Carolina Miscellany." In the main, this quest was vain, but in the course of futility I came upon a document which arrested my attention. I am still in custody, for that foxed and yellowed leaf is dated November 6th, 1848, and relates how learning lighted on a school at Pisgah, situated in your Gaston County. This is the text of that terrifying document:

Articles of agreement in 22 Sde School dstrict Between Charles L. Thomison as teacher & Enoch McNair Francis Battie & Alexander Weer Committee in Said Schooll Dstrict Ar 1 The Said Charles L. Thomison doath bind Himself to teach by the month at thirteen dollars Per month the afore Said Thomison doath Bind Him Self to teach all the Branches Required By the Schooll acts to be taught in Common Schools

Ar 2 The Said Enoch McNair Francis Battie & Alexander Weer doath bind them Selves to pay to The Said Charles L. Thomison the Sum of thirteen Dollars per month by giving him an Order on the Cheareman of Common Schools.

Ar 3 The teacher has the privilege of cloasing the School At the end of any one month or the Committee May Cloase at the end of any month the See proper

Ar 4 School to comence in the morning at the Sun one hour & a half high one hour at inter-mission and Cloase one hour by Sun Set

*An address before the North Carolina Library Association, October 22, 1953, Asheville. Mr. Mearns is Assistant Librarian for American Collections, Incumbent of the Chair of History, and Chief of the Manuscripts Division, The Library of Congress.

Ar 5 All Schollars coming to this School over fifteen Years oald who transgress the rules of Said School Shall Be Expeled by Teacher & Committee

Ar 6 None of the large Schollars Shall Exclude the Smaller Schollars from the benefit of the fire Righting Benches or any other privlidge belonging to them in Said School

Ar 7 Thair Shall be no Swareing rastling nor Tale bareing Dureing Said School

Ar 8 Thair is to be no immoral conduct neither By Teacher Nor Committee in the presence of The Schollars dureing the above mentioned School

Now, for all I know, committeemen and teachers may be permitted their peccadilloes so long as they are conducted in shuttered privacy, off-duty, and out of hours. But not librarians—we belong to the Glass-House Gang! We are forever "in the presence of the schollars." We must be circumspect—or else.

The inexhaustible Blades told a legend which illustrate our quandary in reverse:

In the year 1439 [wrote William] two Minorite friars, who had all their lives collected books, died. In accordance with popular belief, they were at once conducted before the heavenly tribunal to hear their doom, taking with them two asses laden with books. At Heaven's gate the porter demanded, 'Whence came ye?' The Minorites replied, 'From a monastery of St. Francis.' 'Oh!' said the porter, 'then St. Francis shall be your judge.' So that saint was summoned, and at sight of the friars and their burden demanded who they were, and why they had brought so many books with them. 'We are Minorites,' they humbly replied, 'and we have brought these few books with us as a solatium in the new Jerusalem.' 'And you, when on earth, practiced the good they teach?' Sternly demanded the saint, who read their characters at a glance. Their faltering reply was sufficient, and the blessed saint at once passed judgment as follows: 'Inasmuch as, seduced by foolish vanity, and against your vows of poverty, you have amassed this multitude of books, and thereby and therefor have neglected the duties and broken the rules of your Order, you are now sentenced to read your books for ever and ever in the fires of Hell.' Immediately, a roaring noise filled the air, and a flaming chasm opened, in which friars and asses and books were suddenly engulfed.

For having been diverted from their spiritual exertions, it was no doubt proper that the monks were condemned for all eternity to the Great Books program. But books, ladies and gentlemen, are temporally at least, a librarians business. He should respect, honor, revere them. He should know something about them. With some temerity I venture to suggest that he should occasionally even have patience enough to look at them. And if he would serve an earthly penance and thereby assure himself a paradise where there is neither print, nor readers, the librarian should piously bring himself, from time to time, to read a book.

For the librarian is "in the presence of the schollars," and the schollars are uneasy. Their suspicions were aroused when first the librarian decided that he had a profession; those suspicions continue to mount; there are moments nowadays when the librarian, oilcan and wrench in hand, interrupts his tinkering and wonders forlornly what has happened to him.

Warnings of popular disfavor come early. In the Eighteen-Eighties, Victoria's subject, Frederick Harrison, expressed a general misgiving in an essay, in which he wrote:

Our human faculties and our mental forces are not enlarged simply by multiplying our materials of knowledge and our facilities for communication. Telephones, microphones, pantoscopes, steam-presses, and ubiquity engines in general may, after all, leave the poor human brain panting and throbbing under the strain of its appliances, no bigger and no stronger than the brains of the men who heard Moses speak, and saw Aristotle and Archimides pondering over a few worn rolls of crabbed manuscript. Until some new Gutenberg or Watt can invent a machine for magnifying the human mind, every fresh apparatus for multiplying its work is a fresh strain on the mind, a new realm for it to order and to rule.

But ah! the apparatus was lovely; it was an end in itself; the caution went unheeded. Then, half a century ago, a New England divine, Gerald Stanley Lee, with his genius for opprobrium, put the so-called "modern" librarian squirming on the spot. Wrote Dr. Lee:

They [the modern librarians] are not really down in their hearts true to the books. One can hardly help feeling vaguely, persistently resentful over having them about presiding over the past. One never catches them—at least I never do—forgetting themselves. One never comes on one loving a book. They seem to be servants,—most of them,—book chambermaids. They do not care anything about a library as a library. They just seem to be going around remembering rules in it.

And Dr. Lee made other unkind accusations, declaring that "So far as I can get at his mind at all, he seems to have decided that his mind (any librarian's mind) is a kind of pneumatic-tube, or carrier system . . . for shoving immortals at people." Dr. Lee went on to say that "Any higher or more thorough use for a mind, such as being a kind of spirit of the books for people, making a kind of spiritual connection with them down underneath, does not seem to have occurred to him." But Dr. Lee conceded that "As a sort of pianola or æolian attachment for a library, as a mechanical contrivance for making a comparatively ignorant man draw perfectly enormous harmonies out of it (which he does not care anything about), a modern librarian helps."

That was in 1902. In the same year, a youth in the Academic Department of Brooklyn's Polytechnic Institute (his name was William Warner Bishop) indirectly protested so harsh a judgment, writing that "A librarian who is not a lover of books is indeed a sorry specimen of his kind," and insisting that "librarianship does not consist in standard sizes and pneumatic tubes." And the youngster, with that unerring instinct that has made him always an elder statesman, posed a rhetorical question: "May we not find in the spirit of the bibliophile one of the bonds which shall hold firmly together the members of our calling now rapidly differentiating to such a degree that we are obliged to flock by ourselves in a yearly increasing number of sections?"

It is interesting but futile to speculate on what might have happened had anyone read Dr. Bishop's essay and had had the hardihood to act upon an excellent suggestion. But, so far as my findings go, it received no attention whatever. Instead . . .

We find in the Twenties a distinguished colleague, overwhelmed with the number of books which came under his care, averring "the librarian who reads is lost." His listener, my lamented friend, Francis Huddleston, did not agree. Mr. Huddleston thought it would have been more true had he said, "The librarian who does not read will be found out."

Actually, of course, he was found out long ago; but by some miracle of self-delusion he is either unaware of his exposure or completely immune to its implications.

When, in the pages of *The Library Quarterly*, Randolph Adams, the irreplaceable, added librarians to fire, water, vermin, dust, housemaids, collectors, children and other enemies of books, he credited an eastern member of the guild, with having made, in 1935, the bland pronouncement: "Book-loving is no doubt a noble passion, praiseworthy in business men and other amateurs, but out of place in the temperament of the librarian."

Even so decorous and decorative a spirit as Larry Powell was recently obliged ruefully to admit: "It has been my experience that many of the present generation of library administrators are hardly more than literate."

And Manchester's Louis Stanley Jast, put the finishing touches on the indictment when he told an audience at Birmingham: "We speak of a man of the world, meaning a man who is easily at home in any society in which he finds himself. The librarian must be equally at home in the world of ideas." But, continued Dr. Jast: "The things that so many of them don't know, don't want to know, maybe aren't capable of knowing, are staggering." Dr. Jast supposed "that modern mechanized and unduly stressed vocational education is responsible, together with the revolt against the old-fashioned discipline."

There you have it, ladies and gentlemen. Is the charge well-founded? Have we, thoughtlessly but deliberately, changed a rather lovely, personal art, compounded of imagination, pertinacity, initiative, and the exhilarating joy of the search into a grim and selfless technology? Have we forfeited the fertile fields of bibliography to the barbarians who call themselves documentalists? Have those heathens Mini and Magni, proselyted us to their strange cult where perversely invisibility is held benign and everything must be reduced before it can regain wholesome dimensions? Have we replaced memory and ingenuity with electric scanners and magic eyes? Are our libraries become no more than intellectual garages? Must we practice our craft only in accordance with strict, inflexible and anointed procedures? Have centralized cataloging and auto-

matic accession processes removed us to an unlettered world? Have we surrendered our prerogatives to the drugstore clerk behind the counter of paperbacks? If we *have*, ours is a wretched plight indeed.

I do not disregard the plethora of print. I have grown old in acres of arrearage. I am not insensible to the problem of dealing daily with accretions of hundreds and thousands of books. But there is a maxim to the effect that "if you can't lick 'em, jine 'em." This I would paraphrase: if you can't list 'em, read 'em!

Leigh Hunt described our quandary when he wrote: "The idea of an ancient library perplexes our sympathy by its map-like volumes, rolled upon cylinders. Our imagination cannot take kindly to a yard of wit, or to thirty inches of moral observation, rolled up like linen in a draper's shop." He was right. Unless we are resolved to resist the tendency, books in quantity lose their individual identities and become mere commodities, comparable to so many cans of soup on a market counter.

This Hunt was a man who hated "to read in public, and in strange company." Carlyle suffered acutely from what he called "Museum headache." Perhaps our environment discourages us from obedience to our precepts.

But there have been those whom books did not appall. My Lord Bishop of that other Durham, Richard De Bury, old philobiblon himself, exclaimed, "Oblivions would overcome us had not God provided for mortals the remedies of books." Another man of passion, Casanova, when wearied of more muscular exercise, graciously became librarian at Dux.

It was Charles Lamb, you remember, who enquired why have we not "a grace before Milton—a grace before Shakespeare—a devotional exercise proper to be said before reading the Fairy Queen?" And Thackeray, in one of the charming *Roundabout Papers* followed suit when he wrote:

Many Londoners—not all—have seen the British Museum Library. . . . What peace, what love, what truth, what beauty, what happiness for all, what generous kindness for you and me, are here spread out! It seems to me one cannot sit down in that place without a heart full of grateful reverence. I own to have said my grace at the table, and to have thanked heaven for this my English birthright, freely to partake of these bountiful books, and to speak the truth I find there.

Perhaps, after all, there is something to be said for the institutions to which we belong. But how, ladies and gentlemen, *how are we to defend, as we are called upon to defend, the freedom of enquiry, the freedom of information, so long as we ourselves do not enquire and are uninformed?*

There is nothing for it; we must recapture childhood's habit. We must begin to read again.

Petrarch, it is said, died with his head on a book. But prior to that dolorous moment he had written to a friend: "Whether I am being shaved, or having my hair cut, whether I am riding on horseback or taking my meals, I either read myself or get someone to read to me." Now it is quite possible that Laura's advocate overdid it. Reading is very splendid, but when we librarians take it up again, let us be more moderate. The schollars are looking and vicariously insist on temperance in all things.

And there was Macaulay, of whom the Reverend Sydney Smith remarked: "There are no limits to his knowledge, on small subjects as well as great; he is like a book in breeches." It seems to me that Macaulay also went too far. It is fine to be crammed with learning and to talk like a page from the *World Almanac*, but among librarians there are far too many women for the world ever to tolerate their being books in breeches. Despite her prevalent disbelief, it is contrary to a law of nature for Madame becomingly to be contained within a pair of pants.

No, if I have persuaded you, if you are determined to recover an ancient, quite forgotten taste, please, I beg you, take it easy. And if you would follow sound counsel, listen to a rising member of Parliament, Arthur James Balfour, delivering the rectorial address at St. Andrews sixty-six years ago:

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The best method of guarding against the danger of reading what is useless is to read only what is interesting. . . . He has only half learnt the art of reading who has not added to it the even more refined accomplishment of skipping and skimming; and the first step has hardly been taken in the direction of making literature a pleasure until interest in the subject, and not a desire to spare (so to speak) the author's feelings, or to accomplish an appointed task, is the prevailing motive of the reader. . . . There are times, I confess, when I feel tempted somewhat to vary the prayer of the poet, and to ask whether Heaven has not reserved in pity to this much educating generation some peaceful desert of literature as yet unclaimed . . . where it might be possible for the student to wander, even perhaps to stray, at his own pleasure; without finding every beauty labelled, every difficulty engineered, every nook surveyed, and a professional cicerone standing at every corner to guide each succeeding traveller along the same well-worn round. . . . This world may be kind or unkind, it may seem to us to be hastening on the wings of enlightenment and progress to an imminent millenium, or it may weigh us down with a sense of insoluble difficulty and irremediable wrong; but whatever else it be, so long as we have good health and a good library, it can hardly be dull.

If this be so, how long shall we be dullards? For us, salvation is at hand. We can reach it on our shelves. We can find fellowship with the schollars and become again part of a sometimes entrancing company; the noble company of the lettered. And in the words of a manuscript come straight from the Middle Age we can offer a petition:

O Lord, send the virtue of thy Holy Spirit upon these our books; that cleansing them from all earthly things, by thy holy blessing, they may mercifully enlighten our hearts and give us true understanding; and grant that by thy teaching, they may brightly preserve and make full an abundance of good works according to thy will.

Surely we are standing in the need of prayer.