

# RARE BOOK COLLECTIONS

Being a paper presented at a National Library Senior Staff Seminar by  
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## INTRODUCTION

Literature on rare book librarianship is scarce. Administration of the Rare Book Room is a special branch of librarianship which librarians hardly think of and as such have developed little or no literature. It has been an arbitrary growth rather than a planned evolution. In America, for example, it has developed pragmatically, sometimes blindly. The uniformity that exists has come merely by imitation rather than through formal consultation or literature. Dr. Pierce Butler confirms this situation when he said "...Most library courses in accredited library schools of today, whenever they deal with procedures and practices, tend to disregard the function of custodianship and point more directly toward service and effective administration of various techniques; consequently, the questions of handling and preservation are seldom considered. It is solely from the many experienced and qualified professionals working at their jobs in the various kinds of rare book libraries that we can learn more about the day-to-day problems and the many remedies and workable solutions that have proved to be helpful."

## DEFINITION

From the student's point of view rare books are simply books which one wishes to consult and cannot get easily from a library or bookstore. A slightly more sophisticated definition will mention that such books are not handled through the usual channels for the purchase of new books, whether library supplier or bookseller, but instead must be bought (if they can be bought) through specialist dealers or auction houses (the latter not being common in the third world).

A dictum of David Clement, the eighteenth century French bibliographer said that a book which is difficult to find in the country where it is sought ought to be called simply rare; a book which is difficult to find in any country may be called very rare- a book of which there are only fifty or sixty copies existing, or which appears so seldom as to suggest that there never had been more at any time than that number of copies, ranks as extremely rare; and when the whole number of copies does not exceed ten, this constitutes excessive rarity, or rarity in the highest degree.

H. Richard Archer has defined rare books as "books and manuscripts, of whatever kind, that are isolated from a general collection and maintained for use in a supervised area, thus assuring their availability and preservation, i.e. treasure rooms or rare books rooms, with the unintentional but still unfortunate implication that everything therein is to be gazed upon but not touched."

Many librarians prefer to use 'special collections' rather than 'rare books' when describing materials under their care. 'Special collection' as the name



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implies is wider in coverage than 'rare books'. The former includes the latter as well as all other materials demanding special treatment that the general stack area, by its nature, is unable to provide. In addition to rare or otherwise important printed books, special collections could include manuscripts, archives, sheet music, phonograph records, cuneiform tablets, coins, prints, newspapers, maps, microfilms, microcards, pornography, autographed letters, beautiful or fragile examples of printing and hand illumination and all other acknowledged rarities.

If it is impossible to devise another and more satisfactory definition for rare books at least it is possible to suggest some of the categories of printed materials that might reasonably be kept in special collections. In developed countries, it is possible for librarians to segregate all books printed before certain dates e.g. all books printed anywhere before 1550, all books printed in England or in English before 1640, all books printed in Latin America before 1750 and all books printed in North America before 1800. As the world grows older, a set of later dates may be equally defensible, e.g. all books printed in Nigeria before 1900.

## ACQUISITION OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Special collections may come into a library in different ways. It could be by purchase, deposit, i.e. legal deposit, gift or bequest of private collections, or by collection of printed ephemera. The rare book librarian has to formulate his acquisition policy - the essential questions of what to buy, from whom to buy it, and how much?

## ACQUISITION BY PURCHASE

Knowing from whom one can obtain materials obviously precede purchase, and rare book librarian

therefore has to build up his own list of dealers, large and small, specialised or general, highly professional or amateurish, as will be appropriate to his particular collection. There are some directories produced in overseas countries which may perhaps not be too useful to our local needs here. The Sheppard Press for example produces three directories:

1. A directory of dealers in second-hand and antiquarian books in the British Isles, first published in 1951 with new editions about every four years;
2. European book dealers, first published in 1967; and
3. Book dealers in North America now in its sixth or seventh edition.

Other directories by other people include **Annual directory of booksellers specialising in antiquarian and out of print books; the Antiquarian book trade, an international directory of subject specialists**, by B. Donald Grose, which claims to list almost two thousand dealers throughout the world. The International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB) also from time to time produces a directory listing all bookseller members of the ILAB and the various other groups affiliated to the association. Though very useful yet the ILAB directory suffers the usual drawbacks of multinational publications and is in the nature of things limited to the larger firms.

Apart from directories, suggestions could come from readers making use of the collections as to books which could be added. However, not all suggestions will be taken up since some will obviously conflict with the acquisition policy of the library. The third group of additions to a rare book library's list of desiderata will come from those books which the library has sought unsuccessfully to buy either at auction or from booksellers' catalogues.

It is not advisable to send too extensive a list to a dealer at once since one can scarcely expect as diligent and intensive searching for several hundred books as one can for a dozen or two. At times libraries supply the same desiderata list to a number of different booksellers, hoping that by spreading their dragnet, they will end up with more offers than when working through a single dealer. This is not likely to happen if the selected single agent is competent. On the other hand if several advertisements for the same book appear in the trade journals, the suggestion that the book is in hot demand may well drive up the price. In addition, the individual dealer is likely to search less assiduously than if he has the sole agency.

## ACQUISITION THROUGH GIFTS

Gifts may come into a library in different ways and with different conditions. Presentation of books could be in the owner's lifetime or by his bequest, also there might be the presentation of money to augment the library's book-fund for the purchase of books in a specific subject area or even for the purchase of one particular book. There is the concealed gift through which the library is given the opportunity to buy a complete collection, or its choice of books from it, at a price considerably lower than the owner knows he could obtain on the open market. There is also the

virtual gift whereby owners without surrendering legal ownership of material will deposit it in a library and make it generally available for scholarly consultation. The deposit of such private archival records in libraries is a way of relieving their owners of the everyday care and custodianship and the records are thereby preserved for posterity. However, the library housing such deposited materials will eventually inherit them. Another type of gift is the one that will be presented to a library as a **quid pro quo** for services rendered by the library. Occasionally a munificent donor will present not just books or financial assistance but will create an entirely new library. This may not be possible here in Nigeria because this type of gesture is very rare in recent years even in Britain where people appreciate the value of reading.

Some gifts come into the library with different and varied strings attached. However, it should be noted that these strings should in no way prevent the acceptance of such gifts as that may be tantamount to 'opportunity lost'. In the alternative, agreement can often be reached with prospective donors, whereby excessively strict controls are understood to have a stated terminal date, e.g. a donor may wish to have his collection closed to use or housed in some unusual way such as in his own home during his lifetime or for some other finite and reasonable period. Such conditions are in general, entirely workable, and almost any institution can undertake to carry out such terms of agreement knowing fully well that eventually the full interests of scholarship will be served.

Fortunately, for librarians and readers, the great majority of gift collections come with difficult but surmountable complications. The most which a donor may likely ask, unless his collection is of exceptional notability is that his gift be maintained as a unit. Quite often even this stipulation will be relaxed after discussion, to identification by special book plate, without the need to separate necessarily by shelving. Typical phrases preceding donor's name in book plates are "Gift of", "Presented by", "From the Estate of", "In Memory of" and so on. Besides book plates and ownership marks, various bits of data useful to the staff may be added to the book. Some rare book libraries still find it extremely useful to accession their collections because apart from the specific number, the accession record provides a convenient means for determining the order of receipt of titles throughout the year. The accession number may be entered with pencil in a small but readable form in an inconspicuous place, e.g. at the upper right-hand corner of the inside of the back cover. Other useful details are the price, date acquired and sources- collation note, classification, catalogue entry and bibliographical references.

## ORGANIZATION OF RARE BOOKS IN THE LIBRARY

In rare book libraries it is highly desirable to have a certain flexibility in the arrangement of books on the shelves. Subjects alone cannot determine the shelving in a rare book room since shelving strictly by

subject can interfere with the requirements of proper rare book administration which are not necessarily static in nature. Shelve consultation of rare books by readers is normally not allowed, the rare book librarian is therefore free to shelve his materials in any way he feels will facilitate their preservation, augment their usefulness, or bring out clearly some particular facets which cannot be adequately emphasized in subject classification. Most rare book collections, being consequently part of a main library or larger institution like college, university, a national library or public library usually inherit the parental subject classification system. This may not be applicable or universally adequate for all rare books because while simplified cataloguing does purport to distinguish between different combinations or styles, of type, the methods of simplified cataloguing, if adequate for distinguishing between books produced in our day, are not sufficient for early printed books where variations occur with greater frequency.

### CARE, MAINTENANCE AND RESTORATION OF RARE BOOKS

When it comes to protection and conservation of rare books, "curator" would better be substituted for rare book librarian because the curator has the greater responsibility of preserving the book, an urge or training which an ordinary librarian may not possess. For example, a curator must have knowledge of what to look for in the physical condition of a book e.g. points of wear and damage to determine repairs; wear for example is frequent at the eight corners, along the top and bottom of the backstrip, and along the hinges. He assesses the extent of damage and makes sure that accomplishments i.e. maps, plates etc. are the right type and that defective leaves, soiled leaves, missing leaves, and imperfectly printed or bound leaves are noted for repairs and, if necessary, sent to the bindery.

To keep and maintain a rare book library effectively, therefore, some precautions have to be taken:-

1. The normal habit of carrying an armload of volumes should not be encouraged because of the delicacy of the rarities.
2. Rarities should not be stacked.
3. No rare book should be left standing on its fore edge with leaves hanging down as this pulls against the stitching.
4. Whenever a book which is in use is to be left open, never leave a heavy object to hold it; instead, use a velvet shot bag or glass plate of appropriate weight and size to keep it in position.
5. Only a piece of paper should be used as a bookmark, never a pencil or a ruler and certainly the open book must not be placed face down.
6. Leaves should always be turned carefully and slowly with a light touch and by the outer edge when possible.
7. Extraneous substances like ink, food, water and mud should be kept away from rarities.
8. Rubber bands should not be used to hold books

open either during processing or in an exhibit.

9. Do not dangle a book by a single leaf or a cover, in fact do not dangle a book at all.
10. You should avoid turning a corner of a leaf down to mark a place.
11. Never write in a rare book or on a paper laid on a rare book (cover or text).
12. Do not do anything that will in any way damage the book or change it from the condition in which it reached you.

Light, heat and humidity are important factors in the control of the rate of deterioration, and a rarity is supposed to be preserved as closely as possible to the original condition in which it was received. Strong, natural light when it is continuously given damages both binding and paper of books. As much as possible, direct light should be prevented from falling on books since they tend to stay better in subdued light or where there is no light at all. Sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit seems to be the most satisfactory temperature for books of all ages and kinds but since that is a bit chilly for human beings who have to work there it is advisable to store books at a slightly higher temperature between 68° and 75°. Air pollution is another danger that can confront a rare book room and unless the place is sealed off from the rest of the library, there is very little a curator can do. Air pollution is apparent most frequently on leather-bound books which easily get dried up, become powdery, crack easily and finally disintegrate. Occasional house clearing of the room is very helpful.

### REFERENCE SERVICE

Reference books are, as a matter of fact, either rare or expensive but usually both are necessarily needed as support materials for the rare books. The kind of rare book collection will however determine the type of reference tools. A collection rich in incunabula, for example will require such references as the **British Museum Catalogue of 15th century Books**, the **Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke** etc. while serials such as the **Gutenberg FahrBuch** and the **library** should also be housed in the rare book room.

Another consideration in determining which rarities should be acquired is that they should be useful as source materials, especially as regards history and biography. Source materials are the accounts of events of persons written by participants, eye-witnesses, or contemporaries and published shortly after the event took place or the subject died. In literature, these materials are first editions, usually of the earliest published works of an author. In philosophy and science, they are the first enunciations of a theory or the first reports of an experiment or discovery. Later editions are reprints which seldom carry the importance or prestige of first editions and usually the aim of the bibliographer or the critic is to get as close to the author at work as is humanly possible because a book reveals the personality of an author.

The personal knowledge, initiative and imagination of the rare book librarian and staff are important in making possible the fullest use of the materials in their care. They increase their knowledge by studying and interchanging of ideas with the scholars,

researchers, book collectors as well as rare book dealers with whom they are familiar. Fortified with the available resources in their collection, the rare book librarians serve as a clearing house for information. They answer bibliographical queries, including intricate ones. They provide microfilm and photocopying services and at times they prepare and mount exhibitions portraying the potential use of their collections. They may even provide hard lists or catalogues of their most important exhibitions.

### **NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NIGERIA AND ITS RARE BOOK COLLECTION**

The history of rare book collection in the National Library must have unconsciously started with the inheritance of books from the Old Secretariat library, a majority of which relate to our colonial era including parliamentary papers and proceedings. Records from the files show that the idea of rare books came to light with the attempt to introduce Friends of the National Library' in 1967.

One of the best ways of encouraging and fostering public interest in the rare book library and its services is through the organisation of a group of friends of the library. There are various such groups prominent among which are 'Rare books group' and the 'Friends of the National Library'.

The concept of friends of the National Library originated in France in 1913 and became an international issue when an American branch of the French organisation was inaugurated in Berkeley, California in 1930. The first similar organisation got started in the United States in 1922 and since then it has become a common thing in that country. This idea has spread all over the world, including Nigeria with identical aims and set of activities.

Between 1967 and 1968, the former Library Adviser, Mr. Philip Rappaport attempted to establish 'Friends of the National Library'. Unfortunately the organisation got disbanded when the National Library Board disallowed payment of individual levy of N10 thinking that such charges would conflict with the provisions of Section 2(2)(c)(ii) of the National Library Act No. 29 of 1970. Even though the society did not actually function as expected at least one aim was achieved: "For instance, it was possible through this organisation for the National Library to trace and acquire many rare materials which now form part of the holdings of the library". (Extracts from the minutes of the 17th meeting of the National Library Board of 23rd and 24th July, 1971, Venue NIIA).

The list of members then included names of eminent people in their own rights or heads of families or important personalities who had private papers which were vital for preservation. Prominent among these people were Mrs. T.O.A. Sodeinde and Chief Ajani Olujare, the then President of African Chambers of Commerce, who, including other people succeeded in acquiring some rare books for the National Library. Some rare books on Nigerian history which thereby got into the library included **The Origin of the Progenitor of the Yoruba Race; The Demise of the Independence of Egbaland; and The Origin and Titles of Yoruba Rulers.**

Efforts to reactivate the organisation emerged again

in 1972 when the present Director, Mr. S.B. Aje and the former Secretary to the Board, Chief A.O. Odeleye wrote to get clearance as regards "payment of membership fees" in relation to the National Library Act No. 29 of 1970, from the Federal Ministry of Justice.

As of now organisation of the 'Friends of the National Library of Nigeria' is supposed to be in full operation and "Their activities among others include seeking to improve the services or facilities of the library by raising funds, serving as public relations agents in bringing and explaining the intentions of the library to the public at large, to help to secure special or rare collections and to protect the interest of the library in their own personal positions or connections."

Up to early 1973, National Library had no laid down policy as regards rare book collection. Some recommendations were however made in Book Orders - Rare materials file highlighting that the library should be interested in collection of items like incunabula, first editions of Nigerian authors, first editions in various subject fields relating especially to Nigeria and particularly in the areas of humanities, to support research.

Evidence shows that attempt was made to purchase some rare book materials direct from South Africa but the plan was abandoned. Some rare books were however purchased through the University of Ibadan Bookshop. Presently, the National Library has some two hundred volumes of rare book materials kept at its 227 Herbert Macaulay Street office. Most of these books have already been processed and were in fact formerly shelved in a special room and were being made available on request to readers when the reading room was still at No. 4 Wesley Street. Right now, owing to some reorganisation in the Readers Services Division, they are temporarily tied together in bits and kept in a room pending the time a decision will be taken on them.

Putting many things into consideration, National Library being one of the leading libraries in a developing country is making progress as far as rare book collection is concerned. It however has to work harder still. This aspect of the function of the institution should be given more attention than hitherto. A curator should be appointed to see to the smooth running of the section. Documents in the Serials and Documents Section should be thoroughly inspected and decision on the criteria for declaring a book rare should be made. Nigerian however new, because of the special interest and the obligation that the National Library owes to preserve them for the nation, should in fact be regarded as rare books and they should be treated as such

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