

# HERITAGE LIBRARIES AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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## English Abstract

Today librarians are no longer expected to be involved in historical research, not even when they serve in a department holding historical collections. Libraries, so we are told, are meant for patrons, and the duty of library staff – including its specialized, scientifically trained members – is to serve the patronage. Nevertheless, the author discusses three reasons why heritage librarians need to devote themselves to historical research, in order to meet the expectations of the library's patrons and to optimize the management of collections. He particularly argues the necessity of library history and provenance research: if so much scientific research in the humanities is carried out on the basis of heritage collections in libraries, it is a question of scientific deontology to investigate how these collections came about and why individual documents are part of them today.

## French Abstract

Actuellement, les bibliothécaires ne sont plus sensés s'occuper de recherche historique, même s'ils travaillent au sein d'un département de collections patrimoniales. Les bibliothèques sont destinées aux lecteurs, et le personnel des bibliothèques – y compris le personnel scientifique spécialisé – est là pour assister et servir le public. Néanmoins, l'auteur avance trois raisons qui devraient inciter les collaborateurs de bibliothèques patrimoniales à s'engager dans la recherche historique, afin qu'ils répondent mieux aux attentes des utilisateurs et qu'ils optimisent la gestion des collections. Surtout, il souligne l'importance de l'histoire des bibliothèques et la recherche des provenances: si tant de recherches dans les sciences humaines s'effectuent à l'aide des collections patrimoniales des bibliothèques, c'est une question de déontologie scientifique d'étudier la façon dont ces collections furent rassemblées et de démontrer les raisons pour lesquelles des documents individuels en font partie aujourd'hui.

## German Abstract

Heutzutage wird von Bibliothekaren keine historische Forschung mehr erwartet; selbst dann nicht, wenn sie in einer Abteilung mit historischen Beständen arbeiten. Bibliotheken, so heißt es, sind für ihre Kunden da und die Aufgabe der Bibliotheksangestellten – auch der wissenschaftlich ausgebildeten und spezialisierten – ist es, den Kunden zu Diensten zu sein. Als Gegenentwurf dazu erörtert der Autor drei Gründe dafür, dass wissenschaftliche Bibliothekare sich der historischen Forschung widmen sollten, um damit nicht nur den Erwartungen ihrer Bibliothekskunden gerecht zu werden, sondern auch die Bestandspflege zu optimieren. Im Besonderen fordert er die Pflege von Bibliotheksgeschichte und Provenienzforschung ein. Weil eine erhebliche Menge geisteswissenschaftlicher Forschung auf der Grundlage von über Jahrhunderte gewachsenen Bibliotheksbeständen geschieht, ist es eine Frage der wissenschaftlichen Pflicht zu erforschen, wie Bibliotheksbestände sich entwickelt haben und wieso einzelne Werke sich heute darin finden.

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### Dutch Abstract

Van bibliothecarissen wordt vandaag niet verwacht dat ze zich met historisch onderzoek inlaten, zelfs niet wanneer ze werken in een afdeling met historische collecties. Men stelt dat bibliotheken er zijn voor gebruikers, en het personeel van een bibliotheek – ook het hoog opgeleide, wetenschappelijk geschoolde personeel – is er om diensten te verlenen aan het publiek. Toch zijn er volgens de auteur drie redenen waarom erfgoedbibliothecarissen zich met historisch onderzoek moeten inlaten, opdat ze tegemoet zouden komen aan de verwachtingen van de gebruikers en het collectiebeheer zouden optimaliseren. Hij pleit vooral voor bibliotheekgeschiedenis en herkomstonderzoek: als er zoveel onderzoek in de humane wetenschappen verricht wordt op basis van erfgoedcollecties in bibliotheken, is het een kwestie van wetenschappelijke deontologie om te onderzoeken hoe deze collecties tot stand kwamen en waarom individuele documenten er vandaag deel van uitmaken.

Today it is hard to believe, but once upon a time directors of national libraries were invited as speakers for important academic ceremonies. In 1955, this honour was meted out to Leendert Brummel, the director of the Dutch Royal Library in The Hague. On the *dies natalis* of Leiden University, he gave a lecture entitled 'Een stiefkind der geschiedenis: bibliotheekgeschiedenis' [A Stepchild of Historiography: the History of Libraries]. Subsequently, the text appeared in print, offering us some ideas that are still valid nowadays.<sup>2</sup> The Dutch library director made a case for the history of libraries, constructing his argument on two bases: the history of libraries is an enabling condition to the better understanding of the present functioning of institutional libraries, and this history provides us with an important contribution to cultural history. According to Brummel, nobody was better equipped to write this history than academically educated librarians themselves. However, he also predicted that lack of time was likely to interfere with the research of those librarians, and even more with the writing down of their findings. Consequently the history of libraries was doomed to become 'a stepchild of historiography', much to the detriment of libraries and of cultural history.

Meanwhile Brummel's argument has reached its sixtieth anniversary, and its line of reasoning seems to be peremptorily sealed. As he predicted, librarians today are no longer expected to be involved in historical research, not even when they serve in a department holding historical collections. Nobody wants to have around the house the uncanny spook of the erudite but otherworldly librarian who keeps aloof from his colleagues and readers, cherishing in seclusion his individual research interests. Libraries are meant for patrons, and the duty of library staff – including its specialized, scientifically trained members – is to serve the patronage.

This last message is actually the first one I share at the beginning of each academic year with our students of Library and Information Science. I make it perfectly clear to them that it is not enough for librarians or information experts to enjoy using a library themselves, and that the profession, no matter at what level it is practiced, is concerned first and foremost with service, with mediation between (paper or digital) collections and users. As a matter of fact, this principle is also valid for heritage libraries. However, at a later stage of the game, the students who choose the course 'Heritage Management in

2. Leendert Brummel, 'Een stiefkind der geschiedenis: bibliotheekgeschiedenis', in Leendert Brummel, *Miscellanea libraria. Opstellen over boek- en bibliotheekwezen ter gelegenheid van zijn 60e verjaardag aan de schrijver aangeboden door vakgenoten en vrienden* (s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1957), p. 64–80.

Libraries' also learn that a heritage librarian should always be a library historian as well. This needs further explanation.

There are at least three valid reasons why a heritage librarian needs to devote himself to historical research. I hasten to add that they do not interfere with his tasks as mediator between the documentary heritage and the public that is interested in it for teaching and research or for whatever purpose. I will deal with those three reasons in the sequence of their increasing pertinence.

A first reason is relevant for all libraries. If you want to maximize service, it is eminently useful to have qualified professionals around who also know the kind of questions researchers have when they approach a library collection; professionals who, furthermore, can fathom the difficulties of being confronted with the specific modalities for consulting historical documents; professionals who, in short, can feel their way into the wishes and expectations of their patrons. Librarians with a research profile can be a safeguard for a better dialogue with scientifically orientated readers and for tailor-made service to suit them.

A second reason is more specifically related to heritage libraries – and to make myself clear, under this term I also subsume plenty of music libraries, since most of them hold very rich and diverse heritage collections. This is the development of expertise on the level of the book, whether it be hand-written, printed, or digital. The public is entitled to expect – and actually does expect – that the guardians of this documentary heritage are real experts; that it can rely on them for its queries about the material properties, the production methods, the design, the functions and the historical significance of manuscripts and books, regardless of their nature whether as a medieval antiphonarium, a lithograph edition of piano music from the Biedermeier era, or printed sheet music from the sixties. This applies to every single category of patrons: from the private collector or journalist to the pupil, the radio producer, the conservatory student or foreign researcher. Of course, staff members of heritage libraries need to be adequately trained for this task before they start working with heritage collections, but, beyond that, it is also imperative for them to develop and update their knowledge constantly. Their capacity makes them eminently suitable for this purpose: nobody can match their handling of so many heritage objects, their special consideration of the construction and the external form of such a number of books, nobody can beat them in the discovery of connections between books that are totally different in terms of content, while being interconnected through a common provenance. In his article 'A Rationale of Collecting', the American bibliographer Thomas Tanselle described some fundamental characteristics of 'collecting'.<sup>3</sup> Since heritage libraries can be seen as institutional collectors, most distinctive characteristics also apply to their activities. In the context of my talk, the most relevant characteristics are 'a curiosity about the past' and 'a desire for understanding'. About these topics Tanselle writes the following:

A desire for understanding is the natural next step that follows from curiosity. When one repeatedly investigates objects [. . .), one builds up an inventory of details that form the background against which additional objects are looked at, and in this way a body of knowledge develops. [. . .] Possessing the requisite knowledge for placing an individual item in an historical setting and assessing its quality relative to other similar items is often called connoisseurship – which is simply a form of scholarship. People sometimes think of taste and judgment as the primary traits

3. G. Thomas Tanselle, 'A Rationale of Collecting', *Studies in Bibliography*, 51 (1998), 1–25.

of a connoisseur, but those qualities must be integrated with solid learning, and that combination is essential for all sound scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

At the conference ‘Ambassadors of the Book. Competencies for Heritage Librarians’ (Antwerp 2012), Michael Suarez, director of the Virginia Rare Book School, concluded his keynote address with the motto ‘You cannot love what you don’t know’.<sup>5</sup> Heritage librarians are obliged to make their collections known and cherished by a wide public, with a view to convincing this readership to appreciate the written and printed heritage as meaningful and relevant. For this to be successful, librarians have to build up knowledge about this heritage and develop expertise about it as the enabling condition to share their connoisseurship with others. The best way to guarantee this is to encourage staff of special collections libraries to engage in research. Sometimes libraries do not take advantage of opportunities in this respect. Actually, once in a while, serious people indulge in the silliest statements. Recently a guest speaker from the book trade entertained my students on the future of the book. He alleged that nothing had changed in the business model of the publishing houses and the book trade between Gutenberg – in the mid-15th century – and the introduction of the low budget pocket book in 1939; claiming also that this pocket only had a minimal impact on the book trade in comparison with the emerging e-books and online bookstores of today. Such schematizations – including what they imply in terms of overestimation of their own era – have to be counterbalanced by real connoisseurs of the history of the book, offering nuances and expertise. Staff members of heritage libraries are here in a position to produce a surprise trump card that has never been valued in its own right.

Finally, the field that needs most urgently to be explored in depth by librarians, is to my mind that of library history. This brings me back to Leendert Brummel’s special pleading. Three years ago, some heritage associations in Belgium conducted an inquiry at some six heritage libraries. Asked about the unique selling proposition of heritage libraries, their unanimous answer was: the collections themselves, their social and historical value.<sup>6</sup> If this is so, it seems to me that there is neither superfluous luxury nor frivolous diversion involved in taking a critical look at the way these collections came about, and at the paths that led them to their present context of preservation. Which considerations and decisions played a role in assembling and conserving certain specific library collections? What was the impact of fashions and of the changing bibliophile canon on decisions to single out specific documents for acquisition, while neglecting other materials? How did certain collections of books and manuscripts change hands from one collector to the other, and how did they migrate from private to institutional libraries? Which societal developments played a role in this process? If so much scientific research in the humanities is carried out on the basis of heritage collections in libraries, it is a question of scientific deontology to investigate how these collections came about and why individual documents are part of them today.

4. Tanselle, p. 11.

5. Recorded by myself. Michael Suarez’ text has not been included in the conference proceedings: *Ambassadors of the Book: Competences and Training for Heritage Librarians*, ed. Raphaële Mouren (IFLA Publications, 160) Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012.

6. Jeroen Walterus, Eva Wuyts, ‘Erfgoedbibliotheken in 2020. The Future’s So Bright, [We] Gotta Wear Shades?’, *Faro. Tijdschrift over cultureel erfgoed*, 4:3 (2011), 54–63.

This is a fertile and rich research topic, which, on the microlevel, can be carried out in relation to well-defined partial collections, but that needs to be complemented on the macrolevel: how did the concept of ‘collecting’ evolve longitudinally, and what kind of influence was exerted on it by matters of cultural politics or by broader societal developments? Such an approach dovetails with the generalized interest in the accessibility and consumption of culture in the past, manifesting itself in provenance research for example. For that purpose, European heritage libraries develop powerful international research tools such as the *Thesaurus* of the Consortium of European Research Libraries (CERL), which, among others, contains the names ‘of former book owners, personal and corporate, with links to catalogues of the libraries where their books are held today’.<sup>7</sup> Nobody is in a better position than the librarians themselves to reconstruct this meta-story of library collections, to connect it with other aspects of history and to draw the attention of the collection patrons to it.

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Taking a different tack than Leendert Brummel’s in 1955, it was not my primary intention to engage in special pleading for library history, but rather to argue that, as far as I am concerned, there does not need to be an antithesis between contemporary heritage care and critical historical research, on the contrary. What I have attempted to clarify is that historical research by librarians can be a powerful tool to open up documentary heritage collections more adequately, to make them more attractive to a broad public and concurrently to make them more productive for scientific research. This insight is gaining ground in the United States, witness the list with ‘Competencies for Special Collections Professionals’ published in 2008 by a Task Force of the Association of College and Research Libraries (a division of the American Library Association), defining the last competency ‘Teaching and Research’ as follows:

Special collections professionals participate in and contribute to the educational and research missions of their institutions as well as to the learning that occurs within their extended communities. They support and facilitate learning, teaching, and research, focusing on the use of primary sources in the institution’s special collections. *They develop knowledge* of the content of the collections in order to instruct users in the value of appropriate primary resources and to assist researchers in locating relevant materials. They teach, write, and lecture based on the original materials in the collections.<sup>8</sup>

Hopefully this conviction will circulate to many institutions and overrule the objection that staff members of libraries do not have the kind of time to get steeped in research, or that management and research skills are mutually exclusive. For between librarians with a research interest and researchers without a library affiliation plenty of exciting interaction is possible: historians can complement the primarily document- and collection-directed approach of librarians with a broader, critical approach informed by cultural history that is typical of them; while staff members of libraries, for their part, can support historians with their scientifically underpinned connoisseurship, keeping them from the traps of an abstract, theory-directed approach.

7. <[http://www.cerl.org/resources/cerl\\_thesaurus/main](http://www.cerl.org/resources/cerl_thesaurus/main)>.

8. *Guidelines: Competencies for Special Collections Professionals* (Prepared by the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, ACRL/ALA, Task Force on Core Competencies for Special Collections Professionals, approved by the ACRL Board, July 1, 2008): <<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/comp4speccollect>>. I owe this reference to Sam Capiou.

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