

# **Libraries — Repositories of Wisdom:**

## **An Address Given Upon the Dedication of the E. H. Little Library at Davidson College**

by **Dr. Louis B. Wright**  
**Director Emeritus, Folger Shakespeare Library**  
**Consultant in History,**  
**National Geographic Society**

It is a great pleasure to be at Davidson College, one of the ancient and honorable institutions of the South. You represent the best of our traditions, and you have consistently maintained a high sense of proper values in education.

We live in a period which places an inordinate emphasis upon information. We constantly hear injunctions to improve our sources of communication, and we are burdened with a plethora of gadgets to help us transmit information even to those unwilling to receive it. One of the oldest instruments of communication is the book. You may have heard from certain "advanced thinkers" that the book is obsolete, about to be superseded by this, that, and the other electronic medium. Let me assure you that the book remains secure, and that you are wise in preparing a library for the adequate and convenient use of this

ancient and reliable means of communication. To Mr. E. H. Little, for his optimism and his wisdom in making possible this great repository of the wisdom of the past, we are all indebted.

Nobody has yet formulated an economic law to explain the ebb and flow of rare books, works of art, and antiques between one country and another, but such a law exists, and perhaps we can state it: Rare books, works of art, and antiques flow toward the sources of economic strength just as certainly as bad money drives out good in accordance with Gresham's Law. When the United States ceases to import books and build libraries, then the Secretary of the Treasury can begin worrying in earnest about our economic health and our prospects for the future—as indeed, he seems already to be doing. Fortunately for us and our civilization, we

are still managing to build libraries and buy books to fill them. This occasion, when we are gathered to dedicate a splendid new library, is an indication of a faith in the future and a respect for the past that is a peculiarly American manifestation.

This occasion also illustrates another characteristic in our social and intellectual development that we can describe as a law of society. It may be stated this way: The quality of our civilization is measured by the quality of our libraries. By any standard, a nation without books is barbarous. A nation without libraries has no concern for its history and traditions and no pride in the perpetuation of traditional values. A school without a library is unable to carry on the best traditions of education. It is a pleasure to contemplate this library and to realize that it symbolizes the best in both our educational system and in our civilization as a whole.

It may be instructive for us to contemplate for a few minutes the tradition of book collecting and library founding that we have inherited—a tradition that has had remarkable manifestation in America and has transformed the very bases of learning in the Western world. Few people ever stop to consider the enormous contribution that book collectors have made to civilizing us. Without them we would be a nation of barbarians and Philistines, mumberling in ignorance.

From the earliest period of settlement in English America, we have had a respect for books. Occasionally today when we stop to pore over the offerings of paperbacks at the corner drug store, some of us may begin to worry about the quality of the books being read. But just because the bare-bosom murder mysteries seem to predominate, let us not jump to unwarranted conclusions. Hidden among the paperbacks are hundreds of titles of readable classics, and it is statistically provable that more worthwhile books are being read in

the United States today than ever before in our history. This tradition for worthwhile literature had its start with the first settlement at Jamestown.

The early colonists brought little libraries with them. Most of their books were utilitarian, for they could not afford much space in their luggage for items that were merely entertaining. But we might also remember that our ancestors found entertainment in books that we would regard today as merely "improving"—so improving that we would have none of them. For example, our forebears, both Puritan and cavalier, derived an incredible satisfaction from reading pious books, such works as Arthur Dent's *A Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*, Lewis Bayly's *Practice of Piety*, or William Hunnis, collection of penitential Psalms which he gave the allitera-

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tive title of *Seven Sobs of a Sorrowful Soul for Sin* (this was an exceptionally popular book). Even such a gilded gentleman of Virginia as William Byrd II of Westover, who was never regarded as a paragon of virtue, read sermons avidly and appears to have enjoyed them. But sometimes a good sermon could not hold his attention, as for instance on Christmas Night, 1710, when he recorded in his secret diary the passage: "In the evening I read a sermon in Mr. Norris, but a quarrel which I had with my wife hindered my taking much notice of it."

Our colonial forebears were keenly aware of the value of books in transmitting the best of the civilization that they had left behind — the civilization that they wanted to perpetuate in the New World. They were determined, as they often stated, not to let their children "grow up barbarous in the wilderness." Hence they brought over all the books they could afford; every cultivated man believed that he had an obligation to bring together a usable library; and the founding of town and academic libraries became a work of virtue.

Cotton Mather, a pious divine of Boston, and William Byrd, an impious planter of Virginia, both had well-selected libraries of roughly the same size, something on the order of 3,600 titles. Curiously, for all the difference in the backgrounds and points of view of these two unlike colonials, they had many of the same books.

Although book collectors of this period were under considerable pressure to lend books to their less fortunate neighbors and friends, they often grumbled, as who wouldn't, at having to lend a favorite book. Byrd found particular pleasure in puttering about his library, arranging his books, and dipping into this or that volume. He records in his diary his displeasure at being interrupted by some neighboring caller.

All of us who gather books and preside over libraries have reason to be thankful for the example set by an Englishman in the early seventeenth century, Sir Thomas Bodley, whose career deserves a few moments of our consideration. Bodley was an extraordinary man — a scholar and diplomat of distinction, as well as a philanthropist. Born in 1545 and dying in 1613, he served Queen Elizabeth ably as an ambassador to Denmark, France, and the Netherlands. Learned in Hebrew and Greek, as a young man he lectured at Oxford. A contemporary of Shakespeare's, he despised his fellow countryman's theatrical craft. Bodley, for all his talents and his skill as a diplomat, would be totally unknown today if he had not found immortality in books. He established the great Bodleian Library at Oxford.

Before we lavish all our praise on Bodley we ought to pay a tribute to another person, a certain Mrs. Anne Ball, a rich widow whom nobody remembers. Bodley married the widow, and without Mrs. Ball's fortune he could not have founded the Bodleian Library. Mrs. Anne Ball deserves a niche somewhere.

Like every philanthropist, Bodley was beset with requests for contributions to this and that charity. Luckily for the world, he had the wisdom — and the crustiness — to resist pleas to found a hospital, to give to the relief of the poor, to found a home for orphans, to help impoverished widows, and to scatter his charity at large. The poor we have always with us, he reminded persistent collectors for charity, and he insisted that he owed a higher service to society than making provision for the healing of a few broken bodies. With extraordinary singleness of purpose, he set about creating a great library that would endure and grow through the centuries to come.

Bodley made his first offer to the vice-chancellor of Oxford in 1597 to refurbish

the rooms over the Divinity School known as Duke Humphrey's Library. By 1600 new shelves were installed and Bodley was ready to begin the essential work of finding books. Some he himself gave outright. Others he sought from his friends. He became the greatest wheedler of books in the kingdom, and he appointed a librarian named Thomas James and taught him to be a beggar of books. Perhaps James owed his appointment to the fact that he brought with him some manuscripts and sixty volumes of printed books. Where James got the books is somewhat uncertain. Anthony a Wood, the seventeenth-century antiquary, ungraciously said that James stole them from various Oxford colleges, but, be that as it may, the books found a new home in Bodley's library.

If we had time to consider some of the other great English book collectors, we would find what modern sociologists call a curious ambivalence toward women — that is, wives. For example, Thomas Rawlinson, who died in 1725, remained a bachelor until the year before his death to give greater scope to his hobby. He filled his house so full of books that he had to sleep in the hallway, and at the end of his life he married his servant maid, in order, the gossips said, that he might have somebody always handy to dust his books. Another collector, Clayton Mordaunt Crachèrode, who died in 1799, remained a bachelor, it was said, because he had so many books he could not squeeze a wife into his house.

Bodley was determined to encourage every potential collector to give books to his new library. To honor them for their gifts, he provided a handsome Register of Donations where their names were to be written in a large fair hand and their books described with accuracy, "lest," he said, "the goodness of men's gifts be not made apparent to their full content."

When King James signified an interest

in visiting the Bodleian Library the founder and the librarian put their heads together to see how they could please one whom they foresaw might be a great benefactor. King James was an author — and vain. His Majesty would be certain to ask about his own works and might want to see the copies. Bodley instructed his librarian to give out that the royal volumes had been sent away to be bound in fine velvet — but on no account to go to that expense. They were to be merely hidden until the King had departed.

Bodley was determined to make his library an institution for scholars and learned men. He had no interest in entertaining students, who were expected in this time to buy such books as they wanted for amusement. Hence he refused to have in his library what he called "riff-raff" books, which included plays, ballads, almanacs, romances, and "such like trash." And that explains why the Bodleian for a long time refused to give house room to the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays. A university library should be devoted to learning, Bodley said, and learning in the seventeenth century did not embrace contemporary belles lettres.

Thomas Bodley established a precedent for book collectors and benefactors of libraries that has had a far-reaching influence. He knew that a library can be a fountainhead of learning. And he was determined that the Bodleian would serve the state as no other form of charity could. The preservation of the living thoughts of great men who have lived in the past but whose words and wisdom are available in books seemed to Bodley more important for the world of his own day — and for posterity — than making easy the hard lot of widows and orphans or giving crusts to the poor. Measured in sentimental terms, Bodley may have seemed lacking in human sympathy. But if he had not turned a deaf ear to pleas for human charity and

given all his energy and means to the collection and care of books — objects that must have seemed inanimate and cold to unthinking sentimentalists — our civilization would have lost a potent influence that has made it better and finer.

What Bodley did for the whole English-speaking world has been emulated in the United States by a succession of great book collectors and philanthropists. Few people realize what the nation owes to these men.

I realize of course that in this diffuse nation of ours not everyone comprehends or appreciates books. There was the Hollywood actress, for example, who came into her living room to find her newest husband slowly spelling out the words of a comic book. "My God," she exclaimed, "I've married a bookworm!" There was also the Los Angeles wife who sued for and obtained a divorce on the grounds that her husband read Emerson and "was peculiar." But a majority of Americans respect books, and we all ought to take time occasionally to contemplate what our libraries mean to the totality of our civilization. For the United States today is one of the most book-conscious nations in the world.

Despite the efforts of our colonial ancestors to equip themselves with essential books, the new nation lacked adequate libraries. Thomas Jefferson provided the young government with his personal library to form the first Congressional library — and devoted much time during and after his presidency to collecting books. Even a century ago the United States still lacked libraries sufficient for research purposes.

Now all that has changed — changed within less than a century — and the bibliographical center of gravity has shifted to this continent. How has this come about? Because of the devoted and highly intelligent activity of a body of American book collectors who have searched the world,

not for curiosities, but for books with meaning and significance.

In the growth of its library strength, the United States has had one development that is peculiar to this nation. Thanks to the generosity of several collector-philanthropists, the United States has a group of independent libraries, not connected with either universities or with the government, that are research institutions engaged in the active advancement of learning. Nowhere else in the world has this kind of library development taken place. These libraries serve the highest functions of a university by providing places where both faculties and advanced students can carry on important studies necessary to a nation that proposes to occupy a position of intellectual and cultural leadership. These endowed libraries — the Huntington, the Morgan, the Newberry, and the Folger — not only collect books and manuscripts but they see that these materials serve the highest functions of scholarship. Other countries have research institutions operated at the expense of the taxpayer. In the United States these institutions founded by private enterprise provide incomparable research facilities at no expense to the public purse.

A century ago no one would have guessed that a patch of semi-desert eleven miles northeast of Los Angeles would one day be the site of one of the best libraries in the Western world for the study of English literary history and the development of American civilization. And yet today the Huntington Library, which occupies that desert site, houses a remarkable collection of books and manuscripts brought together by a cold-blooded railway and real estate magnate who got a vision somewhere along the line of the value that such material would have for his country. Furthermore, he realized that books and manuscripts must be used, and he set up a foundation to provide for the continuance

of a living library that would subsidize scholars and their publications.

Henry Clay Folger, a poor boy who graduated at Amherst College in 1879, received in college a similar vision. He had an almost religious conversion to literature. Unlike St. Paul, who went out as a missionary when the scales were struck from his eyes, Folger went to work for what became the Standard Oil Company. That was fortunate for us. For Folger accumulated a fortune, cultivated his taste for books, and brought together a library which he bequeathed to the public in 1930 to be a research institution in perpetuity. Furthermore, he provided enough capital to insure both stability and growth. The Folger Library has vastly increased the original holdings that the founder left, and it is now perhaps the most effective place in the Western Hemisphere for the study of the background of Anglo-American civilization. Its great strength is in Renaissance materials and in the diverse historical sources that enable the scholar to recreate any aspect of British civilization from the introduction of printing into England about 1476 until the death of Queen Anne late in 1714. It also is the greatest Shakespeare library in the world, but Shakespeare is only one part of its activities.

The creation of these two libraries gave scope to the personal interests of two great collectors, Huntington and Folger, and I have mentioned these two because I have had intimate contact with their libraries. These two men found in book collecting for a great purpose a satisfaction that endured to the end of their lives. Indeed, I know of no more fascinating occupation than the search for old books that have meaning. It has been my good fortune to be a vicarious book collector — a collector with other people's money, which is a very satisfactory occupation. But seriously, the building of a library that will have continuing utility through the centuries, that

has vivid contacts with the past, that preserves the best of the past to instruct the present, is a vocation that I would not willingly exchange for any that I know.

I am not much of a missionary but there is one message that stirs in me an evangelical zeal. That is an exhortation to all young people to get interested in books, to begin to collect. Not everyone can be a Henry E. Huntington or a Henry Clay Folger, but everyone can experience some of the same fascination in collecting books that have a special meaning for the collector. Start buying books that illuminate some special interest of your own: books about some particular author, some episode in history that concerns you, some theme that has a special fascination. If food is your main interest in life, start collecting cook books. I had a friend who made the greatest collection of cook books in the world (Lord Westbury) — but he died of over-eating a few years ago, and we bought some of his books for the Folger. Realize that book collecting is a pleasure and a joy to you as an individual, and that the books that you bring together may have a continuing value to society.

To return to my original thesis: Books are a measure of our civilization, and when we consider the extraordinary progress made in the United States during the past century in creating great libraries, we must take immense pride in our accomplishment. That accomplishment is a tribute to the wisdom and the generosity of a great body of book collectors who deserve some special preserve in a bibliophilic heaven where they will be eternally surrounded by those rare books that they have always wanted and sought.

Every library is a research library. Every library is a repository of the wisdom of the ancients. Solomon enjoins us to "get wisdom." In this fine library, the gift of Mr. Little, you will find wisdom as well as knowledge. Make the most of it.