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## Review of Stephen Parks, ed., *The Beinecke Library of Yale University*

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**Comments**

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Library of Congress—so often held high as a model to which German research libraries should aspire—Kaltwasser observes that it is not in the slightest (as Daniel Boorstin is quoted from 1980) a “possession of the people, made by the people and for the people, and open to the people” but that it instead has some of the most restrictive (“aristocratic”) access conditions of any major library of the world (312).

At a recent meeting hosted by the University of Oklahoma Library, Arizona University’s Carla Stoffle reflected on the mission of the “transformed” library, anno 2007, and how this mission will play out in collection building, public services, and other traditional areas of library administration. Collection building in the future will focus on enhancing the special collections unique to individual institutions, she says, while the more generic materials will be digital or, if still analog, will arrive shelf ready with little or no human intercession. This future special collections—general collections dichotomy has also been the topic of much discussion in Germany in recent years. In his article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in July 2002 (“Das Ende der alten Bibliothek und ihre Zukunft: Warum die Digitalisierung der Buchbestände und die Tradierung der Originale zusammengehören” [The end of the old library and its future: Why the digitization of book collections and the care of originals belong together], p. 16), Michael Knoche, director of the Herzogin-Anna-Bibliothek in Weimar, commented on the huge intrinsic value of unique historical collections: “The future of old libraries,” he writes, “is actually more promising than that of other libraries,” precisely because they house not only “the works of the most influential mainstream traditions, but also the detours and forgotten dead-ends of history; in other words both canonized and rejected intellectual currents.” Franz Georg Kaltwasser’s book continues the German thread of this discourse and carries it to a new level. For him, as for Debra A. Castillo in *The Translated World: A Postmodern Tour of Libraries in Literature* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1985, p. 16), the true research library represents a “transgressive space,” preserving “all the most potentially disruptive forms, all the most potentially explosive energies as yet unharnessed by society.” The research library of Kaltwasser’s imagination may seem conservative, but it is in fact profoundly revolutionary. A fifty-five-page appendix includes twenty-five transcribed historical documents, from 1602 until the present, enhancing the value of an already highly worthwhile volume.

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*The Beinecke Library of Yale University.* Edited by STEPHEN PARKS. New Haven, CT: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (distributed by University Press of New England), 2003. Pp. 237. \$50.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-8457-3150-5.

Some library users appreciate, others may even like, the libraries they work in, but few write in praise of the libraries they use. One exception, Alfred Kazin’s *New York Jew* (New York: Knopf, 1978, pp. 4–8), is warm and moving about the New York Public Library. Another is . . .

Shallow reading disables me from thinking quickly of other examples. “A Word After: How We Found Mathias”—a kind of epilogue to Craig Harline and Eddy Put, *A Bishop’s Tale: Mathias Hovius among His Flock in Seventeenth-Century Flanders* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 298–310)—more than merely acknowledges the small Mechelen seminary library and its clerical staff where Har-

line and Put did their research. But it is a guide to students as much as a hymn of praise, and, although there must be some, I recall no other examples.

This lacuna in the literature pushes libraries to seize occasions to praise themselves. My own institution used its putative 250th anniversary to publish *The Penn Library Collections at 250: From Franklin to the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Library, 2000). The fortieth anniversary of Beinecke's opening offered a somewhat better-documented occasion to produce *The Beinecke Library of Yale University*. Twenty-five or fifty are more common numbers for such exercises, but forty is respectably noticeable and so, just as Penn had done, Yale too grabbed Opportunity by the forelock.

The resulting volume, beautifully designed by the late and much lamented Greer Allen, is far more lavish and visually stunning than ours at Penn. Well suited to coffee tables in Yale households throughout the world, it will remind loyal alumni, presumably the volume's primary audience (for obvious development reasons), of the gorgeous print and manuscript resources Yale has acquired, often (hint!) through the generosity of alumni just like themselves. Many pretty photographs, showing both exterior and interior views of the building and its Yale neighbors, will help alumni recall the best years of their lives. Viewers will also enjoy photographs of the often beautiful books, manuscripts, and other objects that repose within Beinecke's care. These pictures are streamlined to the interests of those alumni who, like the incumbent president of the United States (Yale '68), echo Herman Melville's *Bartleby* ("I would prefer not to") if invited to read.

No one will read this book as closely as its reviewers, of course. It is not intended for reading. No one was ever expected to read it. Probably no one should. Only one of its contributors was courageous enough to act on this brutal realism. Robert G. Babcock produced "Early Manuscripts and Books" in twelve pages (70–81) with fourteen photographs. Nine easy-to-summarize paragraphs announce: "This is what we've got. If you want to know more about any of it, here's what you should read."

Other contributors were less realistic. Barbara A. Shailor introduces the volume. Patrick L. Pinnell writes informatively about "The Building." (His description of Cross Campus as "embracing and maternal" [p. 31], Beinecke as "disciplined" and "paternal" [pp. 31, 41], and Beinecke Plaza as "the cautious protection of a valued inheritance—indeed, a patrimony" [p. 31], made this reader wonder what millennium he lives in.) Marjorie G. Wynne remembers the move from Sterling to Beinecke. Babcock, next, is followed by Vincent Giroud describing "Modern Books and Manuscripts," Timothy G. Young on "Playing Cards," Patricia C. Willis on "The Collection of American Literature," Stephen Parks on "The Osborn Collection: English Manuscripts," Christa Sammons on "German Literature," George A. Miles on the "Western Americana Collection," and Giroud again on "Music in the Beinecke Library."

Each chapter does what the reader expects. So what's not to like—the proof-reading and grammatical errors that disfigure a book produced by an institution concerned by definition with books? The many such errors are not its worst problems.

Because contributors tend to list names (donors, authors, books, and other materials) without contexts, their chapters, full of details, remain sterile, dull, and lifeless. Who were these people? Willis mentions in passing Neith Boyce Hapgood (pp. 132, 134). Readers who don't know who she was—most of them—will be lost (just as they would be at Yale, where buildings, often unlabeled, reflect the theory that, if you know where you are, you don't need a label and, if you don't, you shouldn't be there). Sammons mentions *Theuerdank* (p. 172). What is it? Why should

anyone care? Miles gives his readers some background about the collectors who gave Yale the bases of its western Americana holdings. But even Parks, who tells us a bit about the Osborns, leaves them shadow figures. By and large, other contributors don't even try. The Beinecke brothers and their collecting daughter, Betsy Shirley, remain utterly opaque.

Shailor notes that "names . . . [will] appear frequently in the following essays" [p. 9], establishing this approach as the volume's norm. Bad pedagogy, it is probably not a useful development tool either ("mystify them and they shall give"? I doubt it, but Yale must know better).

Other contextual issues are left similarly unstudied. Referring to George Alexander Kohut's gift of his Heine collection "recently augmented" at the sale of "the Heine library of Munich dramatist Arthur Ernst Rutra" in 1933 (p. 184), Sammons says nothing about why Rutra might have had the bright idea, that year, of unloading Heine. Does she imagine her readers know? Or don't need to know?

Some contributors gesture at use of the collections: Shailor, Parks, Miles. Miles also notes (as is uncommon in this volume) the existence of other libraries—not at, say, Harvard, but, believe it or not, at Yale—with which Beinecke and its users might have occasional commerce. These are welcome respites in a book of trophies apparently to be valued primarily for themselves and with little reference to their function in the larger institution of which Beinecke is a part.

Beinecke was the first rare book library I ever used. Sometime in the 1960s, I walked off the street with no Yale affiliation, to read (why did I want it?) Richard Knolles's *Generall historie of the Turkes*, perhaps the edition of 1610. Not myself then or ever a member of Yale University—although (full disclosure) my wife, sister-in-law, and niece seem to own many Yale degrees—I found that openness surprising and welcome. The collections, astonishingly rich, are used and shared. Chauncey Brewster Tinker was correct that, without them, Yale would have remained the provincial university that, nowadays, it is not.

But if, because others do not usually celebrate libraries, they must therefore praise themselves, then they ought to do so better than this book does. Who writes the captions for photographs in such a volume as this? But this review finally turned at the caption for a photograph on page 127. Of a James Fenimore Cooper manuscript, a Picasso collage, and two books, one of them *The Pisan Cantos* by Ezra Pound, the caption says, "While developing his 'Cantos,' . . . [Pound] became interested in economics and supported Mussolini's efforts at reform. His antiwar messages broadcast to American troops during World War II caused his arrest and detention by the United States Military in Pisa." *Antiwar*? Is that why the army arrested Pound? Even in an era when words like "torture" bear new meanings, this use of "antiwar" is breathtaking for its rewriting of history.

Libraries collect the past in order to preserve it. Those few readers who take time to praise them value libraries precisely for the amount of the past they try to hold on to—and the honesty with which they do so. If, in celebrating themselves, they betray the past, then they also betray their collections, their donors, the staff who have cultivated and built both, and their purpose. This volume is unworthy of the great collection it celebrates.

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