

Introducing a New Column

CONSERVE THEM
ALL MY DAYS

by Karl G. Schmude*

Have librarians neglected the physical condition of their collections? Certainly, in recent decades, library science has been concerned with other issues — such as machine-based bibliographic control — which centre attention on the organisation of knowledge rather than the physical forms in which knowledge appears. In addition, a major emphasis has been placed on extending the availability and use of library resources — a goal which has proved partly at odds with the obligation to preserve these resources for future needs.

At the same time, the traditions of librarianship have not failed to cultivate some sense of custodial responsibility within the profession. Activities such as binding and environmental management testify to the value which librarians have attached to the maintenance of their collections.

The new interest in library conservation has grown out of a number of factors — in particular, the manifest decline of most book papers used since the mid-nineteenth century. Various surveys have highlighted the broad dimensions of this process of decay, which is affecting the bulk of printed material held in present-day library collections.

Librarians are now beginning to review the professional context in which they function, for they realise that their principal activities — acquisitions, cataloguing, resource sharing, and so on — have all been based on the assumed durability of library collections. The recognition that these collections are undergoing rapid deterioration is posing a challenge to the priorities and perspectives of librarianship in the 1980s. It is not simply contributing a new item to the professional agenda: it is

causing a reformulation of that agenda, placing in a new light the range of policies and practices which libraries have long followed, and leading to a changed professional outlook in which the central activities of librarians will be informed by a concern for conservation.

It is to assist in such a process of reflection that this occasional column has been launched in *InCite*. No doubt a prime need at this time is simply for up-to-date information on the different aspects of conservation, and it is hoped that this column will afford an opportunity to report on developments as they occur.

The deterioration of library materials on a mass scale is a complex problem which bristles with questions of various kinds — not only technical, but also organisational and administrative.

Finally, however, it is a challenge which impinges on the attitudes and activities of the individual librarian. As the Librarian of Cambridge University, Dr. F. W. Ratcliffe, has observed:

'In the last resort, conservation, like charity, begins at home and it is what practising librarians do in their libraries which will tip the balance. There is a need for re-education in the library world, a redirection of minds as well as funds to deal with past neglect and the present crisis. The re-education extends to existing staff at all levels, to governing bodies and not least to users. There is little virtue or value in having conservation management and library conservation departments, if staff mishandle books, if cleaners wipe them with damp cloths, if readers break them on photocopying machines. Nothing short of a root and branch approach to the problem can instill the sense of collective responsibility so necessary for the promotion of conservation.' (*Journal of Librarianship*, 17 (2) April 1985, p. 90)

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VISIT BY US
CONSERVATION
EXPERT

Mrs Sally Buchanan, Conservator at the Stanford University Library in California, is an authority on the design and implementation of 'disaster plans' for cultural institutions, and has successfully pioneered a method of assessing the 'brittle book' deterioration in book and newspaper collections.

Mrs Buchanan arrived in Melbourne on 20 July and will conduct three weeks of seminars and training programmes on the 'Brittle Books Survey — Methodology and Planning' and 'Planning for Cultural Institutions', in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra.

The seminar tour of Australia, originally proposed by the Melbourne University Librarian, Denis Richardson, was organised by the Library Council of Victoria and the University of Melbourne in response to the growing concern of cultural institutions over accelerating conservation problems, and the obvious need for individually-tailored disaster planning programmes. The recent major fire at the National Library of Australia in Canberra highlighted the very real dangers facing institutions responsible for the collection and preservation of historical records.

The Brittle Books Survey method is based on a random sample technique and provides invaluable information on the overall condition of book collections which is essential for adequate planning of a conservation programme.

The training programmes are open to librarians, administrators and conservators, and are

designed to train participants in conducting the survey as well as examining conservation strategies based on the results of such a survey.

Mrs Buchanan holds a BA in English and History (1961) and a Masters Degree in Library Science, specialising in Rare Books. Her very keen interest in books and the book arts led her to undertake an extensive training programme in hand-bookbinding and associated book arts, conservation management, supervising and communicating skills. Mrs Buchanan was trained by the most prominent conservators and craftsmen in the United States.

Gail Evans

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