

- (c) Significant first editions.
 - (d) Editions of special note, including pirated and surreptitious editions.
3. Books of aesthetic importance including fine printing, illustration or binding, and special press books.
 4. Books with significant manuscript or other material laid or tipped in.
 5. Special collections, i.e. unit acquisitions containing both rare and non-rare material, which need to be kept together.
 6. Books of high monetary value.
 7. High quality facsimile editions of important books.
 8. Other books which the appropriate authority designates.

This last category is designed to define the indefinable and predict the unpredictable, and it is important to have such an open category for the cases where a book does not fall into any of the earlier categories, but where it is felt that the book should be included in the collection - for instance if a book is particularly fragile, or vulnerable in form - for example a portfolio of loose plates.

There are two types of reasons why a library might decide to establish a rare book collection - those based on principle, and those based on practicalities.

In the first case a library is likely to have made a reasoned examination of its collection, and taken a conscious decision to preserve those "rare" books it already owns, and to add to them according to a deliberate plan.

This type of decision requires staff which many libraries do not have, and so is less usual than a decision based on practicalities, when a library finds itself with sufficient books

which it regards as special, and in need of more care than the rest of its collection. Then a rare book collection is the logical way of providing that care, with the books segregated in some way from the rest of its collection. A conscious decision to establish such a collection will be needed, otherwise an "ad hoc" collection is likely to develop and cause problems instead of solving them - or if no collection at all is set up the books may be lost or damaged. The decision is not always entirely up to the library: many libraries acquire rare or special books more or less accidentally - they may be donated, or may come as an inseparable part of a collection acquired for other reasons.

A theological library may follow the path of principle or of practice in a decision to set up a rare book collection (or a combination of both, of course.)

By its nature, a theological library has a close association with the past - the history of the Church and of its religious institutions, the history of various religious movements and forms of belief, sacred texts of all kinds, including the Bible in all its versions, commentaries on texts, and the writings of religious figures from the early history of the Church to the present day. All these are represented to some extent at least in its collection, but whether in early or modern forms, the connection is substantial. It can be a library's conscious choice to reinforce this connection with the past through the acquisition of early editions of at least some of the texts involved, as this can be very valuable for students, both to give them a "feel" for the early works, and to introduce them to the content of the early texts in the original form. Seeing and handling an actual copy of a work which appeared at the height of a particular religious controversy, for example, can bring home to a student in an inimitable way the importance of the events of that time. The book can be seen as a historical object.

Rare material can often come to a theological library by donation, as donors tend to feel they can trust a theological library with their precious family bible or prayer book. Such donations may be spontaneous or solicited and may or may not be welcome - no doubt you have all been offered a "really old and valuable" bible which quite honestly you do not need and might not want. On the other hand the Bible Society's

magnificent collection at Bible House is based on donations which were sought many years ago in order to build a collection similar to that of the Bible Society in London.

Given that a library has some books it feels should be gathered together into a rare books collection, it is worth considering how to do this. It is often done by the ad-hoc method, and this is understandable, with the pressures there always are on libraries to give more and better service with fewer staff and less money. It is, however, an exercise which will amply repay the investment of some thought and the making of some informed decisions. These decisions should cover exactly what is to be included, what is to be excluded, whether it is to be a static collection, or is to be developed, and if so how, and whether more detailed cataloguing is needed for it than for the general collection. There is usually more information on a rare book which needs to be recorded and a full cataloguing record can save unnecessary handling of rare books. Other decisions to be made are:

- What security level is needed for its storage
- What type of access is to be allowed to users (including local use, interlibrary loan and photocopying)
- What kind of restoration, repair or maintenance work might be done on it, and
- How much money might be available for purchases, repairs, special shelving, and supplies such as acid-free paper or mylar envelopes.

Once these decisions are made, it is vital that they be written down and kept prominently before all those people likely to be involved in any way with the collection. Staff turnover is the rule rather than the exception these days, and even for long-term staff it is easy to overlook details among the pressure of other work. A thorough and readily available document on the collection will avoid many problems - and as a fringe benefit will save the local expert on the collection many, many requests for information on it.

When should a rare books collection be set up?

The earlier the better. If there are any "special" books in a library, then the sooner the decision to care for them in a particular way is made the more effective it will be and frankly, it will be easier all round: they will not be defaced by ink stamping if that is not meant to happen, they will not run the risk of loss or damage on open shelves or on the other hand they will not be put away "for safe keeping" somewhere, not to be found again for years.

Once the system is set up (and those clear written guidelines I mentioned earlier are available so everyone knows what to do) then any one can recognise an eligible book and deal with it appropriately - and consistently.

If left until late there are problems in:

- identifying eligible books
- extracting them from the general collection
- chasing those missing
- regretting loss or damage
- recataloguing
- altering records, and location marks on books
- trying to remove inappropriate markings from books

Where a rare book collection should be located depends on the current and projected size of the collection, and the level of security required. In some cases a lockable cupboard may do perfectly well, in others a separate room may be needed. Environmental factors will need to be borne in mind. Many libraries are not lucky enough to be air-conditioned, and temperature and humidity are very important in the preservation of books - a temperature of 20°C + 2°C and relative humidity of 50% + 5% are ideal.

Exposure to light is also a factor. At the least, light will fade bindings, at worst it will damage paper, making it brittle.

Shelving should be considered. Wooden shelves can look very attractive, especially displaying other leather bindings, but they burn ...

And while we're on the subject of fire, the almost universally-accepted sprinkler system will do the job it was designed for and put out the fire in your library, but it will soak all the bookstock in the process and the damage to a rare book collection is even more costly than the damage to the collection overall. It is worth considering alternatives, if possible.

A rare book collection is a responsibility, and a library with one is committing itself to its care and maintenance (if not its deliberate expansion) and infinitum. This need not be a daunting prospect if the guidelines are clearly thought out - and set out. And the rewards are great - the books in it will give the pleasure and instruction they were designed to give to readers who come in today, and they will be preserved to give the same pleasure and instruction to the readers of tomorrow, and the next day.

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