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Library History without Walls

Clio's Decalogue Revamp'd for the Untenur'd . . .¹

James V. Carmichael, Jr.

The neglect of library history is taken for granted, even if it is undeserved, and even if proposals have been regularly advanced for improving its status. One of the most prevalent salvos proposed focuses on interdisciplinarity and publishing outside the field of librarianship. Few if any writers have addressed the problem of how the novice professor with a genuine research interest in library history can meet the requirements of tenure by pursuing a low-status specialty, endure the rigors and expense of historical research, and gain the respect of peers, while at the same time promoting the value of the subject outside the field. This article suggests that in order to survive as library historians and library educators, some of the conventional wisdom surrounding tenure tactics may need to be disregarded or modified.

The Professional Dilemma

Occasionally, in social situations where library historians are asked what they “do,” they may skirt past subsidiary job descriptions (and, if they are neophytes in library education, the horrors of the tenure process), hold their breath a moment, exhale slowly, and say casually, “I write for a living.” This confession is good for morale, like a new suit, since part of the historian’s soul needs the exercise of self-disclosure. Unlike would-be novelists, who rarely share plot ideas, library historians typically use social situations as occasions for unburdening themselves of their latest discoveries. They educate the listener in librarianship as well as library history—and if they don’t clear the room in the process—may even develop a nebu-

lous reputation as a raconteur. No one remembers the burning message in their diatribes or the point of the amusing turn-of-the-century gossip, but even practicing librarians will invariably be charmed by the music in such bellicose names as LeNoir Dimmit, Vera Jessie Snook, May Fidelia Boudinot, Mary Utopia Rothrock, Phineas Winsor, or Mrs. Delia Foreacre Sneed.² Listeners will remember the laughter provoked by the story about what really happened to the slush fund on the day the head cataloger cussed out her superior, or the particulars of the acerbic comments made about a recalcitrant director by one of her employees, even if the historian would much prefer that they also remember the facts that the recalcitrant director built ten branches, achieved racial integration in a southern library, or

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championed the cause of African Americans in Memphis. Library historians hope laypersons will think, "Aren't libraries an interesting mirror of society?" even if they are usually short-changed with, "What a hoot!"

Publishers represent a different order of "listener," and the ranks of academe still another. Several years ago, I queried a group of library biographers about research problems they encountered in conducting their research.³ Among 102 individuals, not one person mentioned the difficulty of getting published, although to be fair, over a third of the works represented by these authors were essays in the *Dictionary of American Library Biography* and many had written nothing else in the biographical vein. In other words, few library biographers had dedicated their research energies exclusively or extensively to library history, apparently because of the difficulty, time, and expense associated with travel to repositories and interview sites. These barriers notwithstanding, the greatest psychological hurdle full-time historians had to overcome was the indifference or antipathy of their peers towards library history. While it may be argued that little of universal application or sex appeal has been written in library history, relatively few graduates of LIS programs seem impressed with the need for library history (until, that is, a centenary celebration occurs at their library and they need a brochure in a hurry to promote fund-raising) or with the applicability of that history to present con-

cerns. As library historian Robert S. Martin has remarked informally many times, all research is to some extent historical, whatever the subject or methodology applied (e.g., case studies—historical and otherwise—and certainly any literature review). Positivists regularly deride the large quantity of library survey research and the paucity of experimental research, even though library historians remind them that survey research serves to inform future researchers of conditions at a given moment in time.⁴

Other disciplines, even "marginal" ones, do not seem to experience the curious ahistoricity in which librarians mask their professional insecurities. Elementary school teachers, for example, have to earmark the writings of Horace Mann and John Dewey, whisk through some basic tenets of philosophy, and understand whence came the diversity problems under which schools are still staggering. Medical students must memorize the pantheon of professional heroes and heroines—what Sydney Pierce calls "dead Germans."⁵ The library profession's terminal illness, if indeed it is in a state of decline, results from a long-term staff infection of low status. This has been part of librarianship for so many years that library educators assume as a matter of course that students will matriculate with incipient symptoms of the malady. The remedies proposed by library education have been fairly generic—more management and administrative courses, more emphasis on marketing, more cognitive psychol-

ogy, and more technology, with less emphasis on book arts and bibliography, philosophy, and, of course, library history. When was the last time a library educator suggested library history as a salvo for low professional self-esteem? Psychotherapists seem reconciled to the fact that patients must accept the bad as well as the good about themselves before any degree of self-worth can be achieved, but not librarians, who, to judge from their thin skins, seem to sense a nervous breakdown waiting behind every loss of face.

Librarians have learned to venerate computer scientists, corporate magnates, and management gurus, but very few can name the founders of the ALA, the first ten ALA presidents, the first female ALA president, or the first library to offer specialized services to immigrants.⁶ Library educators were quick to embrace the wider implications of cybernetics for information science and those of cognitive psychology for user behavior, even if they perhaps too readily delegated the codex to the realm of "alternate" information technology at the very moment the history of reading became a hot topic in several fields and reader-response theory was reaching full swing. It is a shame that some librarians could not be distracted from technology long enough to notice that youth constituted the largest group of readers in municipal libraries.⁷ Librarians are quick to assimilate the new and are loath to engage in basic redefinition and reinterpretation of the familiar.⁸ How many library educators, for example, inform students that Melvil Dewey's innovations in office equipment revolutionized the insurance and banking industries?⁹ Some professors are still reluctant to draw the obvious comparison between the history of computer technology with that of the type-

writer, although it is clear that the typewriter has had a significant impact on the library curriculum and practice (consider the demise of "library hand").

The Publishing Dilemma

Publishers approach library history from a different angle; namely, how many copies will it sell? Tommie Dora Barker's now obscure survey of southern library conditions, *Libraries of the South* (1936), was printed in an edition of 550 copies, and the ALA and the Carnegie Corporation distributed many of them for free. Perhaps those days of paper munificence are gone forever, although that contention would be hard to prove by the number of publisher's catalogs, newsletters, and advertising trash hauled to the recycling dump every week. When I finished my historical dissertation and turned it over to the university publisher at hand, it was apparently so unimportant that it remained in the editor's office for a year, unread and forgotten, until it was finally returned with a note that made no mention of the quality of the content but rather speculated on probable sales figures and declined further consideration.

Books by some of our most distinguished, entertaining, and engaging historians have sold well below the four hundred-copy mark, which means that libraries are no longer buying library history.¹⁰ In the not-too-distant past, libraries could be counted on to buy library history, biography, and even autobiography. Many library historians assemble their own collections of "classic" titles from discards bearing the stamps of public and academic libraries of all sizes. Librarians apparently used to have an interest in learning about themselves, even before the 1950s and

1960s, when the ground rules for writing credible library history were redefined by writers like Bill Williamson, Ed Holley, Phyllis Dain, Philip Kalisch, and Laurel Grotzinger. Thus it is not just a publishing crisis that library historians are currently experiencing, but a lack of professional support. One regularly hears these days that the university press market for library history has dried up, but the recent publication of Joanne Passet's history of female librarians of the West, under the imprint of the University of New Mexico, proves that theories of victimization do not always obtain.¹¹

Distressing, however, is recent anecdotal evidence obtained by e-mail messages from two fellow library historians who recounted horror stories of rejections by publishers who should have been grateful to add two major contributions to the field. These authors have all the necessary elements to reach a wider audience—thorough research, incisive analysis, narrative power, compelling themes, and relevance. One of them, an award-winning author, was told to recast his history to current problems and transform his tome—the result of five years of labor—into a manual for practitioners. After some reflection, he posted this message: “I just really don’t want to do that. I mean, these are my *people*, I’m telling *their* story, and if that’s not good enough for [a New York publisher], to hell with them.” The other historian, who wrote a mesmerizing biography of a librarian intimately and prominently associated with all aspects of an academic institution that maintains a flourishing university press, intertwining highly relevant themes of racism, anti-Semitism, and McCarthyism into his narrative, was told perfunctorily that said press was not interested in the subject. So much for institutional gratitude.

Professional wisdom, to judge from the recent host of angry letters in the official organ of the ALA¹² and from the dean of one of the profession’s leading LIS programs,¹³ would argue that research into social issues (most of which have quite complex historical antecedents) is tangential rather than fundamental to the professional mission of librarianship, although library history receives no explicit mention in this discourse. In my case, ironically, publishers and editors have routinely counseled me to recast my historical findings on Southern female librarians in terms that would sell to a wider audience—namely, race, gender, class, and region. The view that librarianship—with its great current emphasis on technology—should aim at technological expertise to the exclusion of social relevance or advocacy seems short-sighted, since a glance at almost any mainstream scholarly publisher’s catalog will feature prominently the subjects of race or ethnic studies, women’s studies, gender studies, social studies, or even gay and lesbian studies (e.g., Haworth Press, Sage Publications—certainly not publishers to sniff at). Indisputably, market forces don’t create all of the publishing problems of professional historians. Moreover, some of these authors become quite famous. Consider Barbara Melosh’s history of nursing, which was incorporated into the film *Sentimental Women Need Not Apply*.¹⁴ To paraphrase Shakespeare, “Our fault is not in our [lack of] stars, but in ourselves.”

The Decalogue: Countering Conventional Wisdom

On the other hand, library historians are in a unique position to address the more concrete problem of disciplinary insu-

larity in their research, even if, in academe, they may have to violate some of the ground rules for obtaining tenure. While academe talks a good game of collegiality and the commerce of ideas at the university, centers that support interdisciplinary study sometimes serve functions of administrative convenience outside of elite research institutions. Little practical advice is available to the assistant professor who seeks to pursue library history while earning the respect of his or her colleagues; indeed, at some institutions the assistant professor would apparently be well advised to abandon it entirely without the support of a dean or department chair. There are nevertheless practical ways to encourage publication of library history outside the field of librarianship, encourage interdisciplinarity, and at the same time foster the careers of recent entrants into the mercurial realms of academe. Here then, are ten guidelines for the untenured novice, a reworking of Clio's Decalogue for the library historian.

1. First, for an assistant professor, historical projects should start small. The monolithic tome is a fine pipe-dream for most, and a possibility for those with a contract and a manuscript in hand, but tenure committees like numbers. Therefore, it is circumspect to publish in small chunks. If tenure committees indeed like numbers, the historian might aim for the journal market. By including one or two refereed articles a year, library historians will be able to fulfill tenure requirements while indulging their historical passion. Save monographs until after promotion to associate professor.
2. Second, use every opportunity—pub-

lic service talks, dinner speeches, workshops, and classes—to incorporate historical components. Such practice is healthy for the intellectual arteries and enlightening for the audience, and the seeds of these efforts may blossom into an article later. Moreover, such exercises also keep the historian flexible and stave off writer's block. Remember that librarians and nonlibrarians alike prefer to be entertained while they are being exhorted.

3. Third, library historians should familiarize themselves with related literature outside the field. Are library historians aware that the 1994 Popular Culture Conference in Chicago had four sessions on libraries? Consider the fields and subfields with which librarianship has a "natural" socio-historical affinity by virtue of being a "feminized" field (nursing, teaching, and social work). *History of Education Quarterly*, in which Passet has published,¹⁵ presents only one such promising venue. Library historians of every stripe need to be reminded that however intrinsically interesting their topics are, they also have a bearing on the current problems of libraries, publishers, and society. Librarians, educators, and laypersons can benefit from the Depression-era experiences of librarians, for example, for perhaps in no other period have resources been more scant nor ideas and experimentation more prolific. What are the recurrent problems? Do library historians have the courage and the talent to remind their peers that they are reinventing the wheel? Can they convince practitioners of the similarities and differences be-

tween modern situations and those of the past? As an excellent example, Kathleen Molz's recent "The Public Library Inquiry" should be required reading, not only for every library historian, but for every library student. It explains as perhaps no other discussion does why the LIS profession eventually became disenchanted with the aims (and means) of social science research.¹⁶

4. In writing, restrain the impulse to recount every anecdote or to load manuscripts with tables, charts, and diagrams. (Photographs are good, however, if the publisher doesn't admonish the writer about additional publishing costs when such materials are submitted.) It is not true that all publishers and readers shrink at the historian's penchant for footnotes, although some editors balk at discursive footnotes and some are edgy about them, (again) because of costs. Some publishers don't like dense postmodernist theoretical jargon, while others demand it as academic *lingua franca*. This does not mean that all library historians have to dress like the emperor. Familiarity with current trends in research methodology is helpful, however, as is an acquaintance with buzzwords, although no verbal fanciness will hide the lack of a sustained narrative.
 5. (Almost) never say no: Yes, Virginia, there is a Saint Jerome, and he doesn't place opportunities in the historian's path for nothing. Elitism and academic snobbery serve a purpose in doctoral programs, and methodological rigor and eloquence will always be desirable, especially for the annual
- quota of refereed journal articles, but there are many ways in which narrative talents can be adapted to a more local market. If library historians write *only* for the refereed journal market, they lose publishing opportunities unique to the historical field—the state, regional, or city historical journal, for example, which operates by editorial caveat rather than the blind referee process, but may nevertheless be useful to historians. (Exceptions to this rule might be major editorial assignments—the rule being, don't offer to ride herd over a bunch of authors—and book reviews that are entirely foreign to the writer's personal research interests).
6. Use public speaking engagements to develop ideas for publications. While due to the rather severe standards of tenure, many writers blanch at invitations to speak at civic or similar associations, such occasions can force historians to market their goods for publication both within and outside the field of librarianship. Some of the organizations I have tapped to good effect reflect a personal research bias toward regional studies and gender studies, but any library historian could compose a similar list based upon the geographical or other special characteristics of a given subject. My own list includes The Colonial Dames, The United Daughters of the Confederacy, and The Daughters of the American Revolution, where subjects covered included images of the South in southern literature; the history of etiquette with particular reference to the southern states; and Christmas celebrations in the Confederacy. Other organizations on the list

(although one hears little about them in doctoral programs) include LIS alumni associations, Beta Phi Mu, student associations, Rotarians, the American Educational Studies Association, the campus Women's Studies Forum, the campus Gay and Lesbian Student Association, the state (regional) library association, the county library association, the staff association at the local public library, and the American Association of University Women. It's important to enlist the emotional support of the dean or department chair in these ventures, and unhealthy to work for a program that won't support them.

7. Also, identify a colleague who is not a historian to read and edit your work—say, a bibliometrician or a survey researcher. If one hates all faculty outside the LIS program, or only speaks to them at faculty senate meetings, this suggestion may stick in the craw. Also, talk to LIS faculty with different interests. In a recent review, Wayne Wiegand reminisced about his relationship with Mike Harris at the University of Kentucky and their early-morning think tanks in which each served as sounding board for the other's ideas. I have three colleagues with whom I share my work and emerging ideas—one is a survey researcher and a school librarian, another is an education professor specializing in postmodern analysis of oral history narratives, and a third is a historian of women's education. I also routinely dispatch manuscripts to library historians and others who I think may be interested in the subject, and the feedback is more than worth the price of copying and postage.
8. Communicate regularly with other library historians via e-mail about their work. It is easy for library school faculty to forget what they have been doing by the time they collapse at ALISE. Casual phone calls to other historical researchers are usually appreciated, and well worth the cost. Find out what discussion groups and listservs apply even remotely to the subject at hand, and begin dreaming of the day when electronic publications will be deemed worthy of consideration for tenure. After tenure, accept out-of-town speaking engagements only if travel and boarding costs are covered by the host institution. Of course, such invitations are flattering, but bankruptcy isn't fun.
9. Practice applying for grants. Although any given research proposal may fail due to factors other than quality—for example, a bias against historical projects, or against library history—someone will eventually be awarded the grant, and you might be pleasantly surprised. Meanwhile, be prepared to pay for research trips out of pocket: historians often do this kind of crazy thing, even though other academics may scoff at such extravagance. If tax deductions are itemized, research expenses can provide a boon at year-end.
10. Most important, whatever and for whomever you write, aim for high quality and muster a maximum of editorial counsel. Writing an article on Southern female librarians for a state historical journal aimed at seventh-grade history students may present a challenge equally as great as that of writing for one of "the big ten" journals. With only one thou-

sand words to make their point, historians need to avoid the litany of multisyllabic expostulations by which academics typically signal their credentials. Imagine trying to explain basic concepts like feminization of the library profession in a way that eleven- or twelve-year-olds can understand (no mean challenge) while maintaining the narrative drift of the story. Preaching to the unconverted is an exercise recommended to all library historians, and the more bizarre the audience, the better.

Conclusion: Beyond Victimization

To return to the publishing quandary, the efforts of library historians have been underappreciated, perhaps, by the profession at large, and in recent times, by publishers who can no longer afford to subsidize all of our literary efforts merely because they are dense with scholarship. What is being demanded is relevance to the canonical debate, to contemporary social concerns, and to contemporary library and educational problems. Making those connections requires creativity and a vision of librarianship at once ubiquitous and omniscient. Rewriting a completed manuscript to incorporate new theories and broad interdisciplinary perspectives may be more daunting than the years of effort devoted to primary research, plus the painful catharsis of the first few drafts. Any glance at the bibliographies of library history published in the *Library History Round Table Newsletter*, however, should convince even the most reluctant and hidebound library historian that the parameters of our subdiscipline are being broadened,

not only in the pages of such unlikely library publications as the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* and *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly*, but also by many university presses, commercial publishers, and journals in the fields of literature, history, publishing, education, social history, and philosophy. Moreover, many writers are published abroad, which presents still other opportunities for library historians to explore “a library [history] without walls.”

In closing, it is worth mentioning that library historians are not alone in feeling underappreciated in their efforts. A recent *New Yorker* profile described the plight of award-winning southern novelist James Wilcox (“Modern Baptists”), a writer’s writer whose novels have been compared favorably to Faulkner’s, although poor sales and publisher’s skepticism have kept him in poverty.¹⁷ The case of William Kennedy (*Ironweed*) also inevitably comes to mind. Shall we blame the victim (the writer) for lack of a market, or trust to luck and admit that, like the novelist, some library historians write library history because they *have* to write library history? Library historians as a group have more often operated by the principle of attraction than by promotion. As academics, if they want more respect for their findings within the profession, they may have to renounce library history entirely; if they want to attract a wide range of casual interest, they run the risk of spreading themselves thin in other fields; if they simply want to make a big splash, let them scout out a homegrown Fawn Brodie, and be prepared for all the unpleasantness and adrenaline that controversy entails. If they really want to write library history, however, they will do it however small their audience; they will

routinely trade the price of a summer vacation for a pile of photocopies and a few anecdotes; they will sacrifice citation counts to panache, color, and the telling quote; and they will pay homage to Clio for the privilege of working in the nethersphere where serendipity and science converge.

References and Notes

1. "Clio's Decalogue, or The Ten Commandments of the Muse," a list of editorial caveats distributed for years by emeritus southern historian George Brown Tindall of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to his students, stems from the "acerbic comments on student papers, usually beginning 'Thou shalt not . . . ' made by historian William Hesselstine of The University of Wisconsin-Madison, and transmitted to Tindall by Hesselstine's master's degree candidate (later Tindall's student), Dan Carter. George Tindall to James V. Carmichael, Jr., March 10, 1992.
2. LeNoir Dimmit, Chief Loan Bureau, University of Texas, 1917-51; Vera Snook, Librarian, Little Rock, Arkansas, Public Library, 1926-48; May Fidelia Boudinot, Librarian, John Brown University (Arkansas), 1934-53; Mary Utopia Rothrock, Librarian, Lawson McGhee Library, Knoxville, Tennessee Public Library, 1918-34; Director of Library Services, Tennessee Valley Authority, 1934-48; Phineas Winsor, Dean, Library School of the University of Illinois, 1909-40; Delia Foreacre Sneed, Principal, Library School of The Carnegie Library of Atlanta, 1908-15.
3. James V. Carmichael, Jr., "Ahistoricity and the Library Profession: Perceptions of Biographical Researchers in LIS Concerning Research Problems, Practices, and Barriers," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science Education* 31 (Spring 1991): 329-56.
4. Papers from the Library History Round Table Program of 1992, "The Public Library Inquiry: Reminiscences, Reflections, and Research," were edited by Mary Niles Maack and appeared in *Libraries & Culture* 29 (Winter 1994).
5. Sydney J. Pierce, "Dead Germans and the Theory of Librarianship," *American Libraries* 23 (Sept. 1992): 641-43.
6. Readers may want to compare these remarks with the earliest essays on the subject: Jesse H. Shera, "On the Value of Library History," *The Library Quarterly* 22 (July 1952): 240-51; Louis Shores, "Library History Education," *The Journal of Library History* 3 (Jan. 1968): 3; (October 1968): 291-95; *The Journal of Library History* 4 (Jan. 1969): 5-8; (Apr. 1969): 103-5; (July 1969): 109-203; (Oct. 1969): 293-95.
7. As an example of the possibilities of reading research, see Janice Radway, "Beyond Mary Bailey and Old Maid Librarians," *The Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 35 (Fall 1994): 275-96. To its credit, the Library History Round Table and *Libraries & Culture* devoted Library History Seminar VIII to the theme of "Reading & Libraries" to incorporate new historical research on reading. To their shame, directors of the Public Library Association voted down endorsement of the "Billions of Bucks for Books" campaign for young readers in 1993. See "Miller Criticizes PLA for Refusing to Support Billion Books," *School Library Journal* 39: 11 (May 1993).
8. For example, Schrader's challenging content analysis of definitions of information science, has been almost totally ignored. See Alvin M. Schrader, "Toward a Theory of Library and Information Science" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1983); and "In Search of a Definition of Library and Information Science," *The Canadian Journal of Science* 9 (June 1984): 59-77.
9. Gerri Flanzraich, "The Library Bureau and Office Technology," *Libraries & Culture* 28 (Fall 1993): 403-29.
10. This observation is based on participation as an editorial advisory board member of the Beta Phi Mu Monographic Series (Greenwood), where the author was apprised of recent sales figures.

11. Joanne E. Passet, *Cultural Crusaders: Women Librarians in the American West* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Pr., 1994).
12. As a sampler of the editorial barrage which began with the publication of members of American Library Association's Gay and Lesbian Task Force marching in the 1992 San Francisco Gay Day Parade on the cover of *American Libraries* 23 (July/Aug. 1992), see "More on Gay Coverage" (Reader's Forum column) *American Libraries* 23 (Oct. 1992): 738; "Gay Rights Is A Professional Issue," (Letter), *American Libraries* 24 (Sept. 1993): 700; and most of the Reader's Forum columns encapsulated by the time span represented by these issues. Many address the broader themes of social responsibilities as they relate to libraries and librarians.
13. Blaise Cronin, "Shibboleth and Substance in North American Library and Information Science Education," *Libri* 45 (Mar. 1995): 45-63. (Keynote presentation at the conference of The Association for Library and Information Science Education, February 1, 1995.)
14. Barbara M. Melosh, "*The Physician's Hand:*" *Work Culture and Conflict in American Nursing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); "*Sentimental Women Need Not Apply:*" *A History of the American Nurse*, produced and directed by Diane Garey and Lawrence R. Holt, 60 min. (Direct Cinema, 1988). Videocassette. The film first aired on PBS.
15. Joanne E. Passet, "Entering the Professions: Women Library Educators and the Placing of Female Students, 1887-1912," *History of Education Quarterly* 31 (Summer 1991): 207-28.
16. R. Kathleen Molz, "The Public Library Inquiry as Public Policy Research," *Libraries & Culture* 29 (Winter 1994): 61-74.
17. James B. Stewart, "Moby Dick in Manhattan," *The New Yorker*, June 27/July 4, 1994, 46-66.