

RBMS: An Overview

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A look over the history of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) is instructive. Since its inception in 1955 as a committee of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)—it became a Section in 1958—it has demonstrated an unflagging devotion to an annual conference addressing the issues of rare books and manuscripts acquisition and management and to the preparation of professional tools.

The group's first program, held in Philadelphia on 5 July 1955, addressed the topic of buying rare books and manuscripts. Its speakers were Mary A. Benjamin and Jacob Zeitlin, two distinguished members of the trade who have remained friends of the Section. Then, as now, local collections were highlighted. One of the liveliest topics at the first preconference, held at the University of Virginia in 1959, was that of tax deductions and appraisals—a topic still very much with us and for which a new committee has just been established. The second preconference, at Oberlin in 1961, was devoted to the care and preservation of rare books, not only a hot topic in the 1980s but a fundable one.

Tools for the profession have been a constant concern. At the second meeting, in Miami Beach in 1956, the proposal for a manual of rare books librarianship met with enthusiastic response. It was finally published in 1965, the work of several dedicated librarians, among them Colton Storm (Clements Library), Gerald McDonald (New York Public Library), Georgia Haugh (Clements Library), and its final editor, H. Richard Archer (Chapin Library).

The interest in standards is also of long standing. When in 1967 the section was expanded to devote more attention to manuscripts, an ad hoc committee chaired by Frederick Goff established a subcommittee that subsequently worked out four standards, coordinated with the Society of American Archivists and the

Manuscript Society. These served as the basis for a manual subsequently published by the American Association for State and Local History. Today the Standards Committee is RBMS's largest and most active. It has addressed most of the issues relating to the cataloguing of rare books into national databases according to modern cataloguing rules and has published or been responsible for the development of thesauri for relators, genre terms, citation forms, and a group of special files ranging from printing/publishing terms to binding and illustration characteristics. It has worked with other organizations, such as the Society of American Archivists, with MARBI, the committee for establishing rules changes, and with representatives of the two largest national databases, OCLC and RLIN, to develop national standards for cataloguing early materials in a machine environment. Its members have been representatives of large and small institutions, each bringing a unique perspective concerning local and national needs for recording and retrieving information about items in their collections.

At present RBMS is one of the most active sections in ACRL. It has ten standing committees and eleven others devoted to developing programs or guidelines on professional topics. Ninety-six members from all across the U.S. serve on them; and many of our members serve as representatives to organizations sharing similar interests and goals, both within and outside of ALA. The issues these committees address are of interest to the widest sort of group. Although John Ottemiller, associate librarian at Yale University, wrote a letter in 1953 supporting the establishment of an organization that would constitute a group "limited to those actually dealing with rare books and manuscripts on a day to day rather than administrative level," at no time could the group be accused of only looking inward. Its goals, as presented in the formal request for Section status called for a group that could "promote wider understanding of the value of rare books to scholarly research and to cultural growth, bring improvement in the care, use and recognition of rare books in all libraries, provide for discussion of problems common to rare book librarians, and encourage librarians of these collections to become active members of ALA." Almost all of today's committees are concerned with issues that express these goals.

Despite this activity, the members of RBMS have continued to express the need for a journal devoted to the issues of rare books librarianship—a forum for dissemination and discussion even larger than that of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section itself. Thus, it is with great enthusiasm that ACRL initiates this journal. It, too, is in keeping with those continuing goals: the development and support of special collections librarianship.

Committees and committee chairs:

Committee on Tax Deductible Gift Legislation (ad hoc)—William Keller.

Conference Program Planning Committee (New York, 1986)—Robert Nickirk.

Conference Program Planning Committee (California, 1987)—to be appointed.

Conservators' Collations Committee (ad hoc)—Terry Belanger.

Conservators/Curators Relations Committee (ad hoc)—Donald Farren.

Continuing Education Committee*—Lynda Claassen.

Developing Guidelines for Loaning Special Collections Materials for Exhibition (ad hoc)—Ellen Dunlap.

Developing Guidelines for Professional Ethics (ad hoc)—David Stam.

Developing Guidelines on the Selection of General Collection Materials for Transfer to Special Collections (ad hoc)—Sam Streit.

Executive Committee*—Anna Lou Ashby.

Exhibition Catalogues Awards Committee*—Sally Leach.

Information Exchange Committee*—Irene Moran.

Literary Rights Committee (ad hoc)—Thomas Verich.

MARC Cataloguing for Special Collections Information Exchange Committee*—John Thomas.

Manuscript Discussion Group*—Robert E. Blesse.

Nominating Committee (1987 election)*—Lynda Claassen.

Publications Committee*—Joan Friedman.

Security Committee*—David Zeidberg.

Standards Committee*—John Thomas.

1986 Preconference Planning (New York)—Marie Korey.

1987 Preconference Planning (California)—Sam Streit.

*Standing committees.

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