

INAUGURAL SESSION, INSTITUTE OF ENGLISH STUDIES SEMINAR IN THE HISTORY OF LIBRARIES, 27/2/08

I.R.WILLISON INTRODUCTION

As we have said in our prospectus 'the purpose of the Seminar is to encourage further research into all aspects of the subject of library history following the publication in 2006 of the *Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland* by Cambridge University Press'. My task to introduce the project by outlining its broader context and its rationale, particularly with regard to the complementary *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (of which I am one of the three general editors).

1. The Cambridge history of libraries joins the four-volume *Histoire des Bibliothèques Françaises* (published between 1988 and 1992) as the only multivolume, multi-authored national library histories we are going to have (since the abandonment of the American project launched at the Library of Congress Center for the Book around 1990); and like the French work, it originated in part with the dissatisfaction at the coverage of library history by the original national history of the book projects, despite their unprecedentedly ambitious range. In our case this dissatisfaction was expressed mainly by the Library History Group of the then Library Association (chaired by Peter Hoare (later general editor of the *Cambridge History of Libraries*) and also by Robin Alston, then Director of the Library School at University College London, Alston subsequently setting up the on-line Library History Database.

In the case of other national projects the history of libraries is integrated with the history of the book (and we should remember that even in France the history of libraries is separate from the history of the book *trade*, *histoire de l'édition*, and not from the history of the *book* as a whole, *histoire du livre*). The British Cambridge projects are the only ones construed separately, and one of the tasks of the Seminar will be to help define the relationship of the history of libraries to the history of the book, not least because the Seminar is being organized in conjunction with the Institute's new Seminar on the history of the book in the twentieth century and, among other things, will be in due course involved with the Institute's inclusive, high-profile London Rare Book School. At this stage I simply suggest that common ground

can be found, over the historical long run, in the concept of the *textual archive*, which is, first, produced by the book trade according to the 'free', entrepreneurial logic of the Market, and then intellectually controlled and ordered by the librarian in the interest of the reader, particularly (over the long run) the scholarly reader, according to the disciplined logic of Knowledge (David McKitterick's contributions to both Cambridge histories look at this).

The history of scholarship as a formal research commitment of the School of Advanced Study is the preserve of the Warburg Institute, and this brings me to the question of the relations between the Institute of English Studies, its Seminars, and the other Institutes of the School. Since the bringing of the Institutes together within the School over ten years ago and the need to coordinate their research strategies, the Institute of English Studies has been encouraged to take the initiative in promoting the history of books and libraries in the other disciplines as well as territories within the School. Thus the Institute of Classical Studies will run a course on The Book in the Ancient World in the London Rare Book School next July; and the Seminar's Steering Group will propose exercises in the history of libraries in other countries outside as well as inside Europe.

Editors of the *Cambridge History of Libraries* see [vol III p.5] the necessity for the history of libraries finally to move away 'from its antiquarian past [by] collaborating with disciplines [such as] sociology or cultural studies, philosophy or architecture',. The moving away from its antiquarian past is vitally necessary as the Institute of English Studies, as a member of the international *Colloque d'histoire mondiale du livre et de l'édition*, is required to prepare for the presentation, and acceptance, of the history of the book and libraries as a now fully sophisticated historical discipline in its own right at the next meeting of the International Committee of Historical Sciences in Amsterdam in 2010. This will represent the conclusion of the national, developmental phase of the history of the book begun with the launch of *L'histoire de l'édition française* in 1982.

At the same time, at the micro-level, the history of libraries, particularly the history of local and public libraries and what Volume III of the Cambridge History calls 'libraries of our own'

(subscription, working class, private etc) and 'hidden libraries' (home, prisons etc) is near, or indeed at, the cutting edge of the so-called 'new history from below' [p 4], Pursuing this will be of equal importance in establishing the history of the book at Amsterdam, and here maximising the range and detail of Alston's Database will play a major role in realising its full research potential, not least in keeping the involvement of the history of libraries with the 'grand theories' of cultural studies, and so on, suitably sober. The Institute of English Studies is now legally responsible for the Alston Database, and one of the earliest tasks of the Seminar will be to set up the problematic network of volunteer and funded research necessary to carry out that responsibility (one can compare the problems facing the *Database of American Libraries before 1876* at Princeton) - as another of its tasks will be to define other specific volunteer/funded research projects, both as important in themselves and in the light of the Amsterdam conspectus.

Finally, to sustain the momentum and the effect of the Seminar I suggest that prospective authors of papers be invited by the Seminar not only to present their papers but then to submit them, for the record, to Professor Black and *Library History* or at least to the SAS-SPACE digital repository.

I.R. Willison

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