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THE VALUE OF RARE BOOKS

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VERY few people, outside of those accustomed to use a library as a workshop, really understand the worth of a so-called "rare" book. "Museum-piece—very interesting," they may say, and promptly forget the item itself, except perhaps remembering it enough to tell their friends that they had in their hands a book worth fifteen hundred dollars.

There are many reasons why a particular book or edition may become valuable. In the first place, it may happen that the first edition is the only one. It may have sold slowly and the true worth of the book may not become apparent until long after the author's demise. Then the edition is scattered to the four corners of the earth and many copies may have found their way into the dump heap.

The books an author publishes in his lifetime constitute the record of his thought and art. No later editions of these books serve so well to set forth that record. He may have made changes and revisions of his early work, so we cannot tell from a late version what the first form was. In a collected edition, he may have omitted some of his early work, so that in using such a late edition we could never know what these early writings were. One can never know the whole story about the art and thought of the poet, novelist, historian, or philosopher, unless one has all his work at hand.

Rare books tell much more than merely what their words convey. The printing, binding, and illustrations all
18 Colby Library Quarterly

tell a story in themselves. For books are the apparatus of
the historian and literary scholar just as machines and lab­
oratory equipment are for the scientist.

Every college library has an obligation to possess full
and complete collections as far as it can—particularly if
those collections relate to the past history of the college,
to its traditions in some specific subject, or to its region.
More and more it has become evident that college libra­
ries must specialize this way and not try to compete. Many
small colleges are known for this sort of thing. One today
goes to Oberlin to look at the Hamlin Garland collection;
to Hamilton for its collection on the history and topog­
raphy of Palestine; to Emory for its Uncle Remus collection.
One goes to Colby to find its Hardy and its Edwin Arling­
ton Robinson collections.

Like attracts like. When a collector knows that a college
takes care of its rare books, is proud of them, displays them,
uses them, lets other qualified people use them freely, he
is very apt to give his treasures to such a place. He knows
that there they will be cherished.

Archibald MacLeish in a recent magazine article point­
ed out that “a university may lose its faculty and its stu­
dents and begin again as a great university if its library re­
mained great. But if it lost its library no conceivable fac­
culty and no conceivable student body would hold it to its
rank.” He went on to point out that civilizations follow
the libraries. If in this war the same thing should happen
to the libraries of Europe that happened after the Moors
destroyed the library of Alexandria, then the only records
of our modern civilization would be found in the libraries
of America.

Colby can become the great college we are all anticipat­
ing with such eagerness, only if her library is encouraged
to grow as the New Campus on Mayflower Hill is growing.
Every member of the Library Associates aids directly in
this great undertaking.