

Report of the Council

A CHANGE of administration is a convenient time to pause and to take stock, to ask what the American Antiquarian Society is, who we are, what is our purpose, how well we accomplish it, and what our goals for the future should be. We are a group of two hundred individuals who have associated ourselves in order that by coöperation we may accomplish more than we can singly. About once a week some scholar or bookman asks us apologetically, "Will you do this for me," and we reply, "Of course; we exist to further the historical and bibliographical work of others." We have no body of students paying tuition; no taxpayers entitled to special service; our clientele is the whole body of scholars in our field. In the first generation of our history this meant the coöperation of individuals, for our founders were all amateurs so far as scholarship was concerned, there being then no professional historians, librarians, or museum curators. Today our operations include the coöperation of institutions and crafts, and in the selection of our members we are careful to maintain equal proportions of collectors, historians, and professional bookmen.

Since our interests are national, a care in the matter of geographical distribution of membership is essential to this coöperation. In the early years of our Society, representation on the Council was on a geographical basis, and dozens of men in distant states were elected only on their reputations. In 1831 the membership list was revised to drop uninterested members and to obtain a more workable concentration. After this reorganization seven per cent of

the membership lived in Worcester and sixty per cent in New England. The local concentration gradually increased until the beginning of Mr. Brigham's administration, when twenty-three per cent of the membership was from Worcester and seventy-three per cent from New England. During the past fifty years there has been a steady spreading out of the membership, so that today twelve per cent are local and fifty-five per cent from New England. During most of our history we have had a class designated as Foreign Members, usually comprising about fourteen per cent of our membership. We seldom heard from these members after they acknowledged their election, perhaps because we did not send them the *Proceedings*. Over the last two decades we have allowed this category of members to become extinct because it was always inactive.

Of recent years we have elected no one simply to confer an honor upon him; we choose our members from the group interested in coöperating in the work which has occupied us for nearly a century and a half. The founders of the American Antiquarian Society were men who had participated in the establishment of the United States and, believing that its democracy was the wave of the future and the hope of mankind, were determined to preserve the record of its organization and growth in order that less fortunate peoples might follow in their footsteps. The Puritans had been content to found the City upon a Hill to serve as a beacon for mankind; our founders were shrewd business men determined to package and to distribute aggressively their wares. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences had been founded for the same purpose, among others, but to the disgust of our founders it had confined its activities to the reading of papers and to communication among the members. The American Antiquarian Society, on the other hand, has always been devoted to the

collection, preservation, and processing for utilization of the records of our past. It is the processing activity which marks us off to such a degree from our sister institutions, and it is this which employs the larger part of the time of our staff. Corn in an Iowa field does nothing for the breakfast tables of the world until it is processed and distributed, and ideas affect only the originators until they are disseminated. The processing of historical materials involves collection, the compilation of catalogues and bibliographies, and the distribution of the processed documents in print or microprint form. This is precisely the work which Isaiah Thomas began with his bibliography of pre-Revolutionary imprints.

Since Thomas's day our goal has been narrowed, our purposes sharpened, and our energies canalized. In our early years we assumed that the term Antiquarian covered the fields which are today called history, anthropology, archaeology, ethnology, and ethnography. Indeed, our founders, still having time on their hands, proposed that the Society should, in addition, concern itself with all that man and nature have done anywhere. For the academies founded in the several preceding centuries, this was a perfectly reasonable goal, but by 1812 the world had begun an expansion of human knowledge which can be compared only to an explosion. In this explosion the American Antiquarian Society was blown aimlessly about. When Justin Winsor, one of our most faithful members, was presiding at the organization of the American Historical Association in 1884, he justified his divided attention by pointing out that we, in trying to do too much, had become provincial. The Historical Association exists to serve a profession which did not exist when we were founded. Twenty other national organizations and a thousand regional societies now exist to explore aspects or regions within our original sphere of

activity. Yet so skillful has been the retreat of the American Antiquarian Society to our core function that these daughter societies of ours to a great extent rely on us to preserve the record of the beginning of work in their respective fields.

During the last six months I have been serving as both Librarian and Director, because Marcus McCorison, who has been called to take over the former post, cannot come until August. To my great surprise we have in this half year cleaned up the most pressing tasks which we told McCorison he would have to face. Three rooms of duplicates and discards have been sorted and disposed of. There were no rarities in the lot, but the very bulk of it brought us a handsome cash return. Thanks to the energy of Mrs. Bruce Crawford, daughter of our friend Hudson Hoagland, the reclassification of the Spanish American collection has been completed. Our Mary Brown offered as odd-time work to list by Medina numbers the contents of the bundles of early Latin-American tracts which have lain on our shelves unopened for fifty years. Our great collection of broadsides has long been divided into a number of subject categories which were last comprehended by employees no longer with us. Thanks largely to the driving energy of a new employee, Mrs. Marcia Kerst, our broadsides have, for the first time, been placed in individual folders and arranged according to the Evans numbers, so that Roger Bristol's index will serve as an index to the entire collection.

The new administration is experimentally changing our purchasing policy somewhat, buying fewer of the kind of books which are frequently offered, in order to be in a better position to take advantage of the once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, but disappointingly few of these have offered. The drought of offers of really good material which has marked the last decade continues, I presume, because more institu-

tions are competing in our field. I do not believe that a research institution should in general compete with private collectors in popular fields unless it is rounding out holdings already strong. Ideally the library should discover the most promising fields and crop them before the popular rush sends prices up; Mr. Brigham did this several times. If we were now to attempt to obtain every item described by our member Jake Blank, we would sink all of our book funds into this one project and wind up with one of many poor collections in this field.

Our collections are much more frequently consulted by mail than by visitors in person, a fact which gives rise to certain peculiar problems of which you as members should be aware because you may be called upon to explain them. The chief difficulty is that no institution can satisfy all of even the important requests which it receives. For example the editors of several bibliographies have in the last few months asked us to compile for them complete lists of our holdings in their fields.

A common difficulty is the multiple query. Mr. X asks us to do a little research for him, and we oblige. Then frequently his helpful friends Y and Z come to us with the same problem distorted by their misunderstanding of it. Sometimes we know that the information which Y and Z ask us to supply will be useless to X; frequently we know that he already has it. Faced by such well-meaning queries from Y and Z we have sometimes invoked an imaginary rule against doing research for a third party; it has caused hard feelings.

Other than small problems like this, and the larger one of air-conditioning, the present of the American Antiquarian Society is quite satisfactory. The great period of the growth of our resources has been the last half century, and although the volume of our accessions has been cut back, the area

in which we can afford effective service is swiftly growing. Our productivity since the appearance of Mr. Brigham's newspaper bibliography has been at an all time high, and other works, such as the bibliography of directories which he is finishing, will increase this pace. University presses are now paying particular attention to the republication of old works, but none of them is remotely approaching our mark of reprinting, in microprint form, some five thousand titles a year.

A couple of generations ago the editors of the Harvard Triennial Catalogue used to place after the name of each graduate the initials of the learned societies to which he belonged, but they caused much controversy and heart-burning by refusing to receive the A.A.S. into the charmed circle. Beginning with the accession of President Waldo Lincoln and Librarian Clarence Brigham, the influence and reputation of the Society spread as its collections and productivity increased, and are today higher than at any time since the day when it was the only national organization in the historical field. Professor James Franklin Beard, the first two volumes of whose monumental *Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper* have just appeared, affords an example of this. He came to Clark University from a more famous institution in order to work in our library, the resources of which, for his purposes, he found to be about equal to those of the New York City libraries combined. He could bring with him to Worcester the film of the Cooper manuscripts on which he was working, but nowhere else could he find assembled the collections of newspapers, directories, genealogies, and local histories which he needed for his editorial work. It is significant of our function in the scholarly world that no university is collecting seriously in these particular fields today. Here and at other points our function and those of the university libraries are

steadily diverging, thus making the services which we afford more essential than they were in days before specialization was necessary.

Does the foreseeable future hold any radical changes for the Society? One frequent suggestion is that we increase our influence by increasing the number of our members. In each of the past twenty years I have spent a part of a week in conference with the executive officers of other national societies, and from our studies there in such mutual problems as membership, finances, and services, I know that it would be a mistake to increase our membership sharply without a great increase in endowment. It has been proposed that we create a new category of membership on the "Friends of the Library" plan, but this would require an increase in staff and services which would offset any gain. The staff is now like an engine running to full capacity; it has no margin of power to apply to new duties.

Our present staff of fifteen is about all that our building can accommodate. It is a large staff for such an organization, and there are two reasons for this. The first is the backlog of processing resulting from the tremendous accessions of the Brigham regime; in the near future this pressure will disappear. The other factor is the inflation which makes it impossible for us to hire college graduates with library school training. We must train our own, and consequently the output per employee is not as high as we could wish. In the future we should have fewer employees with more professional training.

When I came as Librarian in 1940, I surveyed our activities and decided that, in spite of the really massive cuts in our fields of collection made by the Lincoln-Brigham regime, we would need the income from five million dollars of new endowment to carry on effectively all that we were then trying to do. The subsequent pruning out of our poor

collections and ineffectual services has made the rest grow better, so that if we do have such a windfall of endowment as a few of our sister societies have enjoyed, it will be fully utilized without resuming any of the activities which we have abandoned.

If we should receive a large increase in endowment, it would certainly be desirable to increase our membership in order to obtain more uniform national coverage; it is absurd to have no member in Texas. We certainly could expand our publication activities to the great benefit of scholarship. In the field of the history of printing in America, to take an example which is certainly apt for a society founded by Isaiah Thomas, it will at the present rate take us years to publish the full fruits of Miss Avis Clarke's lifetime of research on her biographical dictionaries of American printers, booksellers, and authors, with their related business histories and bibliographies. With few exceptions, the history of American printing and publishing before 1820 is little more than a partial list of names. Of very few Americans would it now be practical to make a study like Leona Rostenberg's article on Thomas Thorpe, the publisher of Shakespeare's sonnets, in the current issue of the *Papers* of the Bibliographical Society. Our great catalogue of printers and publishers, now nearing completion, provides the solid foundation for literally hundreds of such studies, and by such means the next generation will open the history of American publications.

We would be in an ideal position to administer scholarships for research in the whole field of early American history. Occasionally students do come from foreign universities to nearby institutions in order to work in our collections; it would be much better if we had a hand in choosing them and advising on their fields of work.

As I sat writing this report, I thought of the four or five score active members of the Society who regularly further its work by coming to meetings, by giving us words of encouragement and of wisdom polished by long experience, by giving books, or checks, or papers to be read or printed, or by devoting hours of hard work to our problems. I would like to mention some by name, but who can tell which of the talents given today will, from the perspective of the future, appear to have been important. In this I speak as the Director, not as the voice of the Council, for in spite of the hours which these men have given to our affairs, even they cannot know the daily contacts of our office. The American Antiquarian Society is like a coral, the living members building upon the structure created by the 1200 members who preceded them.

Since our last meeting, six members have been retired by death. George I. Rockwood, of Worcester, elected in 1923, died on October 30, 1959. Joseph Gavit of Albany, a helpful and faithful correspondent, elected in 1938, died on November 28. Ferris Greenslet, of Boston, elected in 1947, died on November 19. Henry P. Kendall, of Boston, elected in 1951, died on November 3. Harry Miller Lydenberg, elected 1933, died on April 16, and J. Cheney Wells, formerly of Southbridge, elected in 1948, died on January 6, 1960. We have every reason to think that the new members elected today to replace these losses will be even more active and useful.

For the Council,
CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON

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