

Report of the Council

OCTOBER 20, 2006

THIRTY-THREE YEARS AGO, Marcus McCorison stood before the annual meeting of the Society to deliver the *Report of the Council*, somewhat as I come before you today. That afternoon, he noted that 'during the past year or more the American Antiquarian Society has undergone marked changes—changes which have been designed to permit us to accomplish more effectively our long-established objectives of collecting and preserving the printed record of our country, as well as disseminating the historical knowledge garnered from our literary antiquities.' The 'marked changes' enumerated in his report that day included the inauguration of a program of research fellowships, the transformation of the antiquated bindery into a modern conservation laboratory, and the making of a more commodious reading room by the expansion of operations into a new office addition. Marcus noted that while the staff had doubled in size over the course of ten years—standing at 'twenty-two with six others present through special funding'—it was still not 'large enough to handle the work of the Society,' a problem he attributed to the simple fact that 'fewer and fewer people of any age group are willing to work at the minimum wage, and we have had little success in attracting volunteers to AAS to perform useful work.'

To redress the lack of resources for staffing—and to augment those for acquisitions and preservation of the collections—Marcus announced that the Council had commenced upon an ambitious effort to secure some two million dollars in new monies to be added to the Society's four-million-dollar endowment. In recognition of one generous gift already in hand, Marcus made the announcement that Curator of Prints and Maps Georgia Bumgardner

would thereafter be known as the Andrew W. Mellon Curator of Graphic Arts. Of course, in time she would become known as Gigi Barnhill (though not by act of the AAS Council), and the prediction Marcus made that day—that under her leadership the ‘scholarly and other uses of AAS graphic collections [would] grow demonstrably and satisfyingly’—would certainly prove to be the case. The members at the 1973 annual meeting also learned that new funds had made possible the appointment of Joyce Ann Tracy as the Society’s new curator of newspapers. Arriving at about the same time were a new assistant curator of manuscripts, Nancy H. Burkett, a graduate of American University and Boston University and the University of California—hired by curator Bill Joyce under an NEH grant for collection processing—and a new editor of publications, John B. Hench, who had worked at AAS as a library assistant during his graduate school days at Clark University and was returning after a stint of teaching in his home state of Minnesota. Having started at the Society in the same week, John and Nancy decided to take their leave into retirement on the same day, a short thirty-three years later, on August 31, 2006, and it is that otherwise sad leave taking that we are here to celebrate today, with some short speech making, some gift giving, and with some major partying at the reception which will follow this afternoon’s annual meeting.

Returning to the annual meeting of 1973, it is to be noted that Marcus waxed enthusiastic in his Council report over the acquisitions for the year (though bemoaning the ‘sharp diminution of the availability of materials dated before 1821, with an attendant rise in asking price’) before closing his remarks with thanks to many, including the 121 members and 118 friends who had contributed \$29,790 to the annual fund. Even without adjusting for inflation, much of what Marcus reported in 1973 rings true with me, and I echo his sentiments: ‘It is our opinion that the Society is in a position of strength. Our members are loyal. The staff is imaginative and diligent. We believe that the quality of our work, following the standards laid down by our predecessors, remains

high, and we look toward to the shaping of plans which will allow the Society to develop more truly into a center of advanced research in American history and culture.' But in explaining the reasons why those new plans were needed, Marcus forthrightly revealed the tensions under which AAS was operating at the time: '[T]he impact of rising expectations . . . for the benefits from radical technological alterations in modes of human labor and communication has excited desires for greater economic return for work, for elevated social status, for wider participation in social, political, and economic decision making, and for universally better and more higher education. The tensions . . . between public desires and the traditional ways of administrating a research library are frequently intense, for we have accepted a task which is contradictory. On each occasion that a book is read or consulted in some small way it is destroyed. Yet, our task is not only to collect and to preserve but to broadcast knowledge for the benefit of mankind.' I quote these passages in order to set for you the scene in which Nancy Burkett and John Hench entered the AAS stage. Marcus himself laid the conundrum out squarely: 'Who wishes their institution to appear to be standing in the path of progress, impeding scholarship, or seemingly to be indifferent to the training of our young? To continue to hold the goodwill and trust of the public, such charges must be answered during each generation in terms which are acceptable to the public as well as to the purposes of the institution.' So with Marcus as producer/director and the likes of John and Nancy in the cast, AAS continued to evolve—just as it had in previous generations—to refashion itself as not only relevant but also revered, all the while remaining mindful of what Marcus called 'our duty to preserve our portion of the baggage of the past for the use of generations yet to come.'

John did his part by creating a fellowship program that is now second to none, by fostering the growth of the path-breaking Program in the History of the Book in America, by crafting and producing imaginative public programs built on solid historical ground and

with a flourish of popular appeal, and by maintaining an active program of publishing important and highly readable works

All the while, on this side of Salisbury Street, Nancy in her roles as head of readers' services, associate librarian, then head of the library and, finally, as 'chief acqisitor' set the very tone and culture of the library as one of generosity, friendliness, collaboration, and dedication to building great collections for the use of a widening audience. Nancy made it a point of personal pride that no one ever left the library empty-handed—even if it was only with a page she'd copied out of the encyclopedia and the directions on how to get to the Worcester Public Library—or with anything other than pleasure at their experience, however brief it may have been. Both took every opportunity to be helpful and friendly to all and to share their knowledge of the collections with all. John and Nancy also worked tirelessly to advance the good name and reputation of the Society in many community and professional venues. John became a leader in MusicWorcester and the American Council of Learned Societies, while Nancy became active in what was then called the Worcester Area Cooperating Libraries and in the Bibliographical Society of America, to cite only a few examples. Moreover—and perhaps most important—these two have showed the rest of us what it means to be true colleagues, to be a staff that works together for a common good, that can put aside occasional differences and look for the best in each other and work for the best for the Society.

As I stand before you here at this annual meeting, I feel somewhat as Marcus may have felt when he was thinking of the generational shift about to happen to 'his' AAS. The Society today is in good shape. Lots of good things have happened to us in recent years, our programs are being well received, our fundraising is strong, and we have many wonderful new staff now in place. Those of you who participated in the 'what's new' session earlier this afternoon heard from new young staff who are working along with us 'older folk' to make great things happen. But we have a point of tension surrounding us these days that may well prove to

be as institution-altering as those at hand when John and Nancy first arrived. As fate would have it, I could use the same words Marcus did to start my description of the situation:

'The impact of rising expectations within the entire and growing population for the benefits from radical technological alterations in modes of human labor and communication' has given some people the false notion that if something isn't on the Internet, it didn't happen or isn't worth learning about, even if it did. And just as Marcus may have worried about what would happen if too many people came to use the books and wore them all out, I could just as easily worry about the opposite problem: no one ever feeling the need to consult the originals ever again. Even without stating the conundrum so strongly, the case can be made that the digital revolution is affecting libraries everywhere, and we are certainly not immune.

Indeed, I feel strongly that if the Society does not continue to move aggressively toward the replication and sharing of its collection in the form of digital surrogates, we run the risk of a form of cultural obsolescence when the advantage of having the largest collection of originals in one physical place is trumped by having once-disparate collections aggregated together virtually. Having already digitized our earliest American imprints (through 1820) and a large body of our ephemera, and having commenced in earnest on a partnership to start to digitize our vast newspaper holdings, we are now looking to extend the scope and number of our partnerships in order to maximize the financial return to the Society for the sharing of its content holdings in the online world. Under the guidance of a Council task force on digitization, I am now working with a business consultant on mapping out a cogent strategy—and that means I'm traveling a lot and seeing the inside of lots of conference rooms. While the Society remains committed to the long-term survival of each and every pre-1877 American imprint, we have found that the online existence of digital copies, especially of newspapers, encourages many other repositories to transfer their collections to us.

Indeed, the challenge for the Society, to my mind, is not in the assembly and preservation of the originals nor in the scanning and presentation of the texts; it's in figuring out how we can replicate in the online world that sense of community and intrapersonal interest and concern—among researchers, staff, and others—which has been our strength and hallmark under John's and Nancy's long tenure here. Fortunately, there are a growing number of innovative tools that are springing up on the Internet that can be used to support interaction—even among early American historians.

But there's no magical tool on the Internet that will allow us to keep an interactive surrogate of Nancy and John with us at the library for at least another generation or two. It would be wise, then, for us to reflect for a moment on those lessons they taught us while they were here, to mull over what made John and Nancy so special to each of us, and to contemplate how we might try to honor their legacy by emulating them more closely. For some, it might be as simple as remembering to be as unfailingly positive and cheerful as Nancy is, while others might strive to be as patient and steadfast as John. Honor old traditions and make new one. Care about others; take care of yourself. Make no small plans, especially when it comes to acquisitions. Plan ahead, and in specific honor of John, always know where your next meal is coming from.

But to conclude on a serious note, we announced this summer that the Council had established two mechanisms whereby members and friends might honor our special friends—by making a gift or pledge to the endowment for the John B. Hench Post-Dissertation Fellowship (formerly the Mellon Post-Dissertation Fellowship) or by giving a gift to the Nancy Burkett Collection—a book itself or the funds for the staff to buy something that the Society does not yet have. Not surprisingly, given the true esteem in which Nancy and John are held and the unselfish generosity of all who care about the Society, its collections, and programs, both

efforts have been heavily subscribed. To all who have given and to all who support the Society in any number of other ways, please know that our gratitude is likewise most sincere.

But on the occasion of this annual meeting and the reception that follows, we wanted to have at least one or two surprises. As John and Nancy both well know, there is a long-standing tradition at the Society of giving a nice trip to anyone who retires after such a long, devoted tenure. And now there is a new tradition of dragooning the retiree's spouse into helping pick the destination (if not the details).

Asking Randy Burkett what country he and Nancy might enjoy visiting was just too easy: Everyone who has been within earshot of them since their return from Argentina last winter knows that it is their plan to return as soon as they can.

Nancy and Randy, I consulted with our member, Tom McDermott, who has traveled extensively in South America and asked for his advice on a trip that would pamper Nancy as she so richly deserves and yet knock her socks off at the same time. Tom had several itineraries to suggest, but each took as a given that Nancy and Randy would stay at the Alvear Palace Hotel in Buenos Aires, described in the Frommer's travel guide as one of the top hotels in the world. It was enough for me to read that Robert Duvall stays there, but it is more to the point for the Burketts to know that the Alvear concierge staff is legendary for their ability to arrange anything you need in terms of special trips, tour guides, or tickets to the Colon Theater, even on sold-out nights. Ask lots of questions of the concierge the first day you are there, because at the rate they charge for rooms, you won't have money left over to go anywhere else if you don't get out fairly quickly. And the place we think you'd like to go is the northern reaches of Argentina—by a two-hour plane trip—to see the Iguazu Falls, which is really 270 falls in one. It is reported that when Eleanor Roosevelt first saw it, she exclaimed, 'Poor Niagara!' In keeping with the first-class trip we hope this will be for you, we have figured into your

itinerary a two-night stay in the Internacional Iguazu Resort, the only hotel within the national park itself. The view of the falls from your bed is what you pay for—the roar of the falls is free. By all accounts, I hope you are able to get there when the moon is full and the falls are at their most magical. Randy, until the concierge takes over, I'll put you in charge of the arrangements.

We all know that Nancy doesn't mind a little self-indulgence, but John wouldn't be John if he weren't a bit too practical for his own good. That practicality led John to ask if we wouldn't consider getting him something that he really wanted for his retirement, a fancy new iBook laptop. We did, but even with all the extra bells and whistles, we still hadn't spent all the money we had set aside for his retirement trip, so we thought we'd add a small side trip on to whatever next big trip he and Lea were planning to take. I called Lea and she became my co-conspirator, wangling out of an unsuspecting John an expressed desire to go to Australia in the next year or so. Again I turned to a seasoned traveler in that amazing part of the world, none other than Jill Ker Conway, who had so many suggestions that John and Lea might consider moving down there to take advantage of them all.

John and Lea, what sounded most appealing to me would be a great side trip, if you are arriving in country in Sydney where flights from the United States usually arrive at about 8 a.m., too early to check your jet-lagged selves into a hotel. So it is suggested that you arrange to have a driver pick you up and drive two hours north of the city to Hunter Valley—the wine country of Australia—for an early afternoon check in. There are many small four-star inns to pick from, but the Hunter Country Lodge sounded the most intriguing to me because of its award-winning restaurant, Shakey Tables. The chef runs the tiny lodge with her husband, who is the sommelier; the kangaroos run wild in the yard; there are great vineyards and wineries for you to choose from during your three-day stay; and you can get an amazing bird's-eye view of them all by taking an early morning hot air balloon trip over the entire region. The lift-off area is just across the

road from the Lodge. Lea, I'll leave this envelope and the finalizing of the reservations in your good hands.

John and Nancy, we hope that each of these trips will be memorable ones for you and that they will remind you that your influence and friendship here at the Society will never, ever, be forgotten.

Ellen Smith Dunlap

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.