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Tomorrow's [Bookbinding] History: A Library Contribution

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TOMORROW'S HISTORY
A Library Contribution
A paper read at the History of Bookbinding Advanced Seminar
Standing Conference of National and University Libraries
Oxford University
April 13, 1975

Several years ago I read a sentence in an article by an American writer, William Gass, which has frequently come back to mind.

We may indeed suspect [wrote Gass] that the real power of historical events lies in their descriptions; only by virtue of their passage into language can they continue to occur, and once recorded (even if not more than as gossip), they become peculiarly atemporal, residing in that shelved-up present which passes for time in a library.

I think you will all feel the fascination of that phrase "peculiarly atemporal, residing in that shelved-up present that passes for time in a library."

As a librarian it is my responsibility to preserve both the ideas and the artifact, both the text and the book. Not every book can be preserved, of course, at least in its original form, and perhaps not every book should be. Books should also be used, and indeed use, with all its potential dangers, may be the most effective preserved: the oils of the hand are a balm to leather bindings but more importantly a book unused is a book unknown and less likely to be cared about and for -- except for those of us who work in the shelved-up present and for whom all pieces of the past have their fascination. Even we, with always limited resources and virtually limitless needs, can rarely ignore economic consequences of our actions. Indeed, one of our resources, our time, may face so many demands and constraints that we feel forced to act on what we know is less than sufficiently full knowledge. We can justify our actions in the present; we hope that tomorrow will show them to have been right.

As a librarian, then, it has been among my duties to complete the destruction of nearly 2000 bindings, mostly on books printed before 1800, in the last five years.

Lest I seem to brag, a few qualifications are in order. Not all of the books included in this 2000 had bindings when they came to my hands, some having never been bound, others having lost their bindings to the ravages of time and man. Some were plays and pamphlets obviously removed from previously bound collections and sold or given to us as single items. Not all of the bindings were totally destroyed. Perhaps 300 were partially retained by rebacking, by mounting parts of original tooling into new boards, or by reusing fragments, particularly title-pieces, that could be salvaged. Not all of the binding were original or contemporary either. A significant number were bindings applied by my predecessors, sometimes as recently as a

generation ago, and which were now so badly deteriorated or constructed of such poor quality material as to require rebinding.

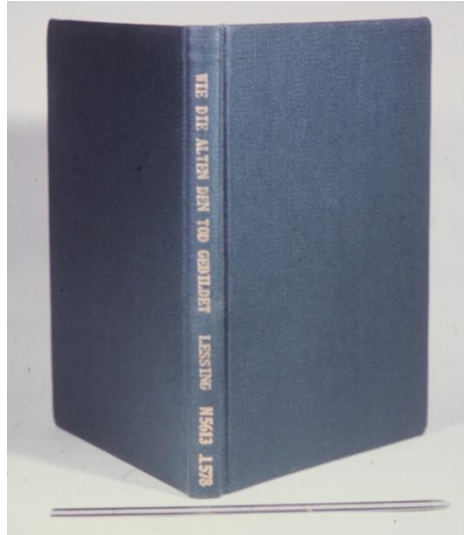
My activity too is modest indeed in the face of the work of my colleagues in our Binding and Labeling Department. They process about 1000 volumes a week every week of the year, year in and year out, three quarters of them new bindings for serials and recently issued unbound monographs, but the other quarter rebindings of books from the collection. Most of this work goes to the Hertzberg-New Method Company of Jacksonville, Illinois and some to General Bookbinding of Chesterland, Ohio. In theory early imprints are referred to my department before being sent for Class 1 library binding; I know that not all are. And in any case this is a fairly recent policy: many, many early imprints were put through the machinery in years past.

My department is responsible for about 120,000 volumes of printed books and some 1500 bound codex manuscripts. These collections, housed in closed stacks and used under observation, are embedded in the general library collections of more than three million volumes, nearly all of which, like most American library collections, are directly accessible to faculty, students, University staff, and indeed any who is able to penetrate the entrance security check. Still shelved in these larger collections are perhaps 30,000 books printed before 1800 which have not yet been transferred to my department.

Open stacks make these books more vulnerable to theft, of course, but they are also subject to much rougher handling. The collection is subject classified and each area is constantly growing; few shelves are full and few patrons or staff close up the ranks when they remove a book from the shelf. Consequently, a large percentage of the collection at any one time is askew on the shelf, a situation which hardly aids in the long-term preservation of bindings. Books circulate casually and the return drops the library provides are effective for the brick-like object produced by library binders but not very tender on bindings designed for appreciation and use rather than indestructibility.

Let me show you four examples of books rebound in the last 25 or 30 years as they came into my department.

[SLIDE 1: PT2400.W6 1796] The first is the first edition of Gotthold Lessing's reply to critics of his *Laokoon*, a small monograph printed in 1769. It was rebound in the last two or three years by Hertzberg-New Method.



[SLIDE 2] The spine was trimmed off, and book machine oversewn – there are about twelve stab holes through the entire book along the spine.



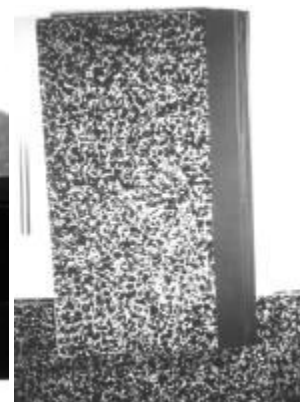
[SLIDE 3]. To even things up, or perhaps so the block would fit pre-cut standard-size boards, the block was trimmed on the other three sides – fairly severely as cropping of the pencil transliteration of the title at the top of the title page suggests. The illustration opposite the title page, by the way, is misbound; it should occur much later in the text.



[SLIDE 4: NA1121.V685] My second example is a 1761 work by Berotti Scamozzi on architecture. This book was acquired by the library in the 1890s but again was recently rebound. On return from the bindery it fell victim to another library practice – you can see the rubber stamp mark that shows through from the verso of the title page. In this case the stamp was particularly unnecessary since in the upper right corner – I don't believe it shows in this slide – is an earlier identification mark, this time embossed. [SLIDE 5] It was also past practice to rubber stamp all engravings and plates as a guard against theft.

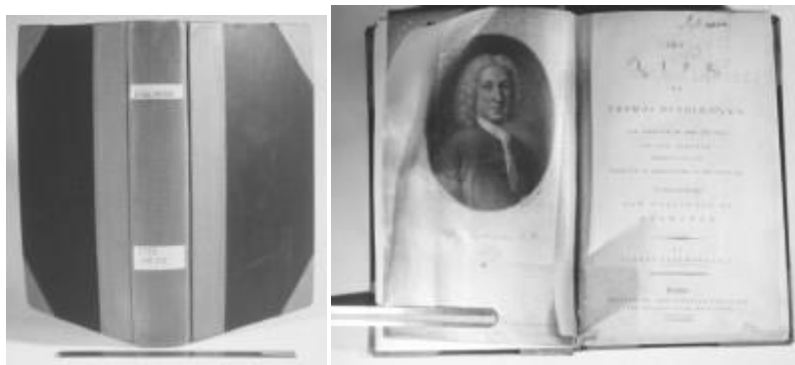


[SLIDE 6: fQL633.G3B6 Atlas] This is part of the atlas of Marcus Bloch's *Fischwerke* of 1782-1784. [SLIDE 7] The lovely buckram and marble paper exteriors conceal 216 hand-colored plates – these are two examples. [SLIDE 8, SLIDE 9] The plates, which were probably issued loose, have been here machine sewn [SLIDE 10] into clumps of ten or twelve – I took one of the volumes apart after these slides were taken – the sewing holes being about a half inch apart. The paper is quite heavy, and some of the plates, which seem to have been little used, were already showing signs of weakening along the lines of the sewing. This work was probably done in the 1930s when the library operated its own bindery in conjunction with the University Press.





[SLIDE 11: Z720.R9C5] This final attractive binding also represents in-house work of the last decade, George Chalmers' *Life of Thomas Ruddiman*, 1794. The labeling, certainly, was done no earlier than 1960. [SLIDE 12] Mr. Ruddiman, unfortunately, was laminated with a less than effective plastic laminate, peeling away, as you can see, but leaving its adhesive to discolor (and perhaps otherwise damage) the engraving. At the top of the title page you can see another early form of library ownership mark – a perforation.



The book is the biography of a librarian. I intend to read it to see if perhaps this treatment is therefore in some way peculiarly appropriate.

We have been in a new air-conditioned building for only five years. Before that the collection was subject to temperature ranging – freely, as you'll know if you have experienced Chicago's weather – from 60 degrees (or colder if the heat happened to fail one winter) to a 100 or more in summer; relative humidity might be nearly zero in the vicinity of steam pipes in winter and nearly 100% in the humid dog days of summer. The air was also laden with sulfur dioxide and other happy pollutants of modern industrial atmospheres – and of course with dirt particles of all descriptions. These conditions took their toll on a collection which was not often cleaned or otherwise much cared for physically.

[SLIDE 13] This group of slides illustrates some of the worst damage done. A couple of multi-volume sets. [SLIDE 14] A group of books with various first-aid attempts showing. [SLIDE 15] One of the sets opened to show the damage done by the highly acid card stock used to

make pockets to hold the cards once required by the circulation system. And some slides of individual volumes. [SLIDE 16. SLIDE 17. SLIDE 18. SLIDE 19.]



This [SLIDE 20] is an Aldine of 1499, a collection of astronomical treatises, bound in vellum which someone in the past [SLIDE 21] carefully repaired with Gaylord hinged tapes. And finally, [SLIDE 22] a Dryden of 1720 rebound in cloth in the 1930s and since read -- at least one hopes read -- nearly to pieces.



But it is not my intention to demonstrate that our collection has excellent resources for the study of 20th century library binding practices – it does, and I will have some further footnotes in a moment – I would also like to relate the character of the contribution we are making to the next chapter of that study. As we are aware, each of our decisions affects the resources available to the student of the history of binding. Some decisions irretrievably destroy the past. Some decisions preserve the past, in whole or in part. Most decisions bring into existence new bindings.

Let me start with some suggestion of the size of our program. In the five years I have been deeply involved with it we have commissioned 1991 bindings or rebackings from 19 different binders or binderies. We had 373 protective boxes made to the specifications of individual items. We have had perhaps 200 flat documents repaired or encapsulated. This work has been accomplished at the cost of \$46,262 (that is, about £20,000), not including the cost of my time nor that of other staff members, nor the cost of wrapping, shipping and insuring the books.

The average cost per volume was \$19.59, the least expensive work costing \$5 and the most expensive \$350. Our average cost per box was \$10.50.

Our binders have included Carolyn Horton of New York; E. A. Thompson of California; Barbara Giuffrida of Florence, Italy; and William Anthony, John Lariviere and the R. R. Donnelley Company's Graphic Conservation Laboratory in Chicago. In Great Britain we have had books bound by Period Binders of Bath, Gray & Son and Margaret McFadden Smith in Cambridge, and Dunn & Wilson Ltd. in Falkirk, Scotland.

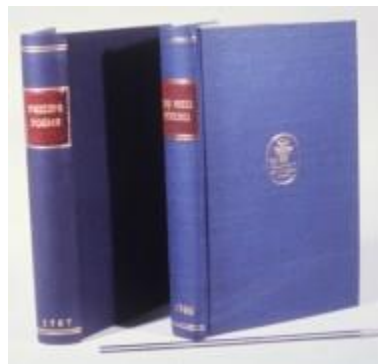
[SLIDE 23] This slide shows a fairly representative group of bindings recently commissioned. This [SLIDE 24] is a group of Dunn and Wilson bindings in quarter leather and full cloth. This [SLIDE 25] is a group of limp vellum bindings by Barbara Giuffrida. The titling is done in ink by calligraphers as we have them on our staff: Barbara herself is reluctant to disturb the natural vellum, but the title and date on the spine reduces considerably the need to handle the book when paging items requested by readers.



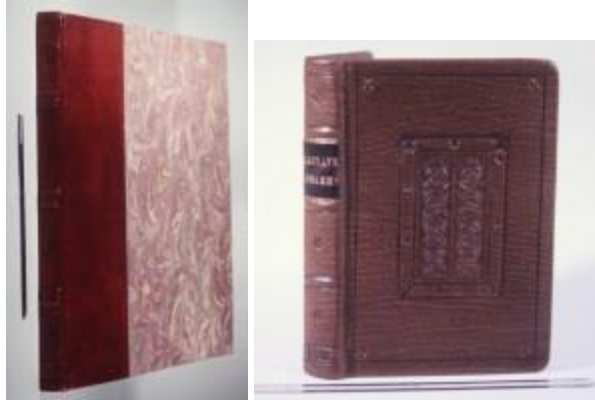
[SLIDE 26: BX9453.B57] This full native-dyed niger binding by Barbara Giuffrida required extensive mending to fill out a group of damaged leaves. [SLIDES 27-27a]



[SLIDE 28] The volume on the left is a cloth case binding by Dunn & Wilson; the one on the right a similar binding, with a French groove, however, by John Lariviere.



[SLIDE 29] This quarter niger binding covers a small folio printed in Paris in 1500 and was done by E. A. Thompson, as was this [SLIDE 30] small full-niger binding for an emblem book. We generally discourage much tooling or decorating, for both economic and aesthetic reasons, but Mr. Thompson has both a strong interest in the history of binding and a friend down the street able to make magnesium dies for a few dollars each; hence the blind-stamped panel on this volume.



[SLIDE 31: B430.F47] This is an extremely rare commentary on Aristotle printed in Rome, 1551, rebacked in calf by Carolyn Horton. The label is new, and new leather has been added to strengthen the corners of the boards. [SLIDE 32: Ms 9] This is another rebacking by Mrs. Horton, a French manuscript on paper dated to about 1465 of Bernard de Clairveaux' *De Consideratione*. It is bound in calf over wooden boards and tooled with stags, agnus dei, and fleur-de-lis.



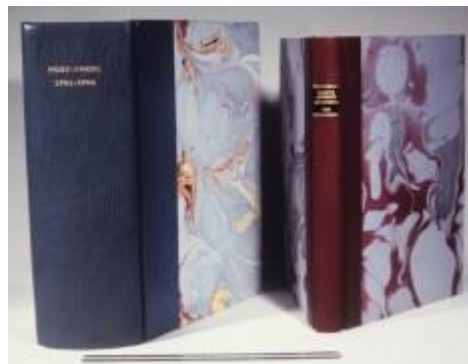
[SLIDE 34: Ms 224] This manuscript on vellum was rebound in 1966 by Harold Tribolet and his staff at the R. R. Donnelley Company. There are simple tooled line on the turn-ins, with carefully inlaid blue paper pastedowns and flyleaves. The manuscript is a chronicle of Wigmore Abbey (Hereforeshire, England) written in French and Latin with some notes in English. It is dated to the 14th and early 15th centuries.



[SLIDE 35] This binding, in full calf, was done by James Tapley, a young binder in San Francisco. [SLIDE 36] And this full calf with an inlay from the original binding was done by Margaret McFadden Smith, [SLIDE 37] A close up of the inlay. The text is a 1657 edition of the heroic poem *Clovis*.



[SLIDES 38] And finally, two quarter niger binding in a modern style done by Ivan Ruzicka, a Massachusetts binder.



I also mentioned protective boxes. Some of you are probably silently urging that we spend far more than 10% of our funds on them. [SLIDE 39] shows a fairly typical group. The one on the left [SLIDE 40] contains a German renaissance binding, rebaked in pigskin earlier by Sheenan/Gilliam of Newburyport, Massachusetts. The box was made for us by Dunn & Wilson, currently our major supplier of this style of box. The other two boxes [SLIDE 41] protecting 19th century boards were made in Carolyn Horton's workshop. [SLIDE 42]





The principles which govern our decisions derive in part from economic considerations and in part from what is currently thought to be good conservation/restoration technique. If the binding is unusual, interesting, or known to be important, we will go to some lengths to salvage it. If it is not distinctive, we usually do not attempt to save it unless the boards, for example, are in good condition and rebacking consequently less expensive than rebinding with new boards.

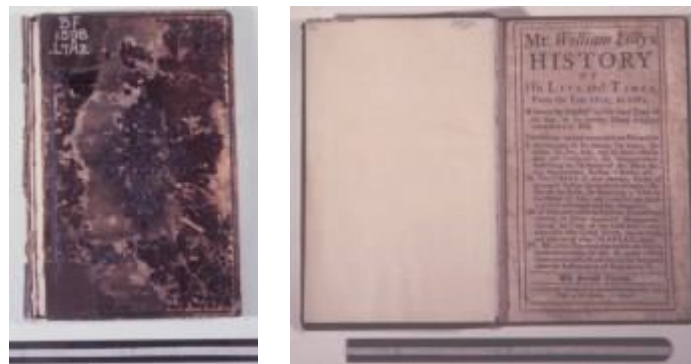
If the binding is contemporary but badly damaged, not distinctive, and sewn on raised cords or thongs with the sewing still strong, we specify quarter or full calf or niger, more often niger than calf. If the spine is flat, we specify a cloth case, partly to save the cost of leather and partly because the chemistry of cloth is certain to be less complex than that of leather. For quarter bindings we use cloth or paper on the boards, depending on the size of the volume and preferring gentler tones like those of Swedish marbled papers to more active color schemes.

If the book needs to be pulled because of damage to the paper, or if the sewing has broken irreparably, we generally specify limp vellum for continental imprints, particularly of the 16th and early 17th centuries, and sewing on tapes for cloth casing for English and American imprints. This is not a firm rule, however, and we do have a few English books in vellum, some in calf and niger, and certainly continental books in all these covering materials.

[SLIDE 43: PA2061.F92] Most difficult to decide are the borderline cases like this one – a fairly typical, not too unusual binding, restorable with decent if not remarkable finished appearance – for a price. Is it worth investing \$100 to \$200 in this binding? The text is a rather lugubrious dissertation on the reading of classical Latin authors printed in Lemgoviae [Westphalia, Germany] in 1745. How much time (which also equals money) should we spend in making a decision?



Perhaps more difficult still are deteriorated bindings of much later dates than the books they cover and which by current, or at least by our, aesthetics are quite unsympathetic to their contents. Horrible bindings, perhaps, but in their own way of a time and place and set of binding conventions. [SLIDE 44: BF1598.L7A2] This copy of Mr. Lilly's *History*, issued in 1715, was most recently bound, we know, by C. Lewis, who has printed his name in ink on the extreme upper left corner of the verso of the flyleaf. I've not tried yet to identify Mr. Lewis, and I suppose he might be the Charles Lewis Mr. Nixon talked about yesterday. His binding shows the signs of poor materials and technique common to many later 19th-early 20th century bindings -- [SLIDE 45] showy but self-destructing. Very likely not many examples of his work will long survive. Is it therefore worthwhile to make an effort with this one? Is it of any importance that we have an example, even if a rather poor and much restored example, of his work in our collections?



[SLIDE 46] Here is another example, probably of a somewhat earlier, though not an early, date, on a 1537 Venice edition of Homer. Both boards are off, the top one having earlier been crudely rehinged, and the leather is well advanced into red rot. [SLIDE 47] Other repairs which would be expensive to remove have also been added. [SLIDE 48] The boards are blind-tooled with a wavy line of flowers, probably a roll, inside a border rule and surrounding a kind of sun-burst with eight thistles radiating from it. The spine panels have a related thistle tool in four panels with author and title hand-lettered rather crudely in gold in the fifth. At the foot lettered in gold is "Venet." and what appears to be "1637". [SLIDE 49] All edges are gilt and

gauffered. These slides are too poor for me to hope that someone will be able to date and locate this binding for me. It is nowhere signed and might, I suppose, as well be a recent amateur attempt to look vaguely early as the genuine expression of some earlier binder. I would welcome suggestions later.



There is another persistent problem in libraries which never seems to have adequate solutions, let alone a single adequate solution. This is ephemeral or pamphlet materials consisting of a single or at most a very few sections. The earliest solution in my library, and one still used, is the manila envelope; [SLIDE 50] this one is about 25 years old. [SLIDE 51] Another early solution was this paper-covered boards model in which the pamphlet was sewn into a double folio of paper, the outer leaves of which were pasted down to hold the pamphlet in place.



A little later, and again still very much used, [SLIDE 52] came the stapled case with pre-glued cloth spine that could be dampened and wrapped quickly around the pamphlet, staples driven through, and it was ready for the shelf – usually after a trim round three sides to tidy things up a bit. This style did not work well with fairly brittle 19th century paper as this half-title [SLIDE 53: HG6193.A9] with a presentation inscription demonstrates. [SLIDE 54: HJ1013.F26] This slide suggests as well the care that was taken to make sure that quality materials were used – for the bookplate.



[SLIDE 55] A more complex style is shown here. This is a case, probably made in standard sizes, which is put round a stapled pamphlet to which flyleaves have been attached. [SLIDE 56] You can, I think, see the staples here; they've rusted a bit.



[SLIDE 57] This was our first attempt at a device that would hold and protect without damaging the contents. The light boards are held by a cloth hinge, [SLIDE 58] and three paper fold-ins hold the pamphlet. Unfortunately we had several thousand made – and hundreds labeled and in use – before someone thought to check the stability of the paper. It is, of course, wonderfully acid.



[SLIDE 59] This model solved that problem. The envelope is acid free paper, as is the second envelope into which the first slides. The second envelope is then hinged into pasteboards connected with a cloth spine. Unfortunately the envelope slides only with difficulty, and it is, of course, impossible to know the condition of the contents until you have the envelope out and open. It is not wise to put brittle paper inside those folders.



We currently make in-house a series of folders based on a related principle and varying in elegance. The simplest is a single folio of heavy acid free card to which a scored and folder pocket is attached with polyvinyl acetate (PVA). [SLIDE 60]



[SLIDE 61] In this model boards have been covered in paper and a cloth hinge added. Still more complicated [SLIDE 62] is this exploration of marbled paper over heavier boards [SLIDE 63].

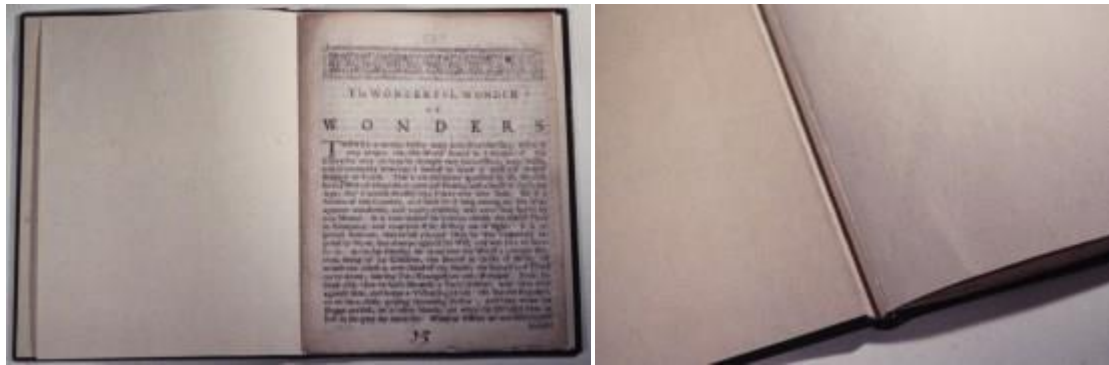


[SLIDE 64] Another style well adapted to somewhat thicker pamphlets, particularly those which have printed wrappers and which have earlier been bound or stapled or otherwise lost their spine strip, is shown here. A flyleaf is sewn with the pamphlet and a paper case then folded around it. [SLIDE 65] In some cases it is appropriate to mount printed wrappers on top of the wrapper, recreating still better the feel of the original pamphlet.



[SLIDE 66] The most elegant, and expensive, solution is shown in the binding for this Jonathan Swift pamphlet of only four leaves. [SLIDE 67] The pamphlet has been sewn on a “returned guard,” a style described in Eric Burdett’s *Craft of Bookbinding* (1975) and apparently

originally used by Thomas Harrison. As in this case, it permits the construction of a spine large enough for titling; no adhesive touches the text paper, and most wonderfully in this age of irrepressible photocopiers, the text is thrust forward to open quite completely flat.



The problems of the single section interest me greatly, but it is shelved-up millions of them that constitute the modern research library. In that shelved-up present of any moment, what can the student of the history of bookbinding hope for? Not everything, of course, and perhaps not really for very much, but surely for a few things.

S/he should find preserved as carefully as possible the relatively few exceptional bindings of any age and all the surviving bindings of the earliest ages. S/he should find the work of binders of many times and countries in representative numbers and styles. S/he should find in the current staff some sensitivity to the history of binding and to the volumes in their temporary care.

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2015 NOTE: There was not much reaction immediately following my presentation – indeed, no questions and a notable silence – later events and conversations, however, make me suspect it may have struck a considerable number of chords. In retrospect, my choice of subject was influenced in part by earlier conversations with Michael Turner about the long, troubled history of conservation in Bodley and the Oxford Colleges. A senior Bodley librarian eventually to become its Conservation Officer, Turner spent long periods in Chicago following the 1973 death of Walter Henry Newton Harding whose huge collection of early English song went to Oxford. While I was (clearly!) comfortable speaking candidly in public about Chicago's similar troubled history, this kind of linen was *NOT* aired in Britain – nor I suspect in many of the other European countries represented at the conference.

Immediately after the Conference, Dorothy Harrop (Aberystwyth University) wrote to request a set of the slides (and happily paid the cost of reproducing them), Michael Turner requested samples of the folders, – and in 1981 Alice Harrison at the Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, asked to borrow and then to reproduce a bunch of the slides.