



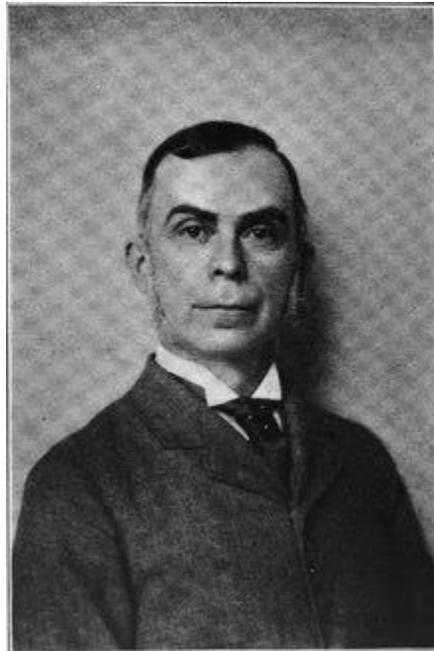
# Book Notes

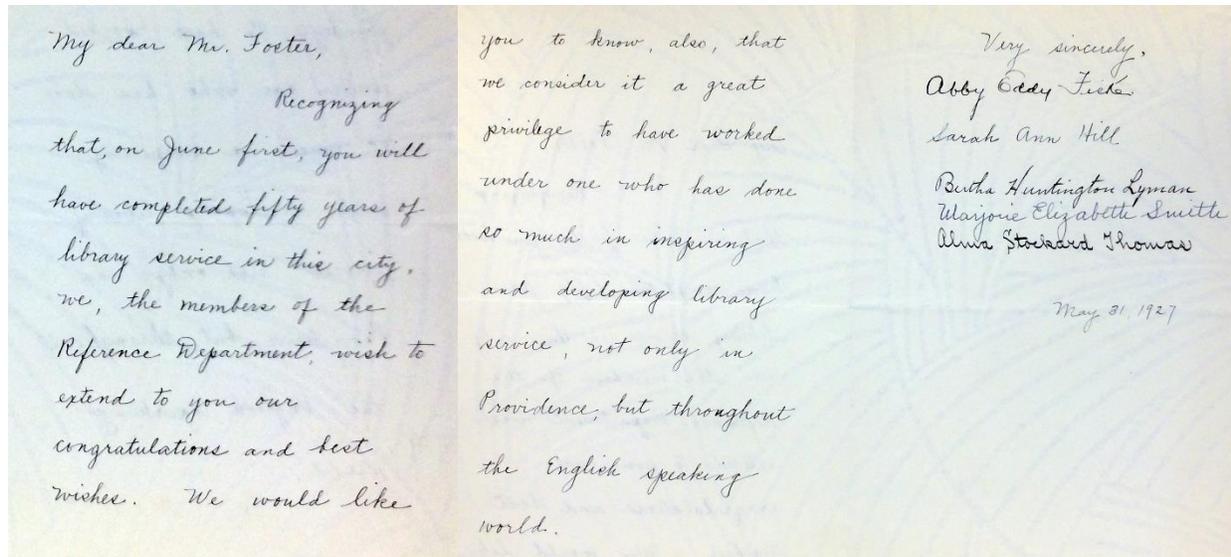
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An Indefatigable Librarian [William E. Foster] (Part 2, continued from *BN* 1.8)





### Further items of interest in the Foster papers at PPL.

[May 31, 1927]

My Dear Mr. Foster:

Recognizing that on June first you will have completed fifty years of library service in this city, we, the members of the Reference Department, wish to extend to you our congratulations and best wishes. We would like you to know, also, that we consider it a great privilege to have worked under one who has done so much in inspiring and developing library service, not only in Providence, but throughout the English speaking world.

Very Sincerely,

Abby Eddy Fiske

Sarah Anne Hill

Bertha Huntington Lyman

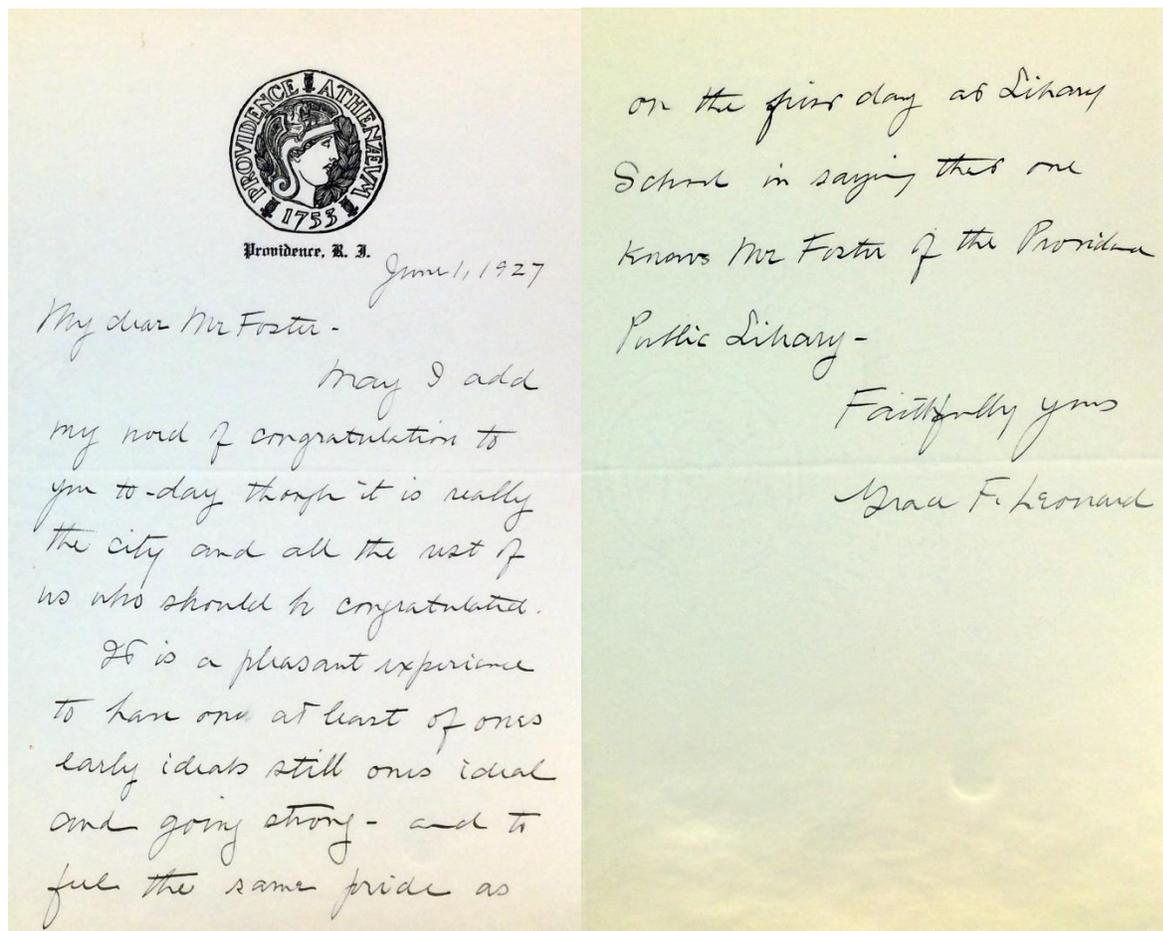
Marjorie Elizabeth Smith

Alma Stockard Thomas

Here is where I can contribute a slight bit of women's bibliophilic history, with information on two of these women gleaned from past issues of the *Providence Journal*.

Abby Eddy Fisk (January 6, 1880–May 21, 1938) was the daughter of John Thomas and Kate E. Fiske. Preparing for college at the Fielding and Chase private school, she attended two years of Pembroke College with the Class of 1901, and was a member of the Delta Sigma sorority. She served in the Reference Department of the PPL from 1919–1928, after which she became the librarian of Pembroke until her death.

Bertha Huntington Lyman (ca. 1875–1944) was a staff member at the PPL for 42 years. The daughter of Asa and Elizabeth P. (Cutts) Lyman, she graduated from “the old English high school” in 1892 and joined the PPL in 1896. She was president of the Rhode Island Library Association from 1917–1919, and a member of the League of Women Voters and the Plantations Club.



[June 1, 1927]

My Dear Mr. Foster:

May I add my word of congratulations to you today though it is really the city and all the rest of us who should be congratulated.

It is a pleasant experience to have one at least of one's early ideals still one's ideal and going strong—and to feel the same pride as on the first day at Library School in saying that one knows Mr. Foster of the Providence Public Library.

Faithfully Yours,

Grace F. Leonard

Another female bibliophile, Grace F. Leonard (1873–1969) was a lifelong resident of Providence, the daughter of Dr. Charles H. and Mary G. (Beecher) Leonard. She graduated from the New York State Library School (Albany) in 1895 and Pembroke College in 1903. She began working as a cataloger at the Providence Athenaeum in 1895, becoming its Librarian in 1912 until her retirement in 1941. The following vignette about her start at the Athenaeum was published in the *Providence Journal* at her retirement in 1941:

As a girl, Miss Leonard had often visited the Athenaeum with friends and was always envious of them, she says. She lived here in Providence and was going to school nearby at Miss Gardner's on Benefit Street, where the College of Pharmacy now stands.

It seemed uncommonly good fortune, then, when Joseph LeRoy Harrison offered her an Athenaeum position when he had finished her two-year course at the New York State Library School at Albany in 1895. Mr. Harrison the new librarian, was also a graduate of the school and wished her to reclassify and catalogue the 56,000 volumes in the Athenaeum. It meant changing the system from that of fixed location to the Dewey decimal classification, and it seemed a tremendous task. (Today there would have been 134,000 volumes to worry about).

In those days there was no electricity, and the gas light was so poor in the alcove which was her headquarters that they bought her an oil lamp, for much of her work was done at night.

At first people complained that they couldn't find anything on the shelves any more, and the period of change was a trying one. But it was a modernizing step that had to be done.

. . . But most of the memories are of the happiest sort . . . there were, for example, those glorious meetings of Providence librarians when Mr. Foster of the Public Library and Dr. Koopman of the John Hay and Dr. Winship of the John Carter Brown would lead the good, bookish talk.

In the course of a half century William E. Foster took the PPL from a 13,000-volume library in rented rooms to a system with 338,000 volumes placed in "a central library, 12 branches (four in their own buildings), one sub-branch, 13 stations and deposits of books in 123 school rooms, factories and stores" (*Providence Journal*, February 9, 1930).

His colleague at Brown, Harry L. Koopman, wrote the following feature in the *Providence Journal* on September 14, 1930 (four days after Foster died).

### **William E. Foster's Consistency An Illuminating Incident in the Career of the Late Librarian**

I had met Mr. William E. Foster at the annual conferences of the American Library Association, but the first time I saw him in Providence was at the Commencement dinner at Brown in 1893. President Andrews had just conferred upon him at the church the honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy, in recognition particularly of his important piece of historical writing, "Stephen Hopkins, a Rhode Island Statesman." That year was the 20th anniversary of Mr. Foster's graduation, and the member of the class of 1873 who represented it at the after-dinner

speaking referred to the distinguished academic degree that had been conferred upon his classmate. But no Brown catalogue gives us any record of this degree.

In those days honorary degrees were intended to be happy surprises. They were given usually without the recipient's previous knowledge, often without his presence in the church, and never with his presence on the platform. Mr. Foster knew nothing of his degree until after it had been conferred. The circumstance must have been far from agreeable to him, for he was constrained to do his Alma Mater the seeming discourtesy of refusing her high honor. The reason was this. The degree of Doctor of Philosophy had come in America to be an "earned" degree, the highest given at our universities for advanced work. It was therefore a much coveted degree, and many colleges, especially those of lower grade, had been giving it as an honorary degree to such an extent that the practice had become an abuse. So a protest had been raised in academic circles, and a strong plea had been made to have the degree kept solely as a symbol of completed graduate work. Mr. Foster, afterward, in explaining his action to me, said he was opposed to the practice of giving the degree as honorary, and had put himself on record against it in *The Nation* and elsewhere. He asserted that he would have stultified himself had he accepted it.

On the other hand, the university was not without justification for its action. Mr. Foster, in writing his exhaustive biography, had done more and better work than most recipients of PhD as "earned" had ever performed. Moreover, in Germany, the home of the degree, it was unhesitatingly given as an honorary degree, and, indeed, only in this form did it receive the highest respect. President Andrews knew this, and, in conferring the degree on Mr. Foster, was endeavoring to do him an especial honor. No hard feeling toward Mr. Foster was occasioned by his refusal, and in 1901 the university conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters and this he accepted. The university, however, after its previous experience, had adopted the practice, which it still maintains, of determining by inquiry whether a contemplated honorary degree will be acceptable to its intended recipient. Though Mr. Foster formally accepted the degree of doctor, his modesty made him shrink from the title, and he preferred not to have it employed either in conversation or correspondence.

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Rick Ring, President  
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