

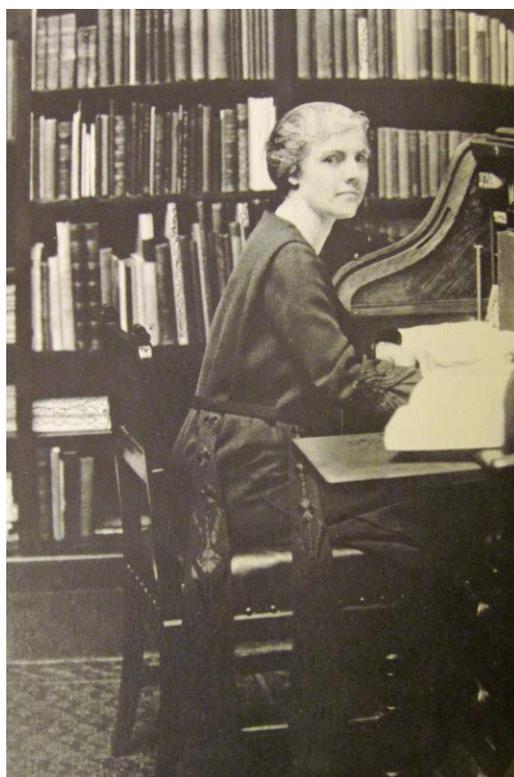


Book Notes

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Missed it by THAT much!

As the John Carter Brown Library anxiously awaits the arrival of [its new Director and Librarian](#)—the first woman ever appointed to the post—I wanted to remind our readers that in fact the JCB *almost* had a female director precisely one hundred years ago, in 1921—and thereby missed being WAY ahead of its time.

If you have occasion to read *Librarians are Human* (Boston, 1973), pp. 105–107, by our own Margaret Bingham Stillwell, you will know this, too. Stillwell was offered the job by Brown's President Faunce and the Committee of Management, and turned it

down out of loyalty to General Rush Hawkins, the great collector of incunabula who had died as a result of being hit by a taxi on Fifth Avenue in New York City a few months earlier on October 25, 1920. She decided to stay with the Annmary Brown Memorial.

During a recent sojourn among the Stillwell Papers at the John Hay Library, I discovered far more of the story in a fascinating and revealing letter from Stillwell to Thomas R. Adams (Librarian of the JCB from 1957–1983), dated January 21, 1969¹. Adams had delivered a talk to the Grolier Club about the JCB, and wanted to know what Stillwell knew of why Winship left for Harvard in 1915, and why his successor, Champlin Burrage, only lasted two years in the post. I will offer a partial transcription of the letter below, but first, a little history.

In 1895—while Stephen Crane published *The Red Badge of Courage*, Henry Ford assembled his first successful gasoline engine, and Oscar Wilde was arrested for the publication and performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*—24-year-old Harvard graduate George Parker Winship² was hired by John Nicholas Brown to replace John Russell Bartlett as the family's bibliographical advisor.³ In 1900, both John Nicholas and his brother Harold died within two weeks of each other, leaving the entire family fortune to a four-month-old boy.⁴ When the Library was given to Brown, Winship was retained by the trustees to continue in his position as Librarian. Winship's most important contribution was to clearly establish the scope of the John Carter Brown Library's collection. Nowhere in Brown's will does it say that the collecting for the Library should be confined to Americana before 1801. Winship ensured that the focus would be manageable, coherent, and yet still flexible enough to allow growth. He held receptions and mounted exhibitions to explain and publicize the Library locally, and through publication and correspondence raised the profile of the Library among scholars, collectors, and dealers. He also aggressively built the collection in the areas of cosmography and geography, the West Indies, and political pamphlets of the American Revolution. By the time he left he had doubled the number of items in the JCB, and turned a gentleman's library into a public research library, serving the JCB for 20 years.

¹ Stillwell Papers, Series 2, Box 6, Folder 2.

²On the strength of Harvard Librarian Justin Winsor's recommendation, a letter, and a meeting. Several impressive bookmen were considered—including Herbert Putnam (future Librarian of Congress) and John Fiske, the popular writer of American history.

³ Stillwell, an undergraduate in 1907, recalled Winship thus: "He was of medium height, thin, and his dark hair looked slightly tousled. His head was thrust forward, and as he turned, I could see that he had a large nose and a Van Dyke beard trimmed to a sharp point. His eyes seemed to flash. They were luminous and extremely brilliant. Impulsively he crossed the room, shook my hand, and bowed from the waist in a quick, wiry motion."

⁴ Few people realize that the collection was not willed directly to Brown. Ownership was legally transferred to trustees who were charged with finding an institution suitable to receive such an incredible gift. Because of family feeling, Brown was chosen above Harvard and the Library of Congress—both had expressed great interest in the collection.

So—why did Winship leave? And now to Stillwell's letter, which is a rich nugget in terms of shedding light on three former directors of the JCB (Winship, Burrage, and Wroth):

...You spoke in your *Address* of Mr. Winship's return to Boston and Harvard after an exile of twenty years. There was more to that, I believe than the call of the wild. For a year or more he had felt much disturbed about the pension system at Brown. He had felt the need of adequate protection in the future for himself and his staff.

I have reason to know that the University about 1913 established a pension fund for the widows of deceased members of the teaching-faculty; also, that in some instances the University customarily made a distinction between the teaching-faculty and persons in non-teaching service. It may well have been one or both of these factors that caused Mr. Winship to take action. Shortly before I left for the New York Public Library, in mid-summer of 1914, Mr. Winship sent a letter to President Faunce in which he presented the matter in quite strong terms and ended by saying that, unless he received assurance that proper adjustment would be made, he should feel compelled to accept the next post offered him.

I feel very certain that he left the Library because of what he believed to be a financial necessity. He was at the height of his career. He was devoted to the Library. And in its transition from a private collection to an institution of learning, he was working ardently to establish it among the leading libraries of Americana.

A partnership with Mrs. Luther S. Livingston as custodians of young Harry Widener's books, in a field in which he was not especially interested, could hardly in itself have attracted him. His position at Harvard was, for a time, a most trying one. Mr. Livingston—Mr. Winship's predecessor—as no doubt you know, had become incapacitated while in office, to the extent that he became confined to a wheelchair. During that period, in order to assist her husband, Mrs. Livingston had been appointed as co-custodian of the Harry Widener Collection. After his death she remained in office. And, greatly resenting Mr. Winship's appointment, she continually tried to assert her rights as senior appointee—a dilemma that was eventually solved by the transfer of Mr. Winship to the Treasure Room of the Widener Library. This apparently worked out well for all concerned, for many years later—when ill health forced him to withdraw from active service—Mrs. Winship said to me, "It is fortunate for us that we left Brown when we did. Harvard has always treated George very generously."

It is my belief that leaving the John Carter Brown Library was at the time the last thing in the world that Mr. Winship wanted to do. If he left with a sense of injury added to regrets, the arrival of Mr. Burrage with his supercilious and patronizing manner would have been maddening to a degree. Hence Mr. Winship's antagonism toward his successor. Under ordinary circumstances, I feel certain he would have been both kind and helpful.

Mr. Burrage had an unfortunate personality. I met him only once, for he left soon after I returned to town to take up my new post at the Annmary Brown Memorial. He impressed me as being strangely detached from reality. As I learned later from the Library staff, he was vague and visionary. He had an inflated idea of the success he would attain and a fixed belief that nothing

that Mr. Winship had done was of value. He was fond of discoursing on these two themes. But no one took the matter seriously until it was discovered that he was systematically destroying material from the letter files and sections of the very fine analytical card-catalogue which Mr. Winship had built up over the years. This was called to the attention of the Committee of Management. And in the interval before action could be taken, the staff salvaged what it could and concealed it in boxes hidden in the Ladies Coat Room. This destructiveness on Mr. Burrage's part was a major factor in his dismissal, and it alerted the Committee to the fact that the Library was vulnerable. In a conscientious effort to lock the barn door, Mr. Worthington Ford of the Massachusetts Historical Society was, as you know, appointed to make fortnightly visits to the Library. And in addition the Committee laid down various rules for the conduct of the Library. This proved unfortunate because rules intended as an expedient became set by tradition, and expanded, they became hampering to the Library until very recent times.

I wonder whether it is known to you that I was offered the Librarianship of the John Carter Brown Library in 1921 and that I was under considerable pressure during that summer to accept the post. If the offer had come a little earlier, I should have done so. I had been steeped in Americana for ten years and I loved it. I had not as yet done anything in incunabula. But General Hawkins had laid out three things which he wished me to accomplish. He had been dead only a few months. To leave the Memorial at that time, I felt, would be a betrayal of my trust. So finally I refused the offer. This brought me a memorable letter from President Faunce, in which he stated that he understood my position and, given the same circumstances, he felt he would have made the same decision himself. In later years, when physical conditions at the Memorial became increasingly difficult, I used sometimes to wonder whether I had not been over-conscientious in remaining there. Then the memory of President Faunce's letter would assure me that I had chosen the proper course. I think, however, that the fact that I had been offered the Librarianship formed a closer bond with the Library than would have existed if it had merely been the place where I had received my initial training in the rare-book field.

You spoke in your Address of Mr. Wroth's having come to the Library with exceptional credentials. That is doubtless true, but that is not the way in which the Committee of Management thought of his appointment at the time. He had had administrative experience in the public library at Baltimore and before that in a diocesan library. Aside from an interest in Parson Weems and the early history of Maryland, he had no experience in Americana. He was looked upon, however, as a young man of promise. But in view of their experience with Mr. Burrage, the Committee members were wary. They felt concerned about appointing a person who had as yet to enter a new field. Their attitude was therefore tentative. While Mr. Wroth was being considered, Dr. Nichols brought him to see me and then returned to ask my opinion of him as a possibility. When he was appointed in 1923, Dr. Nichols and Mr. Updike asked me to guide and help him as much as I could. This proved more simple than I had feared. For Mr. Wroth took a room at the Faculty Club⁵, which was then next door to the Memorial, and I saw him quite often.

⁵ The Faculty Club was located in Andrews House (13 Brown Street, currently the student health center) from 1922–1938.

Conversation naturally turned to matters at the Library and I was thus able to answer his questions and to make an occasional suggestion without offense, I hoped. It took him some time to orient himself. But with the publication of two or three of his *Reports*, the Committee Members began to relax. By 1930 they had accepted him as established. It is amusing to think that he later managed to turn the tables and to dominate them. Oddly enough, in the early days he had a quiet manner. It was not until the organizing of the Associates that he began to project himself and—as you humorously noted in your *Address*—to pronounce THE JOHN CARTER BROWN LIBRARY in the resounding tones of a *benediction*, as if it were a sacred thing.

If there is anything about the Library that I might be able to explain, please call upon me. It came to a surprise when I suddenly realized, while writing this, that I joined the Library only three years after it was opened, and was assistant to Mr. Winship during the major part of his career there. I have kept a friendly eye on the Library, and its good works, ever since.

I find this letter presents a useful perspective on administrative transitions, received institutional narratives, and a library's organizational culture.

Rick Ring, President
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