

# 250<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY LIBRARY NOTES

1754

2004

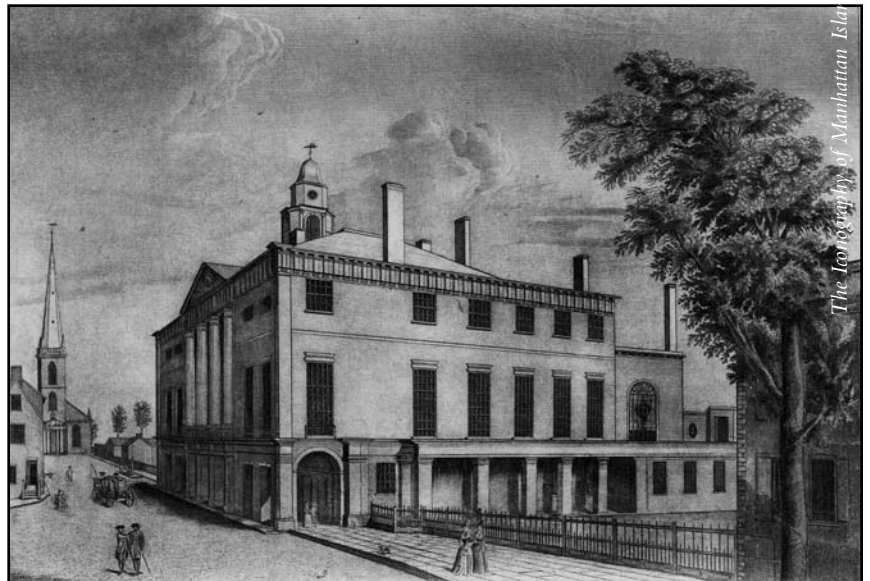
DECEMBER 2003

## THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY: 250 YEARS OLD

*A Subscription is now on Foot, and carried on with great Spirit, in order to raise Money for erecting and maintaining a publick Library in this City; and we hear that not less than 70 Gentlemen have already subscribed Five Pounds Principal, and Ten Shillings per Annum, for that Purpose. We make no doubt but a Scheme of this Nature, so well calculated for promoting Literature, will meet with due Encouragement from all who wish the Happiness of the Rising Generation.*

This notice appeared in the *New York Mercury* on April 8, 1754. It is the first public indication of a plan, conceived by six young men in a rapidly growing colonial city, to make books available to their fellow citizens. Apparently their scheme was indeed encouraged, since by the end of that same month the institution we now know as The New York Society Library had taken recognizable form.

The Society Library has seen that young city grow from one of about 13,000 residents in 1754 to one of more than 8 million in 2004. The Library has survived ten major wars (including the Revolution, in which its books were looted), riots, blackouts, terrorist attacks, and social and cultural upheavals of every kind. The Library has had five homes, beginning in the old City Hall and gradually moving to the Upper East Side. Its collection began with a handful of classics that fit into a single room; today its twelve stacks bulge at the seams. In the early years, members could take out only one book at a time, and space for reading was almost nonexistent; today, readers, writers, scholars, and families with children fill the building with activity.



*City Hall, about 1792. The Library was on the third floor.*

Our 250th anniversary year includes a roster of distinguished speakers, listed on the following pages. A birthday party for the whole membership will commemorate those April days when the Library was founded. We will also be publishing a commemorative book with selections from the Library's archives and contributions from members (see page two for details). Soon we hope to begin a major renovation to increase space for books and for readers within the Library building. Continuing throughout will be reading groups, children's programs, and of course, the circulation of books.

As we wish the Library happy birthday, we congratulate not only its long-ago founders, but also the members who continue to support its activities, use its collections, and enliven its rooms. We hope you are proud to belong to one of the city's oldest cultural institutions, The New York Society Library.



## PUBLICATION AND PARTY

### *THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY: 250 YEARS* RESERVE YOUR COPY

The Library is pleased to announce the publication of *The New York Society Library: 250 Years*, a commemorative treasury of two and a half centuries of books and people. The volume, handsomely designed and bound as a large-format softcover, includes essays on the intertwining history of the Library and New York City, selections from the Library's archives, and tributes from members, as well as historical pictures and elegant drawings.

*The New York Society Library: 250 Years* is free for Library members—our gift to you for your part in the Library's history. To receive the book, fill out and return the enclosed card. A copy will be set aside for you to pick up after April 18, 2004. Copies can be mailed only to members who are housebound or living outside the New York City area.



Librarian Samuel Butler, Green Alcove,  
c. 1880

### 250TH ANNIVERSARY OPEN HOUSE

**SATURDAY, APRIL 17, 1:00-4:00 P.M., CHILDREN'S LIBRARY**

**SUNDAY, APRIL 18, 1:00-6:00 P.M., THROUGHOUT BUILDING**

The Library's anniversary will be celebrated on the third weekend in April, 2004. Festivities will begin on Saturday, April 17, when children are invited to take a trip to colonial New York with storytelling and period games and crafts. On Sunday, April 18, the building will be opened for the whole membership to enjoy dramatic readings, literary games and contests, and, of course, birthday cake. Watch for further details and registration information in early April 2004.



### GLIMPSES OF LIBRARY HISTORY FROM THE COMMEMORATIVE BOOK

When you return home you will never want proper Books, as we have been successful in storing our Society Library with near 2000 Volumes, among which are a great many very valuable & it will annually receive an addition of the best new publications.

*Dr. Samuel Bard to his daughter, June 1789*

To the Librarian  
Sir,

In Happening to be attracted today by a Book cry in Nassau Street, "Here they go, a shilling apiece," I stopped at a wagon full of old, miscellaneous books; and discovering among them two volumes stamped as belonging to the Library, purchased them to return to the Library if they have strayed away through the fault or negligence of any person. If they are not duplicates intentionally disposed of, I cheerfully tender them to the Library.

Respectfully yours,  
J. D. Van Schaick  
May 14, 1852

My dear Librarian,

Will you be so good as not to send me books on the Soviets, on Hitler, or on modern Japan. I am completely fed up on these.... Nor do I want any books on the New Deal, Communism, Mme. Perkins, or the President or LaGuardia.

That book on Louis XIV is evidently good; so too the one on Thackeray.

Yrs very truly,  
Gherardi Davis  
November 27, 1938

## CHILDREN'S LIBRARY UPDATE

**THE FLYING ADVENTURES OF ORVILLE AND WILBUR WRIGHT**

**FRIDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2003, 4:00 P.M., MEMBERS' ROOM**

**FOR KINDERGARTEN THROUGH THIRD GRADE**

Trish Marx, co-author of *Touching the Sky: The Flying Adventures of Orville and Wilbur Wright*, will celebrate the 100th anniversary of their first flight with stories of the brothers' spectacular flying demonstrations, and will help participants make their own model flyers. Marx is also the author of the critically acclaimed *One Boy From Kosovo* and a teacher at Marymount Manhattan College. This program is free for members and guests but registration is required; contact the Children's Library at 212-288-6900 x234 or [csilberman@nysoclib.org](mailto:csilberman@nysoclib.org).





## THE 250<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY SEASON

This is a preview of some of the events which will mark the Library's anniversary in the winter and spring of 2004. Further details about each event, as well as registration information, will be available in the January and March 2004 issues of *Library Notes*.



### ROSS KING

#### **MICHELANGELO AND THE POPE'S CEILING**

Historian and novelist Ross King discusses the creation of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, including the fireworks between Michelangelo and Pope Julian II.

### COLUM McCANN

#### **DANCER**

The author reads from and discusses his critically acclaimed novel about the wild life and times of Rudolf Nureyev.

### CHARLES ROWAN BEYE

#### **IMAGINING A BIOGRAPHY OF ODYSSEUS**

Classicist Charles Rowan Beye, who spoke at the Library on Greek tragic drama in 1999, returns to talk about his new book, *Odysseus: A Life*.

### ELEANOR DWIGHT

#### **EDITH WHARTON'S NEW YORK**

Eleanor Dwight, author of *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life*, shows that although Wharton lived all over the world, she always compared her homes to the city of her heart, New York.

### JON SCIESZKA

#### **THE TIME WARP TRIO AND BEYOND**

Jon Scieska is the celebrated author of the Time Warp Trio books, as well as *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* and *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*.

### DONALD KAGAN

#### **THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR**

Yale professor Donald Kagan is the author of the definitive history of the war that redefined ancient Greece.

### GALWAY KINNELL

#### **THE FATHER AND MOTHER OF AMERICAN POETRY**

Galway Kinnell has received both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for his poetry. Here he brings together the art and influence of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.



### JONATHAN FRANZEN

#### **AN EVENING WITH JONATHAN FRANZEN**

The author of the National Book Award-winning *The Corrections* talks about the writing life and reads favorite selections from his books.



### ERICA JONG

#### **SAPPHO'S LEAP**

Also the author of *Fear of Flying* and other modern classics, Erica Jong will discuss her recent novel about the ancient Greek poet Sappho.

### LOIS METZGER

#### **YOURS, ANNE: THE LIFE OF ANNE FRANK**

Lois Metzger, author of the young adult novel *Missing Girls*, describes the search for the famous diarist's real life.



### NIMET HABACHY

#### **STORY INCREDIBLE BUT TRUE**

The WQXR musicologist brings to life the diverse career of Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart's lyricist and the father of Italian studies in America.

### SARA HOLLIDAY AND GAYDEN WREN

#### **WORDS AND MUSIC: A FESTIVAL OF LIBRARY SONGWRITERS**

Soprano Sara Holliday and playwright/director Gayden Wren present songs with music or lyrics by Library members, from Irving Berlin to Stephen Sondheim.

### KARL KIRCHWEY

#### **SUBJECTS AND PREDICATES**

Karl Kirchwey, author of the collections *The Engrafted Word* and *At the Palace of Jove*, reads his poems alongside other poems that inspired him.



### EDWARD MENDELSON

#### **CHILDBIRTH, MURDER, AND THE SHAPE OF AUDEN'S BIOGRAPHY**

Edward Mendelson, the leading authority on the work of W.H. Auden, sheds new light on the great poet's life and work.



## THOUGHTS ON THE ANNIVERSARY

*The following excerpts come from addresses to Library trustees, staff and friends at an event launching the anniversary celebration on November 5, 2003.*

### JEAN STROUSE

*Jean Strouse authored the Pulitzer Prize-winning Morgan: American Financier. She has been a Library member since 1978.*

Working in my first job as an editor's assistant at the *New York Review of Books*, I learned an amazing thing. You could call an elegant-sounding place called The New York Society Library to ask about a title, and some nice person would look it up in the catalogue and then actually go into the stacks to find out whether or not the book was on the shelf. Now, of course, the librarians can check on availability by computer, but they are still extremely nice about it.

Like all the other writers who are speaking tonight I do not have an academic affiliation, which means that the Library was really my intellectual home during the many years I worked on biographies of J. P. Morgan and Alice James. I happened to have picked two subjects from the American 19<sup>th</sup> century, an area in which this Library is particularly strong. Anyone who's done research here will know the extraordinary pleasure of being able to browse in the stacks, to find exactly what you want, and the even more extraordinary pleasure of discovering the book next to the one you were looking for, which turns out to be even more exactly what you want, even though until that moment you didn't know it existed.

### TOM WOLFE

*Tom Wolfe is the author of Bonfire of the Vanities. He has been a Library member since 1991.*

I've more and more begun to appreciate the extraordinary job the people who select the books do to preserve human memory. It's an extremely hard-to-come-by talent. If I had my biggest homburg on I would doff it to you right now.

I think everybody should follow in the footsteps of Don Quixote at some point in their life. My doomed project is to rescue the American arts of all types from Europe. You know, we're independent in every other area of life, but not in the arts. Schoenberg paralyzed American serious music. In art, the whole American tradition was wiped out so all we have are European pass-me-downs in painting and sculpture. And poetry! Thanks to Mallarmé and Baudelaire and their acolytes T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, a fabulous tradition of American poetry came to an end. There have been only four good American poets in the entire twentieth century, and you know who you are.

But here in the Library I found the original publications of the works of Vachel Lindsay, a name that doesn't ring many bells today. These books are priceless; I don't know why they lend them to me. Thanks to people like [acquisitions librarian] Steve McGuirl and Mark Piel, in my quixotic quest to rescue our arts, I haven't had to move an inch from the Society Library.

### WENDY WASSERSTEIN

*The author of The Heidi Chronicles and a longtime Library member, Wasserstein has won Tony Awards and the Pulitzer Prize.*

I'm somebody who's never been able to write at home. So I started coming here after school to write high school English papers. When I graduated from college I came home and I was taking writing classes and I still couldn't work at home, so I found my way back here and began writing plays here. As time went on, I started writing in the rooms upstairs on the twelfth floor. So I actually wrote a lot of my play *The Heidi Chronicles* here, upstairs in this room that always looked like Dresden to me—there was a pipe with little peels and you look out the window at bricks, and I really thought to myself there's something wrong with me because I feel most calm in this room. If I went anywhere else, even my own apartment, it never worked as well as coming here and staring up at brick wall and hearing the water drip.

I've always been very grateful to this Library not only for the research and the books but for being a place for a writer to find some sort of calm, and where you can come in and say "I'm a writer" and nobody looks at you like you're crazy or it's not a profession. They look at you and they give you the dignity of a wonderful place to write.



**THOUGHTS ON THE ANNIVERSARY** *continued***ROBERT CARO**

Biographer Robert Caro is a winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award and has been a Library trustee since 1994.

I didn't write anything here but I read a lot here and I particularly try to read my favorite author here, Anthony Trollope. The way that I first came to read Trollope is why books are special. I majored in English literature at Princeton and we didn't read one word of Trollope. Most of his books were out of print and he hadn't been taught for about 40 years. Then one day my wife picked up a book by Trollope called *The Prime Minister*. She said to me, "This is the best political novel I've ever read." Well, I didn't believe her, but one night she fell asleep while she was reading it. I got up to take the book out of her hands, and I started reading what she was reading, which was a scene in the British cabinet in 1874. And I said, "This is the best political novel I've ever read." Now Trollope is back. He's taught everywhere. What does that show us about books? That what we learned about books when we were young is really true: if you write a book good enough it will endure. It doesn't matter if it falls out of favor; it'll come back.

Why do I like to read Trollope here? Well, Trollope is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century novelist, his cadences are slow and measured. The rest of the world goes by faster and faster. But look at this room [the Members' Room]. When he read, Trollope probably read in a room like this. This is the world as I always wanted it to be—a place where you could sit quietly in a beautiful room and read. So this place is a refuge and it's a treasure house for me.

**SHIRLEY HAZZARD**

Shirley Hazzard won the 2003 National Book Award for *The Great Fire: A Novel*. She has been a Library trustee since 1974.

Of course I regard the Library as a refuge and a treasure house. But I also regard it as a powerhouse. I think it is real life and I fear for people who miss this because they are missing a great energizing force, even something frightening. For instance, when I look at the novels of Thomas Hardy on the shelf, I fear if I see *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that I will read it again and have to suffer so much and have to understand so much more than I am willing to understand. These things go on in libraries.

A library should be a place where you go into your own heart, into a heartland of understanding. It's also a place where you don't necessarily feel comfortable because of what you read. There may be something that you had hoped not to have to learn about. George Orwell said, "If freedom means anything, it means the right to tell people what they don't want to hear," and every good library should have a fair amount of that in it.

The book is a thing irreplaceable, not because every book is a good book or should even exist, but it is one of the best things invented by man, I would say, and these walls are full of them. A library has to be somewhere where every book can be a potential explosion.

**CHRISTOPHER GRAY**

Writer of the "Streetscapes" architectural history column for the New York Times, Christopher Gray has been a trustee since 1998.

When I walk through the door, I think of the formation of the Library with 650 volumes in 1754. I think of William Livingston, one of our founding trustees, who was later governor of New Jersey, served in three Continental Congresses—I think of him taking the trouble to design our first bookplate, with the four branches of art and a depiction of New York as Athens, and here I am, touching William Livingston's design. I think of all the people at work now, who are working on books that will receive terrible critical attention like *Moby-Dick* and yet in 50 years will be considered part of the canon. I think of the person addressed by John MacMullen, the Librarian in 1856—listen to this: "Through the dim haze that veils the future, I see the interior of a noble library, with all its manifold enjoyments, an ample reading room, whither the telegraph, on lightning wings, concentrates intelligence from all quarters of the world." Now he was not talking about the World Wide Web, but a century and a half later how relevant that is to what we're doing.

There are many institutions in the history of New York that thought they were indispensable, and then they were forgotten a generation later. The trustees were really—perhaps in a genteel way—clawing and biting their way to keep this institution vital and keep it alive. It's that sense of struggle, of a common purpose, that always really leaves me humbled here and makes me feel privileged to have been a member for thirty years.