



LIBRARY NOTES

THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY NEWSLETTER
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DISCOVERY IN THE STACKS

William J. Dean, Chairman
Board of Trustees

A few years ago, I came upon Chekhov in Stack 5 of the Library. While no stranger to his plays, I knew nothing of his short stories. There, sitting on a shelf waiting for me, were *The Tales of Chekhov* in thirteen volumes, translated by Constance Garnett. What a treasure-trove!

Chekhov had a deep sympathy for the human condition and an understanding of how difficult life often was. Ernest J. Simmons, in *Chekhov: A Biography*--the best book on Chekhov in my view (Stack call number 92/C5157S), writes of "the breadth and tolerance" of his judgment, "his tenderness for those who suffered...his charity in the face of forgivable weakness."

These qualities are evident in all his short stories. For example, a prisoner says in "Dreams," "In penal servitude you are like a crab in a basket: crowding, crushing, jostling, there's no room to breathe..."

Yet what beautiful writing one encounters as well. This passage is from "A Doctor's Visit." "And he was charmed with the evening, the farmhouses and villas on the road, and the quiet atmosphere all around, when the fields and woods and the sun seemed preparing, like the workers now on the eve of the holiday, to rest, and perhaps to pray..."

Chekhov has become my favorite writer. I have a framed picture of him on my office wall. And all because I came upon him one day while exploring Stack 5. Library members, what adventures await you in the stacks!

THE ART OF BIOGRAPHY LECTURE SERIES

Geoffrey C. Ward

Last summer I learned to my pleasure—and astonishment—that I had been given a writers' award from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The only stipulation was that I affiliate myself with a "non-profit educational, cultural, or community organization" and develop a program that would reach out to the community at large.

In five minutes I had decided to ask The New York Society Library to work with me. No institution in New York has meant more to me and my work over the past dozen years or so. Whether working on the script for "The Civil War" or "Baseball," writing about FDR or any of a hundred other people from history—even pursuing books about nineteenth century British India for last year's book, *Tiger Wallahs*—I've found the Library's stacks indispensable. As a member, I was free to explore them on my own, a joy only rarely encountered anywhere else in the city now.

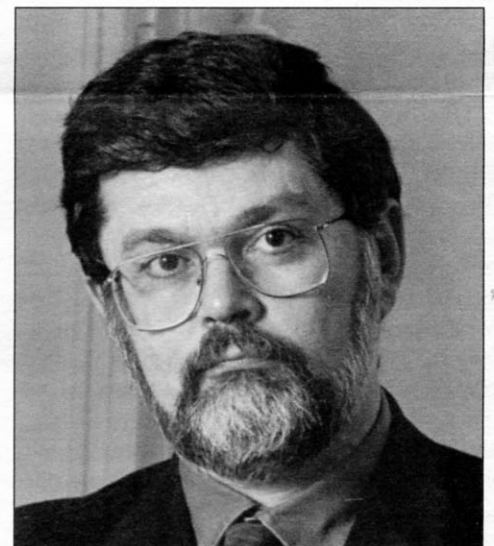
Library officials were enthusiastic. And so together this autumn, we begin a three-year series of talks and round-table discussions on biography, our aim being to let the public in on how biographers go about their work. Last year's furor over the Joe McGinnis book on Edward Kennedy and the courtroom battle between Janet Malcolm and Jeffrey Masson suggest that readers and critics—and biographers themselves—seem genuinely unsure, these days, just where the line should be drawn between legitimate biography and irresponsible exploitation.

What can a biographer claim to "know" about the subject's private thoughts? How does one assess evidence offered

about the dead by living witnesses with axes to grind? How does one assess documentary evidence, for that matter? What is a biographer's responsibility to the truth—and whose truth is it anyway?

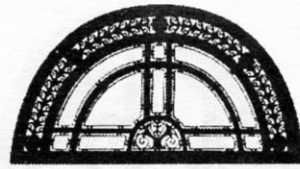
What are the special challenges to be found in writing about living persons? About oneself or members of one's family? About people one admires enormously—or has come to loathe? And how can reliable biography be done on television, the medium from which, for better or worse, most Americans now get what little sense of the past they may retain?

We'll look at topics such as these, which inevitably perplex anyone who seeks to tell the truth of someone's life—and should concern anyone who reads or watches the results.*



Geoffrey C. Ward

* See page 2 for dates, topics, speakers, and how to get tickets.



E V E N T S A N D P E O P L E

NYSL Excursion for Bibliophiles Monday, October 17

The Library Company of Philadelphia was founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1731 and today contains 450,000 books, 50,000 graphics, and 160,000 manuscripts. The Rosenbach Museum and Library was created only forty years ago in the townhouse of the great book collector, A. S. W. Rosenbach, yet its holdings number more than 300,000 books and manuscripts. Both institutions will open their doors on October 17 to New York Society Library members.

Members leave by bus at 9:00 A.M. from the NYSL and return by 6:00 P.M., visiting the Library Company first. Librarian John C. Van Home will show some of the rarities of printing, illumination, provenance, and binding display and lead members on a behind-the-scenes tour of the stacks and library operations. The tour will offer a chance to view the Library Company's recent acquisition of the late Francis R. Cope, Jr.'s

The Art of Biography

The biography program, funded by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, was developed by historian, screen writer, and biographer of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Geoffrey C. Ward, and The New York Society Library, in association with the National Humanities Center and Thirteen/WNET. Ward will open the 1994-1995 series on Wednesday, November 9, with a talk entitled "Riddles of the Sphinx: Trying to Figure out F.D.R." On Wednesday, February 16, Judith Thurman, biographer of Isak Dinesen, will discuss her biography-in-progress on Colette in "Secrets of the Flesh: Trying to Decode Colette." The final presentation will be a panel discussion on Wednesday, March 16, "Small Screen Lives: Biography on Television." In addition to Ward, participants will be Judy Crichton, executive producer of PBS's "The American Experience," David Grubin, maker of "The Wyeths," "LBJ," and "JFK," and Orlando Bagwell, film biographer of Malcolm X and Frederick Douglass. This is the first year of a three-year exploration of the art of biography.

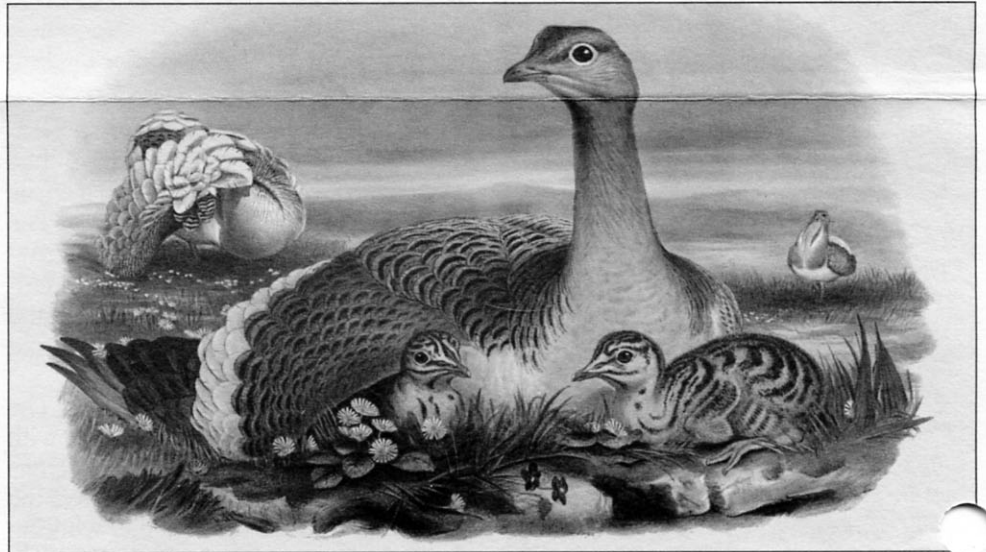
Tickets are free to Library members and their guests (\$8 for nonmembers) and available at the Library's circulation desk.

70 ornithological titles, which include the works of 19th-century artists John James Audubon, Daniel Giraud Elliott, and John Gould.

After lunch at the Philadelphia Club, where curators from both libraries will join the group, members will visit the Rosenbach. Curator of Collections, Wendy Van Wyck Good, and Librarian Elizabeth E. Fuller will talk about some of the Rosenbach's treasures: among them a first

edition of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the original manuscripts of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and the complete set of drawings from the children's books of Maurice Sendak.

The bibliographic excursion costs \$35 per person (lunch included) and is limited to 48 people. For reservations, call (212) 288-6703.



Great Bustard in The Birds of Great Britain (1862-1873) by John Gould. From the Cope Collection, The Library Company of Philadelphia.

In Memoriam:

Phyllis Goodhart Gordan

Henry S.F. Cooper, Jr.

Phyllis Goodhart Gordan joined the board of our Library in 1959; at the time of her death, last winter, her penetrating and kindly intelligence had guided our activities for thirty-five years. Many of the Library's decisions were made over tea and cinnamon toast in her book-lined library on East 78th Street, and her wonderfully generous bequest is only one of the contributions, so many of which were of the mind, for which this remarkably spirited woman will be remembered. In her later years, her refusal to be incapacitated by ever-advancing Parkinson's Disease was the admiration of all her friends and colleagues; her indomitable spirit overrode her illness so completely that she caused us all to ignore her infirmities as completely as she did herself.

Her life was devoted to books and the intelligent use of them. In 1931, when she was admitted to Bryn Mawr College, she won the highest examination score in the college's history—a sufficiently joyful event that the Brearley School, wishing to bask in the glory of having educated her, announced a school holiday. In 1938, she married John D. Gordan, a scholar in English and American literature who later became curator of the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. She herself was a scholar and collector of Italian Renaissance literature—she published an annotated translation from Latin of the letters of a pair of Renaissance book collectors with whom, despite a gap of several hundred years, she must have felt a certain resonance. For clearly in her life and work—and as a trustee not only of our Library but of the New York Public and the Yale Library Associates, as well as of the Brearley School, Bryn Mawr College, the American Philological Association, and the American Academy in Rome—she was a Renaissance woman herself.



The reading room of the Library at 109 University Place around 1890. The building was constructed in 1856 and housed The New York Society Library until 1937.

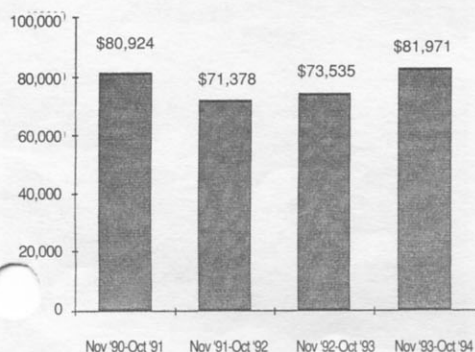
THE WALLET

BARBARA H. STANTON

DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE CHAIR

Both of the Library's fund raising endeavors have enjoyed continued success over the summer. As of July 31st, the Annual Appeal wallet contained \$81,971. This is the largest amount in three years and is particularly impressive because the Capital Campaign wallet also has grown—to over \$620,000.

The New York Society Library Annual Appeal TOTALS



The Library is very much in the debt of the more than 730 members, friends, and foundations contributing to these splendid outcomes.

The amount in the Annual Appeal wallet allows the Library to continue to buy most of the books it wants. This is no light matter as many of our titles come from England, and members who have travelled there this summer can attest to the strength of the pound against the dollar. Capital Campaign funds are being put to work for the inventory and barcoding of the collection. Inventory and barcoding are first steps towards the planned book acquisition, circulation, and reserve systems which, in a few years, should markedly improve service to members and outside scholars while saving the staff much drudgery.

This "walleter" (rare, 1778), like one of Chaucer's pilgrims, made a late-spring pilgrimage—not to Canterbury but to Cambridge. The occasion was a celebration of—and farewell to—Mai-Mai Sze and Irene Sharaff, whose generous Library bequest of books and an endowment was noted in the previous *Library Notes*. These extraordinary women left the bulk of their estates to Lucy Cavendish College at Cambridge, an institution for older women returning to undergradu-

ate or graduate education. Their bequests established the first two endowed fellowships at Lucy Cavendish and also made possible, at one edge of the college lawn, a small, elegant music pavilion that served as the backdrop for an afternoon of recollection and dedication.

Mai-Mai Sze grew up mostly in London, where her father was Chinese Ambassador to the Court of St. James. She was the author of *The Tao of Painting*, published as part of the Bollingen series. But she also had modelled for the couturier Schiaparelli, starred on Broadway, and lectured about China throughout the United States during World War II. Eugene O'Neill used her pen-and-ink sketch of him as his bookplate. Irene Sharaff was a leading costume designer for Broadway and Hollywood, whose eye for color, style, and historical detail was equalled only by her eye for humbug. Her five Oscars (for *An American in Paris*, *The King and I*, *West Side Story*, *Cleopatra*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*) stood on the top of her and Mai-Mai's downstairs bathroom toilet tank.

It was a great privilege to have known Mai-Mai Sze and Irene Sharaff—albeit much too briefly—and a privilege to represent the Library at this moving occasion.



SHELF TALK

MARK PIEL, LIBRARIAN

Inventory: We've already finished doing Stack 11 (about 4,000 books on psychology, philosophy, and books about books); Stack 12 (about 12,500 books on applied science and arts); and Stack 2 (about 14,000 books on history). Stack 1 (about 14,000 books on history, travel, and collective biography) should be finished by the end of December. Stack 5 (about 19,000 books on fiction—authors A-J) is scheduled to begin mid December. Again, we apologize for any inconvenience members may have run into, but please remember that ultimately our staff will be able to serve you more efficiently.

Exhibits: In June, the Library began the first of what is to be a series of book displays in the Circulation Hall's west wall bookcase. The initial collection was on *Brown vs. Board of Education* followed in July and August by materials related to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first lunar landing. These books can be borrowed, and the list selected for each topic is available from the Librarian. Suggestions for future subjects—and a list of specific titles—would be most welcome.

Book donations: The Library would like to replace the following books but has been thus far unable to locate them from out-of-print dealers: *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Jane Addams); *Adventures of Sir Edward Leithen* (John Buchan); *The Later Roman Empire* (J. S. Bury); *Marlborough*, 4 vols., (Winston Churchill); *Home as Found* (J. F. Cooper); *Russia* (A. S. Custine); *Green Dolphin Street* (Elizabeth Goudge); *Son of Royal Langbrith* (W.D. Howells); *Early Law and Custom* (Henry

Maine); *Sanctuary* (Edith Wharton). Would any members donate or help purchase copies?

Volunteers: The response to our call for volunteers has been gratifying. Eight new recruits joined up in July. Hats off to these fine members.

Letters:

Congratulations on publishing *Library Notes*. Like Walter Lord (People and Events, page 3), I recall the special pleasure of doing research at the Library where, "Unlike other libraries...I was completely free to rummage through the marvelous collection of bound volumes of old newspapers and out-of-print magazines..." Alas, were Mr. Lord to wish to use these publications today, he would have to specify which volumes he wanted and wait for them to be delivered to the public reading room. No more rummaging. Cannot some way be found to restore this privilege?

James Munves
Morell, Canada

Response:

When the Library was renovated in the early 1980s, rolling stacks were installed for compact storage, thus adding a great deal of shelving. It was felt that this new area should house the least consulted part of the collection: old newspapers, foreign language books, and disintegrating or scarce older volumes. To protect these mostly frail materials, as well as our members, rummaging (in a movable stack area) is not permitted. But rummaging opportunity aplenty remains in most of the building's stacks.

The New York Society Library, located at 53 East 79th Street, was founded in 1754 by a civic-minded group, the New York Society, which was formed in the belief that the availability of books would help the city to prosper. A private subscription library (a family membership is \$125 for the year), members can take books out or they can use the reading and study rooms on upper floors; they can also browse in the stacks. The public is invited to use the ground floor for reading and reference. Starting in September, the Library's hours are: Monday, 1-5 P.M., Tuesday and Thursday, 9 A.M.-7 P.M., and Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, 9 A.M.-5 P.M.



Give a NYSL membership
as a gift.

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