

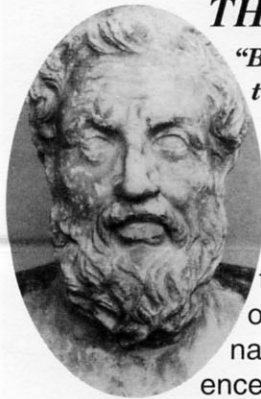


# LIBRARY NOTES

THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

## THE ILIAD—THE MAGIC OF THE SPOKEN WORD

*“But when he let the great voice go from his chest, and the words came drifting down like the winter snows, then no other mortal man beside could stand up against Odysseus.”*

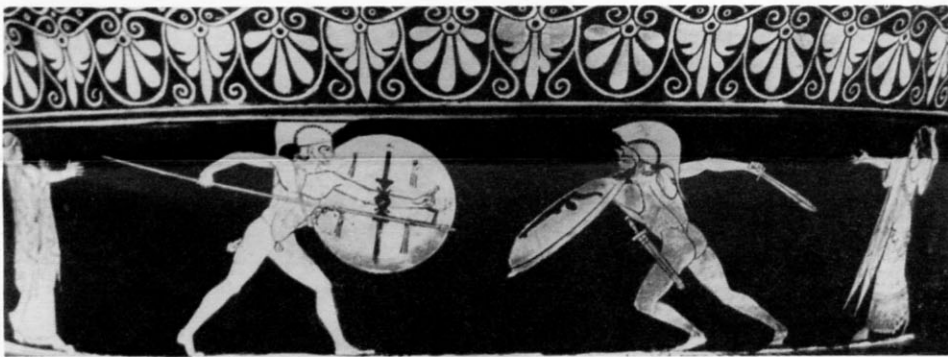
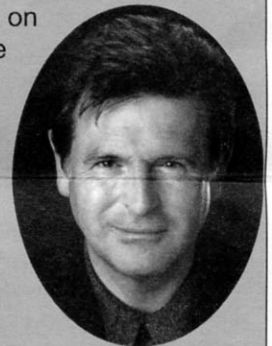


Wednesday evenings, January 22 and 29, from 5:30 to 7:30 P.M., will be devoted to a reading and discussion of Homer's *Iliad*. The epic as we know it was composed some time in the mid-eighth century B.C., but was shaped by preceding centuries of oral transmission. It is therefore fitting that this great narrative poem be read aloud, allowing modern audiences to experience it as spoken word as well as written text. The presentations will be divided between a professional reading (of the Richmond Lattimore translation) by actor Simon Prebble and a discussion led by classicist Dr. Caroline Alexander. Dr. Alexander will focus on specific passages of the epic, demonstrating how background mythology, historical events, archaeology, and comparisons with aspects of other cultures come to bear on the Homeric poem. Dr. Alexander was recently in Troy and will share some of its intriguing, recent finds. Spend these winter evenings listening to one of the oldest stories man has ever told! The program is open to members and guests but enrollment is limited. To register, send your check for \$25 to the Library, attention Nancy McCartney.

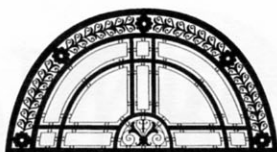
**Caroline Alexander** received her doctorate in classics at Columbia University. Between 1982 and 1985, she established a department of classics in the small African nation of Malawi, an experience she described in a *New Yorker* article (December 16, 1991). Dr. Alexander has also contributed to such publications as *Natural History*, *Smithsonian*, *Granta*, and *National Geographic*.



**Simon Prebble** graduated from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London and has worked extensively in theater, television, radio and film before concentrating on narration. When he relocated to America in 1990, Prebble returned to legitimate acting; he has also recorded over eighty unabridged audio books since coming here.



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| <b>C<br/>A<br/>L<br/>E<br/>N<br/>D<br/>A<br/>R</b> | <b>The New York Society Library on TV</b><br>“About Books”<br>Saturday<br>January 11<br>10:30 P.M.<br>(C-SPAN2)<br><i>see p. 2</i> | <b>“The Iliad: The Magic of the Spoken Word”</b><br>Wednesday<br>January 22 and 29<br>5:30-7:30 P.M.<br>For members and guests. Space is limited and only those registered may attend. To register, send check for \$25 per person to Nancy McCartney<br><i>see above</i> | <b>For Children Storyteller Eleni Constantelos</b><br>“Tales From Around the World”<br>ages 4 to 9<br>Saturdays<br>10:30 A.M.<br>January 25<br>February 1, 8 & 22<br>March 1<br><i>see p. 4</i> | <b>Art of Biography Series</b><br><b>Kenneth Silverman</b><br>“Houdini Unmasked”<br>Wednesday, March 4<br>&<br><b>Geoffrey Ward</b><br>“A Disposition to be Rich”<br>Wednesday, April 1<br>6:30 P.M.<br>Temple Israel, 112 East 75th<br><i>see p. 3</i> |
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## SHELF TALK

Heidi Hass, Head of the Cataloging Department

As many of you have read in the Library's 1995 Annual Report, the inventory and barcoding project has been completed. I'd like to share with you the results of this initial stage of the computerization of the Library's operations. First, the inventory was just as productive as we had anticipated. In a collection as old as ours, which has never before undergone a complete stock-taking, discrepancies abound. We are quite pleased that we are now able to clear these problems up, solving decades-old mysteries of missing, mis-labeled, and mis-shelved books. Call number areas with the highest rate of attrition were the 800s (literature)--one of the oldest segments of our collection-- and the 600s (applied sciences), which seemed surprising until we noted that cookbooks are classified 641.5! The 700s (arts) and 92s (biography), along with the 800s, contained the highest number of books for which the Library has no record; we have almost finished cataloging these items to make them accessible through our card catalog at last.

A second and not inconsiderable benefit of the project has been the unearthing of bibliographic treasures. Among the rare and valuable items we've discovered in the stacks are a 1751 edition of Erasmus' *Moriae enconium (In praise of folly)*, published in Paris and illustrated with engravings after Charles Eisen; 23 chap books bound together in one volume, on topics as diverse as William Wallace and fortune-telling via coffee grounds, published in Glasgow circa 1850; the 3rd edition of Guy Miege's *The present state of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1716, with a dedication signed by the author, and a copy of *An essay in defense of ancient architecture* by Robert Morris, which provided support to the neo-Palladian movement in England. The discovery of these gems certainly enlivened the routine of the project. They, and over 2800 of their fellows, have been re-cataloged for our Closed Stack, and rare book vault, where they are housed in a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment.

| FINAL REPORT ON INVENTORY & BARCODING<br>(130 books per hour completed)               |                |
|---|----------------|
| TOTAL NUMBER OF VOLUMES<br>(Excludes some special collections<br>including reference) | 167,885        |
| TOTAL TIME  | 1,312.15 hours |
| MISSING BOOKS   | 5,941          |
| percentage  | 3.5 %          |
| BOOKS WITHOUT CARDS   | 2,324          |
| percentage  | 1.3 %          |
| BOOKS REQUIRING RELABELING  | 444            |
| percentage  | .26 %          |
| TRANSFER TO CLOSED STACK-Z  | 2,829          |
| percentage  | 1.6 %          |
| SPECIAL PROBLEMS  | 1,335          |
| percentage  | .79 %          |
| TOTAL PROBLEMS  | 12,873         |
| percentage  | 7.6 %          |



### LIBRARY ON TV

The Library will be featured on C-SPAN2's "About Books," hosted by Brian Lamb. Librarian Mark Piel was interviewed in the Members' Room on Monday, October 18, as part of the "About Books" series on libraries. Other programs in the series include interviews with Rodney Armstrong, of The Boston Athenaeum, and Paul LeClerc, President of The New York Public Library. The segment on the Library will be aired on Saturday, January 11, at 10:30 P.M.

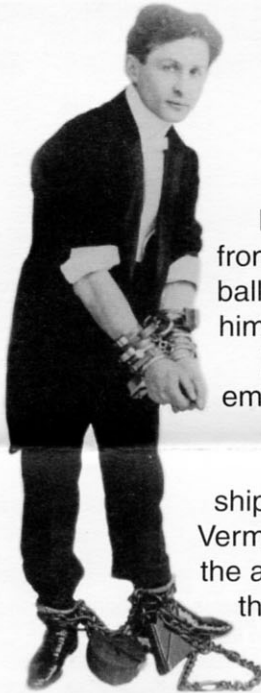
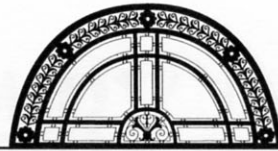
### THE DICTIONARY OF ART DONATED

The Library gratefully accepted a gift of *The Dictionary of Art*, published this year by Grove's Dictionaries, Inc. This thirty-four volume work is a sister publication to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (also in the Library). The set was donated by Barbara Wriston, and Walter Wriston, and Catherine Quintal, in memory of their mother, Marguerite Woodworth Wriston. *The Dictionary of Art* covers a wide range of topics, including such specialized studies as the architecture of libraries. It includes artistic practices outside the West, has scholarly bibliographies for most articles, and a detailed index. This work will be of great service to our readers. It may be found in the fifth floor large study room (class number LSR 703 D).



Biblioteca Laurenziana, S Lorenzo, Florence, by Michelangelo, 1523-71





## Houdini Unmasked:

Researching the Life of the World's Handcuff King

**Kenneth Silverman**

**Wednesday, March 4**

Houdini remains synonymous with Magic--world-famous for impossible escapes from handcuffs, jails, and straitjackets, not to mention underwater coffins, giant foot-balls, and beached whales. As his biographer, however, I wanted to know more about him than his near-miracles.

I wanted to know about his childhood self, Ehrich Weiss, the four-year-old who emigrated here from Hungary. About his luckless father, Mayer Samuel, a learned rabbi reduced, in America, to selling rare theological works from his library to support his seven children. About his mother, Cecilia, on whose grave he worshipfully erected a pharaonic Exedra chiseled from more than a thousand tons of Vermont granite. Half-hoping to reach his mother beyond the grave, Houdini despised the armies of marginally criminal clairvoyants and mediums who promised to contact the spirits of departed loved ones, and relentlessly pursued and exposed them.

Fancying himself an intellectual, he edited a magazine and authored a half-dozen books. Enthusiastic for the automobile and other technological marvels of

the early twentieth century, he created a corporation for developing movie film by a new aniline process, and piloted his own airplane, hauling along on tour a five-thousand-dollar Voisin biplane in huge crates.

Finding out about this Houdini-in-the-round meant not only teaching myself to escape locked mailbags (as I did), but also exploring archives from London to Las Vegas and trying to wrest the secrets of his life from magicians, psychics, a murderer, two CIA agents, and his descendants, most of whom wanted nothing to do with him. Not least, it meant a return to my old neighborhood. I grew up at 218 East 75th Street in Manhattan, directly across from #227--the tenement where young Ehrich Weiss lived with his immigrant family at the turn of the century.



The lectures will begin at 6:30 P.M. in Temple Israel, 112 East 75th Street. Tickets are free to Library members and their guests (\$8 for nonmembers). They will be available at the Library's circulation desk or at the door one-half hour before the lecture begins. For more information, call Nancy McCartney at the Library at (212) 717-0357. 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.



## A Disposition To Be Rich:

Writing about the Swindler in the Family

**Geoffrey C. Ward**

**Wednesday, April 1**

Developer of the Biography Lecture Series, Ward is the author of *The West*, published in the fall of 1996 and based on the PBS series which he co-authored with Dayton Duncan. Ward has also served as editor of this year's *Best American Essays*. He is now at work on a book about his great-grandfather, Ferdinand Ward, the "scoundrel" of the family.



## Books by NYSL Members

Below, a partial section from the exhibition's timeline, which is a chronology from 1754 to 1937 of the city's history, publishing, books by member-authors and the Library's seven homes.

1918

Willa Cather  
*My Antonia*



1925

John Dos Passos  
*Manhattan Transfer*



1934

Lillian Hellman  
*The Children's Hour*

1936

Djuna Barnes  
*Nightwood*

1927

Walter Brooks  
*Freddy Goes to Florida*

1937

Eleanor Roosevelt  
*This Is My Story*

1915

Edgar Lee Masters  
*Spoon River Anthology*



1935

Clarence Day  
*Life with Father*

1928

Stephen Vincent Benét  
(trustee)  
*John Brown's Body*

1937-1983

Wilmarth S. Lewis,  
editor  
*The Yale Edition of  
Horace Walpole's  
Correspondence*

1913

Charles A. Beard  
*An Economic Interpretation  
of the Constitution*

1923

Norman Thomas  
*The Conscientious  
Objector in America*

1930

W.H. Auden  
*Poems*

1932

A.A. Berle, Jr.  
*The Modern Corporation  
and Private Property*

The Library's exhibition, "The City's Oldest Library: The New York Society Library, Its Life and Times," includes a two-panel timeline (partially shown above) from its founding in 1754 to 1937. The exhibition is on the Second-floor Gallery and is open to the public.

**WALLET NOTE:** Members and friends of the Library once again have raised the Annual Appeal to new heights. The 1995-1996 total is \$134,925, a 14 percent increase from 1994-1995. This is the fourth record high in as many years and an 89 percent increase from 1991-1992, the lowest recent level, when only \$71,378 was contributed. This increase far exceeds inflation (up 18 percent since January 1992). As a result, the Library has been able to buy more books. Next year, provided your wonderful generosity continues, we can repair the roof as well (there have been several leaks). Thank you!

### FOR CHILDREN: Tales From Around the World

Beginning on Saturday, January 25, storyteller Eleni Constantelos will present a five-week series of folk tales, fairy tales and myths from the Americas, the Far East, Africa, and Europe. Each week will focus on a different part of the world and will include one of the hundreds of version of the Cinderella story. Eleni Constantelos, a member of the board of directors of the Storytelling Center of New York City, has been performing for adults and children for almost twenty years. Children 4 to 9 are invited to attend this free program, from 10:30-11:15 A.M. in the Library's Children's Room: Saturday, January 25, February 1, 8, and 22, and March 1.

**THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY**  
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