

Frank S. Hanlin

1924-1982



Bibliographer
The University of Iowa Libraries

*Frank S. Hanlin: A Memorial Statement**

HELEN B. RYAN

When I heard, not so long ago, that Frank Hanlin would no doubt die, I, along with many others, felt a sharp stab of anger and bitterness that so fine an individual should be removed from a life which seemed to all observers so worthy. Much as we abhor and wish to rid ourselves of clichés, common thoughts were unavoidable: that so worthwhile a man should die while others, of seemingly lesser quality, were granted the blessing of further life was yet one more proof that this activity of living often denies all rules of human fairness.

But the idea of dying did not greatly upset Frank Hanlin. He assured me, quite early in his illness, that he was curious about this event, that of course he believed in God and some form of afterlife, and that, though he very much regretted any unhappiness which might ensue as a result of his death, it was not a matter of great despair. In short, he was more eager to dispel my concerns than to dwell on any difficulties that fell on him. And so it seemed that the only honorable course was to rise to that same level and to allow the bitterness to fall away.

It is difficult for many to believe in God and eternity, but also, for many, it is nearly as difficult to believe that Frank Hanlin could really die. And there may be another way of looking at such apparent illogic. The very fact that so many of us actively benefit from his efforts and successes, and shall continue to do so long into the future, is proof that, as he believed, he is still, in a sense, very much alive. And through such a simple contravention of logic can those doubters rise, if they wish, to his own level of fineness.

I knew Frank primarily from working with him. His job was to buy books. But, as people in our profession know, this task can be undertaken half-heartedly, ignorantly, shoddily, and unwisely, or it

* Mrs. Ryan's remarks were made at a memorial service for Frank Hanlin on August 13, 1982, and are reproduced here in slightly abridged form.

can be undertaken with good spirit, knowledgeably, thoroughly, and wisely. Frank did the task with the latter qualities. In order to do this job, one must know a myriad of obscure detail, and there is no school which can teach it. One becomes a good bookman through years of diligent effort, a keen memory, a grasp of detail, a love of books, and the unusual combination of common sense, accumulated knowledge, and intellectual adroitness which all together enable one to distinguish between shimmer and substance. As our library collection shows, he possessed that unusual combination in high degree.

To be sure, he also had failings, but they were largely ones of passion rather than inability. For instance, in the recent past the library faced the painful necessity of having to cut back on its purchases of research materials because of funding restraints. Frank, who had bought books with great vigor and delight for many years, was faced with what he considered a despicable task of establishing rigid priorities, and it did not set well, for his major priority was this: to build the best possible research collection for this community of scholars, within the restrictions presented him. He never stated this purpose, perhaps because so encompassing an objective would have lacked modesty were it given definition, and no one ever asked him what he was doing, because we all knew his dedication without the words being spoken.

We knew it because we observed him. I suspect that there are few bureaucratic institutions which employ and place into a position of responsibility even one unfettered individual who understands so well the best purpose of that institution and whose total energies are devoted to furthering that purpose. The University of Iowa and the administration of its library are to be commended for their wisdom in choosing an individual such as Frank and giving him the freedom to exercise his capabilities to their fullest.

His purpose had become so much a part of him that not long ago he mentioned that he read only infrequently. This man, a self-confessed lover of books, found that his pleasure was no longer in reading books, but in reading catalogs or lists of books so that he might buy them for others to read. How fine to have such a person: that a lover of books might be more concerned with another's reading pleasure than his own; that a lover of life might be more concerned with another's apprehension at his death than he was himself.

Because of these qualities, this man evoked fierce loyalty from his colleagues. He received respect and loyalty because we all knew that he was doing the right things for the library and its collections. He held a position and performed a task which I doubt that

even three or four individuals giving their best efforts might accomplish in his stead.

Of course he had to move fast to do all this, so fast that one library assistant was prompted to complain that he had to throw his body over his desk when Frank rushed by, lest all the catalog cards blow away in the wind.

Our library is a fine institution today in considerable part because of this one man, and the majority of the members of this community as well as many from the larger community of scholars throughout the world are beholden to that man, directly or indirectly. As we know, the purpose of the University is to teach and to produce knowledge. This cannot be accomplished without the accumulated knowledge of previous generations, and the library's purpose is to provide and make available the best and most complete collection of that knowledge that it possibly can. Frank Hanlin was in charge of that task throughout the library's greatest period of expansion, and he performed it with excellence.

And once again, I come back to clichés, words which we must view carefully, not just because everyone says them, but because, since everyone says them about so awesome an event as death, perhaps those words act all too humanly as a crutch to steady us in times of fear. The cliché is this: "How less we all are for having lost him." But yet, the truth, which I very much suspect that he should want to hear, and which is possibly more accurate, and certainly more brave, and more appropriate to this occasion is this: "How much better we all are for having had him."