

*Plugging the Gaps:
the D.A.B. Project at Iowa*

STOW PERSONS

The best way to build a great historical library is to acquire the significant books when they are published. This is doubtless the chief reason why the older libraries remain the most valuable places for historical research, in spite of the heroic and expensive efforts of younger institutions to make up for lost opportunities. Of course this is small comfort for the vast majority of libraries which did not exist when history was being made or did not have money or space to accumulate the printed paper which every literate society strews in its wake. Such institutions, of which the Iowa library is one, have no choice but to attempt so far as possible to acquire deliberately what they could not obtain earlier in the normal course of operations.

To one who, like the writer, is a library user but not a librarian, it is always surprising to note how much easier it is to acquire currently published materials than works published, let us say, fifty years ago or more. A formidable array of services is available to assist the librarian in selecting currently published materials, and he generally does as good a job as his resources permit. But for out-of-print books no such aids are available. Collectors whose hobby involves regular inspection of old book dealers' catalogues would undoubtedly be the first to admit that such lists are far from being scientific tools for historical research. Each library has its own peculiar weaknesses reflecting in part at least the interests and needs of the generations of scholars who have used it. No book dealer's catalogue can substitute for the identification of needed items and their individual acquisition if and whenever available. Even with unlimited resources this is an immensely laborious and time-consuming process.

A comparison of the Iowa library with several East Coast libraries of approximately the same size would illustrate these generalizations. The latter, dating from the eighteenth century, were acquiring books at no great rate, perhaps, but steadily, before the Iowa library was established. The head start gave them an advantage they have not yet relinquished. Their routine acquisitions made the problem of subsequent gap filling appreciably less arduous.

The problem of the historical library is further compounded by the greatly widened scope of historical interest in the last generation. During the nineteenth century, when historical study was largely confined to public affairs, it seemed a manageable task for libraries to accumulate public documents and the printed and unpublished records of persons prominent in public life. Today, with the widespread interest in intellectual and cultural history requiring the use of almost any kind of printed or unprinted material, the demands made upon the research library are almost overwhelming in variety.

Without any pretense of fully satisfying these needs, but with the conviction that first important steps toward strengthening Iowa's collection of Americana should be taken, the *D.A.B.* project was conceived. Quite simply the idea was that the *Dictionary of American Biography* provided a carefully chosen list of the fourteen thousand outstanding Americans, together with the titles of their most important writings and selected references to standard biographical and other sources of published material concerning them. We assumed that these books would be of continuing use not only to historians, but to students of literature, philosophy, political science, and the arts as well. The *D.A.B.* furnished a basic bibliography for the history of American civilization, and the possession of at least the major items in this bibliography seemed to be a highly appropriate objective for a major research library. The project was approved in the summer of 1959, and the Director of Libraries undertook to find the money with which to finance it. The Old Gold Development Fund of the University of Iowa has generously sustained the project by successive appropriations.

It would have been impracticable, however, as well as prohibitively expensive to acquire every item listed in the *Dictionary*. Due to its biographical character there is a heavy emphasis on genealogical materials, and it was agreed that genealogy, important though it be, was beyond our scope. The writer undertook to be responsible for making a selection of the items to be acquired, using as his criterion general scholarly value. Over a period of three years, and with the invaluable aid of three research assistants provided by the Graduate College, each biographical

article was studied and a selection made of the published items deemed most important. No count was made of the titles thus checked, but they could easily number seventy-five thousand.

Once the desiderata had been identified, the acquisitions staff of the Library took over and checked off the items already in the collection. A very rough and hasty survey would suggest that perhaps two-thirds of the books were already possessed by the Iowa library. The remaining titles to be sought are forwarded to dealers specializing in Americana who quote a price when and if they become available. Desiderata from the first four of the twenty-two volumes of the *D.A.B.* have thus far been placed with dealers, or are being searched in dealers' catalogues by our own acquisitions staff, and the search will continue for many years to come. Following is a list of a few of the more important and interesting books from among the nearly one thousand volumes already obtained through funds provided by the Old Gold Development Fund for the *Dictionary of American Biography* project.

- Audubon, John James. *Letters of John James Audubon, 1826-1840*. Boston, 1930.
- Bartlett, Elisha. *Essays on the Philosophy of Medicine*. Philadelphia, 1844.
- Benezet, Anthony. *Short Account of the People Called Quakers*. New Bedford, 1780.
- Beverley, Robert. *History and Present State of Virginia*. London, 1722.
- Bourke, John G. *Snake-dance of the Moquis of Arizona*. New York, 1884.
- Bowditch, Nathaniel. *New American Practical Navigator*. Newburyport, Mass., 1807.
- Chauncy, Charles. *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*. Boston, 1743.
- Cobbett, William. *A Bone to Gnaw for the Democrats*. Philadelphia, 1795.
- Cotton, John. *Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven and Power Thereof*. London, 1644.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *Oak and Ivy*. Dayton, 1893.
- Edwards, William H. *The Butterflies of North America*. Boston, 1884-1897.
- Filson, John. *Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucky*. New York, 1793.
- Harlan, Richard. *Fauna Americana, Being a Description of The Mammiferous Animals Inhabiting North America*. Philadelphia, 1825.
- Hewatt, Alexander. *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia*. London, 1779.
- Hutchinson, Thomas. *The History of Massachusetts, From the First Settlement Thereof in 1628, until the Year 1750. . .* London, 1795-1828.

- Le Page du Pratz. *Histoire de la Lousiana*. Paris, 1758.
- Monette, John W. *History of the Discovery and Settlement of the Valley of the Mississippi*. New York, 1845.
- Porter, David. *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean in the U. S. Frigate Essex in the Years 1812, 1813, 1814*. New York, 1822.
- Prince, Thomas, editor. *The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the Old and New Testament, Faithfully Translated into English Metre. Being the New-England-Psalm-Book*, revised and improved. Boston, 1758.
- Remington, Frederic. *John Ermine of the Yellowstone*. New York, 1902.
- Rogers, Robert. *Reminiscences of the French War*. Concord, 1831.
- Sanders, Daniel Clarke. *A History of the Indian Wars with the First Settlers of the United States, Particularly in New England*. Montpelier, 1812.
- Sargent, Winthrop. *Loyalist Poetry of the Revolution*. Philadelphia, 1857.
- Steuben, Friedrich, Baron von. *Regulations, for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*. Hartford, 1782.
- Williams, Roger. *Complete Writings*. 7 volumes. New York, 1963.