

Sybil Campbell Library Monograph Number 7

THE STORY OF THE SYBIL CAMPBELL LIBRARY COLLECTION AND THE PRINCIPLES THAT DETERMINED ITS CONTENT

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Strangers who come into contact with the Sybil Campbell Collection for the first time are often struck by the diversity of the material they find there. At one moment you may have in your hand a piece on the Pearl Oyster Fisheries of Ceylon, written in 1905 by Edith Pratt, a Federation member, and in your other hand the history of the women's organisations in Germany in the 1930s, with photographs and biographies, donated by the German Federation of University Women, or an intriguing 1930s comparison of children's games in several northern European countries, which the author gave the Library after staying in Crosby Hall. These books are among the many in the Collection which are not in the British Library. We have them and they don't. They also reflect the close links with other national affiliates of the International Federation of University Women.

The reason for this diversity is contained in the story of how the Collection came to be founded in the first place and the twists of its later development which was a little haphazard. It began its life as an indirect result of the pain of the First World War. It was a part of the effort of University Women to foster international understanding in the hope that this would help to build peace in the future. This was the founding ideal of IFUW and thus of the two Halls of Residence set up so that women graduates from all over the world could live and study together. One was Reid Hall in Paris, founded by the French Federation, and the other was Crosby Hall in Chelsea, founded by the British Federation. Crosby Hall was opened by Queen Mary in 1927 "in the presence" according to The Times "of a galaxy of representatives of the Diplomatic Corps".

Naturally it was judged that a Hall of Residence for academic women needed a library, so within two months of the opening of Crosby Hall, a library committee set to work to create one. It was chaired by Theodora Bosanquet, a distinguished scholar, ably supported by Caroline Spurgeon who is still today highly regarded for her work on Chaucer and Shakespeare. She had been appointed to the Chair of English of Bedford College in 1912, the first woman to obtain a full professorship in the University of London and one of the first in a British University. (The very first was, of course, her close friend Edith Morley, who was made professor of English Language when Reading became a university in 1908). Theodora and Caroline were joined on the Library Committee not only by Federation members such as Alys Russell, the American ex-wife of Bertand Russell, and Mrs Tawney, the wife of Professor R H Tawney, but also by friends from outside such as Harold Laski who served on the committee for its first two years.

The committee had no funds to speak of but its members had influential friends. Many of these friends were members of the Bloomsbury set, the Fabian Society or other early twentieth century social liberals to whom they appealed ruthlessly for gifts. Their objective at the outset was to create a miniature "college type" library, focusing mainly on the humanities, which would furnish the minds of graduate women of the 1920s and 1930s with wide knowledge of their world, both past and present. This international awareness is an important strand in the Original Collection. You are as likely to find an account of the Trade and Industry of Finland, 1922, as a work on Chinese Art. However, they began more modestly by targeting first the standard English works of fiction, plus modern plays, essays and poetry. Also, because of the location and history of Crosby Hall, they sought material on London's history, particularly Chelsea, and on Thomas More.

Alys Russell was indefatigable. She approached, among others, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Graham Wallas, Desmond MacCarthy, Dr. Eileen Power, Lytton Strachey and Logan Pearsall Smith, her own brother. All these people became supporters and donors. Beatrice Webb donated 229 volumes in two years and continued a firm supporter until her death. Her gifts covered essays, poetry and literature as well as books on art, London, the Courteney family and socialism.

Mrs Wallas became a member of the committee as well as a donor and Desmond MacCarthy gave a lecture in aid of funds.

Mrs Tawney wrote to Leonard Woolf, and he and his wife became regular donors. Miss Bosanquet obtained the works of Thomas Hardy from Mrs Hardy. John Galsworthy himself gave all his works. The beautiful Swan Press books were acquired through the good offices of May Hermes, the committee's first secretary and sister of Gertrude Hermes. The committee also approached all the publishing houses and Harold Laski was particularly successful with the house of John Murray, who donated many volumes including all the Brontes' work.

They also asked for Latin and Greek classics, in the belief that an acquaintance with the classics leads one, as Melvyn Bragg so eloquently puts it, “to understand the arts of language: how to speak, how to persuade, how to reason, the route to truth as well as the means of eloquent expression”.

They were amazingly successful, securing in the first ten years some 2,500 books from over 200 distinguished public figures and well wishers, as well as a great deal of material given by the Governments of Spain and Sweden, and 15 University Women’s Associations in Europe, India, Australia and America, all of which reflected the best of their respective cultures.

Because of its specific time focus, within the context of what was happening in those years, this Original Collection has considerable historic significance, representing as it does a very particular concept of the education of women. As Sybil Oldfield pointed out:

“It was founded precisely at the time of the enfranchisement of all British women on the same terms as men, when further emancipation of women was being defined by the National Association of Women for Equal Citizenship under the Presidency of Eleanor Rathbone, MP. The library saw its role in promoting the intellectual expertise of women”.

Eleanor was a member of BFUW.

We must make it clear that in the early years the library was known simply as the Crosby Hall Library. It was only in the 1960s, when it moved into a splendid purpose built room in the new wing of Crosby Hall that the room was given the name of the Sybil Campbell Library in honour of Sybil, the first woman stipendiary Metropolitan Magistrate, in recognition of all she did for the Federation, for Crosby Hall and for the Library. In due course the books themselves became known as the Sybil Campbell Collection, although not personally collected by her.

In the following years many more books were purchased by the Library Committee, with a focus particularly on books by and about women. In addition, we began to acquire whole collections of books belonging to or donated in memory of members of the Federation who were significant women in their own right and major participants in the expansion of the role of women at that time. And that of course led to a further increase in the diversity of the collection.

They say that “books are an expression of their owner’s identity”. Each group of books given has its own character. Caroline Spurgeon’s choice of books for the Library reflect her work in literary criticism, Erica Holme’s include much on language studies, while Theodora Bosanquet’s books focus on British culture. The books of Ivy Davison, Sybil Campbell’s cousin and the first woman to edit the Geographic Magazine, include much on topography and travel, not least her fine copy of Roque’s Map of London, whilst those of Marguerite Bowie Menzler, the first woman insurance broker in London and also incidentally the first woman to head a Government delegation to the United Nations, reflect her interest in economics and the work of the United Nations. The books these women owned and donated reveal the thinking which influenced them.

After World War Two the focus changed. At its peak Crosby Hall had 80 different nationalities staying. It was a fantastic experience to go there at that time - all the languages, all the talk, and people getting to know each other, creating friendships that went on afterwards. As a result it was decided to provide more leisure reading and information about Britain and British culture. Then in the 1970s Vera Douie, former librarian of the Fawcett Library, carried out a major weeding. And the need for more material on women’s activities and writing was recognized. Whether by choice or design, the Original Collection includes a large proportion of books by women, and it is this that the committee tried to build on in the later stages.

So we find that the Collection has a dual character, on the one hand the historic collection, on the other a collection increasingly focused on reflecting the intellectual contribution of women, particularly but not exclusively academic, and including work of our own members. A few from more recent years demonstrate again the diversity of women’s writing in the Collection: Christine Fell on Women in Anglo-Saxon England, Joyce Dunsheath, who was one of our Presidents, on Climbing in the Caucasus, Francoise Rigby on the Belgian Resistance of which she was a member, Susan Joekes on Women in the World Economy, Mindele Anne Treip on Epic Poetry, Jocelyn Chisholm on Whaling in New Zealand. You see what I mean.

In this way it has come about that the Collection has acquired its multiple character. On the one hand it is a snapshot of the thinking of people in the 1920s and 1930s, and a record of a particular concept of the education of women, and on the other a glimpse of the contribution of women and their achievements. It is a treasure house of material with a wonderful provenance, as important almost as the content, and is part of the archive of women’s history in Great Britain.

We are made aware continuously how the world is changing and we can already see the impact of the global accessibility of knowledge. We are told that ideas will be the currency of the future. But ideas grow from the past. Like seeds they lie dormant and hidden for years till some chance disturbs them and they germinate. We cannot know for certain which tattered volume from the past may contain the link, the trigger which will release some new flow of reasoning for the future. The old unrecognised knowledge must not be swept away and lost as so many rare plants have been swept away and lost.

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