Our Historiographical Enterprise: Shifting Emphases and Directions

Edward A. Goedeken

In the introductory note to a small collection of essays she published in the mid-1930s, Willa Cather observed that "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts."[1] She was referring to the cultural divide that separated forever the cultural sensitivities of America before the First World War from the America just a few years after the war's end. In looking over the historiography of American libraries, librarianship, and all its related cultural accoutrements, I have come to believe that the few years that bridged the recent turn of the century also served as a kind of dividing line, separating the writings and thinking about library history of the 1980s and 1990s from those of the first few years of our new century. It is not a hard and fast dividing line (more crooked than straight), but I think a number of important contributions relating to our historiographical enterprise appeared between 1998 and 2003 that signaled a shift in emphasis and direction for library historiography.[2]

The Turn at the Turn of the Century

During the period 1998–2003 several of our most respected scholars produced important thought-pieces on both the status of our scholarship and where they thought our scholarship should be heading. These essays represent landmarks in our historiographical journey.

Alistair Black initiated the shift in emphasis in library historiography with his 1998 article in *Library History*, "Information and Modernity: The History of Information and the Eclipse of Library History." Black called for library historians to broaden their view to encompass the history of the entire array of information that has been generated over the centuries, especially from the period of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason. Building on the work of scholars such as Foucault, Giddens, and Chandler, Black stressed that since librarians are already comfortable in a world that strives for method, system, and organization, writing

Libraries & the Cultural Record, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2010

about these topics from a broader perspective would be a good way for library historians to become more relevant to the profession of library and information science. In so doing, library historians would move away from the "institutional anchorage" that undergirds the contemporary approach that so often characterizes our work.[3]

Black's remarks—which were, I believe, deliberately provocative—were greeted in 2001 with an impressive response from Donald G. Davis, Jr. and Jon Aho. "Whither Library History? A Critical Essay on Black's Model for the Future of Library History, with Some Additional Options" provided a wide-ranging response to Black's call for a new history of information.[4] Davis and Aho described four main models for the conduct of future library history: 1) the current model, what Black calls the "institutionally based" approach; 2) an information science model; 3) a model more closely associated with mainstream history and historians; and 4) the history-of-the-book model. They then took issue with Black's assessment, arguing vigorously that looking at libraries as repositories of knowledge and keepers of the physical objects holding this knowledge is certainly a worthwhile endeavor. (I have to admit that I am partial to this so-called traditional approach and to note that the book history model as well as the suggestion that we become more closely associated with mainstream historians was the most appealing to Davis and Aho.) Each model has pluses and minuses as a future approach for library history, and indeed all four remain in place today as options.

Incorporating Theory into Library History Scholarship

A person cannot get far into any historiographical discussion of libraries before running into Wayne Wiegand, who joined the conversation over the direction library history should take with a few contributions of his own. In the January 1999 issue of *Library Quarterly* (a journal he now coedits) with his article "Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots: What the Past Tells Us about the Present: Reflections on the Twentieth-Century History of American Librarianship," Wiegand carried forward into the twentieth century Kenneth Carpenter's 1996 evaluation of nineteenth-century library literature.[5] After surveying the most important historical writings on libraries that have appeared during the past century (at least 125 of them!), Wiegand bemoaned the lack of solid historical work on all sorts of libraries: public, academic, special, and school. Moreover, he insisted that beyond basic narrative history we should begin to incorporate into our work the thoughts of a number of prominent theorists, including Foucault, Gramsci, Habermas, and Longino (and I'll throw

in Bourdieu and Baudrillard for good measure). The craft of library history, he wrote, must go beyond what he called being "trapped in its own discursive formations."[6]

That historians are somewhat leery of "theory" does not surprise me, since most of us, I believe, receive little exposure to social and cultural theory in our educational process. In the Anglo-American tradition the empirical approach to research is much more common than the more theoretical leanings of those writing on the European continent.[7] Indeed, an article discussing the impact of such theory on the writing of early American history put it well in the first sentence: "Historians treat theory the way rattlesnakes approach small mammals. They either strike to kill or swallow whole."[8] I do not disagree with the general tenor of Wiegand's plea that our scholarship needs to more actively embrace cultural and social (and most often French) theorists to strengthen the overall quality of our narratives. The impact of postmodernist thought on contemporary scholarship is too established to ignore.[9]

Wiegand's "Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots" essay generated a flurry of articles in *Library Quarterly* representing earnest scholarship incorporating the ideas of these postmodern theorists, but we still have a way to go in incorporating the ideas of these theorists into our work.[10] A quick search in *Library Literature*, for example, shows that since the early 1990s twenty articles have dealt with Foucault, eleven with Habermas, ten with Bourdieu, and one with Gramsci. Despite this paucity of references to these prominent theorists, I believe that our newer scholars may be taking to heart what Wiegand has been saying. I imagine that if one were to peruse the master's and doctoral theses produced over the past half-dozen years or so in LIS, one would see increased attention paid to these social and cultural (and to me often mysterious) theorists. I noticed, for example, in the introductory remarks to her impressive 2008 dissertation on the history of the *Journal of Library History* and *Libraries & Culture* that Maria Elena Gonzalez avers that her study was "interpreted through a sociological lens, crafted from a beginner's understanding of the work of Pierre Bourdieu."[11] Another illustration is a work by Juris Dilevko and Candice F. C. Magowan, who used some of Bourdieu's theories to explain how public libraries provided readers' advisory service over the past century.[12] To gain a better understanding of all this, I believe we could benefit from a close reading of Callum Brown's 2005 *Postmodernism for Historians*, which provides well-reasoned assistance to those of us who are bamboozled by the complexities and nuances of postmodernist theories.[13]

The Library as Place

In "To Reposition a Research Agenda: What American Studies Can Teach the LIS Community about the Library in the Life of the User," Wiegand refers to the importance of studying the "library as place" and examining more closely the role of reading in the history of libraries.[14] Certainly the "library as place" has become a hot area of scholarly attention in the past few years. Impressive is John Buschman and Gloria Leckie's collection of historical essays, *The Library as Place* (2007).[15] In his fine essay "Regaining Place" in *Advances in Library Administration and Organization* (2007) Charles Osburn surveys a number of ways that the "library as place" can be assessed, including the use of such disparate disciplines as environmental psychology, geography, architecture, and even neurology![16] Looking at the "library as place" certainly is one way to gain a better understanding of what Wiegand often has called "the library in the life of the user, instead of the user in the life of the library." Perhaps the current obsession with assessing what libraries do using such measures as LibQual+ will yield data that future historians can draw upon to develop informed analyses of libraries as cultural agents in our society.

The Book History Approach

Jonathan Rose, who has to be considered the number one proponent for the study of the history of the book in America, having been instrumental in the 1991 founding of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing and having produced with Simon Eliot *A Companion to the History of the Book* (2007), in 2003 joined the discussion initiated by Black, Davis, and Aho about future directions for library history, articulating his support of the book history approach.[17] In "Alternative Futures for Library History" Rose advocated for this approach as the best way for library historians to proceed out of their methodological thicket.[18] He called for an expanded definition of "library" that would encompass all kinds of cultural repositories. Noting that churches, schools, museums, theaters, cinemas, and even radio stations have libraries, Rose proposed that the first order of business should be to expand the idea of what a library is. In that context, historians of libraries, he wrote, would join forces with other "historians, literary scholars, publishing educators, book artists, sociologists, anthropologists, and communications instructors to create a new academic discipline: book studies." Book studies, in

Rose's mind, would incorporate the past, present, and future of all forms of written and printed information.[19]

Recent Developments

As the foregoing suggests, I consider 1998 through 2003 to be a significant watershed in the historiography of libraries and library culture. From some of our leading intellectual lights we received a broad spectrum of advice on directions our scholarship should take as we proceed into the new century. Some advocated expanding our vision to include all of information; others suggested focusing more narrowly on printed and written information in whatever form or forum it appears, including the Internet. Others argued that we should vigorously apply the theoretical constructs of cultural and social theorists; still others called for simply doing a better job of examining and explaining the role of the library as a significant social and cultural agent.

So far, I believe we have incorporated parts of each approach into our research agendas. In March 2009 the British journal *Library History* changed its title to *Library and Information History*, with Toni Weller, the author of a 2008 book on information history, replacing Alistair Black as editor.[20] The venerable *Libraries & Culture* in 2006 changed editors and as *Libraries & the Cultural Record* seeks to bring more closely together study of the histories of "librarianship, archival and records enterprise, museum administration, and preservation administration in the province of the cultural record." This new journal, I believe, under editor David B. Gracy, will bring into greater intellectual proximity the activities of three key keepers and interpreters of the historical record: libraries, museums, and archives.[21]

As an example of exciting scholarship emerging at the intersection of the histories of print culture, information, and communication, Richard Stillson's creative and impressive work *Spreading the Word: A History of Information in the California Gold Rush* (2006) combines an informed history of the times with a thorough assessment of how nineteenth-century Americans used the variety of communication media at their disposal.[22] Stillson considered not only newspapers (with which we are quite familiar) but also the use of guidebooks, travel accounts, maps, advertisements, and letters sent back and forth, to name just the most obvious. This work represents scholarship that is both broadly conceived and well written.

In summary, it seems to me that several streams of scholarly investigations can and should come together to create a new synthesis of scholarship about libraries and the intellectual framework in which

they thrive. These would include 1) the history of reading, 2) book and printing history, 3) the history of libraries as cultural institutions, 4) the history of information, and 5) the relationship of libraries to archives and museums. With this in mind, I suggest that certain historical topics warrant our attention for future exploration:

- The library as place
- The evolution of cataloging and classification and the development of Library of Congress schedules and the MARC record
- Biographies of individual librarians and archivists
- The history of school libraries
- Librarianship serving ethnic groups
- A modern history of the American Library Association
- The history of academic libraries and librarianship
- Further investigation of subscription, private, and social libraries
- A reexamination of Michael Harris's theory in the light of the past thirty years of scholarship
- The historical relationship between and among archives, museums, and libraries and the ways in which users perceive these institutions

The challenges and new directions charted for library historians at the turn of this century have prepared us methodologically and historiographically for a number of new approaches and investigations. I look forward to seeing where our scholarly travels take us next!

Notes

An earlier version of this text was presented at a meeting of the *Libraries & the Cultural Record* editorial advisory board in Austin, Texas, April 24, 2009.

1. Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), v.

2. The historiography of libraries and librarianship has been captured in journals such as the *Journal of Library History, Philosophy and Comparative Librarianship*, later called *Libraries & Culture* and now *Libraries & the Cultural Record*; the British journal *Library History*, now *Library and Information History*; the ALA's Library History Round Table's Library History Seminars; the biennial literature review essays in *Libraries & the Cultural Record* and its predecessors; and library history citations for the *LHRT Newsletter* by Edward A. Goedeken. Reference sources include Donald G. Davis, Jr., and John Mark Tucker, *American Library History: A Comprehensive Guide to the Literature* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 1989); Bohdan S. Wynar, ed., *Dictionary of American Library Biography* (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1978); Wayne A. Wiegand, ed., *Supplement to the Dictionary of American Library Biography* (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1990); Donald G. Davis, Jr., ed., *Dictionary of American Library Biography: Second*

Supplement (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003); Wayne A. Wiegand and Donald G. Davis, Jr., *Encyclopedia of Library History* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); David Stam, *International Dictionary of Library Histories*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001); and John Y. Cole and Jane Aikin, *Encyclopedia of the Library of Congress: For Congress, the Nation & the World* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2004). Some recent collections of library history essays are Andrew B. Wertheimer and Donald G. Davis, Jr., eds., *Library Research in America: Essays Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Library History Round Table* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Center for the Book, 2000); and Cheryl Malone, Hermina Anghelescu, and Mark Tucker, eds., *Libraries & Culture: Historical Essays Honoring the Legacy of Donald G. Davis, Jr.* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Center for the Book, 2000).

3. Alistair Black, "Information and Modernity: The History of Information and the Eclipse of Library History," *Library History* 14 (May 1998): 39–45. This essay fleshed out Black's earlier comments in "New Methodologies in Library History: A Manifesto for the *New* Library History," *Library History* 11 (1995): 76–85. Black expanded on his ideas further in "Information History," *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 40 (2006): 441–73. For another perspective on this debate, see Laura Henriette Christine Skouvig, "Institution, Modernity and Discourse: Three Perspectives on Public Library History," in *New Frontiers in Public Library Research*, ed. Carl Gustav Johannsen and Lefi Kajberg (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 249–68.

4. Donald G. Davis, Jr., and Jon Arvid Aho, "Whither Library History? A Critical Essay on Black's Model for the Future of Library History, with Some Additional Options," *Library History* 17 (March 2001): 21–37. Black's response follows: "A Response to 'Whither Library History?'" *Library History* 17 (March 2001): 37–39.

5. Wayne A. Wiegand, "Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots: What the Past Tells Us about the Present: Reflections on the Twentieth-Century History of American Librarianship," *Library Quarterly* 69 (January 1999): 1–32. Indeed, Jean-Pierre Hérubel had surveyed the postmodern landscape for historians in his "Clio's Dark Musings?: A Review Essay," *Libraries & Culture* 23 (Fall 1988): 493–98. Kenneth Carpenter's extended essay can be found in *Readers & Libraries: Toward a History of Libraries and Culture in America* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1996).

6. Wiegand, "Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots," 24.

7. For an excellent overview of the historiographical enterprise, see Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), esp. chap. 3.

8. David Waldstreicher, "Two Cheers for the *Public Sphere* . . . and One for Historians' Skepticism," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (January 2005): 107.

9. The literature on postmodernism is, of course, quite vast. Two readers that can assist those grappling with this topic and its relationship to historiography are Joseph P. Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, eds., *A Postmodern Reader* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); and Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997). For an interesting survey of the impact of postmodernism on American thought and scholarship, see J. David Hoeveler, Jr., *The Postmodernist Turn: American Thought and Culture in the 1970s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996). Another useful critique is by Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

10. The January 2003 issue contained several good essays responding to Wiegand's "Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots" essay. They include Gary P. Radford, "Trapped in Our Own Discursive Formations: Toward an Archaeology of Library and Information Science," *Library Quarterly* 73 (January 2003): 1–18; John M. Budd, "The Library, Praxis, and Symbolic Power," *Library Quarterly* 73 (January 2003): 19–32; Douglas Raber, "Librarians as Organic Intellectuals: A Gramscian Approach to Blind Spots and Tunnel Vision," *Library Quarterly* 73 (January 2003): 33–53; and Marie L. Radford and Gary P. Radford, "Librarians and Party Girls: Cultural Studies and the Meaning of the Librarian," *Library Quarterly* 73 (January 2003): 54–69.

11. Maria Elena Gonzalez, "'Crises' in Scholarly Communications: Insights from Forty Years of the *Journal of Library History*, 1966–2005," Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008, x.

12. Juris Dilevko and Candice F. C. Magowan, *Readers' Advisory Service in North American Public Libraries, 1870–2005* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2007).

13. Callum G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2005).

14. Wayne A. Wiegand, "To Reposition a Research Agenda: What American Studies Can Teach the LIS Community about the Library in the Life of the User," *Library Quarterly* 73 (October 2003): 369–82. Underrepresented in this essay but of exceeding importance to the study of the history of libraries, the subject of readers, reading, and librarianship has already generated a significant literature. For an excellent introduction to and example of this scholarship, see Christine Pawley's *Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late-Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001) and her more recent analysis of prominent research models in the history of reading, "Beyond Market Models and Resistance Organizations as a Middle Layer in the History of Reading," *Library Quarterly* 79 (January 2009): 73–93. A very important recent collection of essays is Thomas Augst and Kenneth Carpenter, eds., *Institutions of Reading: The Social Life of Libraries in the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).

15. John E. Buschman and Gloria J. Leckie, eds., *The Library as Place: History, Community, and Culture* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2007).

16. Charles B. Osburn, "Regaining Place," *Advances in Library Administration and Organization* 24 (2007): 53–90. Osburn expands on his philosophical investigations with his *The Social Transcript: Uncovering Library Philosophy* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2009). The topic of "third place" owes much of its early development to the work of Ray Oldenburg. See his *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999). For a general overview of this topic as applied to libraries, see Karen Antell and Debra Engel, "Conduciveness to Scholarship: The Essence of the Library as Place," *College & University Libraries* 67 (November 2006): 536–60.

17. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, eds., *A Companion to the History of the Book* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007).

18. Jonathan Rose, "Alternative Futures for Library History," *Libraries & Culture* 38 (Winter 2003): 50–60. From Rose, see also "The Horizon of a New Discipline: Inventing Book Studies," *Publishing Research Quarterly* 19 (Spring 2003): 11–19.

19. One byproduct of all this is the publication of a number of histories of the book in various countries, including a series in the United States called A History of the Book in America, whose latest volumes are Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, eds., *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790–1840,* vol. 2; Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway, eds., *Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880–1940,* vol. 4; and David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Michael Schudson, eds., *The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America,* vol. 5 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009 and 2010). For more on book history, see David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, eds., *The Book History Reader,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006). Also helpful for the uninitiated is Leslie Howsam's slim volume entitled *Old Books & New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

20. Toni Weller, *Information History—An Introduction: Exploring an Emergent Field* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2008).

21. David Carr, from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has written extensively on the relationship between libraries and museums and other cultural institutions. His *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2003) and *A Place Not a Place: Reflection and Possibility in Museums and Libraries* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2006) each provides a cogent introduction to his thought. For a good overview of museum studies as an academic field, see Sharon Macdonald, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006). As far as archives go, one should start by perusing the numerous publications of Richard J. Cox. Two of his publications are good places to begin acquiring an understanding of what archives are all about: Richard J. Cox and David A. Wallace, eds., *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society* (Westport, Conn.: Quorum Books, 2002); and Richard J. Cox, *Archives & Archivists in the Information Age* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2005).

22. Richard T. Stillson, *Spreading the Word: A History of Information in the California Gold Rush* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).