THE PRESERVATION OF THE HUMAN RECORD
IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY: WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

The Role of Libraries

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I had expected that the focus of today’s program would be retrospective, concentrating on who might be responsible for preserving what already exists and suggesting ways to cope with that body of materials which has already reached the exalted status of inclusion in the sanctum sanctorum of research libraries. The fact that much of that retrospective material lay buried, seldom used, and often inaccessible on our crowded shelves would not detract from the responsibility for preserving those records of the past—we know from the arrival of King Tut that burial can be the most effective means of preservation. We also know from Thomas Hoving’s recent book that the opening of tombs can also mean the beginning of disintegration, if not destruction.

As the topic for today’s program clarified itself, I was relieved not to have to discuss the archival qualities of visual film, the technical problems of morpholine vapor-phase deacidification, or the rise of encapsulation and the decline of lamination. But I was alarmed to have to address the more intellectually demanding question of what is worth keeping and what godlike creatures we might find to make such decisions.

In periods of affluence, when space and money were relatively minor considerations, research libraries and archives could avoid such questions by calling themselves “repositories of record,” collecting indiscriminately all the records of the past. Austerity challenges such comforts. One noted publisher told me he is content to let the books of the past disintegrate to make way for his new products on our library shelves. The Pitt study and the concepts of the “self-renewing library” (my favorite euphemism) and the “zero-growth library” are essentially the result of a fiscal problem of resource allocation, of finding ways to reduce the costs of acquisition and storage. One authority claims that “we save too damn much already.” Some librarians have even suggested selectively erasing the record. The idea of selective erasure of the record is a dangerous one in a democratic society, reminding us of a certain eighteen-minute erasure which earned some notoriety a few years ago.

Not even the most ardent packrat

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Passing the Gavel

From Lucille Thomas to Dinah Lindauer