

# Leibnitz' Contribution to Librarianship

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IT IS NO ACCIDENT that Leibnitz (1646-1716), whose almost universal attainments are comparable to those of Aristotle, worked as a librarian for over forty years. While he is better known as a philosopher, man of affairs, promoter of the sciences, and writer on theology, jurisprudence, history, and politics, and for his discovery of integral calculus, all these pursuits are closely connected with his position as a librarian.

At the age of twenty-three, Leibnitz, already the author of several essays on philosophy and law, became secretary to J. C. von Boineburg, first minister to the Elector of Mainz. It was in Mainz that Leibnitz entered the field of library work when he compiled a subject catalog of the statesman's library. The thoroughness with which he cataloged the collection is indicated by Leibnitz' own words:

[I set up] a catalog which probably does not have its equal. It enables the reader to find all the authors dealing with a certain subject, and often there are more than ten entries for one small book.<sup>1</sup>

In 1672 the Elector sent Leibnitz to Paris as his diplomatic representative. There he submitted to Louis XIV a plan

<sup>1</sup> Schiel, Hubert. "Leibniz." In *Lexikon des gesamten Buchwesens*. Hiersemann, Leipzig, 1936, v. 2, p. 309.

for the conquest of Egypt by the French. During his stay in the French capital Leibnitz came in contact with the leading French librarians, associating with Caracavi, Clément, and Baluze, and visited the famous Bibliothèque du Roi. Returning to Germany, he was appointed historiographer and librarian by Duke John Frederick of Brunswick-Lüneburg at Hanover, a dual position which was not uncommon in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He remained in the service of the Brunswick family until his death.

The ducal library and Leibnitz' private collection were both housed in his home in Hanover. His private collection, which has been preserved as a whole in the municipal library of that city, consisted, to a large extent, of dissertations, treatises, and pamphlets, and included a number of medieval manuscripts.

Leibnitz expanded the ducal collection constantly. He kept himself informed on new publications and sales and regularly received catalogs, auction lists, and offers from antiquarians. From 1687 to 1690 he traveled extensively in Germany and Italy, collecting material for his genealogy of the Brunswick family, and used this unique opportunity to buy a number of valuable books. Other purchases included the libraries of Gottfried Hermant in Beauvais (1690), Counselor von Westen-

holz in Hanover (1696), Emmerich Bigot in Rouen (1706), and the manuscript collection of the Danish state counselor, Marquard Gude (1710).

On his return from Rome, where he had declined the librarianship of the Vaticana, Leibnitz was entrusted with the additional assignment of administering the Bibliotheca Augusta in Wolfenbüttel. His letter of appointment contained the following provisions: (a) The secretaries had to put the catalogs in order; (b) Outsiders, scholars, and noblemen who desired to see rare books and manuscripts were to be accommodated; (c) In case Leibnitz should resign he was not to take with him copies of secret documents of the Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel family; (d) Leibnitz had to make sure that persons who had used manuscripts of the library in the compilation of their works would submit their writings to the censor before publication, *ne detrimentosum quid aut ingratum irrepat*.<sup>2</sup>

The Wolfenbüttel library had a subject catalog; Leibnitz had to arrange for the compilation of an author catalog. The staff consisted of Lorenz Hertel, Leibnitz' representative, and two secretaries. The cataloging progressed very slowly during the first eight years. In fact, Leibnitz asked not to be called librarian of the Bibliotheca Augusta, because he was able to exercise only partial control as administrator *in absentia*.

#### *Leibnitz on Book Selection*

The letters which Leibnitz exchanged with Hertel were gathered and numbered by no less a man than Lessing, librarian at Wolfenbüttel many years later. At first the correspondence dealt only with library matters; later it touched upon

<sup>2</sup> Guhrauer, G. E. "Bibliothekarisches aus Leibnizens Leben und Schriften." *Serapeum* 12:16, 1851.

literature, science, and politics. From this exchange of letters we learn of a controversy concerning Leibnitz' book selection policy. Hertel maintained that at the auction of Counselor Lucius' books in Hanover in 1708 Leibnitz did not buy enough books of large size. In his reply Leibnitz made his position perfectly clear:

Above all I consider whether with the publication of his book an author has rendered a service to the world of letters; otherwise, there would be no limit to the expenditures. In the case of books dealing with ordinary matters, I prefer the small ones to the large ones, especially when they deal with a single subject. Besides, small but interesting books, which disappear in the course of time, have to be preserved in the great libraries.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Leibnitz and Hertel*

The relationship between Leibnitz and Hertel was not always a happy one. The Duke of Wolfenbüttel received an anonymous letter which discredited Leibnitz' administration and concluded, "The library is in an awful state of confusion which, it seems, will continue as long as the librarian lives."<sup>4</sup> The anonymous writer apparently was Hertel, and in a letter dated Apr. 30, 1705, Leibnitz complained in no uncertain terms about Hertel's giving an unfavorable report to the Duke about the administration of the library. After Leibnitz' death Hertel became his successor.

The library in Wolfenbüttel suffered considerably from the lack of funds. Leibnitz, who on one occasion called the Bibliotheca Augusta *à présent peu auguste*,<sup>5</sup> solicited the interest of the Duke

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Thyregod, Oskar. *Die Kulturfunktion der Bibliothek*. Nijhoff, The Hague, 1936, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Hessel, Alfred. *Leibniz und die Anfänge der Göttinger Bibliothek*. Pillai, Göttingen, 1924, p. 6. (Vorarbeiten zur Geschichte der Göttinger Universität und Bibliothek, iii.)

more than once. He even suggested the creation of new sources of revenue which should be applied to the library. He advocated the introduction of stamped paper, and in a humorous vein commented upon his proposal in a letter to Hertel, saying that the scholars, poets, and artists would cheer the Duke if he would accept the suggestion, but if he rejected it, the whole corps would pronounce anathema against him. ". . . But I have now relieved my conscience."<sup>6</sup> When this proposal was not accepted, Leibnitz recommended that mulberry trees be planted in the domain adjoining the library building for the rearing of silkworms. He started the project with his own funds, but lack of support forced him to abandon it. Finally the librarian had to resort to the sale of duplicates. The Duke in Hanover was little better than his relative in Wolfenbüttel; Leibnitz pointed out to him how small the subvention for the library was as compared to those for "worthy and pleasant yet transitory and ephemeral purposes such as music and comedy."<sup>7</sup> Only in 1708 did he succeed in obtaining an annual budget of two hundred thalers, an amount which remained unchanged until 1835.

#### *Service to Scholars*

Although a visitor from Frankfurt complained in 1710 about Leibnitz' unwillingness to show him the two libraries in Hanover, as a rule the philosopher was most liberal and generous when scholars wanted to use the library for their investigations. An English theologian, for example, asked for books which he needed to compile a martyrology of the Protestants. Though Leibnitz did not view this

project with favor, still he wrote Hertel, "It would be better not to write a book which might stir up passion; yet one must not reject a zealous man who believes he is rendering a service to his church."<sup>8</sup>

In spite of his achievements in library work, which cannot all be enumerated here, Leibnitz would rank with such distinguished fellow-librarians as Lambeck or Magliabecchi if one considered only his practical accomplishments. His specific merit lies in his ideas and plans concerning libraries which he developed in his letters and memoranda to the Guelphic princes.

#### *Universal Library*

The librarians whom Leibnitz had met in Paris were influenced by Gabriel Naudé, first director of the Bibliothèque du Roi and author of the oldest manual on library science, *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque*, published in 1627. He had formulated the idea of a universal library, which was to contain the most important books in all branches of science as well as commentaries and reference books. A library of this type, he asserted, would greatly enhance the glory of its royal sponsor. Leibnitz pursued similar ideas and carried them further.

His ideal is the well-rounded library. He calls it a general inventory, an encyclopedia, a storehouse of all sciences, a mute but pansophical teacher. The library is to him a treasury of the human spirit or a convention of the greatest men of all times and nations miraculously assembled in one building, who tell the readers their choicest thoughts.

If somebody wants to begin a career in trade and industry, a writer who knows the subject well can advise him; if a town is to be fortified, one may obtain plans and may

<sup>6</sup> Schönemann, Carl. "Umrisse zur Geschichte der Wolfenbütteler Bibliothek." *Serapeum* 4:214, 1843.  
<sup>7</sup> Hessel. *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Guhrauer. *Op. cit.*, p. 9-10, 23.

read about the defects of fortification discovered by the victor; if a new law is to be issued, the library has all the information on the subject. . . .<sup>9</sup>

A library must have material on everything, be it finances, carnival, gardens, military science, genealogy, maps, or how to influence men in high positions. It might include "pleasure objects" as well, such as "finds" from voyages, portraits, games of hazard, machines, and medals.

Whether such an ambitious scheme could have been realized by any of the libraries in Leibnitz' time is doubtful, but it shows the grandeur of his conception. No less remarkable, considering the period in which these ideas were conceived, are Leibnitz' observations on the quality and function of a library.

The importance and rank of a library, he states, are determined only by the intrinsic quality of its collections and not by the number, size, or rarity of its books. Leibnitz attaches particular importance to works dealing with inventions, demonstrations, experiments, and historical and geographical matters as well as "curious" pamphlets. Serials and new books must be purchased regularly if the collection as a whole is not to decay. A fixed annual budget is indispensable. The highest duty of the librarian is to make the books accessible to the public. Therefore, he has to arrange for author, subject, and chronological catalogs, long hours of admission, liberal loan rules, and adequate heating in the winter.

#### *Leibnitz vs. Naudé*

A comparison of the ideas of Naudé and Leibnitz shows that a change in emphasis has taken place. The library which Leibnitz envisages helps to achieve the im-

provement of mankind, a consideration totally absent in Naudé's statement. The philosopher considers the usefulness of libraries for the prince and his subjects far more important than the glory that goes with the ownership of valuable books. He assigns to the library the character of a public institution and puts it on the same footing with the church and the school.

At this point a reservation is necessary. Leibnitz has justly been called the spiritual father of the great university library.<sup>10</sup> But, except for his successful insistence on a regular budget, his ideas, which were sent to the dukes in the form of memoranda, were shelved and did not reach the public during his lifetime. Thus, the popular accounts that treat Leibnitz as if his ideas had been applied in practice in his time need some revision. This is particularly true of writers, like Pfeleiderer, who tried to portray Leibnitz' activity as the one bright moment in a dark period of German history.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Classification Scheme*

Leibnitz was well aware of the difficulties of classification. In his treatise on the division of knowledge proposed by Locke we read: "The same truth may be classed in various ways according to its relationships. Thus it happens that people arranging a library often do not know where to put certain books because they might fit equally well into two or three different places."<sup>12</sup> Leibnitz contributed to library science his own system of classification, which was intended to divide books in a library according to their classes by a single and convenient method. He did succeed in evolving a theoretical arrangement consisting of only a few groups,

<sup>10</sup> Hessel. *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Thyregod. *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Guhrauer. *Op. cit.*, p. 37.

the four university faculties of theology, jurisprudence, medicine, and philosophy.<sup>13</sup> However, as soon as he began actually to classify books by his own method, the groups multiplied to such an extent that the whole scheme became too complicated and unwieldy for practical purposes. His experience as a librarian is evident from the fact that his classification provided for a special class, *Communia communium*, books of all kinds which did not fit into any other category. Another interesting feature is a special subdivision in the history of literature class entitled "*Bibliothecaria seu res libraria tanquam pro re-pertio universali*," or, in other words, library science.

This repertory, or *globus intellectualis*, was one of Leibnitz' most cherished projects. Already in his youth he had planned to publish a *nucleus librarius semestralis* based on catalogs of fairs, which was to expand gradually into an *inventarium scientiae humanae libris proditae*, a universal system of science in which every subject would find its well-defined place. Leibnitz hoped that a universal encyclopedia would emerge from the combination of the subject catalogs of different libraries. Pursuing the same idea, the philosopher asked Louis XIV to order a survey which would abstract the world's best books and would then be

<sup>13</sup> Leibnitz, G. W. *Opera philosophica*. J. E. Ermann, ed. Eichler, Berlin, 1840, v. 1, p. 417.

combined with the as yet unwritten observations of the foremost men in each field. This survey was to be the basis of an exhaustive scheme of science, intended for "the greater happiness of mankind."<sup>14</sup>

Thus the relationship between Leibnitz the philosopher and Leibnitz the librarian becomes clear. As a philosopher who emphasized the uniqueness of the individual, he thought that even the smallest book had a specific and definite value. At the same time, his characteristic trend toward the universal made him assign an important role to the libraries. His ideal was to elevate humanity to a higher level. Leibnitz was convinced that mankind would find its happiness if the progress of science were combined with pure Christianity; he wanted the academies, which he was instrumental in founding in Prussia and Russia, to help in the realization of this aim. The progress of science, Leibnitz thought, was possible only if everybody was enabled to inform himself easily about the sum total of the research of preceding generations. In that way he logically came to see the necessity and the inestimable value of libraries, storehouses of knowledge that were equipped to meet the far-reaching demands which he himself had formulated in the interest of libraries.

<sup>14</sup> Leibnitz, G. W. *Samtliche Schriften und Briefe*. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Reichl, Darmstadt, 1923-38, v. 1, p. 42.