

Missionary Research Library Collection

From Idea to Special Library to Special Collection

The Missionary Research Library Collection (MLR) within the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary houses a unique wealth of materials. Dating from the MLR Collection's founding in 1914 until the late 1960s, these materials chronicle early 20th century missionary history. Preservation microfilming projects on missiology invariably depend on materials that can be found in the MLR.

The following article is adapted from a presentation by Cynthia Frame in 1997 at the Yale-Edinburgh Group on the History of the Missionary Movement and Non-Western Christianity. Ms. Frame was at that time Archivist and Preservation Librarian for the Burke Library. Her presentation described the MRL as it evolved from "Idea" to "Special Library" to "Special Collection."

At the 1910 World Conference on Missions Edinburgh Conference, missionary societies gathered to develop a common missionary strategy. Part of that strategy, initiated by Dr. John R. Mott, was to develop a library which would help to prepare and support missionaries as well as to document the missionary movement. As Mott described his vision for the library to Charles Fahs, who would soon become the Director of the MRL: "We are now ready to go ahead full steam on the plan to secure the most complete and serviceable missionary library and archives in the world. I desire it to be thoroughly interdenominational, ecumenical and international. It should be made preeminently rich in source material."

The library opened in 1914 at the Foreign Missionary Conference of North America (FMC) headquartered on Madison Avenue. Seed money for the MRL was provided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who trusted that missionary boards and individuals would provide funding necessary for the MRL to thrive. But that expectation was not fulfilled. The FMC removed it from their budget in 1927 and was not able to locate any other large donors. While missionary boards, denominations, and organizations generously donated publications, monetary gifts were not so forthcoming.

In 1929, the library relocated to Union Theological Seminary and was housed in the recently completed Brown Tower, which had been funded by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and Arthur C. James. The MRL contained more than 70,000 books and pamphlets at that time, and Union housed with it the 12,000 volumes from the Charles Cuthbert Hall Memorial Library of Christian Missions.

Every history of the MRL emphasizes the diligence, enthusiasm, and professionalism of its staff, especially librari-

ans Charles H. Fahs and Hollis W. Hering. Upon reading Hering's 1931 treatise on "The Research Library and the Research Librarian," one gains considerable understanding of her passion and devotion to the field. On a librarian's need for vision she writes: "No one else is in such a strategic position to sense possibilities in outreach...and for no one else is it so imperative to be eternally alert to emerging demands..."¹ It is thanks to Hering, her colleagues, and their successors that the MRL continues to serve researchers today.

In its heyday the MRL was a place of great activity. It provided, "in addition to regular library services, information service, counsel to missionary agencies and students, and a research program on behalf of the foreign mission boards."² In 1934, an average of 15 visitors per day used the collection.³ Hering writes, "From the very start the essential genius of the library has lain in providing aid for research, which has been interpreted as providing not only necessary materials but also consultation and guidance."⁴ R. Pierce Beaver, who was director of the library from 1948 to 1955, explains that "the library served the personnel of the mission boards and Union faculty and students, as well as Columbia University, Teachers College and other institutions in the area. Numerous overseas students who were writing dissertations on subjects relating to their homelands found here the source material essential to their research."⁵

Financial difficulties grew after the retirement of Charles Fahs in 1948. The following directors, R. Pierce Beaver (1948-1955), Frank Wilson Price (1956-1961) and Herbert C. Jackson (1961-1966) managed to raise funds for the collection and see that it was maintained, but it was not to flourish as it once had. Union's president from 1945 to 1963, Henry Pitney Van Dusen, was

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supportive of the MRL and did what was possible to keep it functioning.

In 1958, a development program for the MRL was initiated for the renovation and expansion of the MRL space. Almost half, actually \$80,000, of the expected \$200,000 was raised, and a second reading room with new card catalogs, shelves and lights was added to the public space in the fourth and fifth floors of Union's Library.

In 1960, the MRL provisionally incorporated with Union. In 1967, incorporation was complete, and the MRL became a functioning part of the Union library. The 17-volume printed book catalog of the MRL collection was published by G.K. Hall in 1968.⁶ Records for acquisitions since 1967 in mission-related subjects are included in the catalogs of the Burke Library. Until 1967, the MRL used its own classification.

The MRL reading room, which had a three-person staff, closed in 1976. In the years since its closing, the area which once held MRL catalogs, acquisitions clerks, reference librarians, and researchers have become a space to house the Burke Library Archives. The MRL archives and MRL pamphlet collection reside within the Library Archives.

The collections were built along three main areas: "1) the history, theology, principles, methods, and problems of missions, 2) the culture, history, sociology, ethnic religions, etc. of the lands of the younger, and 3) international affairs and global trends."⁷ As such, the MRL "is strong in its collection of mission agency records, records which document issues facing the churches and mission fields, materials which describe the missionary enterprise for public reference, and of course, missionary research material."⁸

The majority of the MRL monograph collection was moved to the top levels of the newly retrofitted James Chapel Tower in the 1980's. It was weeded for duplicate and out-of-scope materials in

1980, prior to a major renovation of Union's Library. MRL government reports were deaccessioned to Columbia's Lehman Library, along with the shelf list. Union's Collection Development Librarian Tony Byrnes sought appropriate library collections for the other volumes.

MRL serials are housed along with Union serials in the general and rare book stacks. They often provide thorough runs of pictorial and textual reports from overseas missionaries. Many are brittle, but thanks to preservation microfilming projects by Yale Divinity School Library and the American Theological Library Association (ATLA), important serial runs have been preserved and are available.

*"For 50 years we have held up
before the people the Word of God,
and the Holy Spirit did the rest. But,
the Apostle Paul put it best of all:
'I planted, Apollos watered,
but God gave the increase.'"*

The pamphlet collection—with over 30,000 pamphlets from the Missionary era, late 1800's to 1960's—continues to be the most heavily used portion of the MRL collection. Scholars whose research leads them to the MRL pamphlet collection are rewarded with information of a perspective not available elsewhere. As a result, this part of the collection has seen heavy use and resulting deterioration. Union has made two applications to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) cooperatively through ATLA, to microfilm and catalog the pamphlets onto an on-line database. Neither grant application was successful, but because the need to preserve and make available this collection is still pressing, the Burke Library continues to pursue avenues to achieve this.

Organizational and denominational reports, including mission board, home mission, and foreign field reports from the early 1900's to the 1960's, make up another heavily-used portion of the MRL collection. A sample of these items gives a picture of the range and depth of the report collection:

Algiers Mission Band.

Woman's Algerian Mission Band Newsletters. 1910-1927.

All-India Women's Conference. 1933.

Aborigines Protection Society. Annual Reports. 1838-1908.

Berlin Missionary Society in China.

Report of Mission School. 1866-1904.

Bishop Gobat's Fund for Missions in Abyssinia, Egypt, Syria and Chaldea. Report. 1863-1863.

Maori Mission Birthday League. 1926-1931.

Mission to the Aristocracy in India. 1921-22.

Mission to Lepers. Hong Kong Auxiliary. Annual Report. 1956.

Pekin Association for the Relief of Destitute Native Women. China. 1901-1911.

Presbyterian church in Ireland. Jungle Tribes Mission. 1920-1924.

John G. Kerr Hospital for the Insane. 1898-1925. Canton, China.

The MRL archive includes missionaries' journals, diaries, correspondence as well as collections from conferences, organizations, societies, and mission boards. Thanks to a New York State Archives project in 1988, these archive collections were added to Research Libraries Information Network's (RLI) archives and manuscript file. Further descriptions of the archival holdings can be found in *Mission Handbook—North American Protestant Ministries Overseas*. More descriptive information on the collections is located in the "Index Guide to the UTS Archives and Mss in the Burke Library," compiled by Tony Byrnes in 1986 and used within

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the library only. Individual finding aids are available for some collections, again for in-house use only. To give a flavor of some of the collections of individuals, examples of commonly used collections include:

Emory Ross, a missionary of the Pioneer Disciples of Christ in the Belgian Congo;

Robert Hamill Nassau, a Pioneer Presbyterian missionary in Gabon, where he preceded Albert Schweitzer;

Lorenzo Warriner Pease, Presbyterian missionary in Cyprus;

James Whitford Bashford, resident Methodist minister in China;

Matilda Calder Thurston, Protestant missionary in China, who founded and was the first president of Ginling, the first Christian Woman's college in China;

Henry Gerhard Appenzeller, Methodist missionary in Korea;

John Raleigh Mott, Methodist layman and ecumenist who envisioned the MRL and collected Edinburgh Conference papers, which are in this collection.

The MRL is now a fully integrated collection within the Burke Library. There is no longer an MRL Advisory Board or dedicated funding. There is no longer one person in charge; the library staff takes responsibility for the collection. Reference Librarians Seth Kasten and Andrew Kadel provide public service for the collections. [During her tenure at Union, Ms. Frame looked after its archival and physical maintenance.]

Material on World Christianity and Missions continues to be collected on a research level, including the maintenance of periodical subscriptions for mission societies, subscriptions to reports, proceedings of conferences, and purchase of major works on the history of missions. The library is accessible to qualified scholars, but being a special collection, access requires special application.

The collection could benefit from more preservation, cataloging, arrangement,

description and outreach. But even without further activity, it remains a significant and accessible research collection for mission-related materials, one which would make John R. Mott, Charles Fahs and Hollis Hering proud.

Notes

¹Hering, Hollis W. 193 1. "The Research Library and the Research Librarian," *Special Libraries* 22:7-1 1.

²*Union Theological Seminary Catalog*, 1957-58.

³[Fahs, Charles H.?]. "The Missionary Research Library." April, 1934. Unpublished typescript.

⁴Hering, Hollis W. "The Missionary Research Library, 1914-1039: An Accounting for Twenty-Five Years. Presented at the meeting of the Library Committee on June 3, 1939." Unpublished typescript.

⁵Beaver, R. Pierce. 1968. "The Missionary Research Library: A Sketch of Its History." *Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library* vol. 19, no. 2.

⁶*Dictionary Catalog of the Missionary Research Library*, New York. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1968.

⁷*Union Theological Seminary Catalog*, 1957/58.

⁸Kadel, Andrew G. *Collection Development Plan for the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York*. May, 1996. ■