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Justin Winsor, 1831-1897, at Boston Public Library and Harvard

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Abstract:

Justin Winsor (1831-1897) was president of the American Library Association from its founding in 1876 up through the conference of 1885, and president again in 1897. During his career he also headed the Boston Public Library (1868-1877) and then the Harvard University Library (1877-1897). Now he is known primarily as the leading exemplar of the "scholar-librarian." This paper examines the criteria for professional leadership at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, and it indicates that Winsor's understanding of libraries and his accomplishments as a librarian brought him to the fore. The paper also suggests that Winsor's turning to scholarly pursuits may have resulted from his being unable to accomplish as a librarian what he wished to at Harvard.

Justin Winsor (1831-1897) is not nearly as well known to librarians of the twenty-first century as is Melvil Dewey. He did not create a classification system. He did not start the major journal in librarianship; he did not establish the first library school; and, certainly, controversy does not swirl around his name. Yet, Justin Winsor was the first president of the American Library Association (ALA); and he was not just the first president. He was chosen president again and again, up through the conference of 1885, and then yet once again in 1897. Winsor also headed up in the course of his career two of the largest libraries in America. At the Boston Public Library (BPL), he presided over what was for a time the largest library on the continent, the library that was at the same time the most accessible in the world. It was the preeminent public library. Then, when he left that library, he presided over the preeminent university library in the United States, at Harvard University, the oldest university in the United States. He was also a successful head of those two institutions, greatly increasing the usefulness of both.

Winsor was also a prominent historian. He edited two major multi-volume histories: *The Memorial History of Boston* (1880-1881) and the *Narrative and Critical History of America* (1886-1889). He chaired in 1884 the meeting that resulted in the formation of the American Historical Association; and in 1886 he was chosen that organization's president. In the 1890s he published other historical works that were based on his cartographical studies.

To his contemporaries Justin Winsor was probably seen as the most important American librarian of his era. That is not, however, how we see Winsor today. To us, his influence does not seem as great as Melvil Dewey's. We, instead, see Winsor as an iconic figure--the preeminent exemplar of the scholar-librarian, back when librarians not only read books but wrote them, back during the supposed golden age of librarianship, when men (I use "men" deliberately), men who could equally well have been "captains of industry," steered the destiny of libraries—and were esteemed (both they and their institutions) far and wide in American society.

In this paper I will use the example of Winsor to examine the criteria for professional leadership, both within an institution and within librarianship. I will argue that it is Winsor's understanding of libraries and his accomplishments as a librarian—at the Boston Public Library--along with his personality, that brought him to the fore of librarianship. And, I will point out the irony that what we most remember him for—his being a "scholar-librarian"—resulted from the possibilities for creative librarianship being diminished at Harvard in comparison with the BPL.

Before looking at Winsor as a librarian, it is necessary to give some idea of his early life. He early showed an interest in the two fields in which he would later excel. While still a student in high school, he wrote and published a history of the town of Duxbury. When he went to Harvard, he lived in the same boarding house as Harvard's librarian, John Langdon Sibley, who had also written a town history. Sibley gave the young Winsor unusual library privileges. He permitted him to enter the alcoves, which meant, in effect, being able to go into the stacks (to use modern terminology), when no one else could, certainly not other undergraduates. Perhaps Sibley also shaped Winsor's interests, for it is recorded that Winsor read Antonio Panizzi's testimony about the British Museum library in a Parliamentary blue book. Even allowing for the fact that interest in libraries was then widespread (a Nicholson Baker was not needed to get some press for libraries), it cannot have been common for Harvard undergraduates to read about libraries.

Winsor's turn to library work was not, however, a direct result of conversation, reading, and library use during his undergraduate years. To become a librarian was not the dream of this son of a well-off merchant shipper of Boston. In fact, Winsor did not finish his education at Harvard. He left in his senior year (his departure was not entirely voluntary) in order to study in Europe the languages and literatures of France and Germany. Upon returning home, he sought to have a literary career, writing essays, poetry, and literary criticism, though without particular success, certainly without acquiring fame. By chance, his name having been suggested by a friend, in 1866, he was asked to serve on the Board of Trustees of the Boston Public Library. He made such a positive impression that the following year, 1867, he was appointed head of the Examining Committee. This body was a carryover from the tradition in libraries of having an "examining committee" that actually examined the collection annually in order to determine whether the books were all accounted for. But, at the BPL the Examining Committee was expected to report on the operations of the library. Winsor produced a most unusual report. It filled 53 pages of the annual report of the Trustees, so that in length alone it was impressive. The report also showed an extraordinarily detailed knowledge of the library, and at the same time it was a masterpiece of clear and logical exposition.

Winsor used the technique of asking a series of questions. Thus, under "Building," he asked: What are its main defects? and What is the remedy? Under books, he asked such questions as: Does the record of donations show on the part of the public a sustained interest in the library? Is a due amount of current literature purchased? Under catalogues: Are they well devised, in good order, and well

kept up? Under Administration: Is the library conducted so as to be as useful as possible to all classes? Is the library open as much as possible? Under Circulation: Is the circulation satisfactory? What is the character of reading in the Bates Hall? (the non-circulating collection) with the same question being asked of the Lower Hall, where the circulating collection was borrowed. Can anything more be done to guard the books from mutilation and loss? There were more questions, but to list these alone is to show that Winsor raised the important ones for that era. Then, in his answers he explicitly stated the concerns that the report's readers might have; he appeared to hold nothing back; and he supported his arguments with statistics and information on practices of both the BPL and other libraries, including ones abroad.

The following year, 1868, Charles Coffin Jewett, the Superintendent of the Boston Public Library, had a stroke and died. Winsor was asked to become "superintendent," the title used for the director of the library. He was obviously the logical choice. Not only well read in several languages, he had also demonstrated that he understood the institution and its purposes. Thus, through a series of chances, the thirty-seven year old Winsor came to occupy what was arguably the most important position in American librarianship.

That Winsor became a librarian as a second career was not unusual for that time. Samuel Swett Green of the Worcester Public Library most closely paralleled Winsor's path, in that he, too, became head librarian, at the age of 34, after first becoming a trustee and the author of a report on the library. K. August Linderfelt (age 33, Milwaukee Public Library), Josephus N. Larned (age 41, Buffalo), Henry M. Utley (age 49, Detroit), John Cotton Dana (age 33, Denver), and William H. Brett (age 38, Cleveland), Henry James Carr (age 37, Grand Rapids)--all also ALA presidents--pursued other careers before becoming librarians. Ainsworth Rand Spofford became Assistant Librarian of Congress at the age of 36, after having been a bookseller and newspaper reporter. Henry Augustus Homes accepted a position at the New York State Library at the age of 42.

Contemporaries well realized that second-career librarianship was common, and there was a stereotype that such people had earlier been failures--presumably, were also failures in librarianship. Winsor himself succumbed to the stereotype: "Let me say that the day is passed when librarianships should be filled with teachers who have failed in discipline, or with clergymen whose only merit is that bronchitis was a demerit in their original calling. The place wants pluck, energy, and a will to find and make a way." Obviously, Winsor was not unusual in being a second-career librarian, and he likewise was not unusual in being one who "found and made a way."

There were, however, individuals whose entire working lives, or nearly so, were spent in librarianship. William Frederick Poole, Charles Ammi Cutter, William Isaac Fletcher, Herbert Putnam, William Coolidge Lane, and, of course, Melville Dewey. Frederick M. Crunden might also be counted among that number since he became a librarian before the age of thirty. All of these men were also president of the ALA.

Although Winsor held what may perhaps have been the most important post in American librarianship, why should he have been ALA president for the long span of years from 1876 to 1885? First of all, he was librarian of a public library in 1876. (The move over to Harvard was in 1877.) The importance of being a public librarian can be statistically demonstrated--even though the 1876 Report on U.S. libraries showed twice as many membership libraries as public libraries (723 as opposed to 342), and even though the initial supporters of a meeting of librarians had not been primarily public librarians. The Boston Athenaeum, The New York Society Library, the New York Mercantile Library, the Apprentices' Library of New York, the Brooklyn Mercantile Library, the Philadelphia Library Company, the Philadelphia Mercantile Library, the Providence Athenaeum, and the St. Louis Mercantile Library--these were among the largest libraries in the country, and librarians of those nine institutions were nearly one third of the twenty-eight individuals who signed the call for a library conference in 1876; and that percentage would increase if one were to include the Astor Library. Yet, only one of the librarians of those institutions ever occupied the post of ALA president. Charles Ammi Cutter was a special case

because of his pioneering work in cataloging and as well because of the wealth and collections of the Boston Athenaeum.

It should also be noted that Cutter had spent his life in library work. So had the only other non-public librarians to become president of the ALA in its early years. If one excludes

Melvil Dewey, the college or university librarians who became president were William Isaac Fletcher of Amherst and William Coolidge Lane of Harvard. They were closely identified with librarianship. They were not academic librarians who had moved over to library work from the professoriat, and they were active in library affairs. Fletcher had served the ALA in various ways and just the year before his election had started a program for instruction in librarianship at Amherst. Lane was also active in the ALA, was a lecturer at the library school at Columbia and later at Albany, and he was also president of the Massachusetts Library Club. In other words, the selection of ALA presidents showed that public librarians were dominant.

Winsor was not just a public librarian; he was librarian of the public library, and what a public library it was!. At 299,869 volumes, the BPL was recorded as being only a hair smaller than the Library of Congress, at 300,000. Moreover, Winsor's Boston Public Library was nearly twice as large as the next largest libraries, the Harvard University Library, and the New York Mercantile Library. Its circulation was recorded as being 758,493 volumes per year, the next largest being the Chicago Public Library, at 403,356.

Winsor's long tenure as president of the ALA must also have something to do with the fact that he looked and acted the part. He had a neatly trimmed beard, and behind it was a man possessed, seemingly, of complete self-confidence, so much so that he was able to pass around credit to others. In, for example, his 1877 report as Superintendent of the Boston Public Library, he mentions a number of staff; he refers twice in friendly terms to Dewey; he acknowledges imitating Poole; and he acknowledges that the janitor leads in seniority on the staff. He also publicly supported staff as a body. This is from that 1877 report: "The skilled workers of the Library, though their labors require a breadth of knowledge and an acumen of the critical faculties . . . are . . . recompensed with salaries, which leave many of them to eke out a support by labors that impair their energies for the morrow's work. If the tax-payers of the city demand this sacrifice, the struggle must go on, and the harness must gall while the goal is reached. There is too much ambition to maintain the good name of the Library to allow any spirit of indifference to abate the labors imposed."

Winsor had also accomplished so much as head of the BPL. He was immensely successful at the three tasks that lay at the heart of librarianship: building collections, making them accessible through catalogs, and getting them used. Winsor clearly did not consider the first a difficult task; for, as he said in the section "Library Memoranda" in the 1876 Report, "The librarian of a great library largely escapes that choosing between books necessarily imposed on those in charge of smaller collections." The BPL had long used European agents and Winsor gave them considerable latitude to select on their own, in part with the goal of speeding up receipt of material. As for American books, trade publications were apparently all supplied to the library so that it was possible to review them. Winsor did face decisions regarding ephemera and government documents, and he thought through the issues. He strongly urged collecting ephemera, arguing that "there is little that a hundred years will not enhance in value." In this, he was definitely a man of his time, for it is possible to find statement after statement from librarians urging that everything printed be preserved. To collect government documents he urged that a few great libraries in various regions institute a system of exchanges and that the states pass legislation requiring local communities to deposit copies of documents to the state libraries and to one other large library in their region. The actual selection of trade publications may well have been carried out largely by agents, for he seems to have instituted this practice at Harvard in order that books would arrive and be available as soon as possible after publication.

Selection was not problematic, but how to handle material after receipt was. Winsor the organizer set up processes so that the library could process some 20,000 volumes a year, as opposed to five to six thousand, and with fuller records more promptly available to the public. Winsor was not a Charles Ammi Cutter or a Melvil Dewey; he did not innovate in classifying; but he did so in another way—one aimed specifically to increase the circulation of books, particularly of non-fiction. That was, of course, a primary goal of librarians. In that era of printed book catalogs which were used by the public, Winsor added notes on content to the catalog for History, Biography, and Travel in the circulating part of the collection. The resulting catalog was highly praised, and Winsor's notes were often incorporated into the catalogs of other libraries. In Quincy, Massachusetts, under the editorial direction of Charles Francis Adams, Jr., a similar catalog was prepared. Winsor claimed that the catalog worked, in that it increased circulation of those materials.

Winsor would have gained the respect of other librarians because he had no reluctance to get into the details. For instance, how should pamphlets be handled? What kinds of bindings should be put on material? Should covers of periodicals be bound in? To Winsor such questions were so important that he wrote: "It cannot be too strongly impressed upon a librarian's notice that he should acquire something of an expert's knowledge of the binder's art."

So were buildings important to Winsor, and he wrote about them in reports and in the 1876 Department of Education Report.

In the third major area of librarianship, getting the books used, Winsor turned his attention to matters other than the catalogs. His goal was to circulate as many books as possible, in other words, to make the library as broadly useful as possible, and to do that required his attention to everything from the amount and type of fiction to buy, to the systems for recording which books were out, to policies on registering new library users, to keeping statistics, to making books accessible to the public, physically and intellectually.

He did not claim to have originated branch libraries and what he called "deliveries," or what a later generation would call "delivery stations," but he advocated for them and eagerly employed them to increase the circulation of books. He shortened the time the public had to wait for books to be delivered. He declined to require the public to periodically register again. That was the course that many libraries took. Not Winsor; he did not want registration to become a barrier to use, so he devised a system that enabled him to have a "dead" file and a "quick" file. And, he kept statistics, statistics, statistics.

The statistics were crucial to Winsor, in that they gave him the data that he could then analyze. To understand Winsor's role it seems necessary to keep in mind that this was what might be called the "heroic period of librarianship," by which I mean that it was the period in which "best practice" was being established. This was especially so at the Boston Public Library, for no institution had faced the task of running both a research library, to use the modern term, and a circulating or popular library. Moreover, the task was made more daunting by the size of the collection and of the population served. Winsor was keenly aware that the practices employed at the BPL might not be appropriate for other libraries, and he stated this explicitly. It seems that he was generous of his time when other librarians came to visit to see for themselves the practices of the BPL, and he clearly had a major hand in Free Public Libraries; Suggestions on Their Foundation and Administration (Boston: Published by the American Social Science Association, 1871), the first edition of which was so rapidly sold out that a second was produced. Note the word "suggestions" in the title. This was not a "guide" a "handbook," or a "manual." It was suggestions. At the same time that that approach would have made him the ideal person to keep a new organization, namely the American Library Association, from splintering, it has perhaps undercut Winsor's long term influence. It may be that there were two major approaches to librarianship at that time. One was to systematize, the other to think through each case based on the institution and the populace it served. Winsor was definitely the latter.

Just as he saw each library as constituting a system whose parts had to work together harmoniously, so did he see the library world as a community whose members might be induced to cooperate. This could be on the local level, as in calling upon libraries in a locale to share responsibility for collection coverage. Or, it could be on a wider level, for Winsor hoped that libraries would cooperate to produce bibliographies and indexes.

When Winsor moved across the river to Harvard, he continued the major emphases of his years at the BPL. Just as earlier, he above all pursued the goal of making libraries as useful as possible. In his second annual report, he wrote: "There should be no bar to the use of books but the rights of others." His long attention to buildings evinced itself in his first report, as he wrote about plans for a new building. There are hints that he hoped to be part of an effort to produce a universal catalog. He sought more funds for publications.

Basically, he had a dream, which he expressed in his first annual report (1878): "I have at all times aimed to enlarge the Library's importance in the eyes of our academic community. I wish to see it become, not merely in complimentary phrase, the centre of the University system, but, in actual working, indispensable and attractive to all." It is not clear what he meant by this, but perhaps a clue is offered by his comments on a presentation at the International Conference of Librarians, held in London in October, 1877: "I hope to see All Souls' and Bodley join forces to become an exemplar for the world. There is no calculating the good capable of coming from a body of educated fellows of an Oxford college devoting themselves to the science of library management. It is a fortuitous and fortunate combination of forces such as the world has never seen, and from its consummation I think we may safely date a new departure and an elevating outcome." And that, too, is not clear.

What does seem clear, even if not provable, is that Winsor was ultimately disappointed at Harvard. He was able to start a publications program, and he did succeed in increasing use by undergraduates. Yet, a policy change such as admitting students to the stacks took a long time. It was first mentioned as a desideratum in 1878, but not written about as accomplished until 1880, and then referred to as having been carried out on a "limited" basis. His attempts at centralizing and unifying the library ultimately failed. His dream of a new building came to nought.

I do not know why, in my opinion, he was unable to accomplish what he hoped to. Was the absence of an adequate library building crucial? Did President Charles William Eliot not support Winsor? Were the faculty unsupportive? There was then a library committee of the faculty.

That the Harvard library could not engage his talents in the way that the BPL did is, I think, why we have Winsor the "scholar." As noted at the beginning, his scholarship—much of it, incidentally, being cooperative—was carried out in the 1880s and 1890s.

It has been suggested that Winsor planned it that way, that the move to Harvard was to free him up to pursue scholarly interests. I do not, however, find signs of that in his first report. I think that, instead, Winsor adapted himself, but that we in his doing so basically lost Winsor the scholarly librarian, and got something less, the scholar-librarian.