

2017

Review of Forging the Future of Special Collections, Melissa A. Hubbard et al. (editors).

Eric Willey

Illinois State University, emwille@ilstu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpml>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Eric Willey. Review of Forging the Future of Special Collections, Melissa A. Hubbard et al. (editors). *Archival Issues* 38, no. 2 (2017): 81-82.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Milner Library at ISU ReD: Research and eData. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty and Staff Publications – Milner Library by an authorized administrator of ISU ReD: Research and eData. For more information, please contact ISUREd@ilstu.edu.

Forging the Future of Special Collections. Edited by Melissa A. Hubbard, Robert H. Jackson, and Arnold Hirshon. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2016. 202 pp. Index, chapter endnotes. Softcover. \$85.00.

Forging the Future of Special Collections is a follow-up book to the “Acknowledging the Past, Forging the Future” colloquium on special collections held in October 2014 at the Kelvin Smith Library of Case Western Reserve University. For this volume, presenters at the colloquium, with the assistance of editors Melissa A. Hubbard, Robert H. Jackson, and Arnold Hirshon, revised their remarks for publication, and their essays have been arranged around three broad themes. These three themes (“Communities,” “The Enduring Object,” and “From Periphery to Center”) lend the volume more structure than some essay collections, although the overall theme of the work is that special collections departments are experiencing a time of transformation brought about by changes in technology, budgets, and institutional missions.

The first section, “Communities,” contains six essays concerning the relationships between special collections librarians and collectors, booksellers, and archivists, and how those relationships are changing. These include donor communities, with E. Haven Hawley discussing how different audiences derive different meanings from objects in the first essay of the book. Jim Kuhn follows, presenting the argument that publicly available collection development policies are extremely valuable in an environment where new acquisitions are often received via donation. Jon A. Lindseth’s essay discusses the importance of retaining physical manuscripts even after they have been digitized and made available electronically. Melissa A. Hubbard stresses the importance of engaging communities as partners and how collections created by local communities can “become a platform for a new community of stakeholders: the producers of records, researchers, students, and other interested parties from the larger community who can become engaged in discourse with one another about the meaning and value of cultural artifacts” (p. 44). In the next essay, Selby Kiffer describes how the collector community (which often becomes the donor community) has moved toward collecting pop culture items and books that produce a “sense of wonder” but that may not be as clearly tied to the curriculum as past collections (p. 49). The final author of the first section of essays, Athena N. Jackson, discusses how digitization and new areas of study such as the digital humanities have changed the profession of special collections librarian.

The second section, “The Enduring Object,” discusses how digital scholarship is changing both the materials in special collections and how patrons interact with those materials. The section begins with Joel Silver’s essay on how television shows such as *Antiques Roadshow*, *American Pickers*, and *Pawn Stars* market rare books and collectibles as entertainment. Paul Ruxin then argues that even in the age of digitization, descriptive bibliography and the close examination of physical books have value in special collections. Alice Schreyer then discusses the value of collaborating closely with donors, students, researchers, and the public in describing collections and how digitization allows for broader collaboration than might otherwise be possible. In the next essay, Tom Congalton describes the sometimes blurry professional boundaries between booksellers, museum curators, and special collections librarians. Daniel

De Simone argues that despite the enthusiasm for and the benefits of digitization, collectors and researchers still share a love of physical books, and libraries should do what they can to encourage this passion in a new generation of users. In the next essay, Ken Lopez discusses how special collections have an ongoing role in preserving “that which elevates us as humans” (p. 100) despite changes in format (e-mail instead of paper correspondence, word processing files instead of hand-corrected manuscripts, etc.). In the final essay of this section, Stephen Ennis also discusses the transition from paper to digital records and the challenges and opportunities it presents.

The third and final section of essays, “From Periphery to Center,” stresses the importance of lessening the gatekeeper role and making special collections materials accessible to students, scholars, and the public in a variety of ways. This section begins with Jay Satterfield’s essay on the rewards of engaging with students directly and allowing them to interpret special collections materials, as opposed to the more traditional curatorial model where staff interpret materials. This concept is reinforced by Christoph Irmischer’s discussion of teaching a small, advanced English course in which each student used an item or items from special collections to complete a semester-long research project. Students also posted about their research to a course blog and sometimes found unexpected connections between their projects. Sarah Thomas urges librarians to process collections quickly even if it results in less-than-full description in what is essentially an argument for bringing More Product, Less Process (MPLP) to special collections backlogs. In the final essay, Mark Dimunation stresses that change is not new to the special collections librarian profession and that special collections have been evolving for a very long time. Dimunation provides some valuable historical context for current changes and offers suggestions for how special collections might ensure their relevance and grow in the future.

Overall, this is a valuable collection of essays, with some slight limitations inherent in the format itself. Authors provide endnotes for their essays to varying degrees, although the essays themselves are often anecdotal in nature rather than the products of peer-reviewed scholarly research. This is not intended as a criticism of the chosen format but merely as a comment on the nature of the essays. The line between a special collections department (rare but published materials) and an archives (unpublished materials) is also somewhat blurred in a small number of essays, but the authors’ insights remain valuable. In fact, this overlap and many of the changes facing special collections (changes in technology, donors, funding, etc.) also apply to archives, and it is likely that archivists would find many of these essays relevant and informative. Many essays are by contributors who work in university settings, and this may limit the relevance to some smaller libraries or local historical societies, but this book is likely to be useful for any reader wishing for a variety of viewpoints on how to navigate some of the many changes and challenges facing special collections.

Eric Willey
Special Collections and Formats Cataloger
Milner Library, Illinois State University