

The Lamont Catalog as a Guide To Book Selection

THE MOST USEFUL volume available to the book selector in college and undergraduate libraries is *The Catalogue of the Lamont Library, Harvard College*.¹ As the collaborative product of Harvard specialists, the Lamont catalog has become, in effect, the successor to the long authoritative Shaw lists.² Its use as a checklist for evaluating and detecting gaps in book collections is outstanding since it contains three times as many titles as the Shaw volumes; furthermore, as Philip J. McNiff, librarian of the Lamont Library, notes in his introduction to it, the Lamont catalog has distinctive value as "an actual, working list rather than an ideal, theoretical listing of books."³

There is a danger, however, that the Lamont catalog will be accepted as a work of great reliability before its reliability has been definitely established. In order to use this kind of bibliography with the best results, the book selector must have a thorough understanding of its nature: he must know what it is supposed to be, how it was developed, and what it actually is.

The *Catalogue of the Lamont Library* is intended to list books which will be used by Harvard undergraduates. The fullest statement of the criterion for selection has been given by Mr. McNiff:

The Lamont Library . . . contains a live,

¹ Philip J. McNiff, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

² Charles B. Shaw, comp., *A List of Books for College Libraries* (2d ed., Chicago: ALA, 1931); [Supplement] 1931-38 (1940).

³ McNiff, p. vii.

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working collection of books selected to serve the required and recommended course reading needs of Harvard undergraduates in addition to a good general collection of books.⁴

The supervisor of the selection project, Edwin E. Williams, has made it explicit that "books ought to be placed in Lamont only because they will be wanted by undergraduates."⁵

Mr. Williams has described in detail the process of selection. A file of titles compiled by librarians was turned over to faculty members, who made final additions and deletions. The initial file was assembled from reading lists prepared by professors for undergraduate courses, from catalogs of house libraries, from the Shaw lists, and from favorable reviews in about 150 journals since 1939. Fields such as art, education, and agriculture were represented by minimum collections because of particular local conditions.

In attempting to determine what the Lamont catalog actually is, viewed in terms of its purpose, one must not be critical of its omissions. More than four thousand titles originally selected were unobtainable at the time the catalog was prepared.⁶ In the French literature section, for instance, there are striking gaps, but out-of-print books in foreign languages are difficult to procure.

Representative of the omissions are some very useful American literature titles: Alfred Kreyborg's *History of American Poetry*, Margaret Mayorga's

⁴ McNiff, p. vii.

⁵ Williams, "The Selection of Books for Lamont," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, III (1949), 386.

⁶ McNiff, p. vii.

Short History of the American Drama, Emory Neff's volume on Robinson, and Irving Howe's study of Faulkner; critical anthologies such as Harry H. Clark's *Major American Poets* and Allan G. Halline's *American Plays*; the "inclusive edition" of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, edited by Emory Holloway; the American Writers Series volumes for Bryant, Cooper, Emerson, Holmes, Irving, Longfellow, Lowell, Poe, Thoreau, Twain, and Whitman; and, to choose one novel, *The Just and the Unjust*, by James Gould Cozzens. The catalog lists an impressive percentage of essential books in the American literature field, but there are important omissions. A book should not be underestimated simply because it is not "in Lamont."

It is presumptuous to contend that a particular book will not be used by Harvard undergraduates, but we may question the inclusion of titles in the catalog with regard to their probable use by undergraduates in general. For example, do students now read Lafcadio Hearn and Agnes Repplier enough to justify eleven volumes by Hearn and twelve by Miss Repplier? A more realistic estimate might call for no more than one or two volumes by each author.

In the American Literature—History and Criticism section of the Lamont catalog, the titles by Bronson, Ellsworth, Farrar, Mitchell, Overton, Richardson, White, and James Wilson are highly questionable inclusions. The books by Cooper, Halsey, and Lawton in *Collective Biography*, and those by Onderdonk and Otis in *Poetry* are similarly suspect. It is difficult to imagine a rationale for their inclusion in an undergraduate library collection.

How often do students study the works of minor nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists? Will forty volumes by Francis Marion Crawford, fourteen by Silas Weir Mitchell, twenty-six by Frank Stockton, ten by Charles Brockden

Brown, and nine by Joseph Hergesheimer be used by undergraduates?

Compare the list of books about Walt Whitman, particularly the biographies, with the comments in Gay Wilson Allen's *Walt Whitman Handbook*⁷ or in the *Literary History of the United States*.⁸ The best titles up to 1953 are there (with the exception of an excellent study by Frederik Schyberg), but so is one of the least trustworthy (Frances Winwar's); the essential books are in the library, but so are the unessential (those by Bailey, Barton, Carpenter, Masters, and Morris). The same observation can be made about the secondary works listed under Emily Dickinson, Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Melville, Poe, Robinson, Thoreau, Whittier, and Wolfe.

This excess is not found only in the section on American literature. As evidence, see the bibliographies for Kant and Kierkegaard in the Philosophy section, for St. Francis of Assisi and Pascal in Religion, for Homer and Virgil in Classics, for Chaucer and Lawrence in English literature, and for Diderot and Hugo in French literature.

Possibly there are convincing reasons for including such a wide range of material in a library for undergraduates. Some of these books might be recommended, or even required, at Harvard. But the selector using the Lamont catalog must be aware that not all of the titles listed are essential, or useful, or even "good" by modern standards.

One source of a large percentage of these superfluous titles might be the 1931 *List of Books for College Libraries*, which was duplicated in the file checked by Harvard faculty members. In many respects, this volume is as out-of-date as a 1940 treatise on polio prevention. Many authors considered important in

(Continued on page 302)

⁷ (Chicago: Packard, 1946), p. 96-102.

⁸ Robert E. Spiller *et al.*, eds., (New York: Macmillan, 1948), III, 759-68.

Lamont Catalog

(Continued from page 268)

the nineteen-twenties are no longer read except by literary historians; critical and interpretive works have been replaced by more recent studies.

Both the Shaw list and the Lamont catalog include large portions of the work of Louise Imogen Guiney, Margaret Deland, and Richard Gilder, for example. The above-mentioned novelists, as well as Lafcadio Hearn and Agnes Repplier, are represented by disproportionate amounts of their writings in both bibliographies. The titles from the History and Criticism, Collective Biography, and Poetry subdivisions cited above are all in the Shaw volume. We know, at least, how these particular books happened to be considered for inclusion in the Lamont Library.

"The faculty has been responsible for Lamont book selection."⁹ This fact is so impressive that one is inclined to accept the catalog as a thoroughly reliable guide. Certainly there is no doubt that the Harvard staff possesses an adequate knowledge of books. But how effectively will a scholar apply this knowledge to the selection of a library for undergraduates?

Even the finest scholar-teacher is hampered in this effort by his own concept of a book's usefulness. The specialist, who is able to discriminate between reliable and questionable material, is bound to regard some books as useful which are of little value to the student; in fact, what is necessarily vital to the scholar is often beyond the comprehension of the undergraduate.

Consider how important the monumental eight-volume *Text of the Canterbury Tales* would be to the specialist. How often will the undergraduate use it? Apply this same test to the ten volumes of Emerson's *Journals*, or to the

⁹ Williams, p. 388.

fragmentary *Life of Poe* by Thomas Holley Chivers, or to the reminiscences of Thomas Wentworth Higginson—or, for that matter, to the minor writings of any author.

These titles, and many others of a similar nature, are in the Lamont catalog. They indicate that the scholar's concept of a useful book sometimes has little relation to the needs of students. If it is true that "an undergraduate faces wasteful and discouraging searches unless he can start with a selection of the most useful material on any field of interest to him,"¹⁰ it would seem that many of the books which are in the Lamont Library are not intended to be there. The generally distributed quality of profusion in the collection actually makes the Library better adapted to the needs of graduate students than to those of undergraduates.

There is no denying, however, that the catalog itself is more useful because of this profusion. Its value as a list from which to choose appropriate titles for any library far surpasses that of more selective bibliographies. Some of the questionable items should be deleted from later editions of the catalog, but its succeeding editions will be welcome, whatever revisions are made.

¹⁰ Williams, p. 387.

Joyce Collection

Given to Cornell

The Cornell University Library has received for its rare book department a James Joyce collection of approximately thirteen hundred items. The major portion of the collection is the gift of William G. Mennen. Other material, including some of Joyce's personal correspondence, has been given by Victor Emanuel and by Waller Barrett.