

Acquiring the Russell papers and other tales

by Bruce Whiteman

William B. Ready. *Files on Parade: A Memoir*. Metuchen, N.J., and London: Scarecrow Press, 1982. Pp. vi, 268. c\$26.45.

OUTSIDE OF THE specialized literature of their field, librarians have contributed surprisingly little to the world of letters. I say surprisingly, because as a profession they are intimately involved with books on a day-to-day basis, and one might therefore expect that not a few would have been drawn to librarianship in the first place not merely by a love of reading but also out of an interest in writing itself. Of course a number of writers have been librarians—Archibald MacLeish and Jorge Luis Borges, for example—but one thinks of them not so much as professional librarians who also wrote, but foremost as writers who happened to direct libraries. With the advent of an increasingly complex technological environment in libraries and the resulting necessity for librarians to be fluent in the specialized language of computers, it has become almost old-fashioned to think of a librarian as a bookman in the former sense. A librarian still does well to have read Shakespeare and Dickens (or Newton and Darwin as the case may be), and to be able to distinguish the three editions of *Gulliver's Travels*, all published in 1726, without consulting a bibliography. But in fact he may be hard put to find employment if he is not also *au courant* with data-base searches and on-line catalogues.

If few librarians have been writers, even fewer have written autobiographies. The lives of the majority of them are in general rather circumscribed by the kind of work which they do (important work, but not of any special public interest), so that, if the impulse to historical reflection does move them, it more often finds an outlet in the composition of a history not of themselves, but of their institutions.

Files on Parade is, then, an uncommon kind of book. Not a true autobiography, in the sense that it deals only passingly with the writer's spiritual or inner development, it is rather (as its sub-title accurately states) a memoir of William Ready's life as a professional librarian. Ready is best known (to his displeasure, as he tells it) as the university librarian who brought the Bertrand Russell papers to McMaster University, and one is glad to have his history of the purchase. That particular acquisition

was a coup of no small magnitude, of course, but it was merely the most prominent feather in a cap well furnished with other ornaments. As chief librarian at Marquette University he acquired the J. R. R. Tolkien archive and the papers of Dorothy Day, and to McMaster he brought among others the papers of John Coulter, Margaret Laurence, Vera Brittain and Sir George Catlin, in addition to the Russell papers, as well as the superb collection of eighteenth-century English books formerly owned by the Irish collector J. Barry Brown. The Barry Brown books formed the basis for what is now perhaps the finest collection of eighteenth-century literature in Canada. Ready began his career as an acquisitions librarian at Stanford, and it is obvious that in spirit, though not in position, he remained an acquisitions librarian. *Files on Parade* contains a good deal of reflection on the place of the library in the scholarly world, in addition to some opinions on the past and future directions of librarianship as a profession, all of which one would certainly expect from a man who was the director of two important academic libraries during his career. Ready's tone is sometimes that of the poet lamenting in the nostalgic intonations of *ubi sunt*, and sometimes that of the prophet who foresees an apocalypse approaching. But it is the stories of the acquisitions—the descriptions of the hunt—which are told with the most evident relish. This is perfectly understandable. After all, many librarians have the opportunity to oversee the installation of some complex and even innovative system for the acquisition or processing of books, but only one can boast of having acquired for his library the papers of Bertrand Russell.

During his lifetime, William Ready published many short stories and book reviews, and his experience as a writer stood him in good stead when he came to write his memoir. The style is in general fresh and readable. For the most part the various facets of the book—the autobiography, the intellectual reflection, and the adventures recounted—blend together well and in such a fashion as to keep the reader engrossed. Ready died shortly after completing the book, however, and it suffers from his not having been able to revise and edit the manuscript. A number of incidents are repeated two or even three times, and the prose—which mostly manages to balance itself between an anecdotal and a formal style—occasionally becomes somewhat scrappy or too breezy. There are in addition some mistakes in the text whose fault may lie with the publisher rather than the author. For example, a list of classification systems on p. 24 includes UBC (certainly a recognizable acronym, but it is the Universal Decimal Classification that was intended), and the date given on p. 222 for an edition of Pope's works as 1960 ought of course to be 1760. Perhaps the Scarecrow Press felt that it was unfair to edit a book

when the author could not have a hand in the process; but there is no doubt that *Files on Parade* would have benefited from some judicious touching-up.

Perhaps in the circumstances it is unfair to cavil about these points. William B. Ready's two major concerns as a librarian were books and people, and about both he writes in a lively and astute way. Librarians with his imagination, and the ability to realize the projects which that imagination suggested, have always been rare and certainly are not becoming more prevalent. *Files on Parade* is not only a memoir, but a memorial to a man who had those uncommon and enviable qualities.

*Division of Archives and Research Collections
McMaster University Library*