A NEW READING ROOM

Are We There Yet?

I’m very pleased to report that together we have raised $572,000 in gifts and pledges towards the renovation of the former Periodicals Room in Neilson Library, a space currently used as the circulation workroom. Originally, Neilson Library had four reading rooms; now there is one, and the need for an attractive, well lit and comfortable study space has grown more acute. Students have repeatedly asked for more “comfy” chairs, and the limited casual seating in the core area of Neilson’s first floor is full on most afternoons. The planned reading room will feature couches and soft chairs, nooks and small seating areas, casual reading matter, and a few large tables for spreading out materials. It will provide a convenient stopping place between classes or a respite from long study sessions, a place to meet with a professor or study with a friend.

When President Christ recently announced a moratorium on new building projects, an exception was made for the reading room due to the advanced stage of fundraising. As we enter the home stretch, a gap of $150,000 remains. Can you help? Much of the money raised to date has been provided by our members; herein lies the strength of our Friends group. If you believe, as I do, that an elegant and comfortable reading room will enhance anyone’s visit to the library, including prospective students and their parents, please act now. As we anticipate the library’s centennial next fall, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see construction begin on this project. See Page 4 for information about making a gift.

— Ann Shanahan, Chair

In 1955, Nancy Hamilton ’30 won an Academy Award for her documentary film, Helen Keller in Her Story, also known as The Unconquered. Today, her Oscar and her papers are housed at the Sophia Smith Collection. Acquired in 1985, Hamilton’s papers include 125 cans of film that could not be made available to researchers due the fragile condition of the film. In 2006 and 2007, grants from the Friends’ Preservation Fund allowed the film footage (original work prints, including outtakes) to be evaluated, repaired and converted to digital formats. Since 2001, when the collapse of the World Trade Center destroyed the literary archives of Helen Keller International, the Hamilton Papers have grown in scholarly value, and graduate students, filmmakers and film archivists have shown increasing interest in the collection. To learn more, see: http://asteria.fivecolleges.edu/findaids/sophiasmith/mnss476_main.html

Helen Keller’s American Way: From Afflictions to Rights

An illustrated lecture by filmmaker Laurie Block

Thursday, April 2, 2009 at 7:30 PM
Neilson Library Browsing Room

Most people today know Helen Keller only as the deaf blind child in The Miracle Worker, the rest of her remarkable life has largely been forgotten.

Helen Keller (1880-1968) graduated from Radcliffe College and went on to perform in vaudeville and on the silver screen. She became a successful author, a lobbyist and a fundraiser for the American Foundation for the Blind and the American Foundation for the Overseas Blind (now Helen Keller International). In the 1950s she served as a
Greetings from Northampton! My intention was to make this column the last segment of my “whirlwind” tour of Neilson, the branch libraries and the special collections. However, the special collections are such treasure troves that it’s not possible to do all of them justice in this limited space. Thus, I will treat you to the Mortimer Rare Book Room (MRBR) and save the Sophia Smith Collection and the College Archives until the fall newsletter, which, appropriately enough, will coincide with Neilson’s centennial celebration.

Although each of the three collections contains specialized material, they have certain activities in common: all three engage in acquisition, cataloguing, exhibitions and teaching.

During decades of acquisition, the MRBR has assembled some forty thousand volumes (not to mention 370 cuneiform tablets) covering all aspects of historical and contemporary book arts—from medieval manuscripts to contemporary artists’ books in areas from ancient history to zoology. It has recently acquired a number of extraordinary gifts: a collection of sixty seventeenth century maps from the estate of Charlotte S. Wyman ’48, prints and books by artist Bernard Childs from Judith Childs ’53, over one thousand seventeenth and eighteenth century English pamphlets from the estate of professor emeritus Frank Ellis, an original letter from Sylvia Plath ’55 to Sally Rogers presented by Rachael Bartels ’88, and family photographs of Virginia Woolf’s relatives from the estate of Mary L.S. Bennett.

Martin Antonetti, the curator of the Mortimer Rare Book Room, is moving a team of specialists ahead on several fronts. John Lancaster, the recently retired curator of rare books at Amherst College, is now creating on-line records for printed books in the collection. Mel Carlson, the recently retired head of the cataloging department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, is doing the same for approximately one thousand of the MRBR’s hand-written letters, documents and artifacts. And Mark Morford, University of Virginia professor emeritus of classics, is completing his research on the fifteenth century printed books, a project he has been working on for over five years. Cataloging provides better access to the collection, says Karen Kukil, associate curator of special collections, and “scholars from around the world are contacting us in droves.”

MRBR exhibitions include both those created at Smith and those curated elsewhere that include material from Smith’s collection. Kukil tells us that she is writing an exhibition on Yaddo, the writers’ colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, a satellite show for a New York Public Library exhibition of its Yaddo archives. The Smith exhibition, which will be on view from August through October 2009, is entitled “The Literary Lights of Yaddo” and includes selections from the papers of poet Lola Ridge, the late Smith professor Newton Arvin, Sylvia Plath and Constance Carrier ’29. Continued on page 4
Helen Keller’s American Way... continued

Accustomed as we are to almost immediate gratification when it comes to searching for information, it is difficult to imagine what life was like for Smith students one hundred years ago. Here is a glimpse back to that time when the center of campus was a giant work site with the library and John M. Greene Hall both under construction, and Hatfield and the old gym just recently moved to new locations:

“Some are years of upheaval and transformation. Before we can see once more a peaceful and settled smile on the face of our campus, that face is undergoing a treatment worse than even the most severe osteopath could inflict. But it is evil only that good may come, and though 1909 goes out from her college gates with a painfully indistinct idea about just where the ancient landmarks are and with no adequate conception of the glories to be, little 1913 coming up to those gates in the Fall will see precision and new glories which she will take as a matter of course and as the fulfillment of her ideals, but 1910, ’11 and ’12 will rejoice with a deeper joy.

Coming up Main Street and up the College hill, the new library will loom up before us with inspiring dignity. Few of us now appreciate all that this building will add to the beauty and resources of our long-expectant Alma Mater. Crowded into our present reference room and driven to haggle over books after a hasty luncheon, we’ll not know how to behave in this luxurious “browsing room” which is to be open at all times to us all… If this room is the broad way to a liberal education with all its attendant pleasures, the main hall cannot be called the narrow way, although it leads to the true workshop – the large reading room 121x38 which lies across the rear of the building…. Ventilation, light, air and space are all secured, and when our library is finally completed we’ll rejoice in a most gratifying substance of things long-hoped for.”

— Alice Elizabeth Babcock, 1911 writing in the Smith College Monthly, May 1909.

IN MEMORIAM

Enid Epstein Mark ’54 passed away on September 30th, 2008. She is fondly remembered for her smile, her twinkling eyes, her enthusiasm for Smith and her artist’s books. Enid served two terms on the Friends of the Libraries’ Executive Committee, and she made many gifts over the years including a generous bequest to the Mortimer Rare Book Room.

Enid credited the late rare book curator Ruth Mortimer as the person who started her on her career as a book artist. For her 25th reunion, Enid donated some letters to the Rare Book Room that she had received from her classmate and friend, Sylvia Plath. As she and Ruth Mortimer ’53 renewed acquaintance, a conversation about weaving, papermaking and poetry led Ruth to suggest that they collaborate on a book sometime. A print maker, Enid said she knew nothing about making books but she soon enrolled in a course about letterpress printing. In 1986 The Bewildering Thread appeared under the newly-minted ELM Press imprint. It combined lithographs by Enid and poems selected by Ruth Mortimer and Sarah Black. Enid went on to create a dozen books at her ELM Press; an exhibition of her books and some prints will be on display in the library from May 14 through July (see Exhibitions.)

Anticipating the Library

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Laurie Block initiated and is producing, in conjunction with WETA Washington D.C. and WNET/Thirteen, a documentary called Becoming Helen Keller that will air nationally on PBS in 2010. According to Block, “Keller’s long life provides us with a fine lens through which we can view how social change for people with disabilities developed in the twentieth century.”

Block’s work in a variety of media consistently focuses on the cultural history of the body. This includes her award-winning film, FIT: Episodes in the History of the Body (1990). In 1999 she won the Robert Kennedy Radio Journalism Social Justice Award for the four-hour NPR documentary series, Beyond Affliction: The Disability History Project, produced with Jay Allison. Block is co-founder and executive director of Straight Ahead Pictures and its ongoing project, the Disability History Museum.
SPRING EXHIBITIONS

March 16 – May 8
*From Weimar to War: Popular Propaganda in Germany, 1928-1941*
Morgan Gallery, Level 1 and the Book Arts Gallery, Level 3, Neilson Library

May 14 – May 25
*The Heart of Our Place of Learning: Neilson Library’s 100th Anniversary*
Alumnae Gym, Level A

May 14 – May 25
*Cynthia Elbaum ’89: A Photojournalist’s Passion, A Vision Lost*
Level 1 Core, Neilson Library

May 14 – July 31
*The Bewildering Thread: The Work of Enid Mark ’54*
Book Arts Gallery, Level 3, Neilson Library

The Mortimer Book Room... continued

And, finally, teaching—an important and extensive part of the MRBR’s outreach. Along with his many other responsibilities, in the fall of 2008, Martin Antonetti taught “The Artist’s Book in the 20th Century” and will teach a graduate course on the history of the book for Simmons College in the MRBR next summer. During Interterm, Kukil taught “Editing Sylvia Plath’s Correspondence with Marcia Brown Stern ’54” to 21 Smith students, each of whom transcribed and annotated a separate letter. (On the final day of class, Stern paid a visit to talk with the students.) Barbara Blumenthal ’75, rare book specialist, presented books and manuscripts by women travelers for lecturer in archeology Susan Allen’s first-year seminar “Excavating Women” last fall. Many other faculty members, as well, use and refer to MRBR material. For example, this spring, lecturer in art Christine Andrews will take her students there to look at the Books of Hours and other illuminated manuscripts.

Membership Rate Increase and Special Offer

For the first time in seven years the Libraries’ membership dues, along with those of the other three Friends’ groups (Athletics, Botanic Garden and Museum of Art), will increase on May 1st, bringing them more in line with current rates at peer institutions. The revised rates are listed below. If you choose to renew your membership before May 1st, your membership will be extended through the summer of 2010.

The FRIENDS NEWS UPDATE is published twice yearly, in the fall and in the spring. Comments and suggestions may be addressed to Mary Irwin, Executive Secretary, Friends of the Smith College Libraries, Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063, Telephone: (413) 585-2903 or email: mirwin@smith.edu.

FSCL MEMBERSHIP FORM

SHOW YOUR SUPPORT FOR THE SMITH COLLEGE LIBRARIES BY JOINING OR RENEWING YOUR MEMBERSHIP TODAY. Your tax deductible gift helps purchase library materials and enhances the services offered to the college community. Members of the Friends receive this newsletter, invitations to events, and other benefits – for more information, see www.smith.edu/libraries/info/friends.

Membership Levels

- $15 Student/Individual
- $35 Active Member
- $60 Family/Dual
- $125 Contributor
- $300 Sustaining Member
- $600 Benefactor
- $1000 Patron
- $1,500 Champion

Membership Levels After May 1, 2009

- $20 Student/Individual
- $50 Active Member
- $75 Family/Dual
- $150 Contributor
- $300 Sustaining Member
- $1000 Patron
- $1,500 Champion

- My/our company will match the gift.
- I wish to make my gift in honor/in memory of ____________________________
- I wish to designate my gift for the Neilson Library Reading Room Fund.

Name ____________________________ Class ________________ (if alumna)
Address ____________________________________________

Please make your check payable to the Friends of the Smith College Libraries and mail to the FSCL Office, Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063 or, if you prefer, enroll on-line at www.smith.edu/friends.