



The Farnsworth Room, 1916-1947

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NOTES

The Farnsworth Room: 1916-1946

FOR a generation of undergraduates succeeding to the facilities and tobacco-comfort of seven House Libraries, it may be difficult to imagine the green oasis which the Farnsworth Room was to the pre- and postwar generation of twenty-five or thirty years ago. It was the one room to which most of us turned in a free hour to read certain books we had long wanted to read or (more important) to discover others which we well might not have discovered otherwise in that particular lustrum of our lives, if ever. The simple rules regulating one's deportment within the room were not entirely to its full advantage, and they stemmed from a scholastic discipline which the youth of today would not understand. There was no smoking, no sprawling, no notetaking — even for pleasure, no genial informality. Such liberties, of course, were not dreamed of by frequenters. We entered, a pleasant Victorian haze enveloped us, and we read as in a world apart. Mrs Florence Milner — helpful, patient, informed; ready with appropriate answers — presided at her little desk. It was she who edited and introduced a valuable catalogue of the Farnsworth Room, published under the imprint of the Harvard College Library in 1931, and she who is still identified in the minds of us charter readers with a quiet graciousness extended to the freshman on the threshold. A room of many debtors. *Esto perpetuum!*

The Farnsworth Room was opened the fifth of December 1916. That was just thirty years ago. In those thirty years it has passed from an experiment of unpredictable influence to an entity complete and unabridged. By 1931, according to Mrs. Milner, the room had 'served as a model for something like twenty-five similar rooms in both college and public libraries in the United States and Canada.' How many other rooms have since been built in its image I do not know. Probably no small number.

With the completion of the Lamont Undergraduate Library in the not too distant future, the Farnsworth Room will have a fresh setting. In name and books and general physical character it will be transferred to the new building and reopened for the exclusive use of undergraduates. Supplemental to the House Libraries, the new Farnsworth Room will continue to cater to that need of the sequestered and adventurous which the House Libraries, in their more active and functional spheres, do not quite supply.

Meanwhile the Room remains in Widener, its door now open for the first time since 1943. Crowded as the academic schedule is at this writing, some five hundred to six hundred students are using the room each week, and the number is still rising.

The postwar opening has given the administrators an opportunity to take some stock of the books on the Farnsworth shelves; to see which ones might

be jettisoned, and for what reasons, and to devise certain new categories of books which would seem to belong in a reading library of this sort. The catalogue¹ of 1931 is somewhat over-conspicuous in sets occupying too much shelf-footage to justify their collective presence for the two or three significant volumes which they each contain. Thus a complete set of Tolstoi in 28 volumes, one of Bulwer Lytton in 32 volumes, Scott in 48 volumes, and Purchas in 20 volumes call for reevaluation. The room will probably retain but the principal works of the three novelists — perhaps but one of Lytton — and a selection of Purchas. The fairly large shelf dealing with the first World War seems, on the whole, to have outlived its usefulness in this collection. Perhaps a dozen of the books on it will remain. One or two not there will be supplied: *The Spanish Farm Trilogy*, *Undertones of War*, *All Our Yesterdays*, for example. Queer vacancies — no Hudson, no W. W. Jacobs, no Owen Johnson — will be filled. There will be a small shelf of books on college and school-boy life; and on childhood as in Lubbock's *Earlham* and Frank Kendon's *The Small Years*, and in Gosse's immortal *Father and Son*. And another on spectator sports such as baseball, tennis, and the like; and one on sports for solitaries, such as fly fishing, mountain climbing, riding, sailing, and shooting. And one on the joys of walking, and another on traveling. Science for the layman will gather books by Jeans, Haldane, Bradley's *Parade of the Living*, and kindred titles.

¹ The room needs, above all, a card catalogue by authors.

And then there will be a shelf for hobbies, indoor and out — a reasonable coverage — which will include books in certain genial areas of the craftsman and collector. The naturalists ought to be together: and books like *Tarka the Otter*, *The Feet of the Furtive*, *Red Fox*, *Wild Lone*, *White Fang*, *Salar the Salmon*, and Maeterlinck's *La Vie des Abeilles*, distinguishable as a group. Regional books, with a selection of the Rivers of America series and kindred volumes, will have a place. The New England playground and skiground — the Berkshires, the two Capes, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont — will show their lakes, streams and valleys and Appalachian strength in a selected list from Frank Bolles and Walter Prichard Eaton to Weygandt and Odell Shepard, Samuel Chamberlain, and the guide books themselves. Part of a Harvard education is the private mapping of the Northeast Corner — afoot, by car or bicycle, on skis, with a rod, or in a white-water canoe. Here the Southerner, Westerner, and Midwest man will find the cordial introduction.

For all the atomic agèd, there will be a shelf of Utopias, from More to Hudson's *A Crystal Age*, and a shelf for a selection of the world's great letter-writers — to remind one of a failing faculty. Art and music call for segregation; and books on the dance and the cinema. No man's education is in any sense rounded unless he has learned to live in his own company; so there will be a little shelf of loneliness, to include such as *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, *The Outermost House*, *Far Away and Long Ago*, *Lonely Americans*, and Richard Jeffries' *The Story of my Heart*. Embed-

ded in Doyle and Poe, of course, are some of the greatest tales of detection; but we intend to add a foot or so to these volumes — the generally praised and accepted titles such as Sayers' *The Nine Tailors*, Milne's *The Red House Mystery*, and perhaps a dozen others. There will be a half dozen books of cartoons, such as Low, Bateman, Fugasse, Thurber, and Williams. But here as in every other category it would seem unwise to add the merely current or ephemeral. This is a room for lasting things. For myself, I should remember it alone for having given me Cecil Torr's *Small Talk at Wreyland*. And *that* ought to stand in a corner somewhere for books on seclusion and withdrawal: White's *Selborne*, for example, and other fit company such as Taber's *Stowe Notes* and Brewster's *October Farm*.

Beyond a few anthologies and volumes in sets (such as Kipling and Emerson) there will be no poetry, since the Poetry Room is to be housed in the same building. But one will find a carefully selected harvest of light verse, supplementary to a shelf of humorous prose. Last of all, there will be some attempt to offer a representative handful of books about Harvard, factual and fictive; and a collateral shelf of books like Fulleylove and Thomas' *Oxford*, Downs' *Cambridge Past and Present*, and similar volumes surrendering the delights of Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, and sister institu-

tions. Williams College, for example, might be reflected here in Carroll Perry's emerging classic, *A Professor of Life*.

It is not possible here to predict what the physical Farnsworth Room will look like under its new roof. It is my personal hope that it will carry over much of the essential atmosphere of its present state, that the shelves will be low enough to permit a changing list of prints, aquatints, etchings, water-colors, and such to form a casual meander along the top. In short, that it will, much more informally than it does now, truly represent the library of a cultivated person — a library to be remembered vividly by its visitors when they are dispersed in the world as young men entering a business or profession, and building libraries of their own. A time for any man to lay the foundations of his life's reading is in his later school days, his college or university years. If he has not acquired, by the time he is thirty, a few shelves of good and lasting books which for him are always 'home to the instant need of things,' he has neglected or lost not the least valuable part of his education. A small and reasonably rounded collection of books, such as those in the Farnsworth Room, can be both an example and a stimulus. It was that to many young men of my time, and it will surely be the same to many others in the complex days ahead.

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