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## The Cover

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# The Cover

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The materials in the Woman's Building Library emanated from forty American states and territories, the District of Columbia, and twenty-three foreign countries, distributed across four continents.<sup>1</sup> They included valuable manuscripts and rare books, popular, scholarly, and belletristic works, self-published volumes, scrapbooks of journalistic writing, yearbooks, cookbooks, newspapers, and musical scores. At every stage, the development and management of the library involved creativity, cooperation, and the occasional compromise. Its fate after the fair ended was no exception. With its parade of proprietary labels, paying tribute to Northwestern University Library, the Biblioteca Femina, the Chicago Public Library, and the 1893 World's Fair, the bookplate featured on the cover of this issue reflects something of the collection's checkered career after the Columbian Exposition drew to a close.

Although the Woman's Building Library was neither a circulating library nor a reference library, for some it was, nevertheless, in a very real sense, a "working" library. During the entire six-month run of the fair the library was a hive of activity for the team of professionals hired to staff it. Together with half a dozen assistants, senior librarians Ellen M. Coe (director of the New York [City] Free Library), Mary S. Cutler (New York State Library School vice director), and Hannah P. James (of the Osterhout Free Public Library in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania) made themselves available to answer questions and educate fairgoers about the collection, modern librarianship, and the public library movement. Meanwhile, cataloger Edith E. Clarke (head cataloger at the Newberry Library) and her team of compilers attempted to document the thousands of items that amassed in the Woman's Building Library before late September.

Recommended to the Board of Lady Managers by Melvil Dewey, Clarke had obtained a leave of absence from her position at the Newberry in order to lead the cataloging effort in the Woman's Building. Clarke, a graduate of the New York State Library School, had been carefully trained in both the technical intricacies and the ideology of the Dewey system, and her substantial experience and prominent position in the field equipped her with the expertise needed to manage the library and categorize its holdings using the most efficient and up-to-date methods. Yielding, however, to a demand from the library's largest donor, the literary committee of New York State's Board of Lady Managers, the fair's national Board of Lady Managers decided not to integrate and organize by subject matter the myriad collections donated by the various state and foreign committees. Instead, the board allowed the volumes to remain clustered according to state and country of origin, an arrangement that preserved the integrity and prominence of the New York collection. Of course, the resulting geographical organization of materials was completely inconsistent with the Dewey system. Therefore, Dewey suggested that Clarke and her colleagues prepare only a shelf list of the volumes on display and an abbreviated author index to serve as a finding aid.

According to the minutes of the Board of Lady Manager's Executive Committee, Clarke actually took on a much more ambitious project that included three distinct functions. First, she was responsible for "installing, listing, invoicing, classifying, and cataloging each book." This function also included placing a Woman's Building Library bookplate in each volume. In addition, she interviewed and corresponded with the individuals responsible for the various components of the overall collection. Finally, and most impressively, she used "reference books and correspondence" to "[gather] statistics concerning each author and [incorporate] them in the Catalog."

In her preface to her *List of Books Sent by Home and Foreign Committees to the Library of the Woman's Building*, Clarke refers to this "card catalogue of authors, classes and biographical statistics of authors which was prepared at the Library of the Woman's Building from May to August, during the Fair."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Clarke records, "the printing of that more elaborate catalogue was found too costly for present means." Moreover, not only was the catalog never printed from the cards so carefully prepared, but the card catalog itself was eventually lost. Consequently, the only comprehensive record of books in the Woman's Building Library that is known to have survived is Clarke's abbreviated *List of Books*, which was based on the card catalog. Some of the individual state boards prepared catalogs of their own, but discrepancies exist between these state bibliographies and Clarke's definitive, state-by-state listings.<sup>3</sup>

Clarke makes special acknowledgment in her preface "of nearly 4,000 books which are presented as a nucleus of a Woman's Memorial Library."<sup>4</sup> The Board of Lady Managers hoped that this collection could be housed in a permanent Woman's Memorial Building to be erected after the fair ended. Such a collection would complement the more than 2,000 volumes from the Woman's Building Library donated by the women of New York to their state library at Albany. Despite a pledge of \$200,000 from Potter Palmer, however, this permanent building never materialized.<sup>5</sup> Instead the volumes were stored temporarily at the Newberry and then donated to the Chicago Public Library, where they were given Chicago Public Library bookplates.<sup>6</sup> In 1933, following an exhibit organized for the International Conclave of Women Writers and inspired by the Woman's Building Library of the World's Columbian Exposition, the National Council of Women of the United States donated 1,000 volumes of women's writing to Northwestern University Library. Theodore Koch, the library's director, renamed the collection the Biblioteca Femina, after Italy's Biblioteca Femina, and sought to supplement it with the remaining Woman's Building collection from the Chicago Public Library. In 1936 the acquisition was completed with the transfer of 1,234 Woman's Building Library books to Northwestern.<sup>7</sup>

Like the Woman's Building Library, the Biblioteca Femina was conceived as a distinct entity of texts, separated from the larger body of written material on the basis of gender. Evidently, the decision to establish a special collection defined by gender was as controversial in the early-twentieth-century university as it was at the late-nineteenth-century World's Fair. Following Koch's death in 1941, the Biblioteca Femina books were merged with

the university's general collection and dispersed throughout its libraries. Thirty years earlier, in 1911, the monumental New York collection had been destroyed by a fire in the state capitol. Thus, before the middle of the twentieth century, the two largest components of the Woman's Building Library were lost as distinct and fully recoverable collections of books.

## Notes

1. Except where other sources are noted, information in this essay is drawn from Sarah A. Wadsworth and Wayne A. Wiegand, "'Right Here I See My Own Books': A History and Analysis of the Woman's Building Library (World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893)," manuscript.
2. Edith E. Clarke, *List of Books Sent by Home and Foreign Committees to the Library of the Woman's Building, World's Columbian Exposition, 1893* ([Chicago, 1894]).
3. Ibid., preface, n.p. Clarke notes that these state catalogs sometimes listed books that were not received at the Woman's Building Library. In some cases, books may have arrived after 20 September 1893, when Clarke concluded her work on the catalog. In other cases, some books may have appeared in state exhibits at the fair rather than in the Woman's Building Library. See also Bernice E. Gallagher, *Illinois Women Novelists in the Nineteenth Century: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 2–3.
4. Ibid. The shelf list can be viewed online at <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/clarke/library/library.html>.
5. Gallagher, *Illinois Women Novelists*, 2.
6. *Biblioteca Femina: By a Woman Witt* (catalog) (Northwestern University Library, 1983), 2.
7. Ibid.