Mostly in the Line of Duty
"I had been for thirty years a happy librarian, first inside my country and later outside. . . ."

Photograph by Chase Studios, Ltd., taken on the occasion of the author's farewell speech as president of the International Federation of Library Associations on 23 November 1974 in Washington, D.C.
Mostly in the Line of Duty

THIRTY YEARS WITH BOOKS

by

HERMAN LIEBAERS

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IT ALL STARTED with the American Library Association (ALA) which wanted to celebrate its centenary in 1976 at its headquarters in Chicago. With five American librarians and non-librarians I was invited to give a centennial paper. I declined the flattering offer because I had left the profession and had no time to do any research. I added innocently, however, that I would be delighted to speak out of personal experience, for instance on the importance of American librarianship in my professional life. This proposal was accepted; I delivered the lecture and my text was printed in Libraries and the Life of the Mind.

Before I had read my paper in Chicago I received a request from the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) to contribute with Recollections of a President to the fiftieth anniversary volume of IFLA (1927-1977). For reasons with which I agreed IFLA did not publish my paper in full, such as it is given here as chapter 10. I am confident that no one will compare the two versions in order to try to find out what has been left out in the earlier printing. Two other papers have appeared in German Festschriften, one for Kurt Köster from Frankfurt-a/M (chapter 7) and one for Gerhard Liebers from Münster (chapter 5) the former being focussed to accord with the interest of the recipient on medieval Dutch manuscripts, the latter, for similar reasons, on library buildings.

The tone set by the ALA paper and kept by the other requested articles and the chapters which I added on my own initiative shows clearly that this book is half-way between an autobiography and a collection of professional papers. It is a blend, like most of my life has been. The word which I would prefer to use for blend or
mixture would be “bastarda.” It is not listed in the dictionary though it exists with a very specific meaning: the handwriting of the Burgundian manuscripts. All I would like to do is to broaden its meaning slightly and use it as a type of blend applied solely to the people living in what is today called Belgium. For thirty years I have not missed one opportunity to look with love at the Burgundian *bastarda* used in all those princely manuscripts which still represent the rich core of the Royal Library in Brussels. This calligraphic handwriting, a mixture of Gothic and Roman, and blending the qualities of both, has been used to write impressive chronicles of England and of France, also some historical fiction to prove that Philip the Good descended straight from Alexander the Great, with from time to time a sly wink of the eye towards God, as in the glorious *Vita Christi* written in Brussels in 1461 where the *bastarda* matches the exquisite miniatures from the hand of Loyset Liedet.

The very conception of the various chapters excluded a chronological sequence. The book can be read backwards, except for the preface which I wrote last. It can also be read piecemeal, which would certainly be to my advantage because not much consistency went into these pages. Foreign readers are advised to skip chapter 2, as being too heavy with domestic flavour which could be dull from a distance. The situations to which it refers do not travel too well.

The danger of duplication has been my constant worry. The manner in which I spread the material over the various chapters led unavoidably to factual repetitions, but I was careful to limit any detailed treatment to the chapter which seemed most relevant to me. So I leave Brussels several times for my first trip to the United States, but I dealt with it only at some length in chapter 2. There are numerous other examples because I had the feeling that so many activities occurred simultaneously in my life which I, at least, felt worthwhile recording.

The bastard character of this publication lies not always in the way the subject matter has been dealt with but also in the choice of the language. All chapters but one were originally written in English. *Of Men and Books* was written in French because it was published in a Brussels Miscellanea where all contributions had to be in the language of the smaller half of the Belgian population and also of some people outside Belgium. Although I am a poorly
trained linguist the language phenomenon remains always with me, more from a sociological than from a philological point of view. At the family level I am living in Dutch, at social events I speak mostly French, and when it comes to professional experience, English comes readily to my mind. Hence it was quite natural for me to write down these recollections in a foreign language. It was, however, awful to rewrite *Of Men and Books* from French into English and I am afraid the result will again give a pejorative meaning to that lovely bastard feeling.

Clark Stillman corrected most of my mistakes, except in those sentences where he felt that I was exaggerating his exceptional qualities and qualifications. Since I started from scratch, without the slightest note because all that counted for me was the event of the next day, there were innumerable gaps in my draft, relating mainly to dates and titles, sometimes to more important factual omissions. Erna Jacobs, a former colleague at the Royal Library and once my international secretary, not only filled them in but also corrected those which I thought I had remembered rightly. Anne Thienpont, whose English is poorer than mine but who reads my handwriting better than I do, typed all chapters several times. She was kind enough to tell me that it improved her English.

I am grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation which allowed me to finish the manuscript at its International Study and Conference Centre at Bellagio, Italy.

It has been fun to write this book. I thank all those who induced me to start with it. They forced me, for the first time, to take a hindsight look. This also turned out to be a reason for gratitude. It all happened at an appropriate moment, just when I was about to turn over a new leaf. Indeed the story ends rather abruptly with my resignation from the Council on Library Resources in Washington after the King of the Belgians asked me to work for him. My doubts about my ability to meet his expectations were numerous, but the King waved them off airily: “You only have to cross the street from the Library to the Palace.” I was soon to realize that I needed more than a topographical knowledge of Brussels to understand what he meant.

H.L.
July 1979
Acknowledgements

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“Personal Recollections of IFLA” in IFLA’s First Fifty Years (Mün­chen, Verlag Dokumentation, 1977).


“Des livres et des hommes” in Liber Amicorum Léo Moulin (Bruxel­les, Elsevier-Seqouia, 1979)

All these papers have been revised and/or extended.