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Willard Fiske: The Journeys of a Bibliophile

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The name of Daniel Willard Fiske is familiar to many in the Cornell community with an interest in the history of the university. Extensive resources on his life—correspondence, published writings, photographs—exist in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections. Willard Fiske was born not far from Watertown, New York, on 11 November 1831. His origins were modest but respectable; several New England ancestors were prominent educators. Willard was imaginative and gregarious, with a fondness, as an adolescent, for tales and legends of medieval Scandinavia.

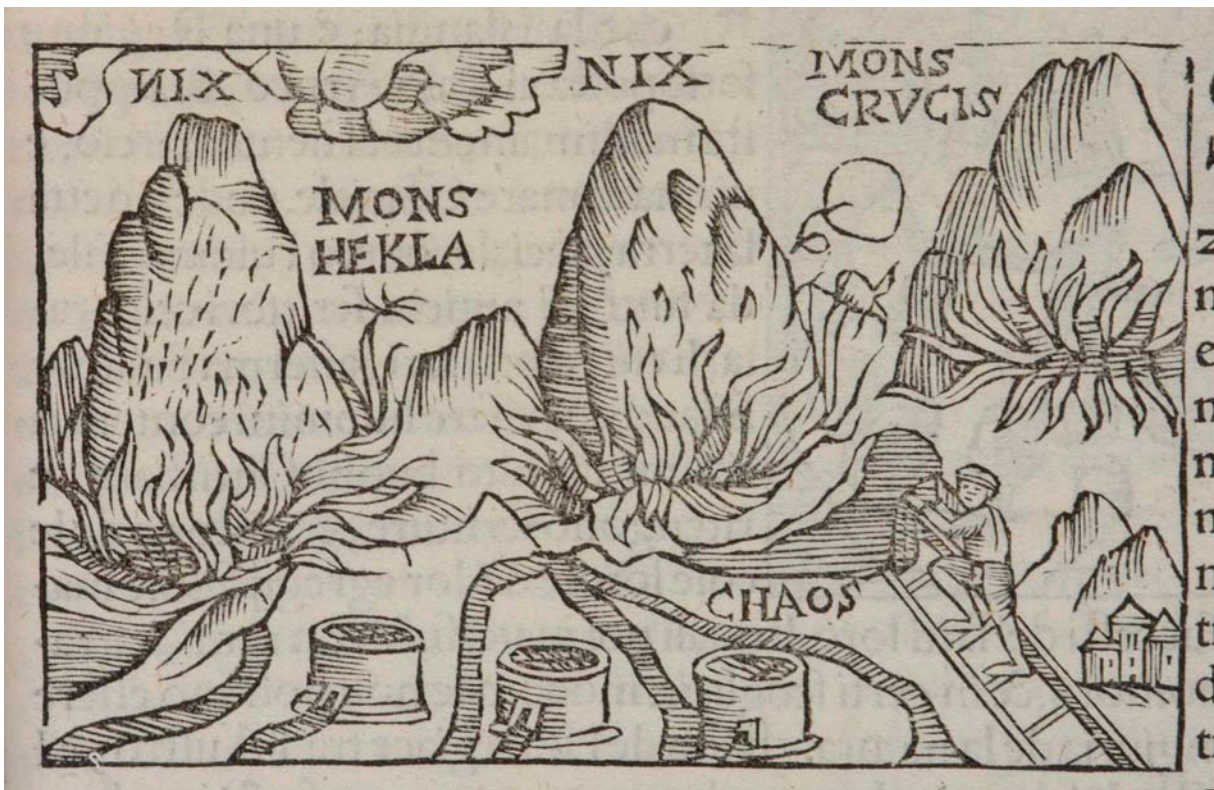
Fiske left for Europe after two years at Hamilton College. By the time he reached Scandinavia, he had traveled through and written extensively about the German lands he visited, and he had tried to wend his way through the no-man's-land of the conflict between Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark to reach his destination. In Copenhagen, he visited and described the "lore of ages" in the Royal Library as "a book-pile of almost half a million volumes." Already proficient in German, he learned Danish and Icelandic in Copenhagen. In Uppsala, he became fluent enough to deliver lectures on British and American literature at the university in Swedish. He read newspapers in French,



Decorated initial from Petrarcha, *Trionfi, Canzoniere*. Manuscript on vellum. Italy (Florence), 1465-1470.

picked up Italian from a waiter, and also learned Russian, with its "remarkably difficult alphabet," though there was otherwise "no great obstacle to its acquisition."

Returning to Copenhagen from Uppsala in July 1852, Willard Fiske missed his passage for Iceland by four days. Nevertheless, with virtually no income to spare, he began to collect the first books of his Icelandic Collection. In April 1853 he wrote to the great Nordic scholar Carl Christian Rafn to report on his unstinting progress in reading Old Norse.



"Chaos (Mount Hekla, Iceland)"
from Olaus Magnus.

*Historia delle
Genti et della
Natvra Cose
Settentrional.*
Venice, 1565.

In the meantime he pursued a succession of occupations, among them as a librarian in the Astor Library in New York and as editor of the *Syracuse Daily Journal*. Fascinated by chess and a capable player himself, he edited *The Chess Monthly* with the grand master Paul Morphy from 1857 to 1861. He traveled to Europe and the Middle East, especially Egypt, and served as a minor diplomat in Vienna.

In the fall of 1868, soon after Cornell was founded, Willard Fiske became both university librarian and professor of North European languages. For a decade he taught and laid for the library a professional foundation, the product of his experiences in Europe, his tenure at the Astor Library, and his active imagination. He also occupied himself with Psi Upsilon, his beloved fraternity.

His health afflicting him, Fiske went on leave from his university posts and sailed to Europe. In the summer of 1879, he fulfilled his dream of visiting Iceland, sojourning three months on the island in the company of two other Americans and endearing himself to a people for whom he had already manifested considerable generosity by organizing donations of books from America. The last line of his poem "Nearing Iceland" speaks of one other love even closer to him than this remote nation, Jennie McGraw, the wealthy, bright and sadly consumptive heiress whom Fiske finally married in Berlin in July 1880: "Thou rul'st my mind as she o'ersways my heart." Fiske had been secretly composing poems to Jennie for a dozen years. In July 1881, not three months before her death, Jennie gave Willard a first-anniversary gift: "a folio French translation of one of

Petrarch's works, the binding of which is as lovely as possible."

Willard Fiske "just about exhausted his field," in the words of Morris Bishop, to create his Petrarch collection. Fiske began collecting Petrarch in the spring of 1881, and he issued bibliographies describing the collection as it grew. The collection arrived at Cornell in 1905 as part of Willard Fiske's bequest to the university. The Fiske Petrarch Collection, now in excess of 5000 volumes, including precious manuscripts of the *Rime* and the *Trionfi*, underscores Francesco Petrarca's repute not only as a virtually unsurpassed poet of the Italian Renaissance who perfected the Italian sonnet but also as one of the great Latinists of the era.

The Rhaeto-Romanic Collection, by far the smallest of the four Fiske collections at Cornell with some 1300 volumes, evolved almost by accident. Sent in the summer of 1891 to take the medicinal baths at Tarasp in the Swiss Alps, Fiske had plenty of free time and went for a walk to Scuol, a nearby village, where he saw several books in Romansch for sale in a shop window. Five weeks later, he and Professor Edward Payson Evans of Michigan, having scoured the hamlets throughout the region and bought more from various bookshops, wound up their little expedition, and the books went forthwith to Cornell.

In April 1892, in Italy, Willard Fiske purchased on impulse a 1536 edition of the *Divine Comedy* and had it sent directly to Cornell. The Fiske Dante Collection grew out of this first acquisition during the rest of the 1890s, and now numbers



Michele Schemboche. *Portrait of Willard Fiske*, ca. 1900.
Platinum print photograph



Beardsley. *Portrait of Jennie McGraw*, ca. 1880.
Albumen print photograph

around 10,000 volumes. Once again, Willard Fiske acquired everything available and worth having. Among the printings from the Incunabula period (before about 1500) in the collection is a first (1472) edition of the *Divina Commedia* from the town of Foligno (Italy). Cornell's copy of the Foligno is remarkable for its decorative initials, marginalia, and robust condition. The editions and translations of Dante Alighieri's works—the *Divina Commedia*, the *Vita Nuova*, and other volumes of poetry and philosophy—are too numerous to suggest more than a few examples; as with Petrarch, Fiske's achievement with Dante was nothing less than spectacular.

In the same year of 1892, Willard Fiske purchased the Villa Landor on the edge of Fiesole, and there he lived the rest of his life, although he traveled much. Among his journeys were a couple of renewed visits to Egypt, where he and Jennie had gone on their wedding trip in 1880. During these Egyptian sojourns, Fiske studied Arabic and worked on a scheme to romanize Egyptian Arabic. When in Fiesole he catalogued his books and published bibliographies and articles on his collections, including the steadily growing Icelandic collection.

For nearly a half-century, Fiske had added to his Icelandic collection, starting from a noteworthy few books he brought back from Scandinavia in 1852. In 1899 alone, he acquired "between eight and nine hundred volumes, and about three thousand pamphlets" in Copenhagen. He also employed two young Icelanders, Bjarni Jónsson (for a year) and Halldór Hermannsson (later first curator of the Fiske Icelandic Collection), to assist him in the cataloguing. Both Bjarni and Halldór traveled on Fiske's behalf, and Halldór Hermannsson was on a buying trip in Copenhagen when he received word of the death of Willard Fiske, not quite seventy-three years old, in Frankfurt am Main on 17 September 1904. Today the Fiske Icelandic Collection, with 40,000 volumes, remains one of the chief repositories in the world on Norse civilization and Iceland from the Middle Ages to the modern era, a living and growing legacy of its founder and of his young associate, the first curator.

In "The Passionate Collector: Willard Fiske and his Libraries," on view in the Hirshland Exhibition Gallery, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University, from 10 February to

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Unit in the Spotlight

Mann Library



Public Services, from left:
*Jim Morris-Knower, Meredith McClure-Scott,
Kornelia Tancheva, and Nan Hyland*



Technical Services, from left: *Roswitha Clark, Jim Spear, Marijo Wilson ,
Betsy Elswit , Brian Lowe, Keith Jenkins, Cindy Sweet, Liisa Moble, Steve
Pantle , Nathan Rupp , Angela Ferris, and Bill Kara*



Collection Development, from left: *Linda Stewart (sitting on left), Mary Ochs,
Joy Paulson, Guy Smith, Scott Wiessinger, Benjamin Addom, Phil Davis,
Nicole Joos, Lee LaFleur, Greg Lawrence, Frank Brown, Olivia Vent, and
Judy Wayno (sitting on right).*



Information Technology Services, above: *John Ferreira, Holly Mistlebauer, Jon Corson-Rikert, Tim Lynch, Philip Halcomb, and Bill Klinko*



Administration, left: *Shirley Cowles, Christina Rice, Eveline Ferretti, and Janet McCue*

Public Services, below: *Howard Raskin, Jeff Diver, and Gail Steinhart*



Access Services, left:
 Front: *Meg Ackersblade, Meredith McClure-Scott, Theresa Wells, Betsy Bush, Margie Ditmars, Nancy Dailey*
 Back: *Tom Clausen, Tom Trutt, Jeff Piestrak*

Kaleidoscope Readers Say, “We Like It!”

Last semester CUL staff members were surveyed to assess their opinions about the content and format of *Kaleidoscope*. We are pleased to report that 58 percent of the staff returned the survey (a response rate that would thrill most direct-mail marketers!). As for the editorial committee, we were delighted to learn that 95 percent of those staff members read *Kaleidoscope* regularly and approximately one-third read it “cover-to-cover.” (Other respondents were split almost evenly: 30 percent usually read just the articles that look interesting to them and 30 percent skim the newsletter.)

Here are some of the other results of the survey:

How important is it to you that CUL publishes a newsletter like *Kaleidoscope*?

Very important 24%
Somewhat important 41%
Neutral 16%
Not very important 9%
Not at all important 5%
No response 5%

Which articles do you find most interesting?

(Respondents could check as many as they wished, so results are listed below in order of popularity.)

“People News” 74%
Photos from staff events 67%
Reports about library projects 63%
Service awards 57%
Library exhibits; staff members’ personal stories; and “Unit in the Spotlight” 48% (each topic)
Promotions of librarians 41%

If *Kaleidoscope* were only published on the Web, would you read it?

Yes 40%
Maybe 34%
Probably Not 22%
Definitely Not 4%

Most respondents who commented about an electronic vs. print publication expressed a preference for continuing to produce the newsletter in print. A number of people indicated that if cost-cutting was necessary, they would rather see *Kaleidoscope* produced in black and white again rather than converted to a Web-only publication.

Many respondents also took the time to write comments and offer suggestions about *Kaleidoscope*. Although space does not permit us to print every comment, we’ve attempted to summarize the gist of the responses received to the following questions.

What, if anything, do you think we shouldn’t publish in *Kaleidoscope*?

- ★ personal stories and travelogues
- ★ stories that have already been published in the *Cornell Chronicle* (especially articles about exhibitions), *Pawprint*, *IRIS News & Notes*, or other campus publications

What do you think the benefits of *Kaleidoscope* are to CUL staff members?

- ★ keeps us informed of people and activities in other libraries and units
- ★ helps us feel connected to other library staff members
- ★ helps us feel unified and promotes a community feeling within a very large organization
- ★ it’s the only “CUL-wide” publication ... the only forum that brings the entire library system together
- ★ more “personal” than CU-Lib listserv
- ★ offers a sense of shared identity

People News--continued from page 8

Goodbye

Good-bye and good luck to **Luke Johnson**, Engineering Library, **Lee Lafleur**, Mann Library, **Derek Messie**, DLIT, and **Sara Spoonhower**, O/K/U Circulation, who recently left the Library.

The Library also says good bye and good luck to **Susan Currie**, IRIS Administration, Director of Resources and Planning, who left the Library after 24 years.



People News



Welcome

Welcome to **Camille Andrews** who has accepted a permanent position in Mann Library. Camille Andrews is a CUL Fellow who has worked at Cornell for the past ten months. For the first nine months of her fellowship, Camille worked at Mann Library—at the reference desk, in the instruction program, and as part of the AGORA team. In January 2005, Camille moved to IRIS where she is broadening her reference and instruction skills and contributing her expertise to the IRIS Research department. Following her placement in IRIS and her work in D-CAPS, Camille will move to a permanent position in Public Services at Mann Library.

Mary Beth Bunge is the Library's new Director of Communications and Media Relations. Mary Beth brings considerable experience working in public relations, having worked in this field since 1997 at the Cayuga Nature Center and in private consulting. Her energy and creativity have most recently been directed toward promoting the Discovery Trail and the Light in Winter festival held at the end of January.

Mary Beth is also known to many in the Library because of her work in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections from 1991-1994 where she served as Head of Public Services and Project Coordinator for the Digital Access Coalition.

Shin-Woo Kim is the new programmer/analyst in the Digital Library and Information Technologies department. Shin-Woo has been working in DLIT as a temp since June 2004.

Melissa Kuo is the new consultant/advisor in the Digital Library and Information Technologies department. Melissa recently completed her Master's of Library and Information Science at Pratt Institute, where she focused her studies on digital libraries and web design within libraries.

Olivia Nellums has joined the O/K/U Circulation department as a public services assistant. Olivia is a graduate student at Syracuse University and is working towards her Master's of Library and Information Science.

Welcome back to **Sylvia Nyana** who has rejoined the Africana Library as a public services assistant.

Kelly Smallidge has just returned to working in CUL. She is working half-time as a stacks manager in the Department of Preservation and Collections Maintenance.

Transfers/Promotions

Ruth Beachler has been promoted to Public Services Assistant II in O/K/U Collection Maintenance.

Ellie Buckley has been promoted to Research Support Specialist I in the Library Research department.

Kathryn Hughes has been promoted to Public Services Assistant II in O/K/U Collection Maintenance.

Xin Li has been promoted to Director of Service Innovations and Resource Planning in IRIS Administration.

Heidi Mallinson has been promoted to Public Services Assistant V in O/K/U Circulation.

Kadri Sercan has been promoted to Preservation Assistant III in O/K/U Collection Maintenance.

Jill Ulbricht has been promoted to Administrative Assistant V in the ASTech Libraries. She is the new administrative manager for the newly integrated Associated Science and Technology Libraries (Engineering, Math, Physical Sciences, and Vet).

Retirements

Goodbye to **Jim Atkinson**. After 12 years at Olin Library Jim has retired. He started as the keeper of the 3rd floor stacks, worked in Collection Management Serials, and has been in Olin Interlibrary Services since 1998. Jim brought varied skills and experience to the library. He has an advanced degree in Slavic Studies. He worked as a newspaper reporter and editor for many years. And he has extensive knowledge and a serious interest in all sports, historic and current. We will miss his unique style and wish him much happiness in his retirement. (Julie Copenhagen)

Oops

In our last issue we incorrectly bade **Michele Hamill** goodbye. You may not have seen her in the last few months because she has been on maternity leave, but the good news is that she will be back in March.

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People News--continued from page 7

Congratulations

Congratulations to **Nancy Moore** from the Law Library on her election to a two year term on the SHARES Executive Group. This is the RLG interlibrary loan group that does the important planning for the future and functioning of SHARES activities. Nancy is in the seat slated for law libraries and, as she is well known and well respected among her ILL colleagues, is a great representative for Cornell University.

Congratulations to **Scott Wicks** who has won the 2005 Association for Library Collections and Technical Services Leadership in Acquisitions Award. This award recognizes the contributions by and outstanding leadership of an individual in the field of acquisitions librarianship. Although individuals who are nominated for the first time rarely win, Scott's many accomplishments and reputation secured him the award which he will receive at the annual meeting of the American Library Association in June in Chicago.

RMC's web site, "Pastimes & Paradigms: Games We Play" was chosen "Cool Site of the Day" for January 24, 2005. The web site, designed by **Ritsu Katsumata**, accompanied RMC's exhibition of the same name, curated by **Eli Brown** (for more information, see the credits section on the Games web site).

Congratulations to the winners of the CUL United Way contest held to encourage giving in the annual campaigns. The winners for 2003 were **CTS Cataloging** (which includes **CTS Administration & CTS Metadata**), ably led by Miriam Scheraga, who doubled their gift last year and gave at the high rate of 33%; **DLIT**, led by George Kozak, who increased their gift by 50% and gave at the rate of 27% (high for a unit of 30); and **Library Administration** (which includes **IRIS Administration**), led at the time by Chris Bucko, who gave the largest amount of any unit and at the rate of 55%. Special mention should be given to Collection Development (led by Martha Hsu) whose participation rate was 67%, and EMP SL (led by Jeanette Miller) which also gave at the high rate of 65%.

Winners for 2004 are (again) **DLIT**, led this year by Michelle Eastman, who increased their participation rate from 27 to 37%; **CTS Acquisitions**, led by Elizabeth Perenyi, whose giving went from 23 to 29%; and **Preservation/Conservation**, led by Susann Argetsinger, whose giving jumped from 6 to 25%. Special mention goes to RMC, led by Nancy Dean, and Library Administrative Operations, led by Michele Hegedus, whose units are very generous in their giving and an important part of the Library's contribution.

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Willard Fiske--continued from page 3

28 May 2005 and online from 17 February 2005, there is a photograph of the aged Fiske seated on the grounds of Villa Landor, pondering a chess board. Clearly he was in a favorite element, pursuing a life-long passion; at the time of his death, he had not completed his *Chess in Iceland and in Icelandic Literature*, and it came out in 1905, most of it undigested "Stray Notes." The photograph also suggests fatigue after a life of vigorous travel and relentless fascination with new projects.

Halldór Hermannsson attributed Fiske's propensity "to start something new before he had completed" the old to "a certain restlessness" in his character, and suggested that he would have published more had he been steadier. There are, indeed, signs of an unquiet passion in Fiske's character. At his best, however, Willard Fiske manifested

a generous enthusiasm that, where his collections were concerned, constituted a genuine love for the books and languages of humanity.

Sources:

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