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Lehigh University
Information Resources

Special Collections Flyer

New Students & Old Books

A short time before the fall semester of 1996 began, Prof. of English Peter Beidler called Special Collections with a question: what did we have relating the encounters between Native Americans and European settlers? That's not a topic which can be considered a strength of the collection; nonetheless, a search of the catalog produced over a hundred volumes ranging in date from the late 17th century to the mid-1800's.

Prof. Beidler's purpose in making the call was to see if it would be possible to support a project in his freshman class on Native American Literature which would take his students beyond the textbook and the World Wide Web.

This is not to say that undergraduates had not previously made use of Special Collections resources. Quite the contrary. Classes regularly are brought into the Bayer Galleria for one purpose or another. Sometimes it's to look at original editions of works that are being read in class, whether the subject is philosophy, history, or some other subject. At other times, students are asked to use the material to research a topic, which may be some aspect of Lehigh's history.

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However, Prof. Beidler's approach to his project was so systematic and well-planned, that it's worth holding up as one model for how Special Collections resources can be used to enrich the teaching of undergraduates at all levels.

Prof. Beidler was teaching a section of English 11, a seminar for freshmen who test out of the regular writing course. The seminar's topic was "Native American life," and as Beidler explained it:

Students today seem to think that all they need to know is available at their fingertips on a computer screen. I wanted them to know that there is much that is interesting in old books that they cannot read on a computer screen. And I wanted them to know that fingertips can be used to turn the tender pages of old books as well as manhandle a computer mouse.

Prof. Beidler reviewed the list of 40 or 50 titles which Special Collections had identified from more than 100 potential volumes. He then reduced the number to about 30, and made an annotated list of them from which the students in the class could choose. Most got one of their three top choices, and each of the 22 students had a different book. They were released from one class period during the week to come to the Special Collections reading room to read their books.

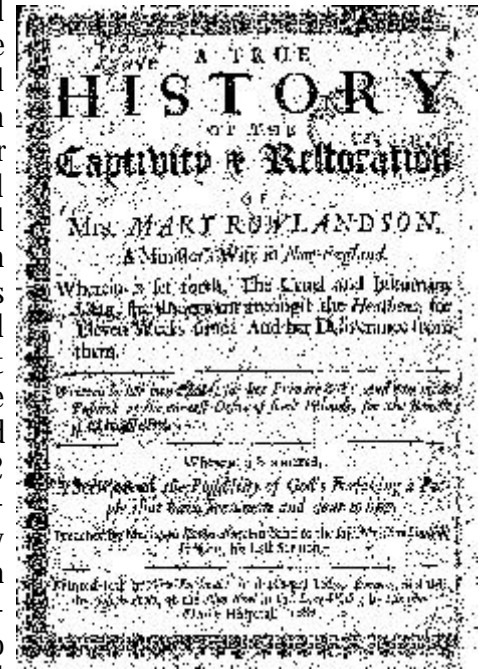


Figure 1

This was clearly a new experience for most of the class. As Prof. Beidler commented,

The students were at first puzzled about the project. Why should they read old books when there were so many new ones they could be reading? Why sit in a library when they could use computers and the Web to find research materials? But by the end of the project, most of them enjoyed the experience, enjoyed the quiet moments

reading their books, enjoyed writing about a book that no one else in the class was writing about, enjoyed discovering some facts and prejudices from a distant era.

The project went smoothly, and the students appeared in the reading room on a regular basis to work on their books. At the end of the project, when all the papers had been turned in, each student gave a short oral presentation about their book and their analysis of it.

In addition to the exploration of new worlds, the exercise had another major purpose.

I try to get my students to see that writing can be fun as well as drudgery. I can do that best if I have them write, at least once each term, something brand new. For them to do that they have to discover something they WANT to share with others who have not made the same discovery. They came to know the thrill of discovering something new to them in a world they had not explored before.

Keith Coyle, a sophomore international relations and Asian studies major was in the class, and worked with a book entitled *Indians in Their Wars*, by Archibald Loudon (London, 1811). In his paper "Indian Warfare the European Way," Coyle drew this conclusion:

Smith's discussions of the Indian style of warfare in North America illustrate the efficiency of Indian tactics while portraying Indian fighters as brutal and blood-thirsty savages. By portraying Indian warriors in this way he was able to show both that the European armies needed to adopt some of the Indians' ways and that the civilized European soldiers were, after all, if perhaps tactically inferior, then morally superior to their savage counterparts.

Coyle said that he had taken a lot of history courses in high school but that the chance to use period writings gave him a first-hand look at the viewpoints of people of the past, without the impediment of someone else's interpretation.

Not every project needs to be quite so elaborately

planned and executed, and not every student will benefit equally. However, the possibilities are waiting to be discovered. As Prof. Beidler noted,

I would encourage every professor to give Special Collections a call to see what might work. We tend to forget that librarians like students as much as they like books, and are eager to share their knowledge and resources with us all. Doing a little course project like this is a lot of work, but it was GOOD work.

—P.A.M.

Figures



Figure 2

The illustrations frame the period under discussions with examples from two "captivity narratives." Figure 1 is the title page of *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson, a Minister's Wife in New-England*, the very rare 1682 London reprint of the even rarer Cambridge, Mass. printing of the same year. Figure 2 is a plate from Fanny Kelly's *Narrative of My Captivity among the Sioux Indians*, 2nd edition, Chicago, 1880. It was first published in 1871, and relates events which took place during the 1860's.

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Special Collections is pleased to have an exhibition of its books in the permanent gallery of the newly-opened Lehigh University Art Galleries in the Zoellner Arts Center. The exhibition includes a volume of Audubon's *Birds of America*, along with eight other books illustrating the role of books in physical and intellectual exploration. The gallery is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday, and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday.

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Special Collections materials are available for research and consultation without restriction. For further information contact Philip A. Metzger, Special Collections Librarian. Reading room hours are Monday through Friday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment. Telephone: (610) 758-4506; fax (610) 974-6471; e-mail: inspc@lehigh.edu.

