

## Overview and History of Robbins Library, Department of Philosophy, Harvard University

Robbins Library is our small philosophy library on the second floor of Emerson Hall. It was founded in 1905, by a gift from Reginald C. Robbins (A.B. 1892)<sup>1</sup>. Robbins was one of a number of students of the Department during the so-called “Golden Age of Philosophy” at Harvard, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century who later became generous benefactors of the department.<sup>2</sup>



Robbins Library is on the second floor of Emerson Hall, in Harvard’s New Yard. The building, designed by Guy Lowell (1900), is named after Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous Transcendentalist writer, philosopher, and Harvard alumnus (A.B. 1821, LL.D. 1866).<sup>3</sup> The library as the patron sees it today is largely as it was in 1905, with a few exceptions. The original dark-stained oak shelves remain in place, along with many of the original worktables. The only changes are the additions of computer work terminals, additional shelving and a library ladder along the back wall, a cubicle for the Robbins librarian, and a front desk for the student workers.

On top of housing the research collection, faculty and graduate students place course reserves in Robbins, though this is beginning to become less frequent as more reserve readings move online. Graduate students, undergraduates, and other researchers looking for a quiet place to work are Robbins’ most frequent patrons. It also serves as an informal social space for members of the Department.

The collection is best described, as any library collection is, as a work in progress, or as a historical archive *cum* contemporary research library. It is a intermingling of the old and the new in the best sense of the words. Volumes from the original books that seeded the Robbins’ collection stand side-by-side with the latest research in epistemology, logic, philosophy of science, and the history of philosophy.

In terms of historical volumes, most of the original books from the seeding of the collection remain on its shelves. Moreover, many prominent figures who have taught in, or who were associated with, the department over the years have donated books to our collection. One can browse the shelves and find books that had previously been owned and annotated by William James, George

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Development of Harvard University since the Inauguration of President Eliot, 1869-1929*. (1930). S.E. Morison, Ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 31. Robbins was quite an interesting figure – poet, amateur philosopher, composer, volunteer naval officer, historian, conservationist, and naturalist – as his obituary in the Memorial Minutes of the *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 29. (1955 - 1956), pp. 116-117, indicates.

<sup>2</sup> Another one of these generous benefactors was Edwin D.T. Bechtel, about whom there is more information at [http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~phildept/bechtel\\_tanner.html](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~phildept/bechtel_tanner.html). Other famous alumni of the Department from this period include the poets T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Conrad Aiken, and Robert Frost; African-American scholar and activist, W.E.B. DuBois; the journalists, Walter Lippmann, Max Eastman, and Van Wyck Brooks; and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. (Saatkamp, H. [2008]. George Santayana. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. E. N. Zalta [ed.] Retrieved 22 September 2009 from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/santayana>; W. E. B. Du Bois. [2009]. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 22 September 22 2009, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=W.\\_E.\\_B.\\_Du\\_Bois&oldid=315531183](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=W._E._B._Du_Bois&oldid=315531183).)

<sup>3</sup> Shand-Tucci, D. (2001). *Harvard University: An Architectural Tour*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 163.

## **Overview and History of Robbins Library, Department of Philosophy, Harvard University**

Santayana, Josiah Royce, or C.S. Peirce. Or, one might find the signed, bound copy of the article “Testability and meaning,” donated to Robbins by Rudolf Carnap. These donations have also included a number of rare volumes. These include a 1644 edition of Descartes’ *Opera Philosophica* (from Peirce), first and early editions of Kant (from Royce, including the B edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Anthropology*, and *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*), and an 1887 edition of Lewis Carroll’s *The Game of Logic* (donor unknown), complete with game board and counters. Many of these items are kept in the glass case facing the cubicle wall of the librarian’s office.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, given Robbins’ century and more of history, several famous first editions of major philosophical works have come into our possession. One of these is the original printing of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus (Logische-Philosophische Abhandlung)* in the journal, *Annalen der Naturphilosophie* 14 (1919), 185-262, complete with errors. Another is the full run of the journal, *Jahrbuch für Philosophie*, edited by Edmund Husserl. Volume 1 (1913) of this journal contains the first printing of Husserl’s *Ideas*. Volume 8 (1927) contains the first printing of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)*. Other volumes contain essays by, e.g., Edith Stein and Max Scheler. Lastly, we have a first edition of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* (1971), autographed by Professor Rawls himself.

Over the years, the Department has slowly augmented and developed, but sparingly culled, the collection, resulting in the wonderful snapshot of the development of Anglo-American philosophy from the late 19th century to the early 21st century that the patron sees today. It is fascinating to see how philosophical interests and tastes have changed over a century and more, and formerly prominent figures fade into obscurity while others come (or return) to the fore.

In addition to the general collection development that goes on during the course of a century, Robbins has received or developed three special collections. The first comes from a donation by Edwin D.T. Bechtel (see footnote 2). Upon his death, his collection of books and non-philosophical materials was given to Robbins. Many of which are presentation copies, e.g., from William James, or are works that are valuable for historical reasons, such as the first (and only) English translation of Bergson’s *Le rire (On Laughter)*, one of the few extended philosophical examinations of humor. The non-philosophical items in the Bechtel collection include Bechtel’s undergraduate and master’s theses, along with clippings, photos, and other things from his student years and adult life. Prominent among these are a letter from Franklin D. Roosevelt (with whom Bechtel clerked at Carter, Ledyard & Milburn), photographs of and ephemera from his tour of Europe in 1904, and materials from his time at Harvard.

Another special collection developed during this time was a collection of Kierkegaardiana. Robbins holds approximately 200 volumes of primary and secondary sources by and about Søren Kierkegaard, and some works by people connected with Kierkegaard, e.g., Rasmus Nielsen and H.L. Martensen. Many of these works are significant studies of Kierkegaard, and of great interest to Kierkegaard scholars.

---

<sup>4</sup> At one point, this case was labeled with a sign reading “Erotica,” in order to discourage browsing of and damage to the materials on its shelves.

## Overview and History of Robbins Library, Department of Philosophy, Harvard University

Finally, in addition to Royce's books mentioned above, we also have other books of his, which include old editions of Husserl, Hegel, Cudworth, Wolff, and others, along with offprints of articles that Royce published during his lifetime. Royce's marginalia and annotations in these books make for fascinating reading, watching a prominent mind at work with Hegel and Husserl, for example.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, for all of this, Robbins does not remain stuck in the past. Gone are the days of card catalogs and print-only resources. The entire collection is cataloged electronically and available via Harvard's OPAC, HOLLIS.<sup>6</sup> News, research tips, and such are available through the library's blog, Robbins Library Notes, at <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/pannone>. Patrons have access to a plethora of databases, electronic journals, and online resources through the Harvard College Libraries (HCL) via HOLLIS. Robbins may appear to be a nineteenth-century gentlemen's club, but it is fully in the twenty-first century, and is ever looking to adapt to the changing research needs and interests of its patrons.

Currently, all Harvard students, faculty, staff, and affiliates may use Robbins Library, though this was not the case in its early days. At that time, the use of Robbins Library was restricted to advanced students in the department and "members of the Philosophical Seminaries,"<sup>7</sup> as a notice in the *Harvard Crimson* edition of 15 February 1906 states:

Dr. H. C. Brown and Dr. P. A. Hutchinson have been appointed to take charge of the Philosophical Library in Emerson Hall. The library will be open every week-day from 1.30 to 4.45 o'clock, and members of the Philosophical Seminaries, having keys to the library, may use it any time from 9 to 5 o'clock. All students of philosophy taking the more advanced courses, will be welcome to use the library, but students in the elementary courses, Philosophy 1a and 1b, are expected to find in the Reading Room of Gore Hall the books needed for their work. Books for all philosophy courses will still be reserved as heretofore in the Gore Hall Reading Room. Books are in no case to be taken from the Emerson Hall Library.<sup>8</sup>

The restrictions on the use of Robbins from these early days no longer apply, for the most part. Faculty and students from all across Harvard, and indeed, from around the world, come to use the Robbins collection every year, and they are welcomed and assisted as much as possible. The only restriction that remains in place is that the collection does not circulate.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> His comments in Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, e.g., reveal an increasing frustration with the work. About halfway through the first volume, Royce indicates that he can make no sense of the text and that he is putting down. There are no further comments in this volume or in the second one.

<sup>6</sup> OPAC = **O**nline **P**ublic **A**ccess **C**atalog. You may access HOLLIS at <http://discovery.lib.harvard.edu>.

<sup>7</sup> "Philosophical Seminaries" were advanced courses open only to graduate students and "specialists." First offered after the reform of Harvard's curriculum by President C.W. Eliot in the late nineteenth-century, they are the equivalent of today's graduate seminars. Please see Rand, B. (1929). *Philosophical Instruction in Harvard University from 1636-1906*. Boston: Harvard Graduates Magazine Association, 36-38, for more information.

<sup>8</sup> *Harvard Crimson*. (15 February 1906). Philosophy Library in Emerson Hall. Retrieved 22 July 2009 from <http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=194512> – the link, unfortunately is no longer live. Gore Hall was the predecessor to Widener Library. It was in use until 1913, when it was torn down to make way for the construction of Widener.

<sup>9</sup> At one point, the collection did circulate to the general Harvard community, but it is unclear as to when this began and when it was stopped.

## Overview and History of Robbins Library, Department of Philosophy, Harvard University

At some point in 1906, Benjamin Rand (A.B. 1879, A.M. 1880, Ph.D. 1885) became the first dedicated librarian of Robbins Library, from 1906 to 1934. According to the description on the back cover of his book, *The Classical Moralists*, Rand was the third person to be awarded a Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard.<sup>10</sup> Over his life, Rand wrote and edited a number of works of philosophy, including the Locke/Clarke correspondence and the works of Shaftesbury. He was also involved with the creation of the B Class (Philosophy, Psychology, and Religion)<sup>11</sup> of the Library of Congress Classification system, which is still in use today. George Herbert Palmer and Ralph Barton Perry both praise Rand's dedication to the development and maintenance of Robbins.<sup>12</sup>

After Rand's death, the library was managed by a succession of graduate students on a volunteer basis. In April 2003, the Department hired its first professional librarian, Jason Pannone, to overhaul and update the collection in a time of rapid technological change and changing research needs and practices. With electronic resources and tools opening up and reshaping ways of accessing hitherto undreamed resources, the Department looks to preserve the legacy of the Robbins collection while keeping it relevant and useful to the research and pedagogical needs of its 21<sup>st</sup> century students and faculty.

Over its history, Robbins had its share of famous visitors, and not just philosophers. While we have no proof at present that T.S. Eliot (A.B. 1910), one of the Department's most famous alumni, used Robbins, it seems unlikely that he would not have spent some time in Robbins, given that he was a philosophy concentrator. Another famous alumnus of Harvard, J. Robert Oppenheimer (A.B. 1926), the father of the atomic bomb, spent a good deal of time in Robbins, as he mentions in a letter to a friend.<sup>13</sup> It is also likely that Bertrand Russell, Rudolph Carnap, and Alfred Tarski used Robbins when they were teaching at Harvard in the 1940-41 academic year.

In conclusion, Robbins Library, like the Roman god Janus, looks both backwards and forwards: backwards, towards its rich legacy and history, and forwards, towards the future. We preserve the best of the past, keep firmly rooted in the present, and seek to embrace the future of philosophy and of technology. In this way, we seek to part of the ongoing conversation of philosophy, and assist faculty, students, and patrons in making their contributions to the discourse.

---

<sup>10</sup> Rand, B. (2004). *The Classical Moralists: Selections Illustrating Ethics from Socrates to Martineau*. Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific. Retrieved 22 July 2009 from <http://books.google.com/books?id=S-1xHAbyfc8C&lpg=PT1&ots=4gvGHIByGG&dq=benjamin%20rand%20harvard&pg=PT1>

<sup>11</sup> To view the complete B Class, please go to <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsolcco>.

<sup>12</sup> See their article on the Department in Morison (1930), 31.

<sup>13</sup> Bird, K. & Sherwin, M. J. (2006). *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*. New York: Vintage Books, 35