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Melcher, Daniel (1912-1985)

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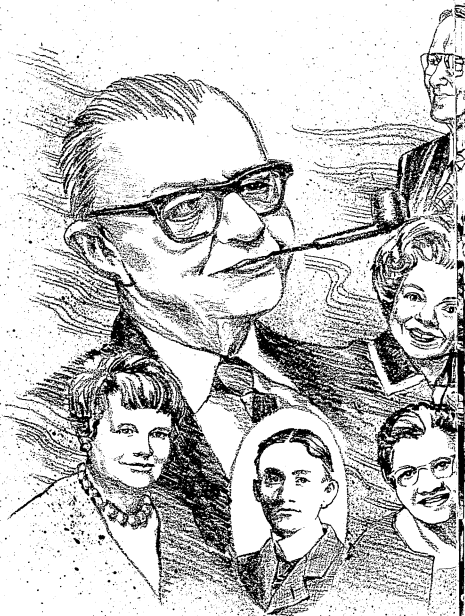
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SUPPLEMENT TO THE

DICTIONARY
OF
AMERICAN LIBRARY
BIOGRAPHY

Edited by Wayne A. Wiegand

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In explaining his own fascination with Abraham Lincoln, Mearns picked up his friend Carl Sandburg's phrase about the sixteenth president: "the son-of-a-gun grows on you." The same may be said of Mearns. Active, energetic, prolific, ambitious, and indefatigable as a younger man, he never lost sight of the strange, the ironic, or the whimsical in human experience. In his later years, that sense may have predominated. Mearns was a fascinating mixture. Never one to suffer fools gladly and blessed with a healthy cynicism about human motives and a sardonic wit to express it, he was nevertheless courtly in manner and publicly polite to all. He was also something of a hero-worshipper, with a pantheon that included Lincoln, Archibald MacLeish, Adlai Stevenson, Sandburg, and Felix Frankfurter, among others. Mearns himself had his own band of hero-worshippers as well. A large man (he is said to have weighed seventeen pounds at birth) with a resonant voice and completely at ease behind a podium, he was always in great demand as an unfailingly witty speaker, but his preference was to sit with two or three professional intimates and exchange historical gossip or delight in his family and old friends. He wrote with facility and admired good writing by others, but he could be guilty of dreadful wordplays (Lincoln was "prodigal of follicle") and cloying whimsicality (that was Lincoln's "haireisy"), along with his great wit and wisdom.

David Mearns's contributions to the Library of Congress were perhaps more qualitative than quantitative. He steeped himself in the Library's history and its collections to know the answers to questions and to make them known to others. He published his own findings but more often encouraged publications by others. He fashioned the Presidential Papers Program and thus spread throughout the American research library system the Library's most treasured original research materials. More than anything else, he represented the Library of Congress to a world of historians, bookpeople, the working press, and the public at large. And within the Library he seemed the beau ideal of integrity, dedication to learning, and wit. Luther Evans called Mearns "the embodiment" of the Library of Congress, "perhaps because you loved it most." If institutions are the "lengthened shadows" of individuals, for a good part of the twentieth century the Library of Congress's

silhouette was decidedly Mearnsian. He died on May 27, 1981, in Alexandria, Virginia.

Biographical listings and obituaries—*Current Biography* 22:302-303 (1961); [Obituary]. *LC Information Bulletin* 40:181-3 (June 5, 1981); [Obituary]. *New York Times*, May 30, 1981; *Who Was Who in America* 7 (1977-1981). **Books and articles about the biographee**—Miers, Earl Schenk. "Byways in History: A Scholar's Scholar." *History* 1:122-7 (September 1959). **Primary sources and archival materials**—The basic source is the David C. Mearns Papers in the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Also valuable are the papers of Librarians of Congress Herbert Putnam, Luther H. Evans, Archibald MacLeish, and L. Quincy Mumford, and Mearns associates Verner W. Clapp and Roy P. Basler, all of which are part of the Library of Congress Archives, located in the Manuscript Division. Other primary source materials include Mearns's voluminous writings, identified in the text, and tapes of interviews conducted by or with Mearns concerning the history of the Library of Congress and related topics. The latter are located in the Library's Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division.

—JOHN C. BRODERICK

MELCHER, DANIEL (1912-1985)

Daniel Melcher was born on July 10, 1912, in Newton Center, Massachusetts. He was the oldest child of Frederic Gershom and Marguerite Fellows Melcher. He grew up with two younger sisters in a household where books and reading were of central importance. His father began his career as a bookseller, edited *Publishers Weekly* for more than forty years, and served as president of the R. R. Bowker Company for twenty-five years. His mother was a poet, playwright, and author of children's books as well as a scholarly history of the Shakers. Frederic Melcher was an energetic, versatile, influential, and widely respected leader of the American book world. Daniel largely followed in his father's footsteps.

Melcher decided early that he wanted to be a publisher. Book manufacturing, the problems of distribution, and the business side of publishing interested him most. He attended Harvard during the Depression and began his college career as a physics major. He soon changed to economics when he realized that the toughest problems of that era were economic. It was an ideal major for an inveterate problem-solver with a strong social conscience who also appreciated more than most the business side of his intended profession.

After his graduation in 1934 he considered going on to Harvard Business School, but his father, who took a dim view of people who tried to manage work they had never performed, discouraged this idea. Instead they worked out a program that would give him experience in every area of publishing and prepare him to start his own firm in the early 1940s. He pursued this program from 1934 to 1942. It began with an apprenticeship year in London at George Allen and Unwin, followed by several months studying book trade procedures at leading book wholesalers in London and Leipzig. He spent the next six years in New York working for Henry Holt & Company, Oxford University Press, Alliance Book Corporation, and Viking Press. Most of these jobs involved promotion and sales. He also wrote his first book, a novel for high school readers interested in book publishing. *Young Mr. Stone Book Publisher* was issued by Dodd, Mead & Co. in its Career Books series in 1939. It concerns three students, two boys and a girl, who run their high school paper and later embark on publishing careers. The chief protagonist, Bob Stone, is the paper's business manager and appears to be closely modeled on Melcher himself.

Following American entry into World War II, he began a five-year period of public service in Washington, D.C. He spent 1942 to 1945 at the Treasury Department, first as a publishing consultant, then as national director of the war bond campaign in schools. Melcher's success in this position was widely recognized, and in November 1945, he was appointed the first director of the National Committee on Atomic Information (NCAI). The committee was established as part of the atomic scientists' movement to generate public support for international and civilian control of atomic energy. Melcher and his staff created and distributed a fortnightly bulletin, *Atomic Information*, and a wide range of other literature to affiliated religious, labor, professional, and other organizations. The collective memberships of these affiliated organizations, which included the League of Women Voters and the General Federation of Women's Clubs, totaled over ten million people. The work of the committee and its affiliated organizations contributed to the passage of the McMahon Act, which established the Atomic Energy Commission, and Senate confirmation of the commission's first members. Despite these successes, Melcher's tenure as NCAI director was

short-lived. He was a forceful and independent administrator in an environment where the lines of administrative responsibility were ambiguous, and personal animosities developed between Melcher and some of the leaders of the scientists' movement. These problems led to his dismissal in late summer 1946. All but one of his fourteen-member staff resigned in protest.

It was probably at this point that Melcher began compiling the *Printing and Promotion Handbook: How to Plan, Produce and Use Printing, Advertising, and Direct Mail*, coauthored with Nancy Larrick (McGraw-Hill, 1949, rev. eds. 1956, 1966). During his years in Washington he had written, produced, and distributed millions of pieces of literature and used virtually every printing process but had been unable to find a source of practical information to help him. The *Printing and Promotion Handbook* was created to fill this need. It served as a standard reference work during the final twenty years of the era in which type cast from hot metal was the basis of printing technology.

Melcher had found public service very satisfying, and at one point he considered making it his career. His father reminded him that publishing was also a form of public service. Then, after his dismissal from NCAI, he offered his son a job. In 1947 Melcher joined the R. R. Bowker Company as publisher of *Library Journal*. He spent the next twenty-two years at Bowker, becoming director and general manager in 1956, vice-president in 1959, president in 1963, and chair in 1968.

Underlying Melcher's contributions were an unusual combination of personal attributes and deeply held principles and beliefs. Among these were a passion for efficiency, a love of technology, and a sound business sense coupled with social and political idealism. Most fundamental of all were his beliefs in cooperation and international understanding, universal education, and the value of books and reading. He was able to harness these disparate attributes and beliefs most fully during his years at Bowker, a service-oriented firm catering to the needs of all branches of the book world. His work at Bowker had a great and enduring impact on the world of books in the United States and around the world.

Melcher helped inform librarians, publishers, and booksellers about current developments in all areas of the book world in a steady stream of articles in *Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*,

and other journals. He played an especially important role in promoting mutual understanding between librarians and publishers. He encouraged international contacts among publishers and American participation in the Frankfurt Book Fair. As publisher of *Library Journal* he worked with four successive editors, Karl Brown, Helen E. Wessells, Lee Ash, and Eric Moon, contributing to its emergence as the preeminent professional journal in the field. Like his father, who established the Newbery and Caldecott medals for children's books, he was a strong supporter of children's books and library service for children. In 1954 he founded *Junior Libraries*, renamed *School Library Journal* in 1961. When his father died in 1963, he succeeded him as donor of the Newbery and Caldecott medals. He was an early advocate of standard book numbers and helped introduce International Standard Book Numbers in the United States in the late 1960s.

The development of the Bowker family of trade bibliographies, beginning with *Books in Print*, was probably Melcher's most significant contribution to the book world. He began planning *Books in Print* shortly after he joined Bowker. *Publishers' Trade List Annual*, which listed in-print books by publisher, had been issued by Bowker since 1873, but no one had ever published an annual directory of U.S. books in print arranged by author and title. (The defunct *United States Catalog*, last published by H. W. Wilson in 1928, had never been an annual publication.) Melcher considered the prompt listing of books with prices and sources as the first objective of national bibliography, and he insisted that *Books in Print* had to appear annually with the most up-to-date information possible. There were formidable obstacles against such a venture. Most experts believed that the project would require nine months of editorial work followed by nine months of production. Melcher established editorial procedures that utilized college librarians and faculty members working intensively during the summer months. Rejecting linotype composition, he devised a production system in which entries were typed on separate cards. This allowed new and revised entries to be inserted at the last moment and outdated entries to be deleted. The cards were then shingled on boards for paging and photographed for offset reproduction. Shingle boards, mounting equipment, and cameras were all designed by Melcher himself. The first edition of

Books in Print appeared in 1948. It was followed by other trade bibliographies, including *Paper-bound Books in Print* (1955), *Subject Guide to Books in Print* (1957), *American Book Publishing Record* (1960), and *Forthcoming Books* (1966). His interest in Latin America led in the early 1960s to the establishment of *Fichero Bibliografico*, a book trade periodical that tried to list all new Spanish-language books published in the Americas, and *Libros en Venta*, a books in print volume for Spain and Spanish America.

Developments in automation and the advent of computers engaged Melcher's attention on several levels. His first article on automation, "Primer in Machine Information Storage and Retrieval," appeared in *Library Journal* in March 1960 (85:909-12). He was fascinated by the technological implications of automation and never doubted the ultimate role that computers would play. But as he gained experience with early computerization projects, his fascination with the technology was tempered by his passion for efficiency. He was appalled by inefficiencies such as batch processing, and he deplored the all-too-common automation of inefficient routines. He often argued that the greatest benefit of computerization derived from the analysis of an institution's operations that ideally took place before a computer was installed. He challenged the overblown claims of computer salespeople and some computer enthusiasts; in 1969 he recommended that library trustees take "a hard-nosed, 'show me' attitude when automation is proposed." In some circles he came to be known unfairly as an enemy of computers. But his strongest attacks were reserved for those who prophesized the demise of the book. He liked to use computer terminology in defending books: "Books are the standard we judge computers by. They give us random access, fast forward-and-reverse, hi-density, legibility, portability, freedom from breakdown, easy integration of alphanumeric data, easy handling of analog features such as graphs, drawings, and photos. They handle color easily. They even cost less than any competitor."

Bowker was acquired by Xerox Corporation on December 31, 1967, through an exchange of stock valued at \$12,410,000. Melcher and the other stockholders, most of whom were near or over retirement age, became millionaires. The Bowker Company became part of Xerox Educational Division. There was little room for Melcher's

brand of idealism under the new regime, and he remained with the company for barely a year. In August 1968 he was replaced as president and transferred to the Xerox Educational Division staff as Director of Venture Planning. He was also named Bowker chair, but he resigned from Bowker and Xerox a few months later. He explained: "The planning group within the Xerox Educational Division had no background in education or publishing, and I had no background in oil, plastics, chemicals, or business machine sales, and we just weren't on the same wavelength."

Melcher was fifty-six when he resigned from Bowker in January 1969. The next few years were devoted to writing and serving on various boards. *Melcher on Acquisition*, written with his second wife, Margaret Saul Melcher, was published by the American Library Association in 1971. He had been impressed with the work of the Institute of Human Potential in Philadelphia in teaching brain-damaged and very young children to read, and he became a member of its board. His work with the institute resulted in several publications, including an article in *Library Journal* (98:3109-17 [October 15, 1973]), "Johnny Still Can't Read: Would Children Learn to Read as Early as They Learn to Talk If We Let Them?," which was reprinted in *Library Lit. 5—The Best of 1974*. He was board chair of Gale Research Co., 1971-1973; served as trustee of the Montclair, New Jersey, Public Library (another position previously held by his father), 1972-1973; and was elected to the Council of the American Library Association, 1972-1974. He received the American Library Association's highest award, Honorary Membership, during the Centennial Conference in 1976.

Melcher was active in the civil rights, civil liberties, and peace movements. He found time for an astonishing array of hobbies, including optics, electronics, photography, tape recording, skin diving, skiing, sailing, instrumental music, and languages. Nancy Larrick described him as follows: "Quiet, somewhat retiring in a large group, Dan Melcher has a knack of forging deeply loyal friendships in some quarters while raising antagonism in others.... Anyone who has worked with Melcher is soon aware that his mind simply operates in a higher gear than anyone else's, a fact he has never fully accepted." He said of himself: "I enjoy more than many people the excitement of finding out that something I have always known is not so. This leads to a whole series of discoveries

as I search the pigeon holes of my mind for notions based on the newly identified misinformation. Often entirely new and intriguing correlations come to light during this mind cleaning process. I like, too, seeing around new corners."

He married Peggy Zimmerman, a children's librarian, in 1937. Their son, Frederic II, was born in 1946. Peggy Melcher developed multiple sclerosis in 1947; as the illness progressed she was confined to the Melcher home in Montclair, New Jersey. She died in 1967. Later that year he married Margaret Saul, a former editor of *School Library Journal*.

Melcher died of drowning on July 22, 1985, after suffering an epileptic seizure in his swimming pool at Glen Echo Farm, his home in Charlottesville, Virginia. He was 73.

Biographical listings and obituaries—"Melcher, Daniel." *ALA Yearbook 1976* (1977); [Obituary]. *Publishers Weekly* 228:22 (August 9, 1985). **Books and articles about the biographee**—Alley, Brian. "A Conversation with Daniel Melcher." *Technicalities* 2:4-5, 7 (September 1982); Larrick, Nancy. "Daniel Melcher." *Bulletin of Bibliography* 24:225-8, 248 (January-April 1966). **Primary sources and archival materials**—Eight to twelve file drawers of material are in the possession of Margaret Saul Melcher, who expects eventually to give them to an institution.

—GORDON B. NEAVILL

METCALF, KEYES DEWITT (1889-1983)

Keyes DeWitt Metcalf, the 17th of 18 children, was born on April 13, 1889 in Elyria, Ohio. Since both his parents died when he was young, neither had a direct impact on his work habits or career choice. An older sister who shared their father's belief in the importance of a college education raised him. With the support of this sister, Metcalf endeavored to overcome a "handicap" in the fifth grade: shifting writing from his left to his right hand. The transition was long and difficult. During his freshman year in high school, Metcalf withdrew from school and lived for a month with another sister, Anna, wife of Oberlin College Librarian Azariah Smith Root.

Metcalf admired Azariah Root and wanted to follow in his footsteps. Since his brother-in-law believed that practical experience was the best way to enter librarianship, he encouraged Metcalf to work as a student page in the Oberlin College library while he completed studies at Oberlin High School (1906) and College (1910). Root exposed him to a wide variety of activities and gave him