

Statement on the FY-1994 Appropriation for the Library of Congress

Before the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch (Committee on Appropriations), by Phyllis Franklin, Executive Director of the Modern Language Association, Speaking on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance

January 27, 1993

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and the Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Phyllis Franklin, Executive Director of the Modern Language Association of America ¹ and President of the National Humanities Alliance. I thank you for the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee. My colleagues and I in the National Humanities Alliance greatly appreciate the important work you and the other members of the committee do and the careful attention you have given to the Library's needs.

I speak today for scholars and teachers of language and literature and, in a general way, for the scholarly community, which depends heavily on the Library of Congress and its many services both directly and indirectly, through other research libraries and state libraries throughout the United States. Those of us in the scholarly community frequently talk about the various institutions that make up what we call the "infrastructure" that supports scholarship in this country. No single institution is as important to that infrastructure as the Library of Congress.

At the Modern Language Association of America, we feel a special connection to the Library of Congress, and so I am particularly pleased to come before you today. You see, over a century ago, in 1846, two members of the House of Representatives who were also modern language scholars spoke in committee and on the floor of the House of Representatives for the establishment of a national research library. They were the former President of the United States John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts and Congressman George Perkins Marsh of Vermont.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, George Perkins Marsh had struggled to be a scholar when no public collections of books existed, and he therefore fervently urged federal support of a national research library. Such a library, he said, could: "... be accommodated to no narrow or arbitrary standard. It must embrace all science -- all history -- all languages. It must be extensive enough, and diversified enough, to furnish alimnt for the cravings of every appetite. We need some great establishment, that shall not hoard its treasures with the jealous niggardliness which locks up the libraries of Britain, but shall emulate the generous munificence which throws open to the world the boundless stores of literary wealth of Germany and France -- some exhaustless fountain where the poorest and humblest aspirant may slake his thirst for knowledge, without money and without price..." (Speech of Mr. Marsh of Vermont, on the Bill for Establishing the Smithsonian Institution Delivered in the House of Representatives the United States, April 22 1846[Washington, D.C.: Gideon] 1846.)

Adams and Marsh convinced colleagues on the Hill of the need for a national library, although the book collection established initially at the Smithsonian did not develop until 1866, when it was moved to the Library of Congress.

What would Adams and Marsh say if they visited First Street and Independence Avenue today? Surely, they would marvel at how well those who succeeded them in Congress had carried out their

idea of a major national resource. The Library of Congress has indeed become a "great establishment" and stands among the best libraries of the world. Not only does it serve the members of Congress and scholars in all fields of study working in hundreds of languages; it also serves writers, publishers, and the general public through its cataloging, research and reference, and copyright services. Through the Center for the Book, it reaches out to all who care about reading. These functions give the Library a preeminent place in the cultural life of the nation.

I am pleased to say that the Modern Language Association has been a partner in the activities sponsored by the Center for the Book for several years and dedicated the 1991 and 1992 MLA conventions to the Center's themes. I have been much impressed by the encouragement the Center provides for literacy.

I turn now to the appropriation for fiscal year 1994. Just as 1846 was a critical year in the history of the Library of Congress, so is this appropriation year critical. Insofar as scholarly communication is concerned, our society stands at a crossroad, somewhere between the end of the print era and the beginning of an electronic era. It is now clear: our grandchildren will think of books and reading in ways that are different from ours.

The implications of these changes are substantial for all sectors of our society, but they hold special significance for scholars and libraries. In a report on libraries and old and new forms of scholarly communication, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation emphasizes the potential of "electronic information technologies... to envision radically different ways of organizing collections and services the library has traditionally provided" ("University Libraries & Scholarly Communication," ARL [23 November 1992] 2). The degree to which the Library of Congress is able to lead this effort largely depends on the fiscal support it receives. In this context, the appropriation for fiscal year 1994 promises to have particular importance in the history of the Library.

I call the committee's attention to three matters that are of special concern to literary scholars. First, we believe scholarly communication must move forward into the electronic era if access to research is to improve and if we are to address the problems caused by the rising cost of publishing scholarship and the increasingly limited library resources for purchasing it. (I speak to this point as one who has responsibility for overseeing the annual indexing and publication of a major humanities database -- the MLA International Bibliography.)

In the view of modern language scholars, moving into the electronic era with intelligence and efficiency requires the Library of Congress to continue to be at the forefront in applying advances in computer and telecommunication technologies and in creating systems, databases, and services that will be used by research and public libraries throughout the nation.

Second, we applaud current efforts to preserve and/or to replicate brittle books and other materials produced between 1850 and 1950. In this massive endeavor, the Library of Congress is also essential.

Finally, literary scholars are concerned about the fate of the entire print record as we enter an electronic era. Some planners envision a future in which all scholarly communication is electronic. Literary scholars do not disagree that eventually most, if not all, scholarly communication will be electronic. We make a distinction, however, between scholarly communication and the primary print record: literature and other texts, including rare books and special collections, that the Library of Congress and research libraries have traditionally acquired and maintained. These collections of print provide the primary materials modern language scholars -- and many historians, linguists, musicologists, and folklorists -- require for their work. Just as scientists look to the natural world as

the object of their investigations, so many if not most humanists look to libraries for the artifacts they study.

We believe that the Library of Congress and some number of additional research libraries should continue to maintain these collections. We recognize the effort will be costly; however, without these collections future generations of scholars will be unable to study the print record as we know it, in its original form. Furthermore, without collections of print, future generations of scholars will be unable to apply techniques and insights we cannot now imagine to improve their own and the world's understanding of these artifacts. Electronic versions of print will be useful for a variety of purposes, but they cannot satisfy the basic scholarly needs of bibliographers, textual editors, literary critics, and historians of print.

We believe that an interest in print will be sustained in an electronic era. At least some, perhaps a good deal, of the literature published between 1455 and the end of the print era will continue to be studied and taught, and scholars will want to consult original materials. Just as we value records from the ancient and medieval worlds and regard original documents as providing the best evidence for scholarship, so future generations of scholars will regard original print records.

Here too, we look to the Library of Congress for considerations of future of the print record.

We urge approval of the budget request submitted by James H. Billington for fiscal year 1994. Not only must the Library of Congress carry out its traditional services and maintain their quality; it must also provide leadership during a critical transition period. Indeed, the wisdom and resources the Library of Congress brings to this endeavor are likely to be decisive both for the Library itself and for scholars, higher education, other research libraries, and the infrastructure that supports scholarship in the United States.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance in support of the fiscal year 1994 appropriation for the Library of Congress.

[1.] Established in 1883 to promote teaching and scholarship in English and the other modern languages and literature, the Modern Language Association of America has over 32,000 members. The association publishes scholarly and professional books and journals, compiles the MLA International Bibliography, organizes an annual convention, and collects statistical information about the field.