

Page by Page

Reconstructing an Intellectual's Drive to Collect

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Abstract

In 2004, Utah State University acquired a collection of approximately 1,200 rare volumes about the history of science and technology as a result of a bequest by Peter W. Van der Pas. A Dutch immigrant and survivor of World War II, Van der Pas proved to be an avid book collector and intellectual. He was a chemical engineer by trade. Examining the nature and origins of this collection of rare books allowed for consideration of how this specific collection reflected the particular ambitions and needs of its creator. As a result, pre-cataloging analysis of the books developed into attempts to demystify Van der Pas's activities and purposes. Research attempts center on evidence of an intelligent, dedicated collector found throughout the volumes of his collection and in the limited biographical information that was published in conjunction with his donations. Driven in part by an immigrant background, Van der Pas arguably used this collection both to demonstrate his worth as a scientist and engineer and to legitimize himself in American academia. Through this sort of analysis, it is possible to begin to understand both the ways and reasons that significant book collections come into existence. Finally, the Van der Pas collection contributes to a different understanding of what it means to participate in scholarship and as an example of lived scholarly engagement outside of the institutional university environment.



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Page by Page

A detailed bookplate graces the inside cover of eight volumes of the *Œuvres d'histoire naturelle et de philosophie de Charles Bonnet*. Bearing a mark of previous ownership (“Ex libris Charles Atwood Kofoid”), these antique French books illustrate some eighteenth century understanding of zoology, natural history, and philosophy.¹ As such, the *Œuvres* naturally complemented the collection of the Pacific Library of History of Science and Technology, the private, non-profit library of one twentieth-century intellectual and book collector.

The bibliophile Peter W. Van der Pas was a determined man. As an educated immigrant without a firm place in the social community of American academia, Van der Pas doubtless believed that his extensive rare book collection would do more than allow him to follow his scientific passions, it would tie him to both new and old cultural homes. Further, by making his collection available to the public through his creation of the Pacific Library and arranging for its donation, Van der Pas would ensure a legacy that illustrated his intellectual ambition. A World War II survivor and a passionate scientist and historian, Van der Pas represented both his heritage and drive through a lifelong hobby of collecting and sharing books.

Peter Van der Pas was born in Helmond, the Netherlands, in February 1915.² A budding intellectual, he began collecting books at the age of twelve. Van der Pas obtained a master’s degree in physics from Delft Technical Institute and was fluent in several languages, including French, German, English, and Dutch.³ Following his participation in World War II as a Dutch lieutenant and member of a British bomb disposal group (occasioning the loss of an eye), Van der Pas moved to southern California, settling in Pasadena. There he worked as a chemical engineer for the Shell Oil Company, retiring to Grass Valley in 1977.⁴

¹ Charles Bonnet, *Œuvres d'histoire naturelle et de philosophie de Charles Bonnet* (Neuchâtel: S. Fauche, 1779-83) 8 vols., Peter W. van der Pas History of Science Rare Books Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

² Obituary of Peter van der Pas, *The Union* (CA), December 11, 2004, <http://www.theunion.com/article/20031211/OBITUARIES/112110044&parentprofile=search> (accessed April 5, 2012).

³ Steve Fjeldsted, “Peter van der Pas: Incredible Library Built on Love of Books and Learning,” Public Library Column Archive, South Pasadena Public Library, <http://www.cityofsouthpasadena.us/library/column.html> (accessed April 5, 2012).

⁴ Obituary, *The Union*.

Perhaps most definitive, however, was Van der Pas's dedication to scholarship. Over the course of his life, Van der Pas collected an impressive set of over 18,000 works emphasizing the history of the Netherlands, of the western United States, and of science and technology. Of these works, he donated 1,245 books of rare science and technology to Utah State University in 2004.⁵ At the time of his death, he was a member of the History of Science Society, the Oregon California Trail Association, and the Nevada County Historical Society.⁶ He published scholarly articles in various scientific journals on many subjects, ranging from "The Discovery of the Brownian Motion"⁷ to "The Latin Translation on Benjamin Franklin's Letters on Electricity"⁸ to "The Correspondence of Hugo de Vries and Charles Darwin."⁹

These articles reflected an interesting bid to participate in the world of academia, seemingly born from an unusual conglomerate of desires and interests; in fact, his notes to one article indicate that the paper was as a birthday gift.¹⁰ The diversity of the subjects on which Van der Pas published was interesting in and of itself. Further, the ties between his articles, his book collection, and a propensity to reach out to his Dutch heritage were strong. Consider, for instance, "The Correspondence of Hugo de Vries and Charles Darwin." In this article, Van der Pas emphasizes the relationship between Darwin and de Vries, calling attention to the influence of de Vries as a premier Dutch scientist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He cites a number of books, including some which he held copies of within his collection (i.e. an 1876

⁵ "The Van der Pas Collection and Digital Library Project," *Marginalia*, no. 22, (2007): 3, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/marginalia/17> (accessed April 6, 2012).

⁶ "The Van der Pas Collection and Digital Library Project," *Marginalia*, no. 22, (2007): 3, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/marginalia/17> (accessed April 6, 2012).

⁷ Peter W. Van der Pas, "The Discovery of the Brownian Motion," *Scientiarum Historia* 13 (1971): 27-35, <http://www.physik.uni-augsburg.de/theo1/hanggi/History/VanderPas.pdf> (accessed April 5, 2012).

⁸ Peter W. Van der Pas, "The Latin Translation of Benjamin Franklin's Letters on Electricity," *Isis* 69, no. 1 (March 1978): 82-85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/230612> (accessed April 5, 2012).

⁹ Peter W. Van der Pas, "The Correspondence of Hugo de Vries and Charles Darwin," *Janus* 57 (1970): 173-213.

¹⁰ Peter W. Van der Pas, "The Correspondence of Hugo de Vries and Charles Darwin," *Janus* 57 (1970): 173-213. The note—note 1—reads as follows: "This paper was originally intended to be published in the *Festschrift*, offered to Professor Frans Verdoorn on the occasion of his 60th birthday; it was unfortunately however not ready at the time of this happy event."

Page by Page

edition of Darwin's "The Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants"). That Van der Pas drew upon the books he possessed and probably expanded his collection as a result of preparation for articles should come as no surprise. Indeed, the article in question and the books he donated to Utah State reveal that Van der Pas had copies of at least twenty different works by Darwin and others by de Vries.¹¹

Van der Pas was an aggressive antiquarian. Folded neatly and placed inside the front cover of Joseph Priestley's *Experiments and observations on different kinds of air* (1790) is a yellow, lined sheet covered in handwritten chemical and mathematic equations and problems.¹² The publication *Balthazar Bekker in Franeker*, otherwise difficult to place, has a small, quickly scribbled note reading simply "by E. J. Diest Lorgian, 1848" tucked about two-thirds of the way through the volume between pages 196 and 197.¹³ In addition to this identifying note, a press release from the Pacific Library of History of Science and Technology illustrating library events from August 1981 serves as a bookmark.

Similar personal ties permeate the collection. From the repeated appearance of the library logo throughout bookmarks and bookplates to newspaper clippings and simple slips of paper, it is evident that as a collector, Van der Pas actually read volumes such as the *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (to the end of the MDCCLXXXIII)*¹⁴ or *The philosophical transactions and collections to the end of the year MDCC* (of the

¹¹ Peter W. van der Pas History of Science Rare Books Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

¹² Peter van der Pas, notes, n.d., in Joseph Priestley, *Experiments and observations on different kinds of air: and other branches of natural philosophy, connected with the subject; in three volumes; being the former six volumes abridged and methodized, with many additions* (Birmingham: Pearson, 1790) Vol. 2, Peter W. van der Pas History of Science Rare Books Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

¹³ Peter van der Pas, notes, n.d., in Evert Jan Diest Lorgion, *Balthazar Bekker in Franeker: een portret uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Groningen: H.R. Roelfsema, 1848): 196-97, Peter W. van der Pas History of Science Rare Books Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

¹⁴ Peter van der Pas, bookmarks, n.d., in American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences: to the end of the year M, DCC, LXXXIII* (Boston: Adams and Nourse, 1785): 234-35, 280-91, 388-389, Peter W. van der Pas History of Science Rare Books Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

Great Britain Royal Society).¹⁵ For Van der Pas, like Kofoid, “the astonishing thing is that he actually knew his books, their relative importance and history, and he knew exactly what he had...”¹⁶ Perhaps atypically, “Van der Pas wasn’t just buying and collecting rare books. He was also reading and studying them”—most in their original published language, even going so far as to utilize reference books to interpret Japanese and Chinese characters.¹⁷ This appears to differ greatly from the pattern with which many collectors build their collections. Many analytical studies of book collectors and bibliophiles have focused on an almost aesthetic, transitive driving motive. They miss the clear scholarly interest given to collection materials by Van der Pas. In fact, while pursuing a story on the mentality of collectors and those willing to go to all lengths to collect books, the journalist Allison Hoover Bartlett even observed a dealer at one New York Antiquarian Book Fair joke to a passerby, “don’t judge a book by its content!” She illustrates that while surprising at first, it is clear that most collectors simply don’t bother to read their books, considering the volumes both as “vessels for stories,” and “historical artifacts and repositories for memories.”¹⁸ Consequently, Patricia Hampl observed: “Collecting is not a simple matter of possessing. It’s a way of looking: a looking that is itself a kind of craving. To look this way is to be possessed, lost.”¹⁹ Although it is possible that Van der Pas was similarly enchanted by the mere physical qualities of his books, the focus of his collection remained subject areas that connected to his life experiences. The clear evidence of his attempts to read and identify many of his volumes, and written accounts describing his intellectual involvement with the collection seem to indicate a much deeper scholastic and academic concentration in his collecting passion.

¹⁵ Peter van der Pas, notes and bookmarks, n.d., in Royal Society (Great Britain), *The philosophical transactions and collections to the end of the year MDCC: abridged, and disposed under general heads. In three volumes*, 5th ed. (London, [1749]): 22-23, 242-3, 370-71, 916-917, Peter W. van der Pas History of Science Rare Books Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

¹⁶ Richard B. Goldschmidt, “Charles Atwood Kofoid: 1865-1947,” in *Biographical Memoirs* (Washington D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1951): 119-151.

¹⁷ Fjeldsted.

¹⁸ Allison Hoover Bartlett, *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much: The True Story of a Thief, a Detective, and a World of Literary Obsession* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009): 20-21.

¹⁹ Patricia Hampl, *Blue Arabesque: A Search for the Sublime* (New York: Harcourt, 2006): 52.

Page by Page

This personal interaction with his collection may have created a conflict of interest for Van der Pas. While he sought to protect his collection and ensure it was well used, he was driven to share his collection more fully with the public. Upon the end of his career as an engineer and move from South Pasadena to Grass Valley (Nevada County), California, Van der Pas founded his non-profit library—the Pacific Library of History of Science and Technology. He housed his library first at the local St. Joseph’s Cultural Center. Later, he purchased a grocery store building to accommodate the growing size of the collection. The assembly of “books, journals, and artifacts” was made available to “locals and visitors alike every weekday afternoon for a quarter century.”²⁰

Operating the Pacific Library, continuing to collect and engage in new books and participating in various scholarly societies characterized Van der Pas’s retirement. Further community scholarly involvement included his twenty year position as the editor of the Nevada County Historical Bulletin.²¹ With an assertive personality and years spent striving to participate in academic circles, Van der Pas ultimately began to seek a practical and effective repository for the products of his enduring hobby. Approximately five years before his death, Van der Pas began investigating schools and institutions that would potentially see immediate relevance and value in his works. One such institution was Hope College in Holland, Michigan—the eventual recipients of approximately 4,900 books from the Van der Pas estate dealing with Dutch history and culture. “Van der Pas. . . had learned of Hope while seeking institutions with Dutch collections—places that might be interested in his materials,” and the library, in turn, “first learned of the materials in November of 1998, when Van der Pas, who had no previous connection to the college, contacted director David Jensen.”²²

The genesis of dialogue between Utah State University and Van der Pas was almost identical. “In 1998 Mr. Van der Pas, who had no previous connection to the university, wrote Richard Schockmel, then Collection Development Librarian, to ask if the library would be interested in taking any part of his extensive collections upon his death.”²³ Within this

²⁰ Obituary, *The Union*.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² Hope College Office of Public Relations, “Library Gift Features Dutch History,” September 7, 2004, Press Releases, Hope College Office of Public Relations, Hope College, Holland, Michigan, <http://cms.hope.edu/pr/pressreleases/content/view/full/2467> (accessed April 6, 2012).

²³ “The Van der Pas Collection and Digital Library Project,” 3.

donation process, however, Van der Pas had clear expectations. As he claimed in his proposal letter to the university library, “I would like the books to go to a library where they are used. I am not willing to donate them to an institution that will put them on the ‘bargain table.’”²⁴

Herein lays the legacy of Van der Pas, of his scholarship and determination: connected so emotionally to the fate of his small entrance to the world of American academia, Van der Pas worked with prospective collections recipients in a meticulous and direct kind of care. In the case of Utah State University, communication continued consistently for nearly five years following his initial offer, prior to Van der Pas’s death.²⁵ What drove such action? Was it simply a collector’s instinct? Or does the careful, cautious consideration given by Van der Pas to his collection reflect something deeper?

While it is impossible to know with certainty his particular psychological or personal motivations, it is relatively simple to picture how distinctive psychological or personal factors may have governed van der Pas’s life work and decisions. Raised with academic interests and blessed with a comparatively extensive education, it would seem natural for van der Pas to continue to seek scholarship in his life. Perhaps turning to history, books, and academic engagement over the course of decades helped to isolate van der Pas from the remembrance of what may have been tumultuous or uncomfortable past experiences (such as his military service). Another possible explanation builds on the foundational assertions by historian Anthony Grafton about the nature of scholarship. Throughout his work *Worlds Made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West*, Grafton illustrates that the history and development of scholarship is tied directly to forms of scholarly conversation and community. He examined the rise of institutionalized academia over the past four centuries through a shift from more personal correspondence between scholars to a process of published and reviewed journals and a central, university-based academic community.²⁶

²⁴ Peter van der Pas to Richard Schockmel, November 15, 1998, Library Donor Records, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

²⁵ Peter van der Pas to Richard Schockmel, November 15, 1998, Library Donor Records, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

²⁶ Anthony Grafton, *Worlds Made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Page by Page

An outsider to some commonly accepted social spheres of American academia, (i.e. lacking an active affiliation with specific colleges and institutions), van der Pas may have viewed his position as an immigrant as a unique challenge and opportunity. By immersing himself in his books and his study, integrating old and new intellectual passions, and deliberately getting involved in the academic world in almost any way possible, van der Pas could have instinctively challenged institutional barriers to conclusively establish himself as a legitimate scientist and scholar, and perhaps validated the sentiment of critic Walter Benjamin: “Ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they can come alive in him; it is he who comes alive in them.”²⁷ The prominence of van der Pas’s passion—his books, and the broader subjects they reflect—realized his personality as a merger of Dutch heritage, a scientific and historical core of study, and of American opportunity.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken, 1968): 67 <http://townsendlab.berkeley.edu/sites/all/files/Benjamin%20Unpacking%20My%20Library.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2012).

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Page by Page

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