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William Beer: An Englishman's Role in Libraries, Literature and Society in New Orleans, 1891-1927

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William Beer: An Englishman's Role in Libraries, Literature and Society in New Orleans, 1891-
1927

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History
Public History

by

Remesia Shields

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	iii
Abstract	iv
Introduction	1
Historiography	2
Early Life	8
Tulane.....	9
New Orleans Public Library	10
New Orleans Literary Circle	14
Rare Books and Scandal.....	24
Conclusion	26
Bibliography	28
Vita.....	30

List of Illustrations

The Peevish Pedestal, William Beer	7
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Abstract

In 1891, an Englishman named William Beer arrived in New Orleans, Louisiana, to take up the position as librarian of Tulane University's Howard Library. Beer quickly gained a reputation as a competent and knowledgeable librarian by bolstering the Louisiana collection at the Howard Library with maps, rare books and Louisiana historical documents. In 1896, Beer played a central role in the organization and opening of the first free and public library in New Orleans, the Fisk Free and Public Library. Beer befriended many well-known authors of New Orleans literature including George Washington Cable, Grace King, Mollie Moore Davis and Mary Ashley Townsend. Beer's influence in New Orleans and its literature, and his roles as librarian and instigator of literature have hitherto been largely ignored. This paper will argue that Beer created the foundations of a New Orleans literary culture.

William Beer, Mollie Moore Davis, Grace King, George Washington Cable, Mary Ashley Townsend, New Orleans Public Library, Tulane, New Orleans, New Orleans literature, Fisk Free and Public Library

"Death has taken, in William Beer, a veritable Louisiana landmark."

-*Times Picayune*,

February 2, 1927

"I wish I could settle down to write something but...I shall leave nothing behind."

-William Beer

This paper traces the life and influence of William Beer, an Englishman who made a significant contribution to the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, as librarian, director and champion of the city's first free and public library while playing a lesser known, but critical role in Southern literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Beer's role as librarian, collector of rare books and manuscripts, researcher and member of numerous social organizations put him at the center of the literary scene in New Orleans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Beer spent much of his career collecting Louisiana maps, manuscripts, rare books and Louisiana ephemera, material that became the core of Tulane's Louisiana collection and can still be found at Tulane's Louisiana Collection Special Collections. As a collector and enthusiast of Louisiana history, he created a massive collection of bibliographical notes on Louisiana and urged others to study and write about Louisiana.

Frequently mentioned in the society sections of New Orleans newspapers, Beer ran with both the famous and the infamous in New Orleans. In addition, this paper will suggest that Beer played an integral but under-historicized role in New Orleans literature and the social sphere that formed around it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Beer, with his successful career in library work and his professional and social connections to writers, was largely

responsible for a strong literary culture in New Orleans. A study of Beer can give insight into how literature is created, encouraged and promoted. Beer's life shows that literature often is not created in solitude, but by the exchange of ideas and information between and among people. Beer instigated the creation of literature and exchange of information throughout his life. Beer passed his time aiding others in their pursuit of writing and left little time for his own writing. Beer anguished in a letter, "I wish I could settle down to write something but I am torn in so many directions that I shall leave nothing behind me after passing a life in getting together valuable material."¹ Though Beer did create a plethora of journal and newspaper articles, and a few pamphlets, he did not leave behind any major work of literature. His role as librarian and purveyor of information, though perhaps no less important, kept him behind the scenes.

Historiography

Despite the attention paid to Beer during his lifetime, little has been written about him since. Although he conducted an intimate correspondence with some of the most noted authors of the day, biographies of these authors seldom mention his contribution to their works. Despite his role in the creation of the Tulane library, little exists in the library's own collection on his contribution. He was largely responsible for the creation of the New Orleans public library, but although a statue to the obscure musician Gottschalk stands in the public library, no bust or portrait of William Beer can be found there.

Though Beer spent his life aiding well-known authors in their literary pursuits, he is only briefly mentioned in one biography on George Washington Cable, by Arlin Turner. Time and

¹ William Beer, to George Washington Cable, North Hampton Massachusetts, March 29, 1917, George Washington Cable Collection 2 , Box 5 Folder 47, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

again these same authors thank Beer in a plethora of letters, but his contribution was omitted by their biographers. For instance, in her book, *Gender, Race and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin*, Helen Taylor discusses Southern literature through the writings of Grace King and Ruth McEnery Stuart, but the book is devoid of any mention of William Beer and his influence or assistance in their writings.

Beer could be described as a Sylvia Beach type, surrounding himself with literary figures in New Orleans as Beach would surround herself with the same in Paris a few years later. Beer and Beach both served as instigators and devotees of literature. Beach funded authors to create works of literature, while Beer, also aiding in creation of literary works, provided the intellectual aspect such as research, topics and bibliographical information. Beer's role as librarian places him directly into the midst of the literary scene in New Orleans as Beach's book shop, Shakespeare and Company, would do for her in Paris. However, many books have been written about Sylvia Beach, but none exist on William Beer.²

In Joe Walker Kraus's essay, "William Beer and the New Orleans Libraries," Kraus suggests that so little has been written about Beer because he did not publish many books and preferred to stay behind the scenes helping with research.³ Although as mentioned, Beer wrote hundreds of newspaper articles and essays for the public, he published few scholarly works. One of these was a pamphlet, "Contributions to New Orleans History by William Beer," and contained bibliographical information on New Orleans, providing research topics for students and historians. Only 200 copies were published of this eight-page pamphlet.

² For more information on Sylvia Beach see *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation: A History of Literary Paris in the Twenties and Thirties* by Noel Riley Fitch; *Shakespeare and Company* by Sylvia Beach; and *The Letters of Sylvia Beach* edited by Keri Walsch.

³ Joe Walker Kraus, "William Beer and the New Orleans Libraries," *ACRL Monographs*, January 1952.

Although Beer is a shadowy figure behind notable literary figures and important institutions in New Orleans, his personality does emerge occasionally in his writings, particularly his correspondence and travel articles. For instance, in 1897, Beer wrote, of his travel to New Mexico, “Weary and travel-stained, clothes and face so covered with dust as to be scarcely recognizable by any friends, I have just entered here on my return from the Moqui Pueblos.”⁴ Later, in 1902, Beer published an article about his travels through Europe and wrote, “The theatres of Paris offered nothing of value, but in the Latin quarter I found a café which provided nightly symphony concerts by the better musicians.”⁵ While travelling to Southampton, Beer met John Kendrick Bangs, American author and satirist, and revealed “I didn’t find [Bangs] near as amusing in the flesh as I imagined from reading his books.”⁶

Beer kept his personal life private, but his correspondence gives insight into his life. Beer tells his close friend, George Washington Cable “I am very lonely here at times.”⁷ Beer never married and had no family in the United States. The *Times Picayune* said of William Beer, “Mr. Beer had scant patience with the flippant and insincere in library roamers, but once one had convinced the librarian that his purposes were serious, that one was genuinely in search of facts, no amount of labor was too great for him to undertake and to carry through with an almost fanatical zeal and thoroughness.”⁸ Beer had little patience with the flippant and insincere outside of the library as well. Beer wrote to Cable about a pamphlet titled “Critical dialogue Between

⁴ “Librarian Beer on the Border Line Between the United States and Its Neighbor, Mexico,” *The Daily Picayune*, August 30, 1897.

⁵ “Librarian Beer Home from Europe,” *The Daily Picayune*, August 11, 1902.

⁶ “Books of the World,” *The Daily Picayune*, August 30, 1895.

⁷ William Beer, to George Washington Cable, North Hampton Massachusetts, September 11, 1903, George Washington Cable Collection 2, Box 5, Folder 40, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

⁸ *Times Picayune*, February 2, 1927.

Aboo and Caboo” and declared it “one of the most stupid things among the many prejudiced publications as pretended criticisms of your books.”⁹ The letters between Cable and Beer show they held a close and personal relationship.

Although Beer and his connection to a literary circle, including George Washington Cable, Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart and Mollie Moore Davis, has yet to be explored, a literary circle just a few years later than Beer's has been discussed in depth in *Dixie Bohemia: a French Quarter Circle in the 1920's*, by John Shelton Reed. Reed, like others, argues that an influential and creative literary circle existed in New Orleans. Reed discusses the creation of literature and art within a circle of authors, intellectuals, and artists -- another example of literature created within a network of people rather than in isolation.

In Reed's analysis of *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles: A Gallery of Contemporary New Orleans*, published in 1926 by William Faulkner and his artist roommate William Spratling, Reed explains that the book, meant as a joke for friends, contains caricatures of literati and artists in New Orleans at the time. Reed used the book and the people featured in it to talk about the societal circles and networks that form around literature and art. Though not every person included in the book may have known each other, he claims, "they did make up a social circle, a loose network of relationships linked by friends in common..., by association with the same institutions, and by common interests."¹⁰ Reed notes that even though the title alludes to a collection of creoles, most people included in the book were not creoles by Reed's definition, (the descendants of the original French and Spanish colonists) and that the naming of these friends as “famous creoles” was part of the joke.

⁹ William Beer to George Washington Cable, North Hampton, Massachusetts, December 12, 1904, George Washington Cable Collection 2, Box 5, Folder 40, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

¹⁰ John Shelton Reed, *Dixie Bohemia: A French Quarter Circle in the 1920's* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 5.

The majority of individuals featured in *Famous Creoles* were fiction writers and many of them were in one way or another connected to Tulane University. Reed contends,

"Institutions bring people with common interests together in the first place, and the circle they form may create other institutions, which then operate to keep the circle going...Tulane University, and the daily newspapers brought the Famous Creoles' circle into being...who then created the *Double Dealer* magazine...the criss-crossing patterns of interaction--in effect, overlapping circles within the larger circle--held the larger circle together. The interests that created these institutions also tied the circle together...those interests included literature."¹¹

Many of the people mentioned in the book were contributors to local newspapers. They wrote about the happenings of the French Quarter, the circle's activities and wrote many social columns. Tulane and the newspapers of New Orleans would constitute two of the institutions attributed by Reed to the solidifying of this circle or network. and artists in the French Quarter. The same institutions discussed by Reed, Tulane University and local newspapers, also connected many authors to Beer just a few decades earlier. Tulane University served as a connecting point for Beer and his literary circle, while writings on and by Beer were frequently found in the local paper. His good friend, Mollie Moore Davis, connected their circle to daily newspapers with her role as editor and social columnist for the *Picayune*.

Beer's frequent appearance and mention in the newspapers of New Orleans showed he held an important and influential role in the city. In 1919, a column titled "The Peevish Pedestal" appeared in the *Times-Picayune* over the span of almost a year. The column proposed replacements for Franklin's statue in Lafayette Square. Beer along with such notables as General

¹¹ Reed, 6.

John J. Pershing and Mayor Martin Behrman were featured in the paper as potential replacements. On June 30, 1919, the cartoon below featuring Beer was published:



Figure 1. The Peevish Pedestal, William Beer.

Beer not only helped create, but participated in a strong literary culture in New Orleans. A search for Beer's name in America's Historical Newspapers database brings up hundreds of articles that he authored or in which he was mentioned. He appeared in society columns and authored columns about his travels, the public library and Howard Memorial Library. While visiting libraries around the world, Beer kept travel notes which often appeared in the *Picayune*. The articles contained mostly comparisons of the libraries he had visited to Tulane's Howard

Memorial Library. However, these newspaper tributes and notes are practically the only record of Beer's career as a facilitator of Southern literature.

The lack of work on Beer leaves unwritten his influence, through his connection with some of New Orleans' most influential writers. A more in-depth look at Beer's work with principal writers of the period could bring a better understanding of a literary culture of New Orleans in the nineteenth century, how works of literature are produced, the importance of certain people in the creation of literary works, and reveal something of the authors themselves that may be hitherto unknown. Before Google Scholar, there was William Beer.

Early Life

On May 1, 1849, William Beer was born in Plymouth, England. At the age of 19, Beer directed the Plymouth Cottonian Library. Beer began his work in the library field at an early age, but would leave that career for a while to pursue an education in Paris. From 1871-1877, Beer studied medicine, modern language and art in Belle Époque Paris. During this same period, American writers, artists and scholars headed to Paris for education, inspiration and new ideas that were brought back to the states. These same authors described their time in Paris as central to their work.¹²

After returning to England in 1877, Beer began working with a company manufacturing stained glass. He studied mining engineering while in England and in 1884 left for Canada. In

¹² For more on Americans in Paris during this period, see David McCullough's *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris*. (Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2011).

1886, he would settle in Opechee, Michigan, as a mining clerk.¹³ This career ended after three years of service to begin the career he would build and excel in for the rest of his life. In 1889, Beer became librarian at the free public library in Topeka, Kansas. Later, on November 11, 1891, J. L. Shellabarger, Director of the Topeka Kansas Public Library during Beer's tenure, wrote what was probably a letter of recommendation to Preston Johnston, president of Tulane University, introducing William Beer as an "energetic, effective manager."¹⁴

Tulane

On March 4, 1889, Tulane University's Howard Memorial Library opened.¹⁵ Two years later, Beer arrived in New Orleans to take up the position of its librarian. Immediately, Beer began enriching the collection with books of literature and Southern history. Beer traveled often to locate Louisiana materials in order to bolster the library's Louisiana history collection.¹⁶ By 1895, the collection had passed the building's holding capacity of 30,000 volumes. An article in *The Library Journal* in 1897 described William Beer "as an effective worker...[who] has brought the Howard Library into the front rank among the reference libraries of the country."¹⁷ Beer spent much of his career locating the many maps, manuscripts and rare books that can still be found at Tulane's Louisiana Research Collection Special Collections. In Beer's obituary, the

¹³ Allen Johnson ed., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1929): 138-139.

¹⁴ J.L. Shellabarger, Topeka, Kansas, to Preston Johnston, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 11, 1891, William Beer Collection, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana

¹⁵ "Joseph A. Shakspeare (1837-1896)" *Administrations of the Mayors of New Orleans* 2: L33-L34, available from <http://nutrias.org/info/louinfo/admins/shakspeare.htm> ; Internet ; accessed 18 February 2008

¹⁶ Kraus, "William Beer and the New Orleans Libraries".

¹⁷ "Librarians," *Library Journal* Vol. 22 (Jan-Dec 1897), 52.

Times Picayune described the Howard Library as an "admirable and unique institution...a storehouse of reference works, unrivaled elsewhere" and explained "the assembling of these collections of books and documents was truly the life work of the deceased."¹⁸ The materials Beer sought out and deposited into Tulane's library played a major role in the literary culture of nineteenth century New Orleans. Authors created works of both fiction and nonfiction using the holdings Beer supplied to the Howard Library.

New Orleans Public Library

Beer was instrumental in the development of the Tulane Library, but his greatest impact on the city of New Orleans might be his role in the development of New Orleans' first free and public library. Although Tulane University could boast a top ranked library, the city of New Orleans had no free and public library of its own in the nineteenth century. This situation was to change in 1896, with the opening of the Fisk Free and Public Library, the first free and public library in New Orleans. St. Patrick's Hall, a three-story building located a few blocks from Canal Street, would be the site for the new library.¹⁹

On December 7, 1896, the library Board of Directors elected Beer as its first librarian. So for a time, Beer served as librarian of both the Howard Memorial and the Fisk Free and Public libraries. An article in the *Library Journal*, published by the American Library Association, said of Beer, "Mr. Beer has been enthusiastic in his support of the free library since it was first planned a year or so ago....He advocates the close co-operation of the Howard and the Fisk

¹⁸ *Times Picayune*, February 2, 1927.

¹⁹ "Synopsis of Ordinances," in New Orleans Public Library City Archives (New Orleans, Louisiana) available from <http://nutrias.org/~nopl/inv/synopsis/l.htm>; Internet; accessed April 15, 2008.

libraries the former serving as a reference the latter as a circulating library, and he will undoubtedly make the new institution an important factor in the educational development of the city."²⁰

William Beer was a central figure in the organization and opening of the new library. Beer advocated for the library, acquired books to be housed in the library and directed the set-up of the library. Beer promoted the library by writing articles that appeared in newspapers and library journals. He wrote about new acquisitions of the library to bring more people into the library.

Beer worked tirelessly on the arrangement of the library, directing the placement of its contents, collections and furniture layout. Beer meticulously described the set up and arrangement of the library in his article, "The Fisk Free and Public Library of New Orleans," appearing in *The Library Journal*.²¹ He described the library room as measuring 185 feet by 85 feet and over 40 feet high with the delivery desk located around 20 feet away from the entrance. Many windows allowed light to shine through the library. A gallery about 14 feet from the floor allowed space for many special reading rooms. The eastern half of the library was used for book storage and contained double book shelves ten feet long and seven feet high in five rows of 10. The shelving was made of oil-finished cypress, costing approximately \$20.70 per unit. Each and every detail was overseen by Beer.

Beer arranged the books near the delivery desk beginning with fiction followed by American history and then German literature. Literature and philosophy were followed by current periodicals and public documents. Newspapers, periodicals and the 15- foot reference

²⁰ "Librarians," *Library Journal* Vol. 22 (Jan-Dec 1897), 52.

²¹ William Beer, "The Fisk Free and Public Library of New Orleans," *The Library Journal* vol. 22 (1897):32.

desk were located in the western part of the room. On the desk were three rows of books from dictionaries to encyclopedias, census reports and volumes of the Congressional Record.

Fourteen tables contained two electric lights and comfortable chairs and stools, seating for about 200 people.

Beer worked diligently to acquire books, periodicals and newspapers for the library. The holdings of the library at the time of its grand opening according to William Beer were as follows:

Bound periodicals, dictionaries and encyclopedias	3250
Philosophy.....	800
Theology	1500
Sociology and public documents	9500
Philology	100
Natural Sciences.....	500
Useful Arts	500
Fine Arts.....	100
Literature.....	3500
Fiction	3500
History.....	5500
Total holdings:	28750

The plethora of books with such varied subject matter gave the citizens of New Orleans a rich collection to utilize. *The Times-Democrat* reported New Orleans citizens were delighted with the thought of having a free public library and would “appreciate it far more than their neighbors of the North and West, to whom such libraries are no longer novelties.”²² The same article mentioned the hope that this new public library would engage the interest of the public in literature and reading.

²² “Fisk Free Library,” *Times-Democrat*, January 19, 1897.

On January 18, 1897, the memorable opening of the new Fisk Free and Public Library took place. According to reports by both the *Daily Picayune* and *Times Democrat*, the opening night of the library was a huge success. The celebration, attended by more than 1,200 people, featured both orchestral and vocal music along with speeches about the value and future of the library. The *Daily Picayune* reported that everyone enjoyed the evening. Although a few hundred citizens had been given an early view of the new library by Beer before the opening, opening night was the first time the public had seen the library illuminated at night. The *Daily Picayune* reported that five minutes after the doors opened, the ground floor seats were filled and people began filling the balconies. After everyone was seated, Mayor Walter C. Flower introduced Archbishop Janssens of New Orleans to the crowd. Archbishop Janssens delivered a prayer and the library was then turned over to Chairman Frank T. Howard and the Board of Directors. The guests were informed that Governor Murphy J. Foster was unable to be present for the library opening so he sent a telegram that was read aloud by Mr. Howard.²³

New Orleans citizens and its officials viewed the opening of the first free and public library in New Orleans as an important event. The *Daily Picayune* reported, “Someone remarked, looking over the great throng which filled all the available space in the big hall, ‘Have you noticed it is hardly possible to mention a name, figuring in the active life of this city in any degree of prominence, who is not here?’”²⁴

Frank T. Howard, credited with the development of the Howard Memorial Library, and William Beer agreed that the success of the library depended upon its popularity with the citizens of New Orleans, and the grand opening night could be seen as a promising beginning for the

²³ “The New City Library Open,” *The Daily Picayune*, January 19, 1897, 1.

²⁴ “Fisk Free Library,” *Times-Democrat*, January 19, 1897.

library. One year after the opening, the *Daily Picayune* reported over 150,000 people had already used the library.²⁵ Surely Beer and Howard must have found the library to be successful considering its instant popularity and heavy use.

Credited with the success of the new public library in New Orleans, Beer became well-known in the library field throughout the world. His ability to open a successful public library and bolster Howard Memorial Library's collection, turning it into a top ranked library, would prove William Beer to be an effective librarian. His knowledge of collections, books and manuscripts would further bolster his reputation. W. B. Smith, Academic Department of Tulane, wrote of William Beer, "a gentleman equally well and favorably known both at home and abroad, preeminently the friend of men, of the spirit and of all who would lead the intellectual life, impassioned with the joy of serving his fellows, often recalling to mind the great word of Sophocles: for men to help (others) to the extent of his abilities and opportunities is the noblest of toils."²⁶ Beer continued his role as librarian of both the Howard Memorial Library and the Fisk Free and Public Library until 1906 when he decided to devote his full attention to the Howard Memorial Library.

New Orleans Literary Circle

William Beer called many influential New Orleanians his friends. Tulane University houses the William Beer papers containing correspondence with many literary, political, scholarly and societal figures. Within that correspondence are letters with such notables as

²⁵ "The City Library," *The Daily Picayune*, March 16, 1898.

²⁶ W.B. Smith, Academic Department of Tulane, to Professor C.J. Keyser, June 26, 1915, William Beer Collection 18, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

George Washington Cable, Grace King, Mollie Moore Davis, Mary Ashley Townsend, Ruth McEnery Stuart, W.E.B. DuBois and Julia Ward Howe. Beer's professional and social interactions with these noted authors helped create a strong literary culture of New Orleans in the nineteenth century. The *Times Picayune* wrote of Beer, "New Orleans has had few citizens at any time of more distinct personality, and it is safe to say that during the past thirty-five years no resident of our community has met, and in a sense fraternized, with a greater number of the intelligenza among visitors to our city."²⁷ Beer often received letters asking for help locating books, documents and assistance with historical research. In the forward of John Smith Kendall's *History of New Orleans*, Kendall thanks Beer for his assistance in preparation of the book. Beer received letters from around the world from individuals in search of books and manuscripts, mostly dealing with Louisiana.

Mollie Moore Davis, a prolific writer of poems, sketches, short stories and novels, was another friend of Beer. Davis, a major feature in New Orleans society, became editor of the *Picayune* newspaper in 1889, and wrote a social column titled "The Social Bee," in the *Times Picayune*. Beer was often featured in her articles. According to her column, Beer enjoyed an active social life, often invited to the weddings and parties of influential New Orleanians. According to her column, his days were filled with societal balls and social events. Their letters often contained an air of humor and friendship.

Many letters written to Beer from Davis are invitations to visit her at her home or asking him to stop by when he has free time. Her correspondence to Beer constitutes the largest collection of letters in the Beer collection at Tulane. In these, she repeatedly asked him for reading suggestions. She looked to Beer for advice concerning books, writing, essays, and noteworthy readings. The tone suggests a close and comfortable relationship. In an undated

²⁷ *Times Picayune*, February 2, 1927.

letter, she expresses her regret to have to break an engagement planned with him due to a previous engagement, but says, "I will however take this opportunity to tell you how much I appreciate all your kindnesses and how much the camaraderie between us means to me. What a pleasant thing is the sense of security in such a friendship- such an "alliance offensive and defensive."²⁸ Her words tell of a valued friendship not easily replaced. She does not want to offend him by having to cancel their engagement and hopes to see him again soon. Their correspondence reveals a long close and personal relationship. In a letter written in their later years, Moore joked with Beer that if he decided to stop by, her bell was broken and he may have to beat on the door with his cane so she would be able to hear him.²⁹ She often spoke kind words to Beer. Three years before her death, she writes of her distaste for New Orleans hot summers and says, "I recall the noise and heat, and unrest of a year ago and that reminds me of you, the only pleasant thing that happened."³⁰ One can sense the respect and admiration she had for him.

Beer and Davis were intertwined in a circle of literary figures in New Orleans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose names were often sprinkled through Davis's social column. Davis tells Beer she would like to "plan an afternoon with Louisiana authors for the [?] club. I think I shall take Grace King and Gayarre for history, Mrs. Townsend and Mrs. Nickolson, with one or two others for poetry, and Cable and Ruth McEnery Stuart for

²⁸ Mollie Moore Davis, to William Beer, New Orleans Louisiana, undated, William Beer Collection 18, Box 2, Folder 7, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

²⁹ Ibid, undated.

³⁰ Ibid, July 4, 1906.

fiction. What do you think?"³¹ Those writers mentioned in her letter were frequent correspondents and visitors of Beer.

Beer and Davis bonded over their love of travel and literature. Her many letters spoke of her travels or asked of his future plans for travel. She travelled through Washington, New Jersey, London, Connecticut, and spoke of plans for touring Italy. Through the years, she spoke often of her winter plans and asked of his plans to stay in New Orleans during the hot summer or retreat to a cooler destination. While Beer was travelling the U.S., Davis complained that she could not locate him and had no address or travelling information to catch up with him. She mentioned that her only information on his itinerary was that he would be staying with George Washington Cable at some point during his trip.³² Beer often visited the Cables, another thread in the circle of New Orleans literati that connected Beer and many New Orleans authors.

George Washington Cable, born in New Orleans in 1844, wrote many books and short stories about New Orleans and the Creole population. Violet Harrington Bryan, author of *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature: Dialogues of Race and Gender*, describes Cable's early works as "a form of dialectic, in which clashes between Creole and American cultures, the African and European races, rational thought and the irrational, civilization and the wild, poor and rich, are dramatized."³³ Bryan emphasized that Cable's works engaged racial divisions and inequalities and social issues during the Reconstruction era.

From Cable's earliest days as a writer for the *Picayune* and as a writer of fiction, he argued for reform. During the time that Cable wrote the stories of *Old Creole Days* and the novels *The*

³¹ Ibid, undated.

³² Mollie Moore Davis, to William Beer, New Orleans Louisiana, September 2, 1904, William Beer Collection 18, Box 2, Folder 7, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

³³ Violet Harrington Bryan, *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature: Dialogues of Race and Gender* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993) 12.

Grandisimmes and *Dr. Sevier* (1873-84), New Orleans, the South's largest city and fourth largest in the nation, was faced with a waning Reconstruction, accelerating racial hostilities, and a growing northern interest in "The Great South."³⁴

The George Washington Cable Collection, also located at Tulane University, contains over 80 letters from Beer to Cable. Correspondence between Cable and Beer suggests they held a close, personal friendship. Cable wrote Beer concerning life, health, family, Cable's home in Northampton, Massachusetts, his trips around the world and research questions for his novels and short stories. Arlin Turner, author of one of Cable's biographies, mentions Beer as "Cable's closest friend in New Orleans."³⁵ Cable writes, "When you next feel lonesome remember two friends [Cable and his wife Eva] who remember you daily and believe me ever Yours Truly G.W. Cable."³⁶ Cable often expressed to Beer how he and his wife, Eva, loved receiving his letters. Beer received a letter from Cable in September 1915, stating, "I trust this may find you in health and good spirits after a stay on the Pacific Coast...We wanted you here. Your absence is a bit of our summer lost out."³⁷ Here, Cable expresses Beer's importance to himself and his wife.

A 1903 exchange of letters between the two men points out the intimacy of the relationship between them. Upon the death of the librarian at the Forbes Library in Northampton, Massachusetts, Cable wrote to Beer requesting a recommendation for a replacement librarian. Beer responded to Cable's request by writing that he would be interested in filling the position

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Arlin Turner, *George W. Cable* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966) 342.

³⁶ George Washington Cable, to William Beer, New Orleans Louisiana, October 19, 1917, William Beer Collection, Special Collections 18, Box 2, Folder 1, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

³⁷ George Washington Cable, to William Beer, New Orleans Louisiana, September 20, 1915, William Beer Collection 18, Box 2, Folder 1, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

himself, revealing to Cable, "I have been very successful in the increase of the Howard...but it seems probable that political pull will become a necessary to the holding of this position and I will not be mixed up in politics."³⁸ This quote in particular shows not only Beer's trust of Cable, but the intimacy of their relationship. Beer feels sure that he can discuss with Cable his loneliness and desire to possibly leave his current position with no fear that Cable will violate his confidence. At this point in his career, Beer holds an important position as librarian at the Howard Memorial Library and is held in high regard by those for whom he works and those who work with him. Beer probably would not have discussed the possibility of leaving his position in New Orleans with someone he felt could send word that he was considering abandoning his position at the Howard Memorial Library. His confidence in Cable can also be seen in a letter from Beer on June 6, 1919 where Beer speaks of his legal troubles and confides in Cable about someone he met at a mutual friends home. He writes,

I had not intended to write you until I could announce that I was through my difficulties, but that might involve too long a silence though I may be able to be free in about 10 days. That is to say I shall have bought freedom at a price which will cause a curtailment of all unnecessary expenditure... I was at Mrs. Kendall's the other day and I met there a woman unfit to be a mother with the result of her bringing up of a boy of 8 or 9. Oh he is a nightmare to me. He will certainly commit murder and be hanged for it. Unless he is taken out of the hands of his mother and sad to say she not only does not think the imp bad but she says she is proud of him. He has never left me. I hope that I frightened him a little.³⁹

Beer would probably not have spoken ill of someone known by their mutual acquaintance if he did not trust Cable.

³⁸ William Beer, to George Washington Cable, North Hampton Massachusetts, September 11, 1903, George Washington Cable Collection 2, Box 5, Folder 40, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

³⁹ Ibid, June 6, 1916.

In Turner's biography of Cable, he not only describes Beer as Cable's friend, but as a research companion for Cable's literary works. Turner describes Cable's works as "built on a combination of historical research, his own recollections, and the traditions of his family."⁴⁰ Beer often assisted Cable with research for his novels and short stories. According to Turner, Beer escorted Cable to book stores around the French Quarter to gather information about an African American book dealer formerly working in New Orleans. This man would later appear as fictional character Ovide Landry, in Cable's novel, *Lovers of Louisiana*.⁴¹ In 1915, Cable wrote Beer, "I am busy on a novel... I have a question to ask, requiring the information for this same novel."⁴² The question Cable asked Beer pertained to his novel, *The Flower of the Chapdelaines*, concerning the length of time served by the grand jury while in term and in what months they serve. In that letter, Cable acknowledges Beer's assistance: "You have so often been so good to me that I find myself leaning on you."⁴³

Beer's ability to get along with a variety of different people is most exhibited in his friendship and close relationship with Louisiana author Grace King. King was not a friend of Cable. In fact, her distaste for Cable's depiction of Creole society, a theme that gained Cable wide disfavor with many New Orleanians, had spurred King to take up writing in the first place. In Bryan's *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature: Dialogues of Race and Gender*, Bryan suggests, "King's stories were written in part to correct what she considered the inaccurate

⁴⁰ Turner, *George W. Cable*, Preface, iv.

⁴¹ Ibid, 351.

⁴² George Washington Cable, to William Beer, New Orleans Louisiana, September 20, 1915, William Beer Collection 18, Box 2, Folder 1, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

⁴³ Ibid, September 20, 1915.

portrayal of Creoles in Cable's works, though from quite another perspective."⁴⁴ According to Bryan, King "attempted to explain that the Creoles of New Orleans were hostile to George Washington Cable because he 'proclaimed his preference for colored people over white and assumed the inevitable superiority...of the quadroons over the Creoles.'"⁴⁵

Beer's ability to maintain relationships with such varied and even combative authors speaks to Beer's character and his ability to maneuver difficult situations. Beer would maintain lifelong relationships with both authors. Beer would work alongside Grace King on the bibliography and biography of Charles Gayarre which was included in Gayarre's book, *History of Louisiana*, while maintaining a close friendship with George Washington Cable. Beer and King also worked closely together as members of the Louisiana Historical Society, discussed in depth later in this paper.

Born in New Orleans on November 29, 1852, Grace King became a well-known author of Louisiana literature, both fiction and non-fiction. The friendship held between Beer and King can be seen in numerous letters found in his collection. King writes to Beer, "The French Consul-Generale is going, officially, to confer upon me the decoration *L'officier L'instruction Publique*, next Thursday evening...It would give me pleasure to have you form the very small number of friends I am asking for the occasion."⁴⁶ King expresses his importance to her with an invitation to a small, but important event. In an undated letter, King asks Beer, "Would you send me, by mail, the name and title of 'Pakenham' (is it spelled so or with a c?) you know what it is for. It seems to me that he was a knight of Bath-we must put up a tablet that is correct in every

⁴⁴ Bryan, *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature: Dialogues of Race and Gender*, 44.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Grace King, to William Beer, New Orleans Louisiana, no date, William Beer Collection 18, Box 5, Folder 2, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

particular.”⁴⁷ Grace King’s insistence that all information be accurate to the detail shows her high regard for historical accuracy. This query reveals how Beer could have been a great asset to King. Beer had knowledge, accessibility to documents and collections, and a vast network of intellectual acquaintances that could greatly benefit King and her work.

Social organizations served as a meeting ground of literati linked to William Beer. Beer was involved in many organizations such as the Pickwick Club, Bibliographical Society of England, A.L.A. Societe des Americanistes, American Historical Society, American Antiquary Society, American Folklore Society, Louisiana Historical Society, the American Economist Association and Bibliographical Society of America and received numerous requests to join social clubs around the world. William Beer, Grace King and George Washington Cable were all members of the American Folklore Society. Beer, King, and Mollie Moore Davis were linked through the Louisiana Historical Society.

Beer and Grace King worked closely as officers of the Louisiana Historical Society. Numerous letters between Beer and King discussed issues related to the society and reveal that they held each other in the strictest confidence. In an undated letter, King wrote to Beer, “I am glad you have written to Mr. Cusachs about Mr. Price (who by the bye thinks his pro Germania vehemence may be the cause of his dismissal. Even in spite of the Lusitania and feeling to the full, horror and hatred of the Germans-I think Mr. Price should be retained for the sake of the Society.”⁴⁸ This letter shows Beer and King held a high standard for the society, deeply considered all decisions and they worked together to make decisions for the society. King

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Grace King, to William Beer, New Orleans Louisiana, no date, William Beer Collection 18, Box 5, Folder 2, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

insisted that she would back Beer up at the next historical society meeting when he makes the announcement that Mr. Cusachs will be retained.

Letters from King to Beer reveal the importance of the Historical Society in their relationship. King expressed to Beer, "I think it would be well to read your list of documents to the Hist[orical] Society at the next meeting. Not that it would incite much interest among the members-who are not historical students-but to give me the chance to mention them in the minutes."⁴⁹ Their correspondence revealed a mutual passion for history and making historical information accessible to others. This letter also shows that King found Beer's work noteworthy, worth mentioning in the minutes of the society.

Beer and King shared a friendship of reciprocity. The letters shared between the two suggest they were supportive of each other's careers and endeavors. They seem to back each other when necessary, revealing a mutual respect and admiration. When contemplating important matters, Beer and King would request the other's advice.

Mary Ashley Townsend was another author of New Orleans literature and member of the social circle of New Orleans literati who held Beer in high esteem. In a letter to Beer, dated May 30, 1895, Townsend conveyed her respect for Beer. Townsend had just received copies of her new book and asked, "Will you permit me to send one to your mother by your hand? I am aware that going from me, a total stranger, it will not convey to her any special message; yet it will be a slight proof to her of the very high esteem and consideration which I and every member of my family entertain for her son."⁵⁰ Townsend's sentiments matched the sentiments of the circle or group of Southern authors who can be studied through the lens of William Beer. These authors

⁴⁹ Grace King, to William Beer, New Orleans Louisiana, no date, William Beer Collection 18, Box 5, Folder 2, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

⁵⁰ Mary Ashley Townsend, to William Beer, New Orleans Louisiana, May 30, 1895, William Beer Collection 18, Box 7, Folder 7, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

were linked not only by social organizations, literature and place, but by their professional and social relationship with librarian, bibliophile and rare books collector, William Beer.

Rare Books and Scandal

In addition to his role as librarian, Beer became well known as a collector of rare books and manuscripts.⁵¹ He received honorable mention at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition “on Howard Memorial Library for Old Maps and Books.” At the 1904 Universal Exposition in St. Louis, Beer was presented a gold medal to for his collection of books with old prints. His enthusiasm for rare books and manuscripts would flow into his personal life and he amassed a vast collection of his own.

In a letter to a "Mr. Edwin" dated August 13, 1903, Beer wrote that he has “ten splendid lots of books on the tables upstairs. How you would enjoy them; some I shall put into the library, others are too good; I think I shall keep them if I can afford it.”⁵² Joe Walker Kraus, author of "William Beer and the New Orleans Public Libraries," suggests that Beer had a remarkable personal collection of Louisiana books and manuscripts, but no record of sale or catalog of his collection has been found.⁵³

Beer's involvement in the acquisition of rare books led to a legal battle that threatened his reputation. On January 11, 1913, the *Times-Democrat* reported that William Beer had been

⁵¹ *The Times-Picayune* February 2, 1927.

⁵² William Beer to Mr. Edwin, August 13, 1903, William Beer Collection 18, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

⁵³ Kraus, "William Beer and the New Orleans Libraries". Kraus does not reference where he found the information on Beers personal book and manuscripts collection.

indicted for his involvement in a book fraud. At the age of 64, Beer was arrested and arraigned on the charge of "defrauding by means of the mail system." Beer claimed he had formerly owned a 5,000 volume set of Americana and had sold the set to a Mr. W. Y. C. Humes of Chicago for \$15,000. The books were said to have passed through the hands of many different people until finally sold to a Mr. Livingston for \$70,000. Beer later dined with Livingston in New York. When asked by Livingston how much Beer had originally sold the collection for, Beer replied "\$15,000." Beer claims the gap in price angered Livingston, who suspected fraud involving Beer and the seller, and a year and a half later Beer was arrested.⁵⁴

Members of the literary and social society in New Orleans rallied around Beer, exclaiming his innocence. In February 1913, author George Washington Cable wrote Beer, "The *Tribune* of the twelfth tells us – in a heartless way that we resent – of the trouble in which you have been involved through the machinations of the book swindlers. It is hard to be so far from a friend in the day of his hardship... You have our deep sympathy and our most ardent hope that matters may so turn out to bring your vindication in the most prompt and sweeping manner possible."⁵⁵ Cable was one of many authors to lend support to Beer in his time of hardship. The scandal deeply affected Beer. In a letter to Cable, Beer expressed hope, but anguish that the matter would not be soon settled and wrote, " I see day light glimmering in the future of my life. My lawyer believes that the matter can be arranged in a way which will be not too onerous for me. He may fail, but will ensue a long fight. Probably longer than my life."⁵⁶ Beer pleaded his

⁵⁴ *Times-Democrat*, January 11, 1913.

⁵⁵ George Washington Cable, to William Beer, New Orleans Louisiana, January 12, 1913, William Beer Collection, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

⁵⁶ William Beer, to George Washington Cable, North Hampton Massachusetts, May 10, 1916, George Washington Cable Collection 2, Box 5, Folder 46, Special Collections, Jones Hall, Tulane University, Louisiana.

innocence and these charges were later dropped due to lack of evidence supporting use of the mail system to defraud.

Conclusion

William Beer, librarian, rare books collector, and friend of New Orleans literary figures, played a significant role in the literary and social life of New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century, a time of intense literary production from some of the South's most influential authors. Working for the most part behind the scenes and as confidant, he served as facilitator, source, inspiration, and colleague of a host of some of the most influential Southern writers of the period. Although his relationship with the writers and his role in the creation of their works has seldom been mentioned, a study of his life could point out the thick, overlapping but hidden networks that might support the creation of an art form and a literary movement. Beer, with his lifelong work in New Orleans libraries and his connections to writers, was largely responsible for a strong literary culture in nineteenth century New Orleans. Though seldom mentioned in scholarship on New Orleans literature, his activities to create a large repository of Southern and Louisiana literature at Tulane University, his role in the creation of New Orleans' first public library, and his membership and support of a variety of institutions, clubs, and societies helped create and enhance a literary milieu in which literature could blossom in New Orleans.

Beer's role in literature, libraries, and social organizations in New Orleans lead to a successful career and worldwide recognition. In the obituary of William Beer, dated February 2, 1927, the *Times-Picayune* reported, "Mr. Beer made Howard Memorial Library a notable repository of early Louisiana books, and an outstanding reference library of the country." His

ability to acquire rare books and manuscripts lead to his success in the library field and to the acquiring of lifelong friendships with noted authors of Louisiana literature. William Beer's accomplishments are integral to the history of New Orleans and its citizens, and could also play an important role in the current historiography of Louisiana literature and its authors.

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