



Conrad Bult, longtime Calvin librarian, is retiring this summer. He is legendary for his tenacity in searching out information and his willingness to help people.

# A Match for Any Computer

## THE IRREPLACEABLE CONRAD BULT

By Lynn Bolt Rosendale '85

**B**efore there was the Internet, there was Conrad Bult.

In fact, before there were computers, there was Conrad Bult.

Despite the advent of this new technology, at Calvin College's Hekman Library you probably have a better chance of being referred to Conrad Bult when looking for an obscure fact or tidbit of information than you do any other source.

For 34 years Bult, a 1957 graduate of Calvin who will retire this August, has been the reference librarian at Calvin seeking out every esoteric detail imaginable for students, faculty and library patrons.

"He's tenacious," said colleague and friend Robert Bolt '52. "I've asked him to find a lot of things for me and I can't think of anything he hasn't been able to find. It certainly hasn't happened very often."

For instance Bolt, Calvin history professor emeritus, recently needed to know the name of the academy President Millard Fillmore attended as a youngster.

"Fillmore is one of the most obscure of our presidents and this is one of the most obscure facts about him," said Bolt. "Conrad found it though. I think, in some sense, it makes his day when he is able to find something for you."

Bult admits that he has been asked to find many, many strange and discreet facts during his time at Calvin.

"I've been asked to find the formula for dynamite, the population of Somalia in 1949, how many advertisements a person is exposed to in one day, things like that," he said. "I learn a lot. It's very humbling."

Bult has made a career of working with people by helping them find information, but also by teaching them to skillfully use the library.

"Any time I have run into graduates, they have such fond memories of Conrad," said library colleague Diane Vander Pol. "Most of

## BULT DISCOVERS RARE BOOK

Conrad Bult has been a librarian at Calvin College since 1965; this summer he'll retire after more than three decades of employment. So he might be excused for taking it easy as he nears the end of his career. But a recent discovery at Calvin proves that Bult's diligence shows no signs of waning in his final months on the job.

The story begins in a storage room in the basement of Calvin's Hekman Library where Bult and fellow librarian Harry Boonstra are working on Calvin's uncatalogued collection — books sitting in piles that are not part of the everyday stacks; books that need a glance to determine where they should go. Some of these books, in fact, end up as part of the annual Calvin College Used Book Sale, fetching anywhere from 50 cents to a few dollars.

Among the books in the basement last fall that passed through the hands of Bult and Boonstra was an Italian play from 1547. It was missing its front and back covers, and close inspection revealed that the spine might be from the 1700s or 1800s, meaning that the book was rebound at some point. It didn't seem like much.

But when the book ended up in Bult's hands, he gave it more than the cursory inspection one might expect. In fact, he paged through it from start to finish. And after 139 pages of Italian drama — a well-known Italian play called *The Tragedy of Free Will* by a writer named Francesco Negri — Bult made an interesting discovery. A new document, complete with title page and page numbers starting over again at one, followed *The Tragedy of Free Will*.

Bult admits that his Italian was not sufficient to read the document, but he could tell that the margins contained Scripture references, leading him to wonder whether the new material was a religious work of some sort.

Intrigued, he brought the book up two floors to the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies — a research center specializing in John Calvin, which has one of the world's finest collections of books written by and about John Calvin. There, director Karin Maag and curator Paul Fields did some research. What they found was startling: the new document was a catechism, but not just any catechism. It was printed in 1545, most probably in Geneva, and was one of the earliest Italian translations of John Calvin's Genevan catechism.

Maag and Fields dug deeper and discovered that only three such catechisms were known to exist! And all are in Europe. The version Bult discovered is the only known North American copy. And

it sat in the basement of Calvin's Library for over 30 years, probably pre-dating even Bult's first years at Calvin.

"It's amazing to think about," said Maag. "It really is an incredible find."

Maag and Fields speculate that the book came from Calvin's old Franklin Street campus during Calvin's move in the early 1960s. And they believe that even then nobody knew what the book actually contained.

"Howard Rienstra (former director of the Meeter Center) was fluent in Italian," said Fields. "If he had known this existed it would not have sat in the basement for 30 years."

Why the book was at Calvin and how it got there is just one mystery.

Another is why the catechism was bound behind the Italian play in the first place. Maag said it could have been done in the 18th century, when the book looks like it was rebound. Or, as is more likely, the two documents may have been bound together already in the 16th century for concealment purposes.

"In Italy in the mid 1500s," said Maag, "the Protestant Reformation was perceived as a threat by the Italian Catholic church. Italian church authorities were particularly concerned at the

proliferation of books and tracts which they saw as heretical. So a catechism by John Calvin may have been controversial enough to need hiding behind something else."

Adds Fields: "In the time this catechism came out (1545), Luther was still the primary voice of the Reformation in Italy, but Calvin was beginning to take the lead. His work would have been one that Italians would have wanted. Perhaps this volume was one way to smuggle Calvin's teachings into Italy."

Maag and Fields note that the price for having such a book would have been steep, especially in 1545 but even more so by 1549 and again in 1559 when the church published lists of banned books, known as the Index of Prohibited Books.

Still a third mystery is who was Thomas Sidney, and when did he own the book. For on the title page of the play is Sidney's elegant signature in what Maag said "looks to be a late 16th century or 17th century hand." And, also in Sidney's had, is an Italian inscription — perhaps his own motto, perhaps a clue to the extra material that lies at the book's conclusion.

It said simply: "To those who are adventurous only a little seed is necessary."



**This Italian translation of John Calvin's Genevan Catechism was discovered in a box of books in the library basement by Conrad Bult. It was printed in 1545 and is one of only four such catechisms known to exist.**

them remember hearing about him their first week as freshmen and can recall certain instances where Conrad helped them find something or taught them something about how to use the library."

Skillful use of the library is something that Bult has continually had to work at himself especially with the amazing advances in technology in recent years.

It all started with the photocopier.

"People don't think much about it much, but it's quite a change from the cylinder we had on the old campus," said Bult. "We would put a cover on it and you could easily burn your fingers while making a copy. You came out with really not a very remarkable copy and no student casually made copies like they do today. You couldn't dream of copying entire articles."

Along the way the invention of the fax machine helped increase accessibility to articles in periodicals.

The biggest change, however, has been the computerization of information.

"The use of computers to manipulate and store information is as great an invention to the library world as the printing press was back in the 1400s," he said. "It has great implications for how people learn, how they comprehend things and their attitude towards the world."

The availability of information on the Internet through computers has certainly changed the way people search for data. It also has changed their thinking, said Bult.

"People's expectations have increased," he said. "They think that if there is something I want to know, it ought to be out there somewhere. That expectation is not as great with books."

Beyond that, Bult believes the computer has revolutionized the way in which information is retrieved.

"The manipulation of information through the use of the computer is a major change," he said. "The computer gives you the unique ability to combine topics which you could never do with a card catalog. To combine key words when looking for a particular topic is quite different than only being able to go to one subject in the card catalog and maybe being referred to another."



Conrad and Dee Bult with Calvin President Emeritus William Spoelhof (center). Dee is retiring after 26 years in the financial aid office.

Although these changes have, in some ways, made Bult's job easier, they have also made it more complex. "You have to keep up or you're going to become a fossil," he said. "But I still like the book. The book is tough competition for the computer."

In fact, Bult likes "the book" so much he owns a large collection of rare children's books, which he and his wife, Delores, started 30 years ago.

"I was a bookish kid," said Bult. "I've been an avid reader ever since I was small. Back then I read *The Hardy Boys*, *Uncle Wiggly* and Bible stories by Katherine Vos. Books became very important to me."

The Bults collect illustrated children's book from the 1800s.

While collecting rare books is one of Bult's personal hobbies, it was an interest he was easily able to transfer to his work at Calvin.

As the Rare Book librarian, Bult has taken responsibility to see that these books are treated with the respect they deserve.

A few thousand books are housed in the Rare Book Room ranging from an 1852 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to a 1799 edition of (Samuel) *Johnson's Dictionary* to a run of *Aunt Judy's Magazine*, beginning in 1866.

"The books are not put in there just because they are old," said Bult. "The books are there because of their unique scholarly value—their intrinsic value."

And Bult, with his experience in rare books, is usually able to judge that quite accurately. In fact, last fall Bult made the most exciting discovery of his career at Calvin finding a 1545 Italian translation of John Calvin's Genevan catechism, the only known copy in North America, among a box of books in the library basement (see p.17).

While this discovery put Bult in the limelight for a few months last fall, he is quick to point out that it was a group effort with his library colleagues. "I'm very happy I was able to help out and that the volume is in the Meeter Center now," he said.

In fact, that's what Bult's whole career has been about—helping people.

"I've always had a delight in books and sharing what they have to say," said Bult. "Have I written

50 brilliant articles during my career? No. I hope I've made my best contribution by helping people."

In a recent retirement tribute, English professor Gary Schmidt reflected on some memories of Bult. The reflections met with familiar nods from those in attendance:

"Following Conrad around the library on the trail of some obscure text—following his quick stride, leaving books open hither and yon in the thrill of the search, bending over a book with Conrad and following his finger up and down the pages; watching Conrad's look of delight, real delight, when he finally finds a particularly stubborn quarry."

And from Randy Bytwerk, communications professor at Calvin:

"Any student who has ever used the library, and that includes at least most of them, will recall Conrad's booming unlibrarianly voice, his determination to track down that piece of information or reference, and, only occasionally, his obvious distress when he could not be of service. There are professors and staff members who, when they retire, remain part of the college's lore. Surely, Conrad Bult is one of those."

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