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Boston College Law School

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Kathryn Preyer Bequeaths Collection of Rare Law Books

9/18/06--Kathryn ("Kitty") Preyer recently bequeathed her collection of over one hundred early American and English law books to the Boston College Law School. A selection of those books is now on exhibit in the law library's Daniel R. Coquillette Rare Book Room.

BC Law Dean John H. Garvey praised Preyer's generosity and commitment to scholarship, noting that this was a significant gift that would enhance the Law School's growing collection of books owned by working lawyers. "We are both pleased and humbled by Kitty's bequest," said Garvey. "She was a brilliant teacher and scholar, and her gift to the Law School will help inspire new generations of students."

Filippa Marullo Anzalone, Associate Dean for Library and Computing Services, called Kitty "an active friend" of the Law School's Rare Book's program. "Having her books as part of the collection will keep Kitty in our hearts in a wonderful and enriching way for generations to come," Anzalone said.

Preyer originally began buying law books to facilitate her own scholarship, and over time amassed a strong collection. As a result of her own collecting, she became an expert in the history and publication of early American law books. A renowned American legal and constitutional historian, Preyer passed away on Patriot's Day in 2005.

Included among the books in the bequest are early justice of the peace manuals, law dictionaries, English and Italian criminal law works, several editions of Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Laws of England, early American constitutional law materials, and multiple editions of her favorite: Giles Jacob's Every Man His Own Lawyer.

"Kitty Preyer was an extraordinary colleague, devoted to her friends and fellow scholars," said Monan Professor of Law Daniel Coquillette. "It was a thrill that she decided to leave her superb collection to the Law School. These are irreplaceable books that simply cannot be found on the open market...it is an honor and a privilege to have her name associated with the School."

Preyer received her A.B. from Goucher College in Towson, Maryland, and her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Wisconsin. She spent nearly all of her academic career as a Professor of History at Wellesley College, where she taught a wide range of American history courses and seminars. She served as Chair of the History Department from 1971 - 73, and was named Professor Emeritus in 1990.

In 1981-82 she was awarded a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities; she also received fellowships from Harvard University and the Harvard Law School. In 1984, the American Society for Legal History awarded Preyer the Surrency Prize for a "scholarly work deemed the most significant contribution to the history of law or constitutionalism." She won the prize for her article "Penal Measures in the American Colonies," which was published in the American Journal of Legal History.

Preyer was active in many professional organizations, including the American Society for Legal History, the Organization of American Historians, and the Massachusetts Historical Society. She...
served as Vice-President of the latter from 1980 to 1995. She was elected Honorary Fellow of the ASLH in recognition of her service and support of the organization.

Preyer was a member of the Grolier Club in New York, where she exhibited her books. She served on the editorial advisory board of the Documentary History of the United States Supreme Court – a multi-volume collection of documents relating to the early history of the Court. Her philanthropic activities included supporting programs for adult literacy, poverty and civil liberties.

"Kitty's books have found a good home here," said Karen Beck, the Law Library’s Curator of Rare Books. "Her collection dovetails perfectly with our existing collection of works likely to have been owned and used by working lawyers from the sixteen through nineteenth centuries. Kitty’s gift will strengthen our growing collection immensely, since nearly every book in her bequest will be a first copy for us."

The selection from Preyer’s collection is on exhibit on the law library’s Daniel R. Coquillette Rare Book Room through early December 2006. The room is generally open Monday – Friday 9 to 4. For more information, visit /lawrarebooks.