

COLLECTING MODERN LITERARY ARCHIVES

A Brief History

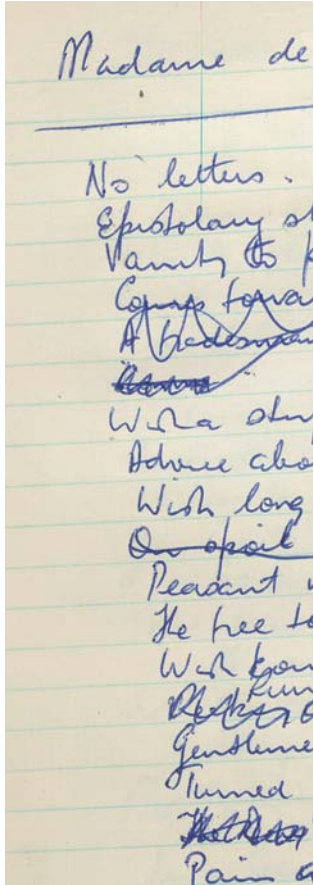


Image Peter Porter. Draft of 'Madame de Merteuil on The Loss of an Eye' from Porter's 1964 collection *Poems Ancient and Modern*. Reproduced by kind permission of Peter Porter.

During the late 1950s, concerns began to be expressed at the impression of British institutional apathy towards collecting modern literary manuscripts, and not the least vocal of these voices was that of Philip Larkin – poet, writer, librarian. As a result of his campaigning – and backed up by the vision of the British Museum's Manuscripts Department and the Arts Council – the National Manuscripts Collection of Contemporary Poets (NMCCP) was established in 1963.

The early years of the scheme saw a number of important acquisitions, and by 1967 the Museum was able to host an exhibition – 'Poetry in the Making' – to showcase the fifty-seven writers already represented in the NMCCP. Manuscripts of WH Auden, John Betjeman, Charles Causley, Cecil Day-Lewis, Roy Fuller, David Gascoyne, Ted Hughes (with drafts of Sylvia Plath on the versos), Peter Porter, Stevie Smith, and Stephen Spender, as well as drafts of poems chosen for the Cheltenham Festival of Literature Poetry Awards (which included six drafts of Plath's 'Insomniac') were displayed, as was a workbook of early poems donated by Larkin himself. However, in his catalogue notes, Larkin emphasised that 'Operation Manuscript' still had some way to go, and that 'the method it [NMCCP] has demonstrated must now be applied on a broader and deeper scale'.

Accordingly, a number of changes were made to the *modus operandi* of the NMCCP: acquisitions moved *from selection to collection* to include diaries, letters and other material in addition to work-sheets; the scheme was expanded to 'all kinds of imaginative writing' including prose-fiction and drama; and other SCONUL libraries were invited to participate in the scheme to make it a truly National Collection. The first purchase of prose material of the renamed NMCCW – the only two surviving folios of Stella Gibbon's *Cold Comfort Farm* – was followed by the first purchase by a SCONUL institution (Larkin's own Brynmor Jones Library, which acquired a large collection of Anthony Thwaite manuscripts). Other acquisitions of note by the scheme during the 1970s included two collections of drafts of Ted Hughes's *Cave Birds* for Exeter University Library, and the enormous Walter de la Mare collection, sold to the Bodleian with the support of the NMCCW and the Purchase Grant Fund.

Regrettably, the scheme was wound up at the end of 1979, but during its almost twenty years of operation, significant manuscript material of writers, magazines, and small presses was purchased for British institutions, often in the face of robust interest from American libraries. Moreover a notable change had been effected in national collecting policy in relation to living authors, and the scheme did much to dispel the outmoded belief that British libraries are not interested in contemporary manuscripts. Today the collections of several British institutions contain material acquired through the pioneering collecting of Larkin and the NMCCP, work that continues to be built upon today through the collaborative energies of national, regional and university institutions throughout the UK.

