MANUSCRIPTS MATTER
Andrew Motion

Ladies and gentlemen, I feel honoured to be invited to open this first session of our conference – honoured a little overawed by the company of so many who know their way better than I do through the intricacies of our subject for the simple reason that they are more closely involved with the purchase and preservation of manuscripts than I am. It means I feel compelled to begin by stating the obvious. I am here as a writer (one who has the further honour of having the literary papers I amassed up to the age of about 45 safely stored in the British Library) – but a writer who has very strong feelings about the need to bolster and energise and diversify the purchase of British papers by British institutions.

It's worth saying why. I came to writing comparatively late – in my mid-teens – but once I'd seen the light there was no holding me. Most Saturdays at school, if I could fake a sickie and get off games, I took the bus from the front gate into Oxford, and bought whatever poetry took my fancy, and I could afford, from Blackwells in the Broad. The day I travelled back with the *Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, edited by Cecil Day Lewis (the fly leaf says it was 25 November 1967) was a highlight. Not just because I already knew I loved Owen's poems, but because at the back of that book there were illustrations of the first and second drafts of his great sonnet 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' – the first with Sassoon's amendments, added when the two poets were recovering and writing shoulder to shoulder in Craiglockheart Hospital. I learned more about writing by looking at those two pages than in whole terms of study and instruction. To realise at a glance that first thoughts were not inevitably best thoughts, to see in the most practical way imaginable how what we used to call inspiration needed to combine with ingenuity and sheer hard work; to understand how valuable the interventions of a second and sympathetic mind might be: all these things, and more besides, made my discovery of those pages feel like a revelation. And when I later saw the pages themselves, in the British Library, it's no exaggeration to say the revelation deepened so that the pages became almost sacred. I still glimpse them in my mind's eye now, almost forty years later, whenever I write a poem. Think harder, they say to me. Stretch your imagination. Write better.

During the last part of my school life, and in the comparatively careless rapture of my first year as an undergraduate, I fed my manuscript-addiction whenever I could – by staring at the first draft of Shelley's 'West Wind', for instance, under its glass in the Bodleian (I especially

liked that, because it was written on 25 October, the day before my birthday); by trawling through the collection of my by-then-friend Geoffrey Keynes (who although best-known as a bibliophile, had some pretty amazing manuscripts in his library as well). And my feelings about the value and fascination of manuscripts got another big lift four years after I'd bought my copy of Owen's poems when Valerie Eliot published her edition of the drafts of *The Waste Land*. Here again – but over many more pages, and in exceptional detail – were proofs of the same truth I'd seen in the draft of the 'Anthem'. The extraordinarily bold eruption of Eliot's genius, checked and shaped by Pound's suggestions; the evidence that Pound always got it right (and not just because he'd helped to produce the poem I already knew). It made me feel I'd be lowered down into the enormous, steaming, gleaming engine-room of the poem, and for the first time could begin to understand how it worked. It made me a better reader, and well as filling me with ideas about how to write.

Five years later, and after an exceptionally happy time writing my thesis on the poetry of Edward Thomas (whose manuscripts floated in my hands like holy writ, even though they were writ without many corrections, because he produced his poems so quickly), I went to teach English at the University of Hull – drawn, I have to admit, more by the possibility that I might meet Philip Larkin than anything else. As you understand from the fact that I subsequently wrote Larkin's biography, we got to know each other pretty well – and although we spent a good deal of time doing what friends do when they're employed by the same outfit (moaning about colleagues), we also managed to raise the tone from time to time. Especially when we talked about poems, and when we talked about manuscripts, about which Larkin had feelings that were just as strong – but better formed – than my own.

It was, in fact, during this overlapping time in Hull that Larkin produced his essay 'A Neglected Responsibility' (1979) – which I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling is still one of the best things that has ever been written about manuscripts. Its value lies partly in the fact that it provides a condensed history of British collecting – and about the lack of it – and although this is elegantly done, it often makes for melancholy reading. Why? Because so much has changed so little. He talks about the lack of information about 'the going price', about the lack of centralised information about who holds what, about the leakage of British manuscripts to American libraries, about the demoralised state of British libraries. And then, brightening, he talks about the initiatives led by himself and Eric Walter White of the Arts Council, which were really the first significant – and in many respects successful – attempt to create a

properly acquisitive and systematic approach to the whole business of buying modern papers.

But the essay has at least two other values as well. It's a call to arms. 'We should do all we can to collect the papers of living writers', Larkin says, 'because increasingly we are at a great disadvantage when it comes to acquiring the archives of the recently dead'. Furthermore, and just as significantly, it's a hymn to the importance of archives as things-in-themselves. 'I think above all that a country's writers are one of its most precious assets, and that if British librarians resign the collection and care of their manuscripts to the librarians of other countries they are letting one of their most rewarding responsibilities slide irretrievably away'. And again, even more plangently: 'All literary manuscripts have two kinds of value: what might be called the magical value and the meaningful value. The magical value is the older and more universal: this is the paper [the writer] wrote on, these are the words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular magical combination. We may feel inclined to be patronising about this Shelley-plain, Thomas-coloured factor, but it is a potent element in all collecting, and I doubt if any librarian can be a successful manuscript collector unless he responds to it to some extent. The meaningful value is of much more recent origin, and is the degree to which a manuscript helps to enlarge our knowledge and understanding of a writer's life and work. A manuscript can show the cancellations, the substitutions, the shifting towards the ultimate form and the final meaning. A notebook, simply by being a fixed sequence of pages, can supply evidence of chronology. Unpublished work, unfinished work, even notes towards unwritten work all contribute to our knowledge of a writer's intentions; his letters and diaries add to what we know of his life and the circumstances in which he wrote'.

I've quoted this at some length because it crystallises the thoughts I found myself fumbling towards when I was young and poring over my copies of Owen and Eliot. And because so much of what we're going to be hearing over the next couple of days will concentrate, quite properly, on the practical steps we need to take in order to improve our present situation, it's as well to remind ourselves as the outset of why we care. I love Larkin's distinction between the magical and the meaningful, but I especially like the fact that these things combine. Yes, manuscripts matter because there is a primitive, visceral thrill I thinking 'My god, Keats's hand rested of this piece of paper, and as I let my eye travel down it I seem for a moment to be actually inside his mind and linked to his thought processes'. But they matter equally because as we share in the creation of the text at a profound level, and feel we understand it in a way

that is frankly very difficult to put in words, we ARE actually putting some things into words. We are articulating thoughts about planning and plotting and scheming and timing (not to mention dating); we are thinking about ingenuities of one kind or another. To put this another way: good writing is usually the result of two parts of the human mind getting on terms with one another – a part which is manipulative and artful, and a part which is given, fundamental, and murky as the primeval swamp. We can appreciate that double-mindedness when we read a printed page - of course we can – but we never feel it so vividly as we do when we read a manuscript. As I say, manuscripts take us right to the heart of the matter, into the engine room.

This is why one of the arguments used against the importance of keeping manuscripts in their native place doesn't work. I mean, the argument that photocopies and other modern means of transmitting material have made it unnecessary to be unduly concerned about where manuscripts reside – their availability is what matters. The fact is, photocopies etc are very valuable, but they can never be the place where magic and meaningfulness most forcefully combine. That only happens in the manuscript itself. And if we add to that thought the realisation that access to manuscripts overseas is often made difficult by funding and other issues (such as the permissions problems surrounding some digitised material), we must accept that there are powerful practical reasons, as well as all those others I've just been summoning, for thinking that not only do manuscripts matter, but where they are kept matters as well.

What I'm recommending here might seem like a solitary pleasure – the blissful, appreciative trance of someone whose whole identity depends to a great extent on writing, as I confess mine does. But of course these articulate responses to a manuscript are only solitary in the sense that they happen to us as individuals. That's to say, the importance of manuscripts does not depend exclusively on their power to move and inspire one particular writer or another, but on their value to whole communities – to a whole nation, I would say. Writers need them because they are exemplary. Scholars need them because they are the essential element of their research. Students need them because they are instructive as well as delightful. Creative Writing students need them for all the reasons I've given in my own case. (And it's worth pausing to remember that over fifty British universities now have Creative Writing programmes: I think every one of them worth their salt should encourage their course-members to scrutinise archives – there is so much to learn from them.) Nations need them because they are an essential store-house

of past achievements, precisely as valuable in their way as the other elements we consider essential to our notions of heritage.

And in saying that, I lure myself away from my hitherto evocative approach to the subject, into something more evaluative and practical. When I was appointed Poet Laureate in 1999 I decided that the post needed up-dating in a respectful way, and as I set about my task I found myself dividing it into two parts in my mind's eye – into a writing part and a doing part. There's no need for me to dwell on the writing part today, and not much need to elaborate what I mean by the doing part – the school visits, the nagging of government about education policy, the creation of the web-based Poetry Archive, which was launched last November. But it is appropriate to mention that under this heading of 'doing' I decided to pick up the manuscript-baton where Larkin and others had left it, and see what could be done about a situation that was – by general consent – regrettable. I gave a few interviews lamenting the tendency of British papers to end up overseas, I wrote to the Treasury and asked whether they were interested in creating tax initiatives which might make home-sales more attractive (they weren't), and I spoke to friends and colleagues whom I knew were interested in the cause – Michael Holroyd, for instance. Then, in the Spring of last year, and with the very active encouragement of the Royal Society of Literature, I wrote a piece about the whole business which was carried in their journal and also by The Guardian. This led very swiftly to my receiving a letter from the Chief Executive of the British Library, expressing her support, and soon after that the UK Literary Heritage Group was set up under the chairmanship of Chris Smith, and the auspices of the British Library itself. Everyone in this room, and everyone concerned about manuscripts, owes the Library a big debt of thanks for taking this initiative.

As I've already said, we're going to hear a great deal over the next two days about where things have gone wrong in the past, and how they might be improved in the future. And while I don't want to pretend that I have a monopoly on all the answers, or even the questions come to that, I'd like to spend the last part of my time today sketching some of the things we might want to discuss. It's worth beginning with another statement of the obvious. While our concerns are to a great extent motivated by the leakage of British manuscripts to American libraries, none of us are here today to criticise those libraries for their aims and methods. Au contraire: we're here to commend what they have done - to commend their purchases, their methods, the way they celebrate their holdings and nurture their relationships with the writers involved - and to learn from them. In other words, we should be grateful to American

libraries, both for what they have done, and because they are generally very generous to interested scholars. More that that, we would do well to consider the possibility that the American enthusiasm for British papers might have kindled our own interest in them to a degree that might not otherwise have occurred. They have woken us up.

Or rather, they have made us more fully awake than we were. As Larkin reminded us in his essay twenty-five years ago, British libraries have run an under-funded but effective buying policy for the last two or three generations, as the British Library itself bears witness – they are quite rightly proud to have laid their hands on papers by Laurie Lee, James Stern, Kathleen Raine, Peter Nichols, Ian Hamilton, Anthony Powell, Conan Doyle, Laurence Olivier, Dirk Bogarde and Harold Pinter among others. Furthermore, other interested parties have done what they can under existing arrangements – the Friends of the National Libraries, for instance, and the National Art Collections Fund, and the National Heritage Memorial Fund. In addition, we have also seen important collecting programmes developed by the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester, by the National Library of Scotland, by the universities of Edinburgh, Sheffield, York and Hull to name but a few, and by the Seven Stories centre for children's literature in Newcastle. And we have seen vital work initiated by the Group for Literary Archives and Manuscripts.

I could add more detail to this picture of collecting by British institutions, and no doubt others soon will add more detail, because it would be wrong to give the impression that nothing whatsoever has been happening on behalf of British manuscripts in the recent past. Something has been happening – but as Larkin also said twenty-five years ago, it's not systematic enough, and it's often done with backs pressed firmly against the wall. The fact is, the list of British writers who have sold their papers to American libraries in the recent past is a long and depressing one. Just to remind you, here are some of the names, in no particular order: Tom Stoppard, David Hare, John Osborne, Ted Hughes, Malcolm Bradbury, Alan Sillitoe, Anthony Burgess, Angus Wilson, John Fowles, Ian Fleming, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Julian Barnes.

So what can we do to change and improve things? In a nutshell, what must be done is this: to create a situation in which British writers feel their manuscripts are as valued and welcome in their native institutions as they are abroad, and to make sure those institutions are put in a position where they are able to demonstrate that value and prove that welcome. At the moment, British institutions and their American counterparts are

playing the same game, but on a very un-level field. In spite of the best efforts of many UK institutions, it is generally perceived to be the case, and often actually the case, that it is more attractive for British writers to sell their papers overseas than at home.

I've already touched on some of the possible remedies. We need to make a much more dynamic case for the intrinsic importance of manuscripts, and to emphasise the ways in which they nourish not only the obvious interested parties (writers and students and scholars), but the wider community as well. We need to spread the word about what libraries here have already achieved. We need to re-moralise librarians who have understandably become de-moralised and encourage them to develop even more coherent strategies for collecting modern papers and for cultivating their relationships with writers at the regional level as well as in the big centres. We need to accelerate the procedures of funding bodies. We need to continue to develop a 'culture of giving' (which is something else America has to teach us). We need to think again about the HLF's recent decision to lower their period for funding eligibility from twenty to ten years (this was a step in the right direction, but it still allows for the break-up of archives, which is a shame in itself, and a dis-incentive to writers thinking of selling their papers). We need a more coherent and better funded national strategy for collecting.

And there we are, on my penultimate page I've come to it at last. Money. We need more of it, more core funding: to take the case of the British library as an example – of the £15 million spent on new acquisitions each year, only 10% is available for heritage items from all periods and in all formats. It's not enough, for items which - although still on the cheap side when compared with paintings - are slowly but surely becoming more expensive. In addition, and as the Literary Heritage Group knows very well (because we talk about it every time we meet), we need for the government to think about three things, as a way of encouraging British writers to sell at home and not overseas. And those three things are: the possibility of making all manuscripts (and not just bound ones) VAT exempt; the benefits of the douceur arrangement with regard to inheritance tax and capital gains tax being extended to income tax for living authors who agree to sell their papers to designated UK institutions through private treaty; and the extension of Acceptance in Lieu of tax to living authors. (At present, no approaches under AiL can be made until after the death of the author and therefore writers can only anticipate, without guarantee, that AiL will be applied after their death, thereby hampering financial planning for their estate.)

I’ll end as I began by striking a personal note. When the British Library bought the first instalment of my papers, which I’d like to emphasise was just before I was appointed Laureate, I felt a mixture of things which I’m sure are shared by all writers who have found themselves in a similarly fortunate position, and would gladly be shared by others if circumstances permitted. I was pleased to have more room in my attic. I was very pleased to have some money in the bank (money is always important, whether we like saying so or not) but conscious that if I’d sold to America I wouldn’t have had to pay VAT). More than anything, though, I felt proud to have my work gathered in a place which connected it at the most fundamental level with the culture and country in which I’d produced it. If manuscripts are the engine room of writing, then archives are the engine rooms of history – that’s where their magic and their meaning are most potent.