

MANUSCRIPTS MATTER

CLOSING REMARKS

20 OCTOBER 2006

Sincere thanks to Max Egremont and his panellists for another superb session in this conference.

Many of you will have noticed that, regrettably, Chris Smith could not be with us today. He would have offered a summation of the conference at this point. It is therefore your misfortune that you get me back again, this time to offer a few concluding remarks.

I think we would all agree that it has really been an absolutely fantastic two days, with a great buzz in the formal and informal proceedings, huge engagement by all of us and, perhaps surprisingly, a true willingness to enter into dialogue in a spirit of complete transparency and friendship. As a member of the UK Literary Heritage Working Group, I can assure you that the conference has fully met, indeed, surpassed our expectations.

The conference organising committee will be sitting down next Tuesday afternoon for what we call in the UK a 'wash up'. This is nothing to do with having to clear up after a lot of messy delegates, nor is it a fatigue we have to perform because we cannot afford to pay the caterers, but it will be an opportunity for us to reflect on the themes of the conference and to discern any potential next steps to add to our existing plans, for example, how might we bring pressure to bear on the UK Treasury from the striking recent infrastructural improvements in the Republic of Ireland?

If, before next Tuesday afternoon, you have observations or suggestions to feed into this process, please let us have them. Perhaps the best way of feeding them in is to send an email to Eileen Kinghan at Eileen.Kinghan@bl.uk – as you know, Eileen has been one of the great organising forces behind this event. We shall naturally also be conferring with GLAM and other interested parties.

Perhaps it might help to get your exhausted grey cells working again for me to offer the ten key impressions which I shall be taking away from the conference. I do not claim to have a monopoly of wisdom, or recollection, in this regard, but these are the things which have struck me. They appear in absolutely no order of priority and are not intended to be exhaustive:

- We have identified that there is such a concept of 'appropriateness' of location for literary archives, although we all have somewhat different criteria as to what constitutes being appropriate, and we have raised the associated question of whether there is an optimum number of separate repositories per country
- It would appear that none of us is arguing for the ultimate *reductio ad absurdum* position that all manuscripts should necessarily be returned to the

particular backyard in which they were created – this would require thousands of repositories

- We probably all agree that it is undesirable to break up archives and to disperse them across several different repositories, even if it means an archive is held abroad – I recall a particularly hard fight here to stop the dissolution of the final tranche of Conan Doyle’s papers
- It seems not unreasonable, from a British perspective, that a higher proportion of the British literary heritage should be retained and made accessible in Britain, and that the scale of ‘losses’ of major collections abroad has been disproportionate
- Accessibility should not just be focused on academic researchers, crucial though they are – as Andrew Motion so eloquently told us, manuscripts inspire – we need to invest in, to quote the jargon, audience development, to unlock our archives for children, the public and the next generation of creative writers
- The Brits are not being especially critical of the Americans – we admire what they have achieved through purposeful planning and effective use of resources; rather, we are urging in concert that more be done to create a level playing field on which British collecting institutions can compete on a par with, in particular, their American counterparts – we look especially to funders of all sorts and to Government, through the taxation system, to help (there is a special note to Tom Staley here – I have not mentioned export stops!)
- We will all – authors, dealers, collecting institutions – have to face up to the technical, selection and resource challenges of handling hybrid paper and digital archives, which are likely to be the default collections for the next decade or so
- While acquisitions are important, the long-term stewardship and sustainability of an archive is also critical – we need holistic solutions to cataloguing, conservation, access and so forth, not just to buy material
- It seems not unreasonable that authors should expect to derive income from the sale of their papers, although the market should not be ‘monopolised’ by just a few great names at the height of their careers, and more should be done to ensure that collections are more comprehensive in spread and representative, including of gender, ethnicity and career stage
- There is a tension for some authors between their literary papers and their private papers, including correspondence, whereas for archives there is interest in acquiring both – there is the associated issue of embargoes in an age of Freedom of Information

Overall, I would sum up by saying that, as the GLAM survey is revealing, there is a real sense that, over the past decade or so, Britain is, to quote Philip Larkin, ‘in the fight’ – to mix metaphors quite horribly, we are no longer a whinging convention of stable-door lockers of old, but we are a well-led posse which has rounded up the horses and is now sitting firmly in their saddles and hopefully on our way to becoming champion jockeys.

In conclusion, on behalf of the Board and Executive of The British Library, could I offer my sincerest thanks to all who have made this conference such a success. My fellow members of the UK Literary Heritage Working Group have all made an enormous contribution to planning and delivery. We are sorry that not all of them could be here today. In addition to Chris and Andrew Motion, we think particularly of

Michael Holroyd, who is unwell, and Cate Newton, who has suffered a bereavement. I am sure that you would wish to join me in extending them our warmest good wishes. Many of the Working Group have been on stage yesterday and today, and we thank them and all our other panellists for inspiring and challenging us.

As ever on these occasions, a small army has worked behind the scenes to ensure our two days have run smoothly. Many of them are part of the British Library's home team, including the unsung heroes in the audio-visual box up there to whom we give a special wave of gratitude, but we have also had some volunteers from outside. We thank our seven academic and funding sponsors again. Most of all, the organisers would like to thank you, the delegates, for coming in such large numbers and for participating so fully. We hope you have drawn some wisdom from the proceedings and made some good contacts (albeit preferably not with anybody The British Library is courting!) We wish you a safe homeward or onward journey.

Dr Clive Field