

Early to the Feast: The Archival Education of Undergraduates

by Ronald Schuchard

Like my colleagues on this scholar's panel, manuscripts and archives are the matter of my scholarship, too, but so they are for my teaching as well, not only of postgraduates, but even more of undergraduates, and the emphasis on the latter puts me in the anomalous role that motivates my remarks this afternoon. I would be surprised to learn that any of those present today came to their love, use, and preservation of manuscripts as undergraduates. I dare say that 99% of undergraduates in US, UK, and European universities never darken the doors of their special collections library, and if they even know the location of such uninviting rooms they look upon them from the outside as alien inner sanctums inhabited by a strange cadre of dour postgraduates, mouldy fellows, and cadaverous old professors, a view inimitably universalized for them by Yeats: "All shuffle there; all cough in ink; / All wear the carpet with their shoes," all passionlessly poring over lines "Rhymed out in love's despair." Thus, because the manuscript rooms play no role whatsoever in their higher education, they graduate into their vocations and rise to influential positions as alumni utterly immune to appeals for the acquisition, development, and retention of manuscript collections. In the larger scheme of an alma mater's or a nation's concerns, manuscripts do not matter much. As a prominent Liberal Democrat MP of your Commons culture select committee is quoted in the *Sunday Times* as saying, public money should be spent on "more pressing projects. The fact that archives . . . go abroad is, I'm afraid, the reality of the world. We have many artefacts in the UK that belong to other cultures."

If such indifference to manuscripts by the university-educated public is a scandal, it is a scandal of our own making, caused by the traditional exclusion by universities and research libraries of undergraduates from the magic of manuscript use and failing to educate them in their intellectual and cultural importance. Ironically, we deny the exhilarating experience of manuscripts to the ever-increasing body of higher-educated citizens to whom we look for manuscript support.

The good news is that the seeds of a mini manuscript revolution, within the larger digital revolution, have begun to sprout in a few American and UK universities. One liberating effect of the digital revolution has been the democratization of scholarship--making once-remote and grant-dependent scholarly materials increasingly accessible to all researchers, regardless of prestigious credentials and fellowships, and now universities are forming digital partnerships to share and complement their archival collections, to create virtual reunifications of dispersed manuscripts, to enhance the quality and efficiency of primary research. The time has come, many of us believe, to democratize access to manuscripts within

institutions of higher education, especially in research universities that have archival resources and materials that could and should be used in the education of undergraduates. In this regard, I want to share with you the teaching model for manuscript collections at Emory University, much in the news last week with the acquisition of Salman Rushdie's manuscripts. You may be astonished, some perhaps appalled, to know that by next autumn those manuscripts may be not in glass cases but in the hands of undergraduates, as are those already of W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Carol Ann Duffy, and many other English, Irish, American, African-American, and Anglophone writers. How did we become such irresponsible custodians?

In 1975 I brought a group of twenty-five undergraduate students to England for a six-week course entitled "Literature and a Sense of Place." Our travels took us to D.H. Lawrence country in Eastwood, to the birthplace and the sharp division between the beautiful countryside and the disfiguring collieries. I had written in advance to the archivist at the University of Nottingham that if possible we would like to visit and see Lawrence materials of whatever kind, especially related to *Sons and Lovers*. When we arrived we were taken not to glass cases with printed materials but into a room with long double tables, neatly covered with manuscripts, letters, and photographs, ready for personal examination. For two hours those students, including the lager-louts among them, were like discoverers of an Egyptian tomb, O-my-godding and yelping over the manuscripts, calling to each other to see this and that letter, spontaneously reading out lines. None of us will ever forget that morning. The students talked about it for the rest of the trip and all wrote about it as the highlight of the program in their evaluations. They criticized me only for not having arranged more close encounters of a manuscript kind. I profusely thanked the archivist, who had been delighted to show and share the manuscripts, informing me that no instructor of a student group had ever asked to see them before. It changed my teaching life.

Before 1979 Emory itself did not have a modern manuscripts collection (full stop), but in that year a munificent donation to the University by the chairman of Coca-Cola, philanthropist Robert W. Woodruff, made it possible, with the assistance of the late Richard Ellmann, to make substantial acquisitions of the manuscripts of Yeats and Lady Gregory. When Professor Ellmann died in 1987, we established the Ellmann Lectures, which were inaugurated by Seamus Heaney, and when Heaney donated the manuscripts of his lectures to the library we were inspired to continue the collecting into the contemporary period. In the 1990s came the archives of Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Thomas Kinsella, Edna O'Brien, Paul Muldoon, and Medbh McGuckian, to name but a few. These manuscript collections have hardly come of age, but the point to be made today is that as the post-Nottingham development took place the teaching mission of the collections was emphasized as much as the research mission. For the past twenty years, thousands of Emory undergraduates--students of the humanities and

sciences-- have enjoyed being brought early to the feast of archival research, and the intellectual lives of many have been transformed by the initial awe of handling, and the excitement of using for independent discovery, the manuscripts of works studied in their textbooks. From the first day of their freshman year they are warmly welcomed to become familiar with and take pride in the manuscript library's resources and exhibitions; students reading all subjects take courses that routinely examine manuscripts and rare books, with instruction by library staff for independent visits and supervised use of materials, with encouragement to draw on its archives for course papers, special projects, and honors theses. Some of these students receive undergraduate internships to assist with receiving and cataloging new archival materials and to hone the research skills that greatly enhance their competition for graduate fellowships. (You can imagine the impact on an interview committee, of an undergraduate who knows the Hughes/Plath archive inside out and can challenge the committee's conventional views of their relationship with reference to specific unpublished material). For the past decade, such students have been reaping the dividends: some are coming to England as Rhodes and Marshall Scholars, and they are heading straight for your archives. But let me give you an extraordinary example of how this has worked in reverse.

The journalist who scooped the Rushdie story for the *Sunday Times* last week was Olivia Cole. Olivia was completing secondary school in England when she heard about the opening of the Ted Hughes archive at Emory. She acted on this news by choosing to spend part of her gap year in the archive, where she was welcomed, and as one of its first sustained users she discovered the manuscripts of the unfinished, thought-to-be "lost" novel of Sylvia Plath, an exhilarating if not ecstatic moment for even the most shuffling of scholars. Her transformative experience in the archive helped her get a place at Oxford, where she continued to mine the material for her honors paper. Her manuscript experience with the Hughes and Plath material, she writes, "absolutely changed the way I think and write about literature," and now she is writing weekly about the manuscript matters of Rushdie, Larkin, Sassoon, and others that you have read about in the last two issues of the *Sunday Times*. Dare we trust our manuscripts with undergraduates?

Each year more and more faculty members make the archival collections part of their syllabuses with innovative projects. Last spring poet-Professor Kevin Young's undergraduate seminar met every class in special collections, and each student curated and mounted independent, near-professional exhibitions of single-author collections that were the showcase of the library for several months. Why are most of our research institutions not allowing their special collections to play such a central daily role in the research development of their students? Indeed, the authors who have chosen to place their archives

and collections at Emory have been greatly attracted by the teaching mission and by the accessibility of their materials to students as well as scholars. They have enjoyed being a part of a unique “living library”, as it is known, where writers in the prime of their careers place their works, give readings, visit classes, assist students with their projects, and return periodically to add new manuscript materials and continue the cycle of student contact. The teaching vision has an enormous captivating power to world-class writers, including Salman Rushdie, who was attracted mainly by the collection environment and its teaching enterprise, and who will join us as a teacher next year. It is *not just the money* that builds great archives (though I admit it helps!). Many writers want some kind of meaningful purchase on the place of their papers, not an abandonment of them. Undergraduate students of all subjects have been entranced by the presence of writers discussing their works and manuscripts with them in special collections, and the writers themselves have been equally transported by the experience. Whenever a new manuscript acquisition is made by the University, it makes the headlines of the student newspaper, for the news is that yet again they will have opportunities for contact with and original research on another important writer.

The teaching revolution in special collections is spreading to other universities as well. In recent renovations the Beinecke Library at Yale has added three new seminar rooms for use by undergraduate classes. The Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Columbia regularly brings its core-curriculum students into the archives, and other universities have begun opening up on a small scale as facilities and resources allow. I am delighted to hear from Dr. Jessica Parker of Exeter that the 2006 GLAM survey shows the revolution beginning in a few UK universities. I believe that in future the most prosperous special collections libraries will be those that have incorporated an active teaching mission into their research mission. When trustees, chancellors, administrators, government officials, grant-giving foundations, and alumni see that the manuscript collections are serving not only a few scholars but each new entering class of university students, when they see that the collections are an integral part of the educational curriculum, they will open and keep open the financial pipelines. And in time the positions of those authorities will be taken by the students we have educated, students for whom manuscripts matter, students who will constitute your much-needed Friends of the Library associations.

I realize that many special collections libraries were built long ago, with no anticipation of serving undergraduates or housing seminar rooms, and that in any case they are now swelled to capacity and have little or no room to accommodate these recommendations. There are certainly problems to be solved. But knowing that solutions can be found, renovations made, and new libraries built, let me close by briefly offering my vision of the ideal special collections library, one that would be the marvel and

envy of universities throughout the nation and world, one where manuscript and print materials would be married to sophisticated digital technology in a new environment for teaching and research, with rare materials on the table and their digital forms on monitors and screens, with immediate links to complementary materials in partner libraries. It would contain seminar rooms integrated into the heart of the collections, so that classes could be scheduled there on a daily basis, moving beyond the occasional “field trips” from distant classrooms. It would have not only a formal reading room but an informal lounge and browsing room where undergraduates and seasoned scholars could meet, refresh themselves, and talk manuscripts in the course of study. It would have ample exhibition space in public reception areas to highlight new acquisitions and collection strengths, an adequate auditorium for readings and lectures, an attractive space for public receptions, library and university dinners, and other festivities of academic life. It would, in brief, become a high-flow, high-use building of teaching and research that serves the intellectual life in all its private and public forms. Over the entrance portal would be carved in block capitals, MANUSCRIPTS MATTER.

Am I envisioning too much, to turn what students see as grey mausoleums into the heartbeat of the university? What I not only envisage but actually see is the beginning of a revolutionary change in the culture of special collections and an expansion of their teaching mission. As the revolution takes hold, I urge more UK universities and Oxbridge college libraries to open the doors of their research collections wider, to encourage teachers to bring their undergraduates early to the feast of manuscripts. You need not worry that they will all go to graduate school and become Yeats scholars, thank god, but most will become avid supporters of and contributors to your manuscript collections when the appeals are made, making presently necessary conferences like this eventually and happily redundant.