

## **Manuscripts Matter: collecting modern literary archives**

### **A conference at the British Library, 19-20 October 2006**

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Friday 20 October, 11.30-13.00 | Session 7 | Nations and Regions  
Chair Chris Sheppard, Head of Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds

#### Panel members

Stella Halkyard, John Rylands, University of Manchester Library

John Gray, Linen Hall Library, Belfast

Robin Smith, National Library of Scotland

Jessica Gardner, University of Exeter Library

This panel presented reports from the UK Group for Literary Archives and Manuscripts' (GLAM) recent survey of collecting practices and reports from the regions.

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The following paper by Jessica Gardner draws on the GLAM survey to report the wide variety of uses and audiences for literary manuscripts using examples from collecting institutions across the UK.

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This presentation moves on from the earlier panel reports about UK collecting practices to ask what exactly collecting institutions are doing with all the literary treasures they are busy acquiring. In contrast to the other reports, permission has been given to name institutions and individuals as people want to actively publicise the examples of good practice they submitted to the survey.

At the start of this conference, Andrew Motion presented a persuasive argument for UK libraries and museums who collect literary manuscripts to embrace his belief that the documentary evidence of literary heritage belongs to everyone, and not just to the writer, student, scholar or even curator or dealer.

The survey results from GLAM show there is already plenty to celebrate in terms of collecting institutions engaging with a wide variety of audiences, but GLAM will also need to use the results as a benchmark against which to measure future achievements.

Evidence from the survey allows us once and for all to disprove the traditional perception of literary archives being relevant only in order to advance scholarship

and allows us to replace this image with a much more dynamic and contemporary report on what is actually happening.

Research is the bedrock of work in many of the institutions represented by GLAM and this conference has rightly predominantly focused thus far on scholarship, but GLAM's report reveals that UK literary collections support a range of access initiatives for a wide variety of audiences that deserve mention alongside the traditional field of research.

For this reason this paper will focus on the use of literary archives and manuscripts for purposes other than scholarship, including exhibition, outreach and teaching and also on the potential of collections to inspire new writing.

Rather than collecting for its own sake, we might say that the Roald Dahl Museum's mission to 'inspire a love of stories and creative writing in everyone' binds GLAM's members. As archivists, librarians and curators, we are as readily seduced as anyone by the 'magical value' of literary manuscripts and it seems we like our jobs most when we get a chance to share our passion with other people. For instance, out of the 40 survey returns, 11 respondents chose to give an example that highlighted use of their collections in what can broadly be described as teaching and learning activities.

In the higher education sector there is strong evidence of a steep and strategic rise in the use of special collections, including literary manuscripts, for inspirational teaching at all levels: undergraduate, taught postgraduate, and doctoral study. At the universities of Manchester, Exeter, Warwick, Sussex, Cardiff, Bradford, Nottingham, Bristol, Oxford and Leeds, just to name a few, literary manuscripts are now routinely integrated into core learning activities for those studying everything from literary criticism to life writing and from research skills to textual editing. At Exeter, for example, even the coolest undergraduates describe workshops with the literary collections, which take place under the supervision of experienced curators, as 'magical' and one student studying Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, memorably described du Maurier's original typescript as 'the big gun':

It's like that's when you get your [white] gloves on! It's like the big hitter, the one everyone was looking forward to when it was going round the circle.

It is this sort of feedback from the users of archives that is driving forward growth in the use of literary manuscripts in teaching in higher education.

At Manchester, Exeter, Oxford and Leeds universities, there is also a parallel rise in interest in the potential of literary manuscripts to help teach creative writing, by using the drafts of established writers to demonstrate the hard slog and craft of composition and to inspire new works.

Outside of the higher education sector, the national libraries and the museums, author houses and independent libraries have been quicker to develop ways of making literary collections relevant to school audiences and adult learners who are outside of formal education. In the museum sector this work is often greatly facilitated by dedicated education officers with school curriculum knowledge.

For instance, Keats' House run a variety of workshops for schools. In their survey return they cited as one of their most successful events for children a workshop run in conjunction with Young Cultural Creators, whose work fosters creative writing in children. The Gifted and Talented Group of Year 9 from Croyden High School for Girls visited Keats' House recently with the writer Tim Bowler. He based his workshop around two poems and a wonderful letter from Keats to Fanny Bawne, which begins seductively, 'I have been for a walk this morning with a book in my hand, but as usual I have been preoccupied with nothing but you'. Bowler worked with students in this supportive and creative environment to write their own poems and letters in response.

Linda Carey, Education Officer at Keats' House, adds: 'I don't want to give the impression that this sort of session is only suitable for very academic students: [on the contrary] they have inspired some very good work from all ages and abilities'.

Her experience is underlined by the work of the Roald Dahl Museum, which hosts an extensive programme for schools focusing on creative writing topics – like creating a plot or creating characters - all tied to the requirement of the National Curriculum for 7-13 year olds. They even arranged for a poetry workshop for builders during the construction of their new site...

National libraries and the museums, author houses and independent libraries in GLAM often also have better and larger exhibition galleries which they can use to enable the casual visitor to interact with literary collections. For instance, Seven Stories, the Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle, launched their Centre with the imaginative 'Incredible Journey Exhibition', which invited visitors to journey through a series of literary worlds, like the Topsy Turvy World, the Wilderness World and the World of Quests.

University libraries have *tended* not to have dedicated exhibition space, or at least not on the same scale as the museum sector.

However, this too appears to be gradually changing as the agenda to enable access to all gains momentum. For instance, new facilities at John Rylands will lead the way for the higher education sector to aspire to greater public showcasing of collections through exhibition and Durham University's Special Collections have followed the museum model and appointed a permanent

Education Officer, on the back of the success of a fixed term project funded by the HLF.

In total 19 of the 40 respondents cited examples of use of their collections for exhibition, with member institutions exploiting both physical and virtual exhibition spaces. Virtual exhibition points towards the massive potential of the internet to open up access to literary collections to all, but as things currently stand, copyright restrictions are a huge obstacle to digital exploitation of modern literary material, even when the intentions are learning-orientated and non-commercial.

Literary collections are also being used to inspire new creative writing. As collectors, many of GLAM's institutions foster close working relationships with their regional and national literary communities. Follow up on the GLAM survey shows how these relationships are being turned into creative as well as collecting partnerships. Several institutions gave examples of literary manuscripts being consulted by writers to create new works, including Sarah Waters, Andrea Levy, and Margaret Forster who have consulted material at Sussex University for instance, and Julia Copus and Justine Picardie at Exeter and Leeds universities.

The high profile of the literary archives at Leeds University has led to the possibility of the institution reviving its prestigious Gregory Fellowships, and others too have pursued the route of writers - and even artists – in residence. For instance, Ken Cockburn was writer-in-residence at the National Library of Scotland's John Murray Archive, where he led workshops and turned his own adventures in the archive into new work. Equally, the conceptual artist Camelia Parker has recently been installed at the Brontë Parsonage, putting manuscripts under an electron microscope to find the Brontë's 'unconscious creations' for her current exhibition.

Elsewhere, at the universities of Manchester, Bradford, the Theatre Collection at Bristol and at the Royal Air Force Museum, GLAM survey work has found examples of collections in use to inspire dramatic performance for stage and screen at both student and professional level.

The bottom line is that manuscripts matter, and they matter a great deal to the institutions and curatorial staff represented by GLAM.

But we are not complacent.

Andrew Motion's call for literary archives and manuscripts to belong to everyone has set each of GLAM's individual members a fresh challenge to make the collections as accessible and as relevant as possible and – crucially – to gather evidence of the results of this endeavour as we proceed.

What is the total number of visitors to literary collections across the UK and what is their visitor profile? What do our visitors say about our collections – what did

the builders at the Roald Dahl Museum make of their workshop, for instance - and how can we weave their comments into a simple story that communicates to everyone the value of literary manuscripts on an individual and national level?

We don't have all the answers yet.

Many individual institutions are simply not very good, or perhaps just not very consistent, about gathering the sort of hard evidence that can communicate value externally on either an institutional or a national level.

GLAM's survey results provide a helpful benchmark of activity in 2006, but there will be more for GLAM to do here in the coming years. GLAM needs to build on its survey evidence to be able to demonstrate progress over time towards realising Andrew Motion's vision that literary archives and manuscripts matter, and that they matter for everyone.

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