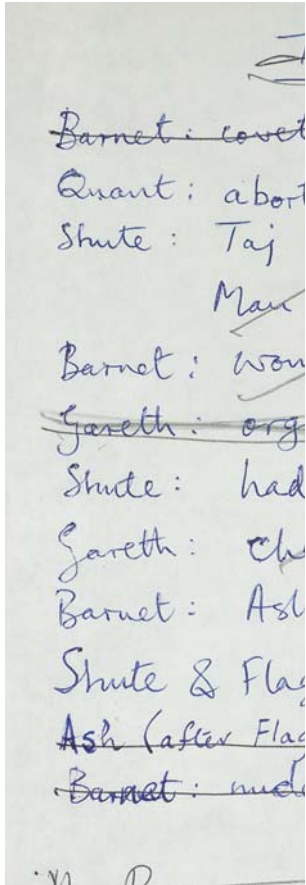


# COLLECTING MODERN LITERARY ARCHIVES

## Recent Successes



**Image** Peter Nichols. Early notes for *The National Health* (originally called *The End Beds*), first performed by the National Theatre Company at the Old Vic, London, on 16 Oct. 1969. Reproduced by kind permission of Peter Nichols.

Most museums, libraries and galleries (the Getty is perhaps the obvious exception) would claim to have inadequate acquisition funds. Nevertheless, in surveying the field of literary manuscript collections in the UK and USA since Philip Larkin's clarion call of 1979 (when he described Britain as 'a nation of stable-door lockers'), it is heartening to see how many important collections – as well as single items – have been acquired by libraries both here and abroad. Larger, more high-profile institutions have, naturally, gone for the 'big fish', but smaller libraries and archive collections have proved to be remarkably resourceful in acquiring interesting and relevant material – archives and manuscripts which, as the newly-formed GLAM (Group for Literary, Archives and Manuscripts) points out, are then assured 'busy afterlives in perpetuity'. In the words of the biographer Hermione Lee, describing the Edith Wharton archive in Lenox, Massachusetts, a writer's 'whole social life, private affairs and literary career' can be discerned in a carefully preserved – and well-arranged – collection.

In recent years, British and Irish authors whose papers have been sold abroad include the novelists Peter Ackroyd (Beinecke Library, Yale University), Julian Barnes (Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas) and Malcolm Bradbury (Lilly Library, University of Indiana), poet Seamus Heaney (Emory University, Atlanta), and the playwrights David Hare and John Osborne (Ransom Center). There is no question, of course, that the UK is at an international disadvantage in matters of taxation – and that the reputation of US institutions for having funds at their disposal to make swift decisions means that authors wishing to sell their archives have often looked to the US market first. But while there has been some hand-wringing about the 'loss of our cultural heritage' and research opportunities, we should nevertheless celebrate the fact that British institutions have also reaped a rich harvest over the last quarter century – a harvest which benefits large numbers of scholars, academics, researchers, readers and visitors who study and enjoy these collections in different ways. Poet Laureate Andrew Motion sums up the eternal appeal of archives: 'the nuts-and-bolts of writing, and manuscripts themselves, have a primitive fascination, whether poems, letters or scientific calculations'.

The UK can now be said to have 'caught up' substantially with the well-known American collecting institutions (with whom we are on increasingly cordial terms, lending to exhibitions and discussing policy of various kinds). Some examples of recent acquisitions in British collections include the papers of the poet Elaine Feinstein (John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester); the writer and film director Bernice Rubens (National Library of Wales); the author Dame Beryl Bainbridge, the playwrights Ronald Harwood and Peter Nichols, and the poet Kathleen Raine (British Library); the playwright Jack Rosenthal (Sheffield University Library); and the extensive archive of the publisher John Murray (National Library of Scotland).



While it is worth pointing out that – again in Motion’s words – American institutions ‘are not hobbled by our buying rules’, there are various bodies, the Heritage Lottery Fund chief amongst them, which can provide grants towards literary manuscript purchases, and many UK institutions have benefited from them, as well as the Acceptance in Lieu scheme, which – it is hoped – will be extended to include the archives of living authors.

The recent Goodison Review called for a change in export regulations: while the 50 year rule for export licences has not as yet been abandoned, there has been an officially stated need ‘to strike a balance between the need to preserve our heritage and the interests of owners’. We should also remember that archives are very good value, especially compared to the cost of fine art, and their benefits extend to audiences at all levels.

