

Nations and Regions

“Within these Islands”: Aspirations for Collecting Literary Archives and Manuscripts. A presentation by Stella Halkyard, Modern Literary Archivist, John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester for the Manuscripts Matter Conference, October 2006

According to the Orcadian poet and novelist, George Mackay Brown, "The past is like a great ship that has gone ashore, and archivist and writer must gather as much of the rich cargo as they can". A brief encounter with the returns of the GLAM survey would gladden our poet's heart. They reveal much which suggests that, against all the odds, creators, depositors, curators and dealers from England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland are actively engaged in the art of collecting literary archives and manuscripts. Of the forty three analysed so far, forty repositories across Britain and Ireland claim to be seeking to secure the literary heritage of their nations for the pleasure, learning and research of this, and future, generations.

This presentation will scrutinize the data gathered from two of the sections of the GLAM survey. Those who have participated so far represent repositories which range across the domains of archives, libraries and museums including national repositories, libraries in higher education institutions, author houses, author museums and “themed” repositories.

I shall seek to interrogate the data, in a general and impressionistic fashion, to see if it can be made to speak to us about significant silences in our aspirations to collect. And finally I will offer some recommendations which might assist us on our way to establishing collecting strategies which are cooperative and ethical to ensure every area “within these islands” has access to the rich cargo of the literary heritage of its own, and previous times.

The sections of the survey I analysed were sections one and two. To facilitate candid responses participating institutions submitted their returns on the understanding that individual organisations would not be named in the reports, and so anonymity will be respected here.

In section one respondents were asked to describe their literary holdings in the form of a discursive narrative of a hundred words or less. They were asked to pay particular attention to the quality, size and significance of

the collections in their care which they develop and augment with their collecting.

By contrast the survey's second section contained a set of questions in "tick box" format. We elicited responses on the subjects of literary genres; periods; circles and movements. We wanted to know if an organisation concentrated its collecting activities on writers associated with a particular geographical area, institution, publishing house or literary magazine. We also wanted to establish whether the organizations collecting aspirations focused on a particular writer or small group of writers.

A further set of questions were included in this section of the survey to determine which organisations were prepared, and able, to accept particular archival formats, including: audio visual materials; electronic records; 3D objects; etc. Respondents were also asked for information about the terms under which they were prepared to acquire literary archives and manuscripts, including: fixed term loans; and indefinite loans.

Additionally, we asked respondents to provide copies of any collecting policies they had produced and these have been analysed separately. The map of the collecting aspirations which begins to take shape displays the following characteristics. In terms of geography the spread appears to be excellent. Institutions are collecting the literatures of Scotland, North East Scotland, West Scotland, Scottish literary organisations and publishers and "Scottishness" which is defined as "including those who live abroad temporarily or permanently and emigrants and immigrants".

Institutions are collecting the literatures of "Wales and other Celtic countries" as well as Welsh publishing and material pertaining to Welsh literary organisations. The collection of the literary heritage of Ireland appears to be carried out without subdivision into regions in contrast to England which is broken down to cover the North of England, North East England, the Midlands, the South West, East Anglia and the South East.

One trend which can be drawn out is that Higher Education repositories often see the research, learning and academic interest of their alumni as a compelling force in their collecting priorities so the geographical imperative defers to a the notion of the Institution.

In terms of chronological spread the pattern which emerges strongly suggests that the vast majority of respondents focus their collecting on the 20th Century and the recent and contemporary periods. The bad news here of course is that these are the very periods which are most difficult to

secure public funds for. However, some institutions emerge as centres for the collecting of earlier literary periods. Though conducted at a slower pace, this collecting is not entirely moribund.

From here on in the delineation of the territory becomes less clear. An interesting feature of the returns of the survey was that the questions devoted to "literary matters" often went unanswered by respondents whilst those questions devoted to more "collections management based" issues, such as "Are you willing and able to accept electronic records?", were answered assiduously. For example, thirty six of the forty institutions were keen to tell us they were willing and able to acquire photographic materials and three were able to tell they were not. In contrast, only twelve institutions responded to questions relating to literary circles and movements. This was tantalizing, not least because the information provided by the respondents in the discursive account of the institutions' literary holdings (and sometimes in the collecting policies provided) implicitly contained the information asked for. This struck me as curious.

At the risk of turning a hermeneutic circle into a knot I wondered whether this hesitancy denoted a certain lack of confidence in applying, and employing, literary categories within the collecting process itself.

By "brushing" the returns "against the grain" and pressing them to make the implicit explicit, it is possible to see the outline of a pattern of collecting which shows good coverage of all the genres, including: poetry; the novel; the short story; life writing; letters; prose; playwrighting and theatre history; screen writing; translation; literary criticism; and Children's Literature in all genres. Once more, however, within this general framework it is possible to identify particular centres which focus their collecting on specific genres such as poetry, or drama or Children's Literature. It is also possible, in some select cases, to discern the faintest glimmer of a pattern for some literary circles, such as Romanticism, Modernism, the Bloomsbury Group, or the Brontes. However, more detailed information about literary circles, communities of writers and writing; or networks of publishers and the literati, continues to remain hidden from history.

Because of a lack in the survey itself the responses do not speak very eloquently about the ethnicity, gender or sexuality of the literatures collected. Furthermore what is to be said about the kind of writing collected, that is, whether archetypally canonical writers are favoured over those engaged within the less "elite" circles of popular culture is, in all but two cases, all but a whisper.

Whilst the GLAM survey has, to date, been successful in elaborating what we know about collecting priorities and aspirations in the field of literary manuscripts and archives, we are still some way off from being able to identify particular and significant gaps within these priorities. What GLAM needs to do next is undertake a thorough-going mapping project, perhaps by winning funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which builds on the data from the survey and the pioneering work of David Sutton and his teams at Reading on the peerless *Location Register* Projects, to provide a more detailed account of the nature of the literary collections we acquire .

This kind of inter-institutional collections analysis and mapping would clearly be invaluable within many contexts of curatorship, learning and research aside from the matter of collecting and would unquestionably enable and support the use of the collections by many different audiences.

Furthermore GLAM and the UK Literary Heritage Group should join forces to learn from the successes of the Contemporary Art Society. The Contemporary Art Society is a registered charity supported by funding from its members, various charitable trusts and public money. Its purpose is to “promote the collecting of contemporary art through its gifts to public museums”. From 1998-2004 it ran the Special Collections Scheme which enabled fifteen English museums to develop challenging and distinctive collections of contemporary art and craft using funds from various sources including the Arts Council Lottery! A similar scheme is currently in place in Scotland. The CAS recognised that many museums lacked not only the resources but also the skills necessary to buy contemporary art so skills development was a key part of the programme. The CAS claims that the scheme has “fundamentally changed the way our profession now talks and thinks about museum collecting”.

The peoples of England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland have historically been, and continue to be, blessed by a virtuoso ability to create literatures which enjoy international recognition. This is, after all, the reason why our cousins in America are keen to acquire the unique and auratic materials generated by our writers. Surely a collection of nations as linguistically gifted as ours deserve, as a basic right, to expect to have access, across and throughout these islands, to the literary manuscripts and archives created within them, just as they appear to be able to do with contemporary art.