

Manuscripts matter

Jamie Andrews of the British Library on attempts to save British manuscripts in the UK



A year ago, the British Library and the working group for UK Literary Heritage hosted the first international conference to be devoted to literary manuscripts. Writers, curators, academics, politicians, dealers: all gathered to celebrate the magic of original literary documents, and to demonstrate their vital importance to the country's cultural and intellectual heritage. One year on, and significant behind-the-scenes campaigning has fed into official government reports published over the summer, while questions about the retention of literary archives have been vigorously debated in the national and international media.

When the UK Literary Heritage working group (UKLH) was formed in 2005 to respond to concerns raised about the preservation of British writers' archives, one of its key goals was to challenge government to confront the inherent advantages enjoyed by American libraries, which can dissuade British writers from considering home institutions when deciding on the disposition of their papers. Accordingly, UKLH pressed for the implementation of two proposals to help secure the nation's literary heritage: the extension of the *douceur* (the arrangement whereby tax on posthumous private sales to public UK institutions is waived and the benefit split between the vendor and the purchaser) to the sale of manuscripts of living writers; and the extension of the Acceptance in Lieu (AIL) scheme to allow authors to bring forward the settlement of their estates in their lifetime.

Members of the group made the case to Treasury, and presented evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport (CMS) Select Committee's inquiry into *Caring for our Collections*. The Select Committee concluded:

'We share the concern that the literary archives of some of our most important writers are being lost overseas for relatively modest sums. We recommend that the *douceur* arrangement should be extended to income tax which may be payable by creators on sales of their archives to designated public institutions in the UK and that AIL should be extended to allow living creators to offer their archives to such institutions in exchange for promised tax relief on their deaths.'

The Government's official response, published in October, records that it: 'shares the Committee's concerns at the loss of such archives and is keen to work with the literary

heritage sector to ascertain how it might be possible to stem the flow of authors' personal archives [abroad].'

It's up to UKLH, drawing on support from the literary and archive communities, to hold the government to its word.

Meanwhile, in several articles (including a piece in *The New Yorker*) and radio interviews over the summer, the director of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC) at the University of Texas at Austin celebrated the institution's 50th anniversary with dizzyingly energetic tales of Texan derring-do, and took the opportunity to repeat a number of (often personal) critiques of British collecting institutions and their advocates. The British Library, we read, is 'not aggressive', we 'flounder', British institutions are 'inept' – while our proposals to government were again misrepresented.

I know many curators, admirers of the work of HRC, who were disappointed by the comments. British institutions owe much to far-sighted American collecting practices in the field of modern literary manuscripts (including those of British writers) from the early 1950s, and I hope we both continue to learn from each other's successes. Any reflexive suspicion of legitimate American collecting practices in this field would be a distraction from our main purpose, to respond to what British writers have told us they want: for their archives to be housed in home institutions. I believe we are addressing this wish, both through our efforts to ensure parity in the global market for acquisitions, and our national, collaborative work to make the case that British institutions provide a secure, accessible, and above all vibrant home for authors' papers.

But perhaps we do need to be more aggressive, less shy, in trumpeting the creative energies of UK institutions. Our specifically targeted – and, in Treasury terms, relatively modest – tax measures would be ineffectual if there had not been a vigorous effort by British manuscript repositories to ensure their treasures not only stay here, but are seen by as many people as possible.

Last year's conference provided countless examples of ways in which British children as young as primary school-age are engaging with original literary manuscripts throughout the country, and ever-increasing numbers of visitors of all ages are taking advantage of the British Library's exhibition spaces in the heart of London (now the heart of Europe, as the Eurostar glides into St Pancras International). Writers, scholars, and performers continue to exploit our collections and in turn produce new works and editions. New fiction and poetry, including novels by Tracy Chevalier and Stef Penney, have been inspired by the British Library's collections; editions of the letters of Edith Wharton, of Ted Hughes, and of recently discovered letters and poems by Isaac Rosenberg have been

Best Things

Margaret Drabble

What I like to have around when at work is not always what I find on my desk. I intend to have to hand *Roget's Thesaurus*, the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, some Post-It notes, a red pen and a blue pen, paper clips, a glow pen, my laptop, my diary, a tape measure, some scissors and some Sellotape. Some of these are the old-fashioned implements of the trade, some new-fangled. (I learned about Post-It notes from David Lodge, who is always up to date. I'd never seen them before he showed them to me, and I was most impressed by them.) But in fact I often mislay or leave in another room several of these objects, and have to run up and down stairs looking for them, which is good for my health, so their absence is probably subconsciously intentional. Less utilitarian accoutrements include a rather fine small black bust of Arnold Bennett from the Potteries and a black tin crow which was given to me by a student in Chicago when we were studying Ted Hughes. The crow is a hunched and gloomy-looking bird which perches miserably on my desk or my mantelpiece, expressing all too clearly the duller moods that sometimes overtake me while I try to work. More comfortingly, I have a beautiful encaustic tile, also from the Potteries. I salvaged this from the house of my aunt, where I think it may once have been used as a teapot stand. It is square, and decorated with a symmetrical six-petalled white flower, the sort of boldly simple daisy flower one used to draw at school when learning how to use a pair of compasses. The white petals, separated by light green-grey bells, are set into a dark blue background, a blue of an intense and luminous richness, and the flower is surrounded by a dark brown border with a simple light brown fringed curving motif. The tile itself is thick and heavy and always cool to the touch, as though it remembers a cloister or a church or a grotto, although it was never set in any floor or wall. On its underside it tells me that it was made by the Campbell Tile Company in Stoke-upon-Trent, so I like to think it represents a link with my ancestors who were potters. The weight of it is a comfort to the hand, and its simple symmetry is a pleasure to the eye. I am trying to write something about my aunt at the moment, so the tile is a talisman. It is full of memory.

made possible by our literary holdings; and several theatre producers and directors have been indebted to our theatre archives for developing their scripts, and – as in Southwark's Union Theatre's production of Noël Coward's *The Better Half* – unearthing texts long assumed to be lost.

The British Library's theatre archives are a particular strength, and one that we are always looking to develop. The highly successful Theatre Archive Project, a collaboration with Sheffield University, recently brought members of the seminal Theatre Workshop group together for the first time in decades for a sold-out evening at the Library, while the project's Oral History strand has carried out several hundred interviews with those who visited or worked in British theatre in the post-War period. This autumn the National Life Stories (NLS), part of the British Library Sound Archive, embarked on a new series of recordings to compile a national collection of life story interviews with writers. The result will be a unique archive available at the British Library alongside writers' papers.

As we all move from cultural memory based on physical artefacts towards new forms of digital memory, the British Library – with University College London, and the University of Bristol – has begun a three-year research project, 'Digital Lives', bringing together curators and practitioners from the fields of literature, politics, and science to evaluate how digital collections are being created, and how best to ensure their preservation and long-term accessibility.

No one institution can hope to acknowledge and preserve the entirety of a nation's literary output on its own. A formal structure for collaboration among all UK literary collections was instituted a few years ago with the creation of the flamboyantly-acronymed GLAM (Group for Literary Archives and Manuscripts), which is working towards establishing one truly national collection, spread throughout the UK.

Authors' manuscripts matter to UK literary curators. UKLH's work to ensure equality of opportunity in acquisitions with American institutions must continue to be matched by imaginative and energetic use of archives acquired, and by real collaboration with partners in the UK and overseas. We believe that this work to safeguard and celebrate literary archives makes an essential contribution to the UK's cultural heritage, a contribution that deserves the support of policy makers for our modest proposals.

Some useful websites:

Proceedings of the *Manuscripts Matter* conference:

www.literary.org.uk/conference.php;

UKLH: www.literary.org.uk;

the Theatre Archive Project: www.bl.uk/theatrchive;

the Digital Lives Project: www.bl.uk/digital-lives/;

National Life Stories: www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/nlsc.html;

GLAM: <http://archives.li.man.ac.uk/glam/>;

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