

David Sutton on tracking down modern literary manuscripts and letters in British universities

A highly original paper chase

"Holographs," Michael Holroyd has written, "will never lose their power of attracting people. Handling a manuscript is the nearest textual critics, biographers or historians come to their subject."

To look through the corrected drafts of a favourite book can be, for any reader, a powerful experience. And for the literary scholar (Jon Stallworthy on Yeats or Gittings on Hardy, for example) original manuscripts are the tools of the trade. Yet collectors and teachers in British universities have seldom appreciated their value – least of all those of living or recently-dead authors.

In 1979 *Encounter* reprinted a talk by Philip Larkin whose title summed up the situation: "A neglected responsibility: contemporary literary MSS." Larkin was urging a change in a whole set of British critical attitudes: towards the study and teaching of modern literature, where the use of original materials might show how imaginative works came into being; and towards the collection and recording of such materials, where British university libraries had in general shown little of the enthusiasm of their American counterparts.

Larkin outlined clearly the sad story: too many keepers of British collections in the postwar period had refused to take an interest in modern literary manuscripts. Some in consequence were lost or not preserved; and huge numbers found their way to the new treasure-houses of North America: the Humanities Research Center at Austin; the Huntington Library in San Marino, California; the Berg collection in New York Public Library; or one of the splendid collections in the large university libraries.

Important British authors, including some of the most English of writers, can now be properly studied only in the United States. Most of H. G. Wells's manuscripts rest in a purpose-built library in the University of Illinois; J. R. R. Tolkien's literary papers went to the Marquette University in Milwaukee; to study Evelyn Waugh one has to travel to Austin; for Robert Graves to Carbondale; for Winifred Holtby to Nashville; for Iris Murdoch and Angus Wilson to Iowa City; for Frank Swinnerton to Fayetteville, Arkansas; and so on. The list seems endless.

The great successes of American collectors in the 1950s and 1960s further discouraged British universities. If everything was already in the United States, why bother? E. M. Forster believed that for the period 1850–1950 the battle was already lost; North American repositories had bought up most of the available material and the best that British librarians could do was to write politely and ask for microfilms.

This gloomy view was reflected in the committee on manuscripts set up by the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries. In 1960 Larkin wrote to 20 leading British writers asking for their experiences in disposing of their original papers. Almost all had had pressing offers from North America, no interest at all from Britain.

One reply was heartbreakingly clear: "If almost any English university had asked me five years ago to give them my manuscript collection, which happened to be unusually complete, I should certainly have said yes."

The standing conference received Larkin's report coolly. The committee on manuscripts in 1961 declared themselves against collective action, against the earmarking of grants for purchases and against allocating special responsibility for modern literary manuscripts to particular members of library staff. But they did agree that national and university libraries should make known their interest in acquiring manuscripts from living authors.

Eric Walter White and some of his colleagues at the Arts Council received this feeble response with justifiable dismay. They set about the founding of a National Manuscript Collection of Contemporary Writers and, with the aid of a small grant from the Pilgrim Trust, the Arts Council started buying poetry manuscripts and reselling them to the British Museum.

They found opportunities in plenty. For the first time, the museum began to accept the papers of living authors.



Auden, Andrew Young, Peter Porter, Ted Hughes, Stevie Smith and Larkin himself found a place in the main national library. After 1967, all kinds of manuscripts, not simply poetry, were bought and sold to any SCONUL library at a 25 per cent discount, raised in 1972 to 50 per cent. The whole enterprise showed what might be done.

More recently, however, Arts Council grants to SCONUL libraries have been first reduced and then brought to an end. The main reason for this was not the general cuts in Arts Council funding but the fact that too few universities were taking advantage of the scheme. In the present economic climate it is difficult to see it being restarted (although a Victoria and Albert Museum purchase grant fund still exists) and difficult to resist the conclusion that another chance has been missed.

The story is not wholly one of decline and neglect. An increased awareness of the importance of modern literary manuscripts has undoubtedly developed. And while the collecting of such papers has entered an unpromising period, progress is being made in the recording of information about collections (large and small) already brought into public custody.

As the Arts Council grants trickled away, SCONUL took up an idea which could bring the papers of contemporary writers into universities, and other places by a different route. At the same standing conference meeting to which Larkin gave his "neglected responsibility" paper in 1979, Paul Levy of the Strachey Trust suggested that SCONUL should sponsor the recording of the whereabouts of those 20th-century literary manuscripts and letters which remain in the British Isles.

A register of locations of literary manuscripts had been one of the aims of the founders of the Strachey Trust, but they had had to labour against wide-spread scepticism. When Michael Holroyd and Paul Levy first floated the notion in *The Times Literary Supplement* in November 1972, they encountered indifference and even hostility. *TLS* correspondents implied that the National Register of Archives, a general historical register, covered literary papers as much as they needed to be covered.

By 1979, the Strachey Trust was winning the argument. The SCONUL decided to commission Dr James Edwards, keeper of archives and manuscripts at Reading University, to conduct a pilot project on the feasibility of a computerized location register of 20th-century English literary manuscripts and letters.

His report, presented in 1980, was accepted by the SCONUL committee on manuscripts. James Thompson, the

librarian of Reading University, agreed to head the project, and funding for the scheme came from the Strachey Trust, the Leverhulme Trust, the British Library, the Arts Council, the British Academy, the British Council and a number of commercial firms.

The location register came into operation in October 1982, in Reading University library. The survey has now been running for almost half of its allotted five years and it is perhaps not too early to issue a preliminary sketch of its findings, which are not as discouraging as might have been feared.

Clearly the migration to the United States of the papers of many writers whose reputations were made by 1960 will never be reversed. Moreover, there have recently been unfortunate withdrawals of valuable deposits. Most of the John Galsworthy collection is now gone from Birmingham University and the Charleston papers, removed from King's College, Cambridge, were dispersed at auction (although King's cannily kept photocopies).

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Experience should now be teaching depositors who need to raise money (and cannot therefore afford to convert their deposits into gifts) that it is much better to negotiate with the library where their deposits are housed than to rush to the auction rooms. They can benefit from tax concessions and not having to pay premiums and they can at the same time earn the goodwill of the British academic community.

Such big losses are in any case comparatively rare. The general picture being revealed in the location register's work is one of steady growth and increasing interest. Despite the under-use of Arts Council funds (only the universities of Hull, Birmingham and Exeter feature in Jenny Stratford's catalogue of Arts Council acquisitions up to 1974), a good number of university libraries have now joined the national libraries as important repositories of modern literary manuscripts.

The growing collections of papers of individual authors in university libraries fall into three main groups: ● papers of prominent local writers (Edwin Morgan at Glasgow, Charles Causley at Exeter, Adrian Henri at Liverpool, Walter Greenwood at Salford, D. H. Lawrence at Nottingham, Helen B. Cruickshank at Stirling,

Arnold Bennett at Keele);

● collections of writers who have for various reasons been "adopted" by a particular university (Gavin Ewart and Anthony Thwaite at Hull, Samuel Beckett and G. S. Fraser at Reading, John Wain at Edinburgh, Kingsley Martin at Sussex, William Plomer at Durham, Roy Fuller and G. Wilson Knight in the Brotherton collection at Leeds);

● accumulations of miscellaneous papers, some of which are particularly appropriate (the original of Tony Harrison's "Newcastle is Peru" is in the University of Newcastle library, for instance), but many of which are quite random.

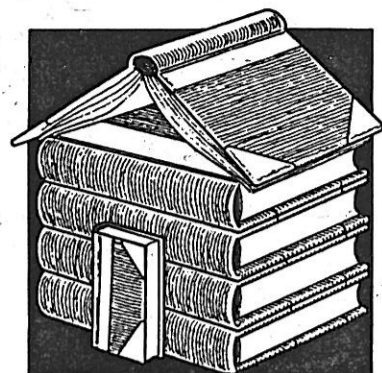
Another encouraging sign is that more universities now seem prepared to take the risk of acquiring papers of comparatively young writers – like the poetry manuscripts of Tom Paulin and Paul Muldoon recently bought for the Brotherton collection, or those of Andrew Motion acquired by the University of Hull. This is, of course, the sort of risk that the American repositories have always been prepared to take.

The location register will draw the attention of scholars to small collections in unexpected places, some of which (such as the Laurence Housman deposit in Bromsgrove Public Library or the correspondence files at Elgar's Birthplace Museum, Broadheath, or the E. A. Hornel Museum, Kirkcudbright), are extremely difficult of access by public transport!

It will also underline the value of collections in the colleges and schools attended by certain authors. Most Oxford and Cambridge colleges hold papers of former undergraduates and several public schools (notably the King's School, Canterbury and Eton College) have magnificent collections.

Without expressing opinions of its own, the register will illustrate the fact that many British repositories are collecting the papers of "non-canonical" writers. For example, the Bodleian Library has the papers of James Blish (creator of "Star Trek"); the University of Glasgow those of Benjamin Swift; the University of Southampton those of E. M. Almedingen; Trinity College, Dublin those of Thomas MacGreevy; the University of Reading those of R. L. Mégroz; and Churchill College, Cambridge those of Cecil Roberts.

Researchers will also be guided to riches buried in two further sorts of accumulation, which have hitherto been underused: publishers' archives and the archives of periodicals and magazines. Collections like those of the Carcanet Press and the *Critical Quarterly*, both in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, the *Dublin Magazine* archive at Trinity College, Dublin, and the huge Archive of British Publishing at the University



of Reading all contain valuable manuscripts as well as fascinating correspondence. Equally, the register will embrace personal papers of publishers (such as the Victor Gollancz collection at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick).

In collecting 20th-century papers, archivists have already had to come to terms with one major piece of new technology: the typewriter. Almost all the collections so far mentioned include both typescript and handwritten documents. Now, however, we are about to enter an age when many writers will presumably compose on computers.

The implications are enormous. So, just as fair copy typescripts can occasionally be of interest to students if they are found to differ from the work as published, it may be that keepers of special collections in the future will have to be ready to take in "floppy diskettes" from the word-processors on which authors have worked and reworked their creations – even though only the final version will usually survive. And if some "writers" (like Agatha Christie) do not write at all, but speak into dictaphones, then dictaphone tapes should also be collected.

Such media may be thought to be outside the range of a location register of literary manuscripts. It is therefore pleasing to report that a recently established directory of recorded sound resources, based at the National Sound Archive, should catch them in its net. This directory is one of a number of initiatives giving some cause for optimism about the state-of-the-art in recording original materials for contemporary and humanities studies in general.

It is hoped, for instance, that an artists' papers index, now actively promoted by the University of Glasgow library with the support of the Art Historians Association, will come into being in the next couple of years, and proposals for a location register of records of the book trade have recently been discussed.

How then does the future appear? New literary manuscripts come into existence every day – produced by pencil, pen, typewriter and word-box. How can we ensure that as many of them as possible are preserved in British public institutions?

First, the developing awareness of the importance of contemporary literary manuscripts must be consolidated – especially by increasing their use in teaching and research. Clearly the location register (which may become one of a network of location registers) can help here.

Second, there should be increased cooperation among libraries, university and other, based on wider knowledge of their collections and interests. Third, the collecting of papers should continue, with gifts and deposits being actively sought and gratefully received and with use being made of those grants-in-aid which remain.

Arts Council grants may have come to an end, but others have not – for example the V & A purchase grant fund, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and, in Scotland, the Local Museums Purchase Fund (which last year helped bring several lots of J. M. Whistler letters to the University of Glasgow). Scotland is, indeed, rather favoured at present, for the Scottish Arts Council still has funds reserved for purchase grants. Last July it made a substantial contribution to the purchase of Robert Nye manuscripts by the University of Edinburgh.

No possible sources of help should be neglected. It might then be possible to press for a restoration of the Arts Council scheme, with a firm commitment from SCONUL libraries that money offered will indeed be spent.

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