WRITERS AND THEIR COPYRIGHT HOLDERS: THE WATCH PROJECT

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WATCH (Writers and their Copyright Holders) is probably the first information database jointly compiled by British and American librarians using the Internet. Its increasing use, which is being monitored, reflects its value not only to librarians and information scientists, but also to scholars, students, anthologists, literary agents and publishers.

WATCH was brought into being in response to a widespread view that it is often difficult and frustrating to try to find out who holds the copyright in an individual author's works (especially when the author has recently died). Discovering the identity of copyright holders has always been a laborious and haphazard process, and this problem has long concerned those who work with largely unpublished archival materials. The difficulties have been much the same in the USA, the UK, and most other western countries, despite their differing copyright laws. (Unpublished papers are normally given separate and extended copyright protection.) Those specialized files that exist, such as the ones maintained by the Copyright Office in Washington DC and by the Authors Licensing and Collecting Society in London, are concerned primarily with individual published works of living authors, and are not designed to assist scholars working on archives and manuscripts. Librarians and archivists are often asked by researchers to help identify and locate the copyright holders of works held in their collections, and a good number of informal files are maintained for this purpose, but the absence of any central reference-work or database has continued to be at the heart of a problem recognized by the whole profession. Now the WATCH project is beginning to provide a new solution.

US REGISTER OF COPYRIGHT HOLDERS

In 1993 progress towards this new solution first became apparent. Over the previous six or seven years the ad hoc Literary Rights Committee of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (American Library Association) had been trying to cajole someone into taking responsibility for the establishment of a central US Register of Copyright Holders. In spite of a general agreement that such a Register was highly desirable, no institution felt able to commit the time or resources to taking the lead.

CREATING INTENTIONS

Then came an announcement by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin. They declared in 1993 that they intended to create a file of copyright holders at least for those authors represented amongst their own collections. With admirable public spirit, they proposed to make their file available free of charge on the Internet. Shortly afterwards, the Strachey Trust, a charity established in 1972 to further the pursuit of scholarship especially in areas connected with literary manuscripts, agreed to provide funding for a small-scale UK project on literary copyright based at the University of Reading Library. The director of the Ransom Center initiative was Cathy Henderson, and I was appointed to direct the Reading project from early 1994. Agreement was quickly reached between the two institutions that they would work together on a single database, and the first publicity for the joint venture was released in March 1994. The file was named *Writers and their Copyright Holders,* giving the pleasing acronym WATCH (although a graduate intern at Austin, after a long day's inputting, enquired whether we

had considered Authors, Copyright Holders, Estates!). The first version became available on the Internet in August 1994. The file is also available through the World Wide Web (http://www.lib.utexas.edu and follow the route via Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center to WATCH).

Our intention is to make information about copyright holders available free of charge for use by anyone who has access to the Internet. Wide availability of the information should make it easier for scholars to identify whom to contact to seek permission to publish from unpublished manuscripts housed in libraries and archives. The initiative may grow further into a much larger programme of copyright research, in line with an all-embracing feasibility study prepared for the Strachey Trust in 1993 by the Authors Licensing and Collecting Society.

THE WATCH FILE

At present WATCH is an indexed text file containing predominantly the names and addresses of copyright holders or their agents for English-language authors whose papers are housed, in whole or in part, at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. Records from the Reading team have now been added to the file and it is anticipated that the principal area of growth through 1995 will be further Reading-generated records. The Reading team draws extensively on its predecessor project, the Location register of English literary manuscripts and letters, which provides valuable data about manuscripts of literary authors which are to be found in British repositories.

Workers at Reading are also seeking to confirm and then include information from various locally maintained files, including those of the Book Trust, the British Library, the Bodleian Library, King's College Cambridge and Trinity College Cambridge. The help and co-operation of such institutions is testimony to British recognition of the importance of the project.

In order to compile the initial list, staff at the Ransom Center sent letters to all the copyright holders known to them and asked them to confirm that they held the copyright in question and to give permission to include their name and address in the proposed WATCH file. The responses were very positive. Fewer than fifteen of about a thousand respondents asked for their name not to be included in the new file.

Occasionally information is received to the effect that an author's copyrights are in the public domain and this assertion is recorded; other authors or executors reply that they do not wish to exercise their rights. We also come across situations where copyright in unpublished materials is still protected under US and UK law but we cannot identify anyone who will claim the copyright. Consequently, some entries are worded cautiously and inconclusively, as in this example:

'Copyright in unpublished papers of William Heinemann was believed to be held by the publishers William Heinemann Ltd and was assumed to have passed to their present parent company Reed International, whose legal department,

however, states that they do not hold any such rights [letter to the UK WATCH office, 20 May 1994]'.

The compilers particularly encourage anyone who has copyright information to contact them. WATCH is a not-for-profit public service, and will be that much more effective if it has the active support of the archivists, librarians and writers whose workload it aims to lighten. The continuing work of the project is dependent upon funding from charitable and cultural bodies, and already in the UK grants have been committed by the Arts Council, the Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust, the Chase Charity, the Pilgrim Trust, the Marc Fitch Fund and the Newby Trust, in addition to the core-funding from the Strachey Trust.

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Provided that such financial support is sustained, the two teams in Austin and Reading will continue their researches and 'detective work', using everything from telephone directories and probate registers to anecdotal accounts and newspaper reports, with a special appreciation of voluntarily contributed information. The co-operation of a growing number of literary agents and publishers is also furnishing a rich source of information, and special mention should be made of the enthusiastic help of Colin Smythe (of Colin Smythe Ltd) and Linda Shaughnessy (of the agents A P Watt).

WATCH ON THE INTERNET

WATCH on the Internet now consists of over a thousand records and is organized alphabetically by authors' surnames. The entry below each surname usually contains a contact name and address for copyright enquiries, the date when the information was collected, and a code indicating which of the compilers created the record. Telephone and fax numbers, email addresses and explanatory notes are included in some cases, and dates of the authors' births and deaths will be added as part of a future editorial review, since this information is essential in calculating the term of copyright protection.

With the funding and other support which has already been attracted, it seems likely that the first stage of WATCH's work will be completed in the course of 1996. Plans have been drawn up for three future stages, should funders be prepared to continue their backing. The second stage would cover English-language authors in other fields of the Humanities. A third stage would extend the coverage to authors in the Humanities in languages other than English, beginning with Welsh, Irish and French; and a fourth stage would deal with English-language authors outside the Humanities. The availability of a comprehensive copyright database is clearly many years in the future, but it is encouraging that a good start has been made and a useable database is already up and running.