

# Locating Literary Manuscripts

Some good news for researchers  
David C. Sutton

If you are engaged in the study of one or several British historical figures, how do you begin the task of locating surviving documentary evidence? Normally the answer would be that you begin by travelling to one of the national historical information centres: the National Register of Archives in London or the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh. There you can sort through a variety of indexes, lists, catalogues and source-books and make a start on mapping out your research-programme.

If you have been engaged in the study of one or several British literary figures, you will, until now, have found the locating of their papers much more difficult. You may have been fortunate and have found that your chosen authors are considered of sufficient historical significance to have been covered, at least in part, by the National Register of Archives or the Scottish Record Office. Or you may have been interested in the sort of major, long-dead authors whose manuscripts and, to some extent correspondence, are being exhaustively covered in the *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*. For the majority of literary authors, however, there has been no such coverage, and students, critics and biographers have had to do all the spade-work themselves – writing dozens and dozens of letters to the most likely repositories they could think of.

This huge gap in research and reference tools for the humanities is progressively being filled by a project launched in 1982 and known by the rather cumbersome title of the *Location Register of Twentieth-Century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters*.

## Genesis

The origins of this project date back to 1972 and the formation of the Strachey Trust by the biographer Michael Holroyd, writer and journalist Paul Levy and historian Lucy Norton to rectify the state of neglect that in their view prevailed particularly in the case of the papers of twentieth-century writers. Philip Larkin, the celebrated poet who was also for thirty years Librarian of the University of Hull's Brynmor Jones Library, wrote and spoke eloquently on the subject and, with his backing, and the support of the Arts Council, in the late 1970s the Trust launched the pilot project that in 1982 became the *Location Register*, initially a five-year project covering British literary authors who wrote in English in the twentieth century and confined to those of their papers available for public consultation in the British Isles.

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The progress of this twentieth-century register has been followed with interest in British literary and professional journals over the years<sup>1</sup>. The project has been run from an office in the Library of the University of Reading and from the start has had the benefit of computer technology in all its operations, using the services of the British Library to store, maintain and update its database. A two-volume printed catalogue, containing some 50,000 entries produced directly from the database, was published earlier this year by British Library Publications in Britain<sup>2</sup> and by G.K. Hall in North America.

## Defining the Scope

The terms of reference for the twentieth-century register are splendidly broad. It includes all poets, novelists and dramatists and many essayists, critics and men and women of letters – provided that some of their papers survive in British or Irish institutions. No attempt has been made to confine the register to any

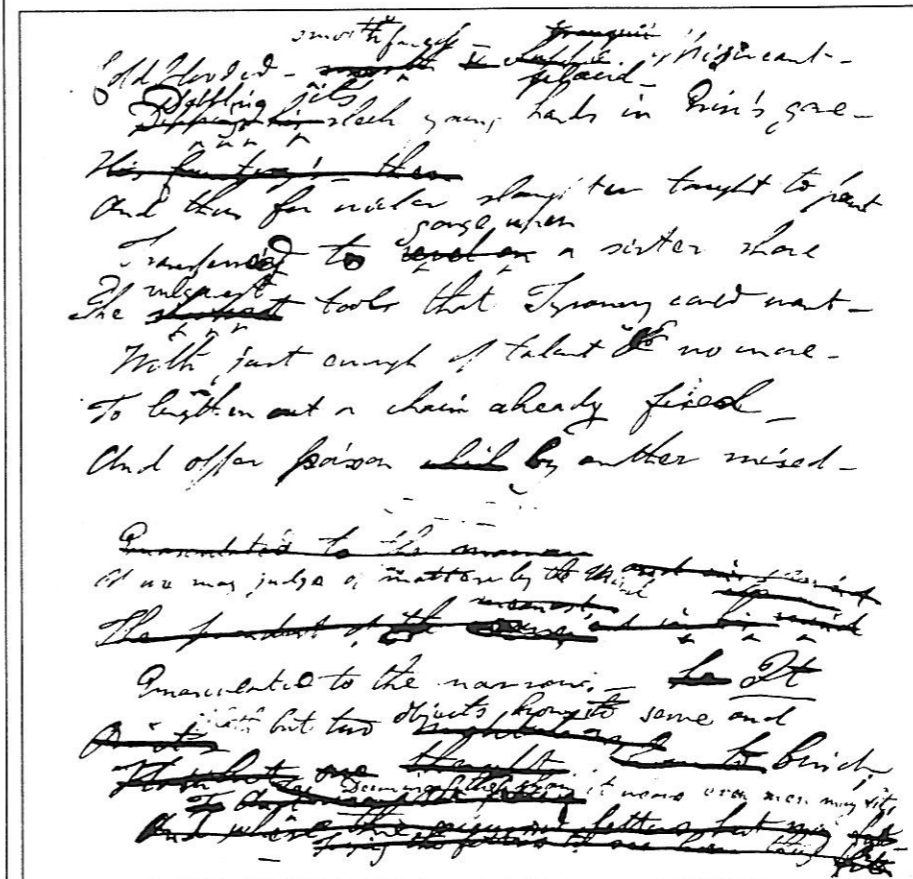
canon of recognized or 'serious' writers: Marie Corelli, Ethel M. Dell and Agatha Christie are treated in exactly the same way as 'heavyweights' like Virginia Woolf, Dorothy M. Richardson and Doris Lessing. Science fiction writers co-exist with major poets: the W.B. Yeats collection in the National Library of Ireland is fully covered, and so is the collection in the Bodleian Library of the papers of James Blish (creator of *Star Trek*).

The expression 'twentieth-century' has also been generously interpreted. It includes all living authors, from a group of notable nonagenarians to writers like Andrew Motion and Oliver Reynolds who were born in the 1950s; twentieth-century authors who are now dead; authors like Thomas Hardy, Lady Anne Ritchie, Lady Jane Strachey and Rudyard Kipling whose careers spanned both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; but also such quintessentially Victorian figures as George Meredith, Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Ouida' and Aubrey de Vere, who lived on into the Edwardian period.

There have been occasional challenges to the use of the term 'English' in the register's title, but in choosing it the project's founders intended no narrow chauvinism. 'English literary manuscripts' are manuscripts pertaining to 'English literature', and the latter is interpreted to include all English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh authors who wrote in English, together with other authors who from time to time lived in the British Isles as visitors or refugees or temporary residents. Ezra Pound and Rabindranath Tagore are included, and the *Location Register* is enriched by the presence of more recent writers like Wole Soyinka, C.L.R. James and Dennis Brutus. Henry James and T.S. Eliot, who adopted British nationality, are present; so is J.P. Donleavy, now an Irish citizen; but writers like Leslie Charteris, Denise Levertov and W.H. Auden, who gave up their British citizenship, are not excluded.

## Reaping the Benefits

The twentieth-century *Location Register* is now available in larger libraries



The very stuff of research: Byron's *Don Juan* in the poet's own hand (Ashley MS B. 4732, f. 128, reproduced by courtesy of The British Library)

throughout the world. The benefits it brings for researchers based in Britain are great, but for overseas students of English literature planning a research visit it is quite invaluable – not least because it may do away with the need for that most embarrassing question: 'Are your collections really important enough for me to make a visit?' It is frustrating enough to travel, say, from London to Edinburgh to find that a supposed literary archive contains only a note to a housekeeper and a greetings card, but consider the anguish of a researcher arriving from, for example, Sydney or Santiago. Nor are the advantages of knowing what manuscripts are in which libraries felt only by literary scholars; for librarians too the burden of dealing with so many purely speculative enquiries from hopeful researchers is greatly lightened.

## The Next Stage

As the allotted five years of research on twentieth-century documents drew towards a close the *Location Register's* management committee (a group appointed by the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries) considered whether to close down the project or to try to extend it in some way. They looked at the possibility of extending the survey-area beyond the British Isles, but this was not found to be feasible (however attractive the idea of

In the meantime, research continues. In the *Location Register* office, the James Blishes and Ethel M. Dells have been replaced as everyday companions by such as Capell Lofft, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Thomas Frognall Dibdin and Lady Maria Callcott. Maria Edgeworth and Charles Dickens have taken over from George Bernard Shaw and Edmund Gosse as the letter-writers whose correspondence seems to crop up everywhere, while Shaw's place as the writer of the most vital and witty letters may be said to have been taken by Lord Byron (although the typical subject matter and the legibility of these two larger-than-life authors have equally little in common). Libraries and record offices who have patiently dealt with twentieth-century enquiries over the past five years are having their patience taxed again with questions about older documents. The great majority of British librarians and archivists, it should be said, have been extremely tolerant and helpful towards the *Register's* staff.

There are now two separate but compatible databases maintained from Reading. One, covering the twentieth century, is large, almost complete and almost identical at present to the two-volume published version. The other, covering the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is much smaller but is growing week by week. A number of interesting options are now under consideration concerning the future online availability of the first database, and eventually, the second. Negotiations are under way with both the British Library's BLAISE-LINE service and the RILIN network of the Research Libraries Group of Stanford, California. We would like to see the *Location Register's* data merged with other data about manuscript collections that will be available through these networks. We dream of a future where a researcher at a single terminal will be able to key in the name of a chosen author, and the computer, searching across a variety of databases, will produce locations of that author's papers in the British Isles, the United States, Canada and elsewhere. The realization of our dream may still be some way in the future, but we can at least see how we shall have to proceed.

## References

- See, for example, David C. Sutton 'A Highly Original Paperpurchase', *Times Higher Education Supplement* (5 April 1985), 13; David C. Sutton 'The Location Register of Twentieth-century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters: A Report on Progress', *Archives* (October 1987), 82–84; Notes in *BBN* (January 1983), 3; *Museums Bulletin* (January 1983), 192; *Aslib Information* (February 1983), 53–54; *Times Literary Supplement* (4 March 1983), 214; *American Archivist* (Summer 1983), 344–45; *Journal of the Society of Archivists* (April 1984), 328.
- Location Register of Twentieth-century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters* 2 vols 1988 British Library £95 0 7123 0146 1