The WATCH Project

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www.watch-file.com

The project known as WATCH (Writers Artists & Their Copyright Holders) was founded by the universities of Reading and Texas in 1994, and at that time it was probably the first Anglo-American internet collaboration in the field of arts and humanities. Its initial aim was to record the contact details of the copyright holders for all UK and US literary authors. In those pre-web days, it functioned on the Internet through something called a 'gopher search'. Graduating to a web-site in 1996, WATCH soon became the primary source of information about copyright holders in the English-speaking world.

Information about copyright holders is notoriously difficult to obtain. There are no mainstream library sources, although handwritten card-files from libraries ranging from the British Library to the Huntington Library in California provided valuable starting points. Some publishers made their author-files (privately) available to WATCH, while others were outraged at the very idea of doing so. The major UK literary agencies were very helpful from the start, with agents such as Linda Shaughnessy and Giles Gordon taking a personal interest. The Book Trust and the Society of Authors were also keen supporters.

Once such sources had been exhausted, informal networking and detective work had to take over. The UK is unusual in that wills are considered to be public documents, and it was possible to do a lot of work tracing the heirs of dead authors in the Probate Office in London (formerly Somerset House). Telephone directories and electoral registers were also widely used in research which often seemed to be more to do with private investigation than with librarianship. An article on WATCH in *The bookseller* in 1999 was entitled 'The copyright detectives'.

The web-site was expanded to include a certain number of authors from other European countries, as it became clear that there was no other reference source in the world which gave information about owners of literary copyright. The copyright-owners for Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir thus appeared in WATCH, alongside those for Virginia Woolf and James Joyce (not to mention Alison Uttley, Agatha Christie and Enid Blyton) – as the web-site grew ever more comprehensive. Non-literary authors have also begun to appear on the site, ranging from Lord Butler of Saffron Walden and Albert Einstein to Frankie Dettori and Damon Hill.

In the last couple of years, unfortunately, WATCH has been beset by a succession of technological problems partly caused by its status as one of the world's oldest web-sites. In the summer of 2002, for example, visitors to WATCH were greeted by the message 'hacked by Chinese'! Now in 2003, however, a redeveloped and strengthened WATCH site has emerged (still reached via www.watch-file.com), built now on a Microsoft Access platform, and once again providing a wide array of information about literary copyright and the copyright holders for almost all the major figures in UK and US literature, with many other authors besides. The site is just about fully functional once again, and comments and suggestions from its visitors will be very much welcomed.