

Migration of Literary Manuscripts

Paper for the Manuscripts Matter conference, October 2006

As Andrew Motion has clearly outlined, the cardinal text on the migration of modern British literary manuscripts is the talk by Philip Larkin entitled 'A neglected responsibility: contemporary literary MSS', given at the British Academy and published in *Encounter* in 1979, and later collected in *Required writing*. It is a text coloured by Larkin's notorious prejudice against everything he grouped under the heading "abroad" (elsewhere in *Required writing* we read his recoil "Oh no, I've never been to America, nor to anywhere else, for that matter"). But it is the text which first brought to wide public attention the issue of the migration of modern British (and Irish) literary manuscripts, and its prose has an excoriating clarity. Here is another famous passage:

... I think we all know ... that during the last forty or fifty years, and more particularly during the last twenty years, the papers of the major British writers of this century have been intensively collected not by British but by American libraries. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in so far as future studies of these writers, and definitive editions of their works, depend on direct access to their papers, these studies and these editions are most likely to be undertaken by American scholars in American universities. There are of course exceptions but in the main the popular view of modern literary manuscripts is that they are all in America, and when one considers the great American university collections one can only agree. A meeting of British national and university librarians to discuss modern literary manuscripts resembles an annual convention of stable-door lockers.

So much for us lot.

Larkin was correct in stating that during the 1950s and the 1960s North American institutions had the field virtually to themselves. This was partly because they had money and were ready to spend it, but mainly because there were twenty or thirty North American university libraries which were committed to collecting modern British and Irish literary materials and were prepared to be very active and solicitous in acquiring the papers of authors who were not only still alive but in many cases were under the age of 50.

The American libraries did not always proceed through purchase. They solicited and accepted donations with charm and grace. They treated “their” authors as true friends. They showed themselves much more ready than their British counterparts to collect the papers of women authors. And they supported their collections with superb programmes of conservation.

The British approach up to 1979 was, by comparison, mean-spirited as well as mean-pocketed.

The 1979 conference which heard Larkin’s paper identified two significant failures: first, the failure (with noted exceptions) properly to collect the papers, and, second, the failure to record what had been collected in the UK.

For the first failure (the failure to collect) the conference called for strengthening of the funding available through Arts Council and other sources and called upon its own participants (the “stable-door lockers” themselves) to change approach and direction.

For the second failure (the failure to record) the conference agreed to try to set up a national location register of literary manuscripts, and the pioneering campaigners for literary manuscripts known as the Strachey Trust agreed to fund a pilot project based at Reading University Library.

In due course, I was appointed to direct this national location register of literary manuscripts and to the disbelief of many (not least myself) I am still doing so a quarter of a century later.

The Location Register surveys, begun in 1982, quickly showed that the situation in the UK was not quite as bleak as Larkin had imagined, and was rapidly improving too. Andrew Motion has referred to the collections acquired by the British Library. We soon found that fine collections were also being established in many university libraries - most notably the Brotherton Library and the John Rylands University Library, but also including Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Newcastle, Durham, Hull, Birmingham, Sussex, Exeter and Reading. We found rich holdings in the main libraries and the colleges of the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and London, and we found intriguing collections too in public libraries and museums - notably the Alan Brownjohn collection held by Lewisham Library Service; the Edward Carpenter collection in Sheffield Central Library; the Winifred Holtby papers in Hull Central Library; the Walter Brierley papers

in Derby Central Library; the Ivor Gurney collection in Gloucester Central Library; the Housman papers in Street Public Library; the Jerome K. Jerome collection in Walsall Central Library; and the wonderful Thomas Hardy collection in Dorset County Museum.

In presenting our emerging findings we began to develop the theme of “appropriateness”. We celebrated the appropriateness of the Hardy collections in Dorchester, the Alexander Cordell collection in Newport Central Library, the E. M. Forster papers in King’s College Cambridge, the Naomi Mitchison collection in the National Library of Scotland, the papers of Yeats and Lady Gregory in the National Library of Ireland, the Leonard Woolf papers at Sussex, the Douglas Dunn papers in Hull University, and so on. Even at the level of the individual poem, we celebrated the fact that the manuscript of Hardy’s ‘Aberdeen (April 1905)’ is in Aberdeen University Library and the manuscript and working papers for Tony Harrison’s ‘Newcastle is Peru’ are in Newcastle University Library.

I now find it very unfortunate that in the 1980s I went well beyond this celebration of appropriateness, and indulged in Larkinian laments about inappropriate locations in a number of published articles. I dwelt upon the fact that Tolkien’s manuscripts had found their way to the Marquette University in Milwaukee. And I sought other examples of “inappropriate” remoteness: the Frank Swinnerton papers in Fayetteville, Arkansas; the major collections of both Iris Murdoch and Angus Wilson being in Iowa City; the papers of John Betjeman in the University of Victoria, British Columbia (which I reflected grimly was rather a long way from St Enodoc).

I permitted myself to speculate on how Evelyn Waugh would have felt about his papers being in Austin, Texas; or what H. G. Wells would have made of Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, where his papers reside in their own special archive room.

I was on surer ground in pointing out the problems for Robert Graves scholars caused by the fact that five major North American institutions had established Graves collections: the Lockwood Library in Buffalo; Southern Illinois University; the Ransom Center in Austin; the University of San Francisco; and the University of Victoria, British Columbia again.

There was far too much Larkinian xenophobia in these early reflections (“How distant”, perhaps), and I regret that. (In mitigation, I might mention that he was on my Management Committee at the time.) But the notion of appropriateness is one that I will continue to support and defend.

That's why I'm here today.

(It's also why I'm a member of the Marbles Reunited group, campaigning to return the Parthenon Marbles, looted by Lord Elgin, to Athens. [...] *[I'll just pause for a moment for any ripples to settle.]*)

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The fact is that in 1979 most British librarians and archivists knew very little about modern literary manuscripts. Despite the brave pioneering work of Eric Walter White and Jenny Stratford with the Arts Council modern literary manuscripts fund, there was no proper philosophy or policy. We did not know whether or how to collect literary manuscripts, or how much to pay for them. There was a sense that librarians in North America were collecting the whole of our modern literary heritage, but few people knew exactly how, why or where. If there was any systematic collecting going on in the UK and Ireland, no-one knew much about that either.

We are in a much better position now.

Typically, by lamenting how terrible it all was, Larkin began a process of making it all much less terrible.

The publication in 1988 of the *Location register of 20th century English literary manuscripts and letters* (now updated as a website) helped to further the changes – changes of attitude, changes of awareness, changes of practice.

Larkin himself (again perhaps typically) was not as aware as he might have been of the major collecting programmes already under way – with a very strong focus on appropriateness, of course – at the National Libraries of Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

Only with the publication of the *Location register* did the richness of the literary collections at, for example, King's and Trinity Colleges in Cambridge become widely known.

From the 1980s into the 1990s we began to witness great collecting successes for British and Irish university libraries. The archives of John Wain and Arthur Koestler arrived at Edinburgh University Library; David

Lodge's papers went to Birmingham University; the vast Ronald Duncan collection went to the University of Plymouth; Kevin Crossley-Holland's papers went to the Brotherton Library; the Denis Johnston collection went to Trinity College Dublin.

In the cases of the Peter Redgrove papers going to Sheffield University and the Joe Orton papers being bought for Leicester University, those institutions entered the field of literary manuscripts (pretty much) for the first time.

Most appropriately of all, and in culmination, the Philip Larkin Nachlass has been deposited at the University of Hull.

We now have, very clearly, our own twenty or thirty major collecting institutions, which are worthy repositories for our modern literary heritage. We also have, starting from the Location Register and being taken forward now by GLAM (the Group for Literary Archives and Manuscripts – of which more later in this conference) the beginnings of a national collecting policy.

With the existence of the Location Register and the emergence of GLAM, the collecting approach in the major British and Irish institutions has to a significant extent helpfully “frozen”. There is no national collecting policy, but there are professional understandings. No-one, outside of the University of Reading and Trinity College Dublin, is now likely to start a new Samuel Beckett collection, for example. If further Charles Causley papers came onto the market, I hope and believe that colleagues would now be more likely to notify the University of Exeter than to think of bidding themselves.

This is real progress, a huge advance on where we were a quarter of a century ago, and a genuine platform for the further advances that the rest of this conference will advocate.