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**Speech to the Scone Foundation**  
***Archivist of the Year* presentation**  
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I came to Reading University Library in 1982 to set up a programme of research based on literary manuscripts. I had previously spent a year at Trinity College Dublin, a year at the Library of the Polytechnic of Central London, two years at the British Library, two years at the Université de Paris-VIII Vincennes, and less than two years at Warwick University Library. As I recall, I imagined that I would spend two years, maybe three, in Reading, getting the research programme underway, before moving on to the next challenge.

24 years later, I am still at Reading University Library, still researching literary manuscripts. You might conclude that either I have suffered a complete breakdown of the faculty of imagination – in respect of career-planning – or I have been rather enjoying my job. Perhaps by the end of this evening's talk, you will be able to take a view on that.

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My job was brought into being by a group of British scholars and writers who were deeply committed to the importance of modern literary manuscripts - the primary papers of poets, novelists, essayists, biographers and dramatists. Foremost among them were the poet Philip Larkin and the founders of the Strachey Trust, Michael Holroyd and Paul Levy.

In 1979 these advocates of modern literary manuscripts came together at an important conference held at the British Academy, where they heard Larkin's gloomy and excoriating paper 'A neglected responsibility: contemporary literary MSS', which remains the cardinal text for British people with an interest in literary manuscripts. Here is its most 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.

(It must be wonderful to have such status and self-confidence that you can launch an attack on your own audience.)

Larkin was correct in stating that during the 1950s and the 1960s North American institutions had the field of British literary manuscripts 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 1979 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 nearly 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. The British Library had begun to develop a collecting strategy for modern literary papers, and to collect papers of authors such as Ted Hughes, Peter Porter, Kathleen Raine and W. H. Auden. Larkin had not been fully aware of the extensive collections being established in the National Libraries of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. 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 (often surprising) collections too in public libraries and museums - notably the Alan Brownjohn collection held by Lewisham Library Service; the Ivor Gurney collection in Gloucester Central 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 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, 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.

Alongside this, in some of the first articles and conference papers I wrote as the Location Register got under way, I probably spent too much time on

inappropriateness. I'm sure I mentioned too many times that the papers of J. R. R. Tolkien are housed at the Marquette University in Milwaukee and that most of the John Betjeman papers are in the University of Victoria, British Columbia (which I used to reflect grimly was rather a long way from St Enodoc).

There was 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 idea of appropriateness is one that I will continue to support and defend.

In other words, I subscribe the notion that there is a general good which derives from cultural artefacts being located in the most appropriate library, museum or archives office. When we visit the Uffizi or the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, we feel that we know naturally what should be there and we are pleased when it is.

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In October 2006 another major conference on modern literary manuscripts was convened, at the British Library, with the title "Manuscripts Matter". This time, I was one of the keynote speakers, and for the first time I was able to announce myself (a little shyly) as the Scone Foundation's Archivist of the Year. In my paper there and in debate, I extended the idea of appropriateness of location further than I can do this evening.

Just as importantly, I was also able to point to a clear line of progress and improvement from 1979 to 2006.

The fact is that in 1979 most British librarians and archivists knew very little about modern literary manuscripts. Despite some brave pioneering work by our Arts Council, 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 the British 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.

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; the Peter Regrove papers have ended up in Sheffield University Library.

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 (British and Irish) 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) 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.

In these ways, our Location Register project has probably done a bigger job than its founders anticipated. It has not only provided the widest possible list of locations for the British and Irish literary heritage, it has also provided a starting-point for all consideration of future acquisition of modern literary manuscripts.

It has also branched out into other research areas. I'm not saying much today about the work that was done in order to extend our survey of literary manuscripts back to cover the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And I'll do no more than refer to the project which we undertook from 1998 to 2003 to revise and update completely the modern Location Register and to make it function as a website - [www.locationregister.com](http://www.locationregister.com).

But I must tell you about the offspring of the Location Register - known as WATCH and FOB. WATCH is very well established, and possibly even better known than the Location Register. FOB is so new-born that the birth has not yet been announced.

WATCH is now the world's primary source of information about who holds the copyright in any individual's creative works. It is one of the less far-fetched acronyms in our profession. Standing originally for Writers And Their Copyright Holders, it upgraded itself painlessly to Writers, Artists & Their Copyright Holders seven years ago at the request of art librarians in the USA and the UK. In the mythology of the WATCH project, its acronym was dreamed up in a rooftop wine bar under the stars of Santa Fe, New Mexico in the Spring of 1994, but I can no longer remember whether there is any truth in this.

The need for a project such as WATCH derives from one of the central themes of the Berne Convention of 1886, namely the removal of any need for copyright to be registered. I have written about the Berne Convention as the victory of the French notion of authors' rights (*droits d'auteur*) over the Anglo-American notion of copy-right, the protection of property from unrestricted copying. The primacy of author's rights led to a decision at Berne that signatories would abolish compulsory registration of copyright, with copyright becoming an automatic right which would come into existence as soon a creative work came into existence, regardless of quality, whether written, drawn, composed or photographed. In Britain implementation of Berne marked the end of copyright registration at the Stationers' Hall.

WATCH came into being in 1994 as a joint project between Reading University Library and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin. It was designed as a catalogue to be mounted on a new computer network which was starting to become known as the Internet. In those early pre-Web days, the file was accessed through an Internet engine charmingly known as a gopher. In 1996 WATCH became

one of the earliest public information websites, and probably the very first to be a joint US-UK project. The web address has changed over the years, but has always been reachable by way of [www.watch-file.com](http://www.watch-file.com).

Both in the UK and in the USA, the absence of any central register of copyright-holders had long been seen as a major obstacle to research and publication. It was entirely coincidental, however, that in the latter part of 1993 two projects were starting to come into view, one in the UK and one in the USA. Once the two nascent projects learned of each other's existence, the existing good working relations between the Universities of Texas and Reading led quickly to a decision in favour of merger.

The people most involved in the establishment of WATCH came from an archival background. On the British side, the particular interest of archivists derived from the transitional arrangements of the Copyright Designs and Patents Act (implemented 1989), which abolished "perpetual copyright" for unpublished works but allowed a 50-year transitional period of protection. This means that unpublished manuscripts of authors as long-dead as Charles Dickens and William Wordsworth will remain copyright-protected in the UK until 31 December 2039.

The first name-list of authors to be included was provided by the Location Register parent project. This underlined the literary and archival nature of the original WATCH file. But very early we established a principle of never refusing to include copyright information which was notified to us, even if it was not very literary and not very archival.

The starting-points for our research were informal (often handwritten sources in the major research libraries). Libraries including the British Library, the Bodleian Library, the National Library of Wales, and the Henry E. Huntington Library in California made their records available to us as research got under way.

The biggest file of all was in the University of Texas. They had records of the copyright holders of up to 1000 authors, mostly literary and mostly British, and by the middle of 1994 they had written permissions to include details on over 700 of these copyright holders in our gopher database. WATCH was under way.

The British end of the project was enthusiastically supported by the Society of Authors and the British Library, among many others, and attracted

funding from the Strachey Trust, the Arts Council, the Royal Literary Fund, the British Academy and a number of private charities.

Beginning as library-based research, our working practices came to resemble more and more the activities of private detectives. The WATCH gumshoes trawled through wills and family trees in pursuit of heirs. We importuned publishers and literary agents, universities and collecting societies, Oxbridge colleges, and even people with the same name as one of our authors. We read through poetry journals and especially obituaries. We wrote to biographers and fellow poets and friends and acquaintances. We thumbed telephone directories and electoral registers, and scrolled through similar websites. Inevitably, we have become devoted Googlers.

The WATCH file grew until most of the major names of English literature were there, together with quite a few French authors, some artists and photographers, and some politicians and public figures. It had become clear that there was no other project anywhere in the world providing this sort of service, and we were thinking about expanding our remit. By 2003, there were over 6000 individuals and their copyright contacts listed in WATCH.

In September 2003 the WATCH file was “re-launched” at an event hosted in the British Library. The occasion of the re-launch was the rebuilding of the website using Microsoft Outlook (the 1996 software had become very tired and vulnerable), but it also led us to think about where WATCH should go next. The file had been created as a service to archival and literary scholars, but it was now clear that it had become the primary source for almost all copyright holder enquiries. We felt that we should accept and welcome this, and expand fully into the areas of “popular culture”, fine art, European literature, and also “prominent people”, whose copyrights we had been including on an occasional basis.

Some of our original supporters were rather startled to see the copyright details of Britney Spears, Jimi Hendrix, Damon Hill and Frankie Dettori start to appear alongside those of Virginia Woolf and W. H. Auden, but most users welcomed our continuing expansion.

Our coverage of European literature continues to be uneven. With the help of the Institut Mémoires de l’Edition Contemporaine (IMEC) and of bilingual members of my own family, WATCH has been able to include a reasonable number of French authors. Researchers will find the copyright holders for Anouilh, Bernanos, Breton, Camus, Cocteau, De Beauvoir, Foucault, Genet,

Gide, Malraux, Mauriac, Maurois, Nizan, Proust, Sartre and so on. Other European countries, however, are not yet so well covered; and our serendipitous contacts with literary agents have produced anomalies such as our better coverage of Swedish and Turkish authors than German or Italian ones. This is clearly an area for improvement and expansion.

Similarly, we have been very aware of the incomplete coverage of WATCH until recently in respect of artists, sculptors and photographers. It was therefore especially pleasing to be invited in 2005 to participate in an initiative by the Museums Copyright Group to expand access to information about artists' copyrights. The MCG had thought about creating their own website for this purpose, but after a series of meetings decided to work through WATCH.

Since that decision was taken, WATCH has been able to include over 700 artists whose copyright details are held in the excellent files of the National Portrait Gallery. We have also benefited from close cooperation with the Bridgeman Art Library in London, the Visual Arts & Galleries Association in New York, the Design & Artists Copyright Society in London and the Artists Rights Society in New York. Our coverage of copyright in the fine arts has become much more comprehensive, and the total number of authors and artists in WATCH now exceeds 14,000.

It is much more difficult to raise funds for a project which has been running for eleven years than for a new project. For that reason, commitments to future funding by the British Academy (which has designated WATCH an Academy Research Project) and the Strachey Trust are especially important. Our working relationship with the trustees of the Strachey Trust, in particular, has developed from that of funder and funded into a set of good friendships.

The first thing that will be achieved by these future financial commitments is an assurance of continuity and updating of the WATCH file. There will continue to be an office in Reading University Library offering copyright advice and able to help with particular copyright problems.

Beyond that, however, we have established a platform on which it should be possible to build an a growing international database of copyright holders for all types of writers, all types of artists, and many other prominent people whose copyrights are regularly or occasionally sought.

The next research area beyond WATCH has now been identified, and after toying with LAMP (Lost Agencies, Magazines and Publishers), we have dared to call it FOB (Firms Out of Business).

Literary businesses - publishing houses, literary agencies, and little magazines - which have gone out of business and disappeared from view are notoriously difficult to track. Both in Austin and in Reading, this has long been a primary area of concern. FOB is just getting under way as a comprehensive listing of disappeared literary businesses, and although we have not yet widely announced its existence, you can get a “sneak preview” at [www.fob-file.com](http://www.fob-file.com).

The Universities of Texas and Reading are fully committed to maintaining WATCH and FOB well into the future, and supporting participation in new and related areas of research. Keeping the Location Register up-to-date is also a priority for Reading University Library. Provided that we can continue our track record of attracting regular external funding, there does seem to be the prospect that your Archivist of the Year will have an exciting, interesting and multiple job to do at Reading for the rest of his working life.