

Setting the agenda: the critical role of special collections in the research and education enterprise¹

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The future of rare book and special collections in the 21st century has become a topic for considerable debate within library circles internationally over the past few years. A number of factors appears to have contributed to this trend. For example, policy-makers, scholars, teachers and the general public have shown an increasing interest in national, local and institutional heritage. As a consequence, additional funding sources for preservation, retro-conversion and digitisation have become available in many countries. This opportunity to acquire funds has led library managers to focus increasingly on the potential of their special collections. After a period characterised by relative neglect, there is in many places a growing recognition of the central importance of special collections to the mission of the modern research library. In this brief introduction I will attempt to define what is meant by ‘special collections’ in academic and research libraries and the context in which they are developing, as well as describing various aspects of an emerging agenda for special collections at the beginning of the 21st century.

2. What *are* “Special Collections”?

There is no consensus about the precise meaning of the term “special collections” as it relates to research libraries, even if special collections are generally acknowledged to be a distinct phenomenon and to be significant. It is apparent, however, that such collections are best understood in the context of research collections as a whole.

Any major research library holds current and retrospective material that, through the breadth and depth of its coverage, provides a critical mass of documentary evidence in printed and digital form (and materials in a diverse range of other media), enabling complex questions to be addressed and unexpected connections to be made. Special collections can perhaps best be defined as those holdings that extend this evidence across boundaries of time and space, of language, culture and medium, allowing students and researchers to draw on the fullest possible range of the human experience.

¹ This paper is partly based on a report prepared for Leiden University Library in 2004-2005 on the future of its special collections and appears here by permission of the Library. See also section 4 below.

The distinction many libraries make between “general” and “special” collections is not insignificant. Special collections are often described, if not entirely correctly, as holdings of primary sources and precious, rare or historic material. They often require special treatment in their storage and use and special expertise in their description and interpretation.² Special collections are therefore by their very nature relatively expensive to acquire, preserve and make available to users. Precisely for this reason, some library managers might prefer to define special collections rather narrowly in order to hold down costs.

On the other hand, the Board of Directors of the influential Association of Research Libraries in the United States has endorsed a rather broad definition of special collections.³ Beyond the generally accepted categories (i.e. manuscripts, archives, rare books and so on), ARL identifies material extending “beyond paper to other formats of cultural significance” (e.g. “photographs, moving pictures, architectural drawings, and digital archives”). ARL also includes “focused assemblages of published materials” in the Special Collections category if they are “so comprehensive as to constitute unparalleled opportunities for scholarship”.⁴

If ARL directors appear to take a relatively broad view of special collections, they are clearly in no doubt about the significance of such collections for research libraries. The development and care of special collections is not merely a “characteristic of the true research library” but also an “obligation”: “Special collections represent not only the heart of an ARL library’s mission, but one of the *critical identifiers* of a research library”.⁵

2. The Strategic Context

If special collections in research libraries were previously considered rather marginal to the day-to-day concerns of library administrators, for example during a period when library automation was a clear priority, there is evidence that they are moving rapidly to the centre of the stage. In the US and UK considerable sources of additional

² Richard Ovenden (Bodleian Library, Oxford) uses a very similar definition, citing the University of Iowa as his source: “The Special Collections [...] includes those materials that, because of subject coverage, rarity, source, condition, or form, are best handled separately from the General Collection”.

³ ‘ARL Collections Program: Special Collections – Statement of Commitment to Special Collections’, February 2003, <http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/principles.html>. See also below.

⁴ In other words, the (often erroneous) argument that printed material may be intrinsically less valuable because it is not unique is countered by the argument that the *assemblage* of material may itself be unique in its range and scope.

⁵ My emphasis.

funding have become available for research library collections of special and historic materials through national programmes. In the UK, for example, programmes such as the Heritage Lottery Fund or Research Support Libraries Programme (RSLP) have begun to transform the sector. A new emphasis on national, local or institutional heritage has also drawn increasing attention to this often neglected aspect of collections. In the Netherlands, projects such as *Metamorfoze* have focused attention on previously little regarded (mostly 19th century) material.

At a time when external funding from such sources was often most readily available for projects relating to special collections and historic materials, questions began to be asked more urgently about preservation and access, about collection management and description. Concern was expressed about professional skills and standards at a time when library education institutions appeared to have abandoned previously core subjects relating to special collections.⁶ The new importance placed upon access and accessibility, however, assumed the availability of qualified staff able to describe and interpret special collection materials.

At the same time, special collections managers and curators are increasingly expected to be able to argue a case for additional funding (for example, through grant applications) and to manage newly acquired resources responsibly (for example, by applying project management techniques). In addition, they are expected to foster cooperation across institutional and sector boundaries in order to ensure the total research resource is accessible and can be exploited effectively.

Special collections in research libraries therefore find themselves in a period of renewal and transition. A new agenda appears to be emerging for special collections, an agenda that recognises their place at the heart of the research library's mission and assigns them a range of tasks. These tasks require both "traditional" specialist knowledge and a range of "new" professional skills. Many issues remain to be resolved, but the future direction is becoming clearer. Let me attempt to describe a number of recent attempts to clarify the new agenda for special collections.

3. A 'Statement of Commitment to Special Collections'

In their 'Statement of Commitment to Special Collections' of 2003, research library directors in the US, working through the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), set

⁶ Especially such topics as rare books librarianship, historical bibliography and even library history.

out specific obligations and activities for research libraries in respect of their special collections.⁷ Research libraries should:

- Provide reliable funding for the support, staffing and preservation of special collections;
- Build special collections in keeping with institutional collection development policies, existing strengths, and regional or national commitments, and enter a new collection area only if there is a firm commitment to develop the collection and make it accessible to users;
- In communications, characterize special collections as fundamental to the mission of the Library;
- Make information about all special collections visible online within a reasonable time period, following established guidelines for what constitutes adequate access;
- House special collections in secure, environmentally sound space;
- Provide functional, welcoming space for the use of these collections;
- Include special collections in overall strategic planning and library development;
- Work collaboratively with appropriate partners to build collections in emerging areas of scholarly interest, to enhance access to special collections, and to design the most effective, standards-based digitisation projects;
- Explore the issues, implications, and promise inherent in acquiring primary materials that are “born digital”;
- Inform university administrators, boards of trustees, legislators, and other members of the community about the obligations and responsibilities an institution assumes when it undertakes the stewardship of special collections of international importance.

The concept of “stewardship” has is frequently used to emphasise the obligations that institutions holding “special collections of international importance” undertake. It implies a continuing investment not only in secure and environmentally sound storage space but also in the resources necessary to make material more readily accessible for teaching, research and for the wider public. It is increasingly apparent that this new understanding of “stewardship” and the associated agenda for special collections will have profound implications for libraries and library professionals.

⁷ <http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/tforce/status1203.html>.

4. Leiden Workshop: 'Rare Books & Special Collections in the 21st Century'

How might these general principles inform the development of special collections in particular libraries? As part of the Special Collections Development Project at Leiden University Library in 2004-5, an invitation workshop on 'Rare Books & Special Collections in the 21st Century' was organised to raise awareness of national and international developments affecting rare books and special collections departments in research libraries and to discuss their implications for Leiden itself. The ARL 'Statement' was certainly proposed at the workshop as a 'standard' or guide for the development of the library's own internationally important special collections. In his summing up of the results of the workshop, Ronald Milne (Oxford) identified the following strands in the discussions:

- Access: the continuing importance of physical access and the need to improve access through the development of appropriate online tools;
- Awareness: the need to raise awareness of the significance of special collections at all levels and to clarify this significance in terms of their value as academic heritage and as a research resource;
- Audience: the need to improve knowledge of the aspirations and needs of users in order to improve and target services.

5. 'The Continuing Development of Special Collections Librarianship'

In their introductory chapter to a special issue of *Library Trends* on 'Special collections in the twenty-first century',⁸ Michèle V. Cloonan and Sidney E. Berger sought to review "the current world of special collections, showing how it has evolved and how, in many ways, issues of the past are still with us". Although many of the specific challenges faced by special collections librarians had not disappeared over the years, many had changed. New challenges and initiatives meant that special collections librarians needed "to stay current with the world of information management".

One of the recent changes for special collections the authors identify relates to the clientele:

"With ever-tightening budgets and the constant suspicion of many who do not understand the role of rare books and special collections in libraries, we must 'justify

⁸ Vol. 52, No. 1, Summer 2003, pp. 9-13.

our existence' by proving that the collections are being used for scholarly and other purposes" (p. 10).

Special collections librarians are now obliged to seek wider audiences and to make their collections "universally accessible". The collections have become test-beds for new applications (such as Encoded Archival Description - EAD). Budgets are increasingly being diverted from the purchase of rare books and manuscripts to the acquisition of electronic resources. The introduction of new technologies has overturned existing management structures and new working patterns.

Despite these changes, special collections continue to be confronted with familiar problems or problems that have re-emerged. Cloonan and Berger identify seven areas of particular concern:

- Finding new space for growing collections;
- Planning new spaces and securing secure, environmentally sound storage spaces;
- Rights management for intellectual property;
- The introduction of a "team-operation" style to replace old configurations;
- The emergence of "experiential, dynamic and interactive records";
- Finding new sources of funding in order to maintain collecting of "traditional" and electronic materials;
- The interest in placing collections on the web and raising revenues from them.

In addition, there is heightened concern about security and preservation (including the preservation of digital objects).

6. The Future of "Curatorship"

Closely linked with discussions about the future of rare book and special collections has been a continuing debate about the future of "curatorship". Here, a distinction needs to be made between the use of the word (or the equivalent in Dutch, "conservator") in different sectors (especially museums and libraries) and different countries. (I must admit by the way that there is no exact equivalent for the word in German.) In many research libraries, such as the British Library, the term normally implies a professional with a close link to a specific aspect of the collection, often defined by format, period or language. Graham Shaw of the British Library Oriental Collections, for example, has spoken of curatorship as "collections-based expertise

[that] underpins all ... core functions - it is crucial to the Library's present and future success" and has emphasised the need to build this expertise over a relatively long period.

Except in the very smallest organisations, there are seldom generalist "special collections curators" in research libraries responsible for materials in all languages, periods or formats. Many individual specialisms have developed over the past century, each with their own specific methodologies and professional networks, including manuscripts librarians (which sometimes seems to have close links with archives than with other branches of librarianship); rare books librarianship; music librarianship; maps librarianship; oriental studies, and so. In addition, some larger collections will have specialists dealing with incunabula, bookbinding, children's literature and so on. Almost all of these areas have an individual theoretical base, a recognised identity within the profession as a whole, and national or international special interest groups linking different institutions.⁹ The value of these specialisms needs to be recognised and their development encouraged so that the library as a whole has access to the specific knowledge and skills that will enable it to interact most effectively with other institutions - and with users.

At the same time, research libraries and special collections within them face new, "generic" challenges, especially those associated with wider access and the development of web-based services and digital collections. Curators also need to develop a wide range of managerial and advocacy skills. Shaw has pointed to the serious choices that will need to be made in a situation where the capacity to continue "vital core services" is necessarily limited by the need to develop and sustain new ones. As the information environment changes, so the nature of curatorship will change ever more rapidly.

In the new information environment, curators will be expected to acquire and maintain a range of "new," generic tasks, widening the range of key competencies. At the British Library, Graham Shaw and others have defined these competencies in the following terms:

- academic grounding in a specialist subject, language or genre related to the Library's services;

⁹ The UK Rare Books Group (CILIP) and the US Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (ALA) are obvious examples. At the international level, there is an IFLA Section for Rare Books and Manuscripts. There are also specialist groups at both the national and international levels for many special collections areas, including maps, music and oriental studies.

- knowledge of the collections related to that specialism - their potential in terms of revenue, promotion, etc.;
- e-literacy and resource discovery skills - the capacity to provide web content;
- awareness of the opportunities offered by technological innovations;
- staff and financial management - maximising value from them;
- capacity to conceptualise work in project terms - project management skills;
- outreach (personal contacts/networking) - research community status – “academic street cred”;
- entrepreneurial flair - creativity - lateral thinking;
- presentational/promotional skills - ability to communicate the significance and potential of the collections;
- involvement in sponsorship-raising and revenue-generating activities.

It might reasonably be assumed that this list will be very similar for curatorial posts in any given research library. To this a range of (traditional) professional library and information skills must be added (for example, in the case of rare books librarians, historical bibliographical method and rare books cataloguing). That being the case, a new balance will need to be found between the “old” collections-based knowledge and “new” skills and competencies required in the developing information environment.

Clearly some staff feel profoundly unsettled by the apparent suggestion that their established knowledge and skills are in some way insufficient; their concerns need to be treated sensitively. The importance of collections-based knowledge should never be under-estimated, but neither should the urgency of developing skills so that staff can work effectively in the current information environment. These issues need to be discussed openly and solutions found that are appropriate to each institution. An audit of skills and competencies should identify ongoing staff training and development needs. The development of “specialist” and “professional” skills needs to be given equal priority.

7. Training and Development Needs of Special Collections Staff

In many countries there is considerable concern that library education, including post-graduate training, has increasingly lost touch with the needs of special collections departments. Core skills such palaeography, book and library history, or

bibliographical method have largely been dropped from library school curricula. Book and library history are also currently neglected. At the same time, rare books and special collections are “enjoying new popularity” among entrants to the profession and there is a demand – as well as a clear need – for library training in this field.

In addition, special collections have always attracted staff that have not pursued a conventional library career path. In order to find suitable candidates with specialist linguistic or subject knowledge for particular curatorial posts, many institutions have traditionally been open to appointing staff without formal library and information qualifications. In contrast, some countries (including Germany and the Netherlands) do not require degree-level qualifications for all special collections posts. In Germany, for example, the cataloguing of early printed books has traditionally been regarded as the preserve of non-graduate library professionals. This grade of staff, however, has never been employed in research libraries in the UK or US (where all professional library posts now require at least a degree-level qualification). Indeed, at the British Library, the production of a catalogue of early printed books has often been regarded as the crowning achievement in the careers of senior scholar-librarians. Such international differences in professional traditions and practice make direct comparisons between qualifications and training difficult.

Especially in the United States, a number of initiatives has been launched to meet the needs of new entrants to the profession wishing to make a career in special collections.¹⁰ Any such initiative needs to be based on an analysis of core competencies and specialist skills required for special collections work.

8. The User's Perspective

Paul Hoftijzer's paper at a conference on the future of manuscript collections held at UB Amsterdam in 2003 sought to examine special collections from the user's point of view.¹¹ Hoftijzer stressed that users, like library staff, have changed, along with their “scholarly equipment”. Libraries found it inherently difficult to adapt to changing demands but they would need to “make clear to policy makers and administrators what function they perform in our modern electronic information society” if they were to have a future at all.

¹⁰ See for example the Rare Books and Special Collections programme of the Palmer School of Library and Information Science at Long Island University, <http://palmer.cwpost.liu.edu/mslis/mslirbbsc.html>.

¹¹ <http://liber-manuscripts.kb.nl/mss/papers/hoftijzer.doc>.

Special Collections should seek to break down barriers with their users. Librarians needed to “get out of their offices” more often. Hoftijzer clearly resents those “traditional” curators who believed curatorship to be primarily a vehicle for their own scholarly ambitions. Curators “who often possess an unparalleled knowledge about their collections” should share that knowledge and expertise more readily. The collections needed to be used much more widely in teaching, with curators actively promoting their use among faculty staff. Curators should “guide students to possible research topics”; they should “facilitate courses by providing extra services”.

There is of course a paradox in Hoftijzer’s criticism. If it is not to be regarded as a caricature, then it can only apply to the most “traditionally minded” curators of a generation that has long since begun to take retirement. In addition, many of those curators whose working style Hoftijzer apparently takes objection to would not themselves have had a library and information background nor formal professional qualifications. Rather they would have regarded their curatorial role as primarily a scholarly one involving work with the collections. In other words, Hoftijzer is not objecting to special collections librarians *per se* but rather to a species of staff in library curatorial posts that is surely becoming extinct.

If a good working relationship is to be established between scholars and scholar-librarians, there is a clear need to distinguish between roles and functions. Special collections curators have much to offer through their close knowledge of the collections, knowledge which is often built up through their own research interests, for example on the origins and organisation of the collection.¹² Special collections curators will also bring their methodological expertise, their subject specialist knowledge and knowledge of sources to the dialogue with scholars.

In a recent article written by an academic from a very different perspective,¹³ Zoë Toft sets out some of the difficulties encountered in practical cooperation between academics and librarians, for example in the creation of online resource guides for students. Here, she admits that academics often prefer to “work alone and to be self-reliant”. They will have specific requests about topics for which the library has no in-house expert. Librarians with generic skills have a role to play, she adds, but subject specialist knowledge is essential in many cases. She outlines a number of suggestions for collaboration:

¹² Of course, these private interests cannot normally be pursued as a part of their day-to-day work. Where appropriate, they may be supported by the library – for example by granting occasional study leave, but always clearly circumscribed. An agreed code of practice is probably necessary to exclude misunderstandings.

¹³ ‘What can librarians do for us?’, In: *CILIP Update*, 3(1), Jan. 2004, pp. 43-44.

- Offer “individualised, short and just-in-time hands-on sessions”, including sessions on resources for research;
- Be proactive in approaching staff with personal offers of help;
- Make as many resources as possible available outside the library;
- Employ librarians who have as much specialist knowledge as possible;
- Create library resources that are as subject-specific as possible.

Toft’s article raises another set of difficult issues. Of course, each academic requires personal help and finding aids tailored to her or his specific needs. Librarians must target their limited resources on activities that support as many users as possible. A balance needs to be found between “generic” and “specific” resources finding aids.

9. Summary and Conclusions

From this partial survey of global trends and challenges relating to special collections in research libraries it should be possible to extract a number of key themes:

- Special collections are widely recognised as central to the mission of the research library;
- There is broad, international consensus on priorities for special collections;
- Special collections managers must be advocates for their departments, arguing the case for the investment needed to maintain and develop collections and services;
- The acquisition of additional funding and the management of resources are primary tasks for special collections;
- Special collections must work to improve access for users by developing online services and finding aids;
- As stewards of their collections, curators need to ensure priority is given to the preservation and security of the collections in their care;
- New management structures and ways of working are emerging appropriate to the changing environment; they are based on the principles of team- and project-working and collaboration across institutional and sectoral boundaries;
- Special collections curatorship is redefining itself under the impact of change; staff will need to maintain specialist skills while developing a range of new competencies;

- The relationship between specialist curators and users will need to be redefined as a new form of partnership in which both parties make their particular contribution through specialist knowledge and skills;
- A paradigm shift in the information environment is making change in special collections inevitable; the status quo is not an option.

This brief survey has also reinforced the view that special collections have the potential to become one of the most intrinsically interesting and innovative in research libraries. Emerging perhaps as the over-riding themes are the need to define the nature of collection “stewardship” and the need to manage change in ways that will benefit collections and their users.

I should like to conclude by quoting Cloonan and Berger again: “The world of special collections continues to change rapidly. The only constant in the field is change”.