

THE COLLECTION AND KEEPING OF SOURCE MATERIALS

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The object of this paper is to express some points of view and to pose some of the problems arising from the collection and keeping of source materials in libraries, and from the corollary of this, making source materials available for research. This may be specially apposite at the present time since the mantle of the collector is on us all, with growing competition amongst libraries and institutions to acquire materials for research, and with the rapid and fairly recent growth of an awareness of the need for this kind of material. There may also be some merit in putting a librarian's point of view and indicating some of his problems, although it must always be remembered that in this connexion the librarian exists to serve the scholar.

In general, source materials may be taken to include any document in the widest sense that is a source of original information or that provides original evidence of any transaction or activity of any kind. For the most part source materials have a primarily historical importance and are probably used more by the historian than by any other kind of scholar. But they are not necessarily manuscripts and not necessarily unique, while some may be sources in one way and not in another: for example, Gibbon is not a source for the history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire but he may be a source for the state of English literature in the 18th century, and for the study of the art of writing history. Similarly, other source materials may serve two or more purposes as sources: for example, Pepys's Diary is an obvious source for some aspects of 17th century Britain but the original document was written in shorthand and has been used as source material for English pronunciation in that period.

The standard definitions are not very satisfactory. Harrod in The Librarian's Glossary [1959] defines "primary sources" as "Original manuscripts, contemporary records, or documents which are

used by an author in writing a book or other literary compilation". The A.L.A. Glossary of Library Terms [1943] defines "source material" as "Fundamental authoritative material relating to a subject, used in the preparation of a later written work, e.g. original records, written documents, etc." These definitions merely serve to illustrate the difficulty of definition but I think it must be taken that "source materials" is a relative term. Both definitions envisage manuscripts, but a manuscript may be merely a copy and quite worthless in default of other evidence; some scholars still do not accept that James Tucker's manuscript of Ralph Rashleigh is the original composition. On the other hand the 19th century manuscript copy of Midshipman Renouard's "Account of the Voyage of the Pandora's Tender", 1791, in the absence of the original, may reasonably be considered a source document. At the same time, the printed First Folio, which is by no means unique, is surely a source in the absence of Shakespearean manuscripts.

Similarly, government documents, including Government Gazettes, White Papers, and so on, may in some sense and for some purposes be regarded as source materials, while for many people the Historical Records of Australia and the Rolls Series may be regarded in the same way. Other published work may also be source material in some contexts, for example, Cherry-Garrard's Worst Journey in the World, Collins's Account of the Colony of New South Wales, and Cunningham of Hyndhope's A Sailor's Odyssey; so also may Coronelli's famous Globes, and a collection of 17th century political pamphlets. But whenever an original document, which is usually a manuscript, is published then there is room for error, so that the published work must be treated with reservation. M. H. Ellis, in the T.D. Mutch Memorial Lecture for 1962, ⁽¹⁾ tells of the amusing but inexcusable creation of a mythical Mr Barracks, in the Historical Records of New South Wales.

Source materials, then, are primarily unique manuscripts or some similar form of record, although it is useful to recall that almost every document before Gutenberg was a manuscript even though the books of that period commonly existed in multiple copies. But,

despite Gutenberg, it is almost certainly true that there is now far more material in manuscript, or at least in typescript, than there is printed material, and it is quite clear that even if all the tremendous outpourings of manuscripts at the present time could be considered as valuable source materials, only a small proportion of them could usefully be permanently kept, Sheer quantity alone does, I think, make it quite certain that there is a need for evaluating source materials both in their collecting and in keeping them.

But first, it may be as well to consider why source materials should be collected. The object fairly obviously is to provide the most reliable and therefore generally the earliest sources of information, both for research and possibly for teaching. As to teaching, I do not propose to say much, for I do not support the proposition that unique documents of any value may be worn out merely as teaching aids, however desirable it may be for the undergraduate student to handle original material. It has been claimed that "manuscripts are as essential to work in history as a laboratory is to work in physics and chemistry," (2) but a "laboratory collection" of manuscripts seems to be a practical impossibility. As to research, Gibbon summed it up by saying "My curiosity as well as a sense of duty has always urged me to study the originals". The object therefore is, first, to preserve, with emphasis on security including protection against physical misuse, deliberate mutilation, theft, and so on; and secondly, to make available to the greatest possible number of scholars who need and who are competent to use. There is from this an argument to be made for the big repository which has the biggest possible resources of like source materials together with the associated secondary sources, but this need not be elaborated here.

As to what should be collected it is almost universally agreed that there should be a basic policy, that collecting should not be capricious or arise from mere acquisitiveness, but that the scope of the collection should be well defined and adhered to. One reason for this is that no institution can possibly monopolize or even collect exhaustively in a single field of human knowledge.

Associated with this is the principle generally accepted in libraries, of building to strength, with the likelihood that the strength and unity of a collection may lead to co-operation with other institutions collected in related fields. As a recent instance of this kind of co-operation, the second Memorial of de Quiros, which was acquired by the Council of the National Library, was transferred to the Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales who, in the Mitchell and Dixson Libraries, already had by far the greatest collection of Quiros material in this country. It is desirable, therefore, to avoid isolated and unrelated pieces, especially perhaps in smaller collections, and, so far as practicable, to maintain the integrity of any series of source materials, whether of an archival nature or not.

A collection can be formed on the basis of period, place or subject or, more usually, on a combination of these. The Australian Academy of Science, for example, is seeking to establish a comprehensive collection of source documents on science in Australia; the University of New England is collecting material especially concerned with its own region. But there is a heavy responsibility in this business of collecting and keeping. It may be considered presumptuous and even an arrogation of the omniscience of the Deity to give final and irrevocable judgement on what should not be kept; it has certainly been regarded as an invasion of the rights of man or of scholars. Nevertheless, within a defined policy the object is to collect evidence, whether historical or otherwise, and therefore to collect authoritative, reliable and relevant evidence. This also necessitates evaluation of what is being collected.

For the librarian must evaluate, not be merely a sponge. There are two aspects to be considered in this: first, the importance of the information recorded that is, in effect, of the subject dealt with. For example, how important is the information recorded in a film star's diary or the engagement book of a minor business man? Secondly, there is the quality of the recording, with special reference to how well or in how much detail the information is

preserved and whether it is new or corroborative. Unintelligible memoranda or miscellaneous notes and cuttings of unrecorded origin are frequently of no significance in themselves, although they may be of some importance in illustrating the thought or activity of a great man. It has been truly said that "It is better to have an original letter from an obscure soldier telling of his tribulations at Valley Forge than a pass signed by George Washington",⁽³⁾ and this can easily be translated into Australian or any other terms. The papers of almost any great man may be worthwhile but not in isolation. For example, five holograph lines of Captain Cook may sell for £200 sterling but may be of negligible value for the information they contain and, in any case, are likely to be of little significance completely isolated from all other Cook material. On the other hand, Voltaire's only surviving letter to Alexander Pope is surely more than a collector's piece.

Evaluation, therefore, may be related to the type or form of the material itself, including diaries, letters, literary manuscripts, personal documents, financial records, minute books, memoranda, reminiscences, and so on, each of which has its special qualities. While it has been said that "good diaries get published; bad diaries encumber shelves".⁽⁴⁾ nevertheless, as William Matthews has pointed out,⁽⁵⁾ diaries may be sources of social history, even if they are of "the unworthy and unwashed". Letters, on the other hand, were written for other people than their authors and are therefore different in kind from diaries, which, generally, were not. Literary manuscripts are now mainly typescript, generally reveal little about the author's ways of thought and working, and may often be adequately represented for any author by a few samples. There are peculiarities of this kind about almost all other types and forms of manuscript records.

Evaluation, however, necessarily leads to a decision either to keep or to destroy, for deliberate destruction is an inescapable corollary of collecting. This does require a strong sense of proportion together with an informed mind, while, for the most part, it is something which should not be decided by a single person

without discussion or consultation. But once a collection of source materials has been acquired it should be examined quickly and with some ruthlessness. Some classes of documents may be immediately destroyed, including such things as envelopes, unless they have a philatelic interest; duplicate typescripts; routine household bills and receipts; publicity literature; menus; unidentified and unrelated cuttings and so on; although, depending on the collecting policy, each of these may have some value. But there is also a possibility of further destruction after a collection of documents has been worked over by a competent scholar: it may be that a single monograph can extract all that is worth preserving from a quite substantial collection of papers although this has to be considered in relation to the total importance of the collection, while it is well to keep in mind that there are always revisionists and deviationists in historical and economic thought. Richard III, for example, seems to have been roughly handled by the Tudors; the documents about his reign and career if preserved in full might well have allowed a different interpretation, even 500 years later. Destruction therefore, even after comprehensive and competent use, has to be treated with care.

However, once it has been determined that a collection of source material will be kept, the advice given by the ad hoc committee on manuscripts set up by the American Historical Association⁽⁶⁾ may be commended as food for thought on collections and their arrangement and use. Broadly, the committee recommends the adoption of what is I think fairly general practice in libraries in Australia. The essential points are that the original arrangement should be kept if it is significant and that, if it is not, arrangement generally should be chronological, with some allowance for special series such as correspondence; that guides, generally in the form of lists, should then be made since it is now universally accepted that detailed indexing, other than in very rare and special cases, is quite impracticable, and from the true scholar's point of view, may even be misleading and undesirable; and that, as a standard principle, it is better not to divide a series.

There is likely to be general agreement with R.W.G. Vail's proposition that "it is the duty of the scholar to select and appraise the manuscripts under his consideration",⁽⁷⁾ and that the cataloguer cannot hope to aim at the impractical ideal of the documentalist and make the catalogue "serve all possible needs for all possible people for all possible time",⁽⁸⁾ even though the "cataloguable unit" may be of any size. But the cataloguer must of course guide the scholar to the right collections. There are difficulties even in this: for example, how does one catalogue the 19th century manuscripts in the Mitchell Library to show which are likely to be the most valuable for a scholar who is compiling a dictionary, on historical principles, of divergencies between English usage in Australia and in England?

There are also broader problems of organization. For example, should a library have one department for all source materials, which may also include rare books, or should the organization be according to the various forms of material such as manuscripts, pictures, photographs and maps, or should it be by subject or period? In any case, should an institution such as an art gallery or a museum collect manuscripts, which are a different medium from what it specializes in but which are related in subject? The Mitchell Library recently acquired the original correspondence between the late Sir Lionel Lindsay in Australia and the late H.J.L. Wright in London; my own view is that this kind of collection is far better kept in an appropriate library than in an art gallery, because the library is likely to be better equipped to house and use it, and because, on the whole, such correspondence will probably not be used in very close conjunction with the picture collection of an art gallery.

However, once source materials have been collected and organized there then arises the question of who is to use them. The American Historical Association Committee states a general view, that responsibility should rest with the user in making proper use; that is to say, in avoiding libel, in quoting correctly and indicating sources accurately, and in avoiding infringement of copyright. Nevertheless, some sort of screening is inevitable if only to ensure

that unique source materials are not needlessly worn out. The Committee suggests a number of questions which should be answered by prospective users of source materials; we do not go quite as far as that for the Mitchell and Dixson Libraries but admission to those collections is open only to holders of a reader's ticket who have made formal application and have had their applications supported by a reputable citizen. We do not admit undergraduate students below the final honours year.

Restrictions even apart from this are, however, inevitable and form one of the biggest problems in administering large collections of source materials. Most writers on the subject seem to think that restrictions imposed by a donor are undesirable, although they may be accepted if the conditions are reasonable and temporary. I do not altogether agree with this since restrictions by a donor or a vendor may relieve the Library not only of embarrassment but of undesirable consequences. The trend is clearly changing but it is still not practicable to make material available without restriction when it relates to convicts, or to insanity or the desreputable private life of citizens with immediate descendants still living. Restricted access may frequently, however imposed, be the only means of securing source materials from a donor, while failure to restrict, leading, for example, to a sensational newspaper article, may and does discourage other potential donors or vendors: a library cannot afford to have its resources used for raking up scandals that cause needless pain or embarrassment to living persons. Copyright restrictions, on the other hand, are fairly well defined by law and cause little real difficulty except where the owner of the copyright may not be known.

Restriction inevitably has the flavour of censorship but this must be accepted. There should, however, be no discrimination between qualified persons; that is to say, as a general rule if any given collection is available to any accredited scholar it should be similarly available to all other accredited scholars. Even here, there may be temporary variations, as when a scholar acquires a collection of source material and offers to deposit it

in a library on condition that he alone has access to it for a limited period, but such cases are comparatively rare and, while not to be encouraged, must be dealt with on their own merits.

The main cause for restriction nevertheless arises from the need for sheer physical preservation of original documents, especially when they are particularly fragile or specially valuable or important. This is obviously necessary where such documents are required only for popular use, as in journalism, broadcasting, television, and so on. Photographic copying alleviates this since it is only the rare specialist who really needs to handle the original of a precious and fragile document.

Perhaps the ideal is for all source materials to be copied or published in some form both for preservation of the original evidence and to make the information more widely available. But copying does affect market values and some question of ethics tends to arise. Should, for example, an institution which has strained its financial resources and by diligence and professional skill acquired a rare document, then be called upon by others with less skill or more regard for their finances to provide a photographic copy at an almost nominal cost? As Dr. Peckham says, "There is such a thing, it would seem, as a right of exclusive possession as a reward for diligence, enterprise, imagination and self-sacrifice".⁽⁹⁾

Photographic copying can of course be of enormous importance to the scholar. The Joint Copying Project was instituted by the Mitchell Library and the Commonwealth National Library "with the ideal of providing in this country a copy of all material of Australasian interest wherever located". But there are difficulties implicit in photographic copying, particularly when copying is selective; there is always a need for an accurate and precise record to be kept of searches made in other repositories and not only of material copied, but also of that seen and not copied. Lack of care in this may present a partial and misleading copy. Copying has the often incidental merit of duplication and therefore of preservation of a text even if the original is subsequently destroyed. In the Mitchell Library we frequently and deliberately copy for this reason and, as time and funds permit, we publish,

just as many other of the world's great libraries publish their important documents. Publishing in this sense, which usually includes printing, does not usually result in a facsimile of the original and is therefore likely to be open to inaccuracy, but reproduction in print has the advantage of being more durable than microfilm. Where it is necessary, however, for any reason, to restrict publication this should not be made a reason for restricting access. The general principle is that all source materials should be available to all accredited scholars unless there are very good and specific reasons to the contrary.

This brief survey of some of the problems in the keeping and collecting of source materials has not dealt with the very great problems of physical preservation of different kinds of materials, nor has it more than glanced at co-operation in collecting between different institutions, nor has it considered the very important question of collection and immediate use as distinct from final deposit and permanent preservation. All of these are special topics in themselves and all of them, especially the last two, are under consideration in Australia at the present time, especially following the Conference on Australian Source Materials, held in Canberra in July 1961; all of them need much more thought and experiment than they have yet had. But it is as well to give continuous thought also to some of the problems that face any institution within its own walls, in the collection and keeping of source materials.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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