

Perspective

SCOTT CLINE, editor

Researching Literary Manuscripts: A Scholar's Perspective

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Abstract: Scholars who do their research in literary manuscripts appreciate the professionally managed archival research collection and the archivist's role as a mediator between collectors and researchers. The author, a literary editor, discusses how the issues of copyright, restrictions on access, arrangement, description, reference policies, and copying are viewed by literary researchers and calls for collaboration between scholars and archivists to make information about collections more accessible.

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JUST AS THE NATURE of an archival collection informs the nature of the inquiry, so does the inquiry influence a scholar's perception of archives and their role in research. In recent research on the correspondence of Samuel Beckett, my colleague and I have worked in many fine archival collections in the United States and abroad and have come to rely upon the professional support of archivists. But it is the research we have done in materials not administered by professional archivists that has made us appreciate the archivist's work.

Appreciation of Archival Management

Literary research may take the scholar to materials that are not a part of library- or archives-based manuscript collections. For example, the study of a twentieth-century author often involves examination of records that are still in the hands of a publishing company. Scholars value such records for their primary or secondary relationship to study of the literary text, while the owner may view them simply as a record of business transacted. They may be poorly maintained, difficult to access, and inadequately supported with personnel or copy services.

The researcher may have to sort the files—assuming that the company permits this—before the pertinent documents can be studied. Because files must be maintained as found, selected papers must be copied and replaced in files one at a time. The researcher with questions may find that the current staff has little understanding of the original context or previous office practice. When the immediate research is completed, the files must be returned to storage, so that if verification is needed in the future, all of the materials would need to be brought out of storage and the whole process of sorting begun again. Even a company with some archival support may not be in a position to respond to scholars' requests with efficiency or adequate understanding of their research process. In other cases, full access to business archives may be

blocked because of company policy or government regulations.

Out of experiences such as these comes appreciation of the comprehensiveness and accessibility of a professionally managed research collection, the service of archivists in developing, deciphering, preserving, and arranging the collection, and most of all the supportive collegiality between curator and researcher that makes a literary archives a productive and enjoyable place to work.

The Archivist as Mediator Between Collectors and Researchers

Literary researchers value archivists who share an understanding of the scholarly process and commitment to support research. However, what researchers take for granted sometimes may be at issue for the archivist or for those who fund archives. A reason for this becomes evident when we consider the archivist's role vis-à-vis the collector who may donate materials and the researcher who will use them.

Literary manuscripts curators and researchers encounter private collectors far more frequently than do archivists and archival users in most other fields. The collector acquires literary manuscripts to see them preserved and for exclusivity of ownership. The more popular or significant the work and the rarer the document, the greater the value of the collection. Value is preserved by maintaining rarity, sometimes by restricting the use and publication of such materials.

On the other hand, the researcher values the richness of association that a manuscript suggests, as well as the document itself. The scholar uses literary manuscripts to understand an author's work and creative methods or to infer characteristics of a literary period; the assemblage of a collection of an author's work in one place increases its interpretive value. Dissemination through interpretation is the scholar's purpose. Value is enhanced by wide dissemination of

scholarly work and even publication of the literary manuscripts themselves.

A literary manuscripts curator is neither a private collector nor a researcher but plays the difficult role of mediating between the sometimes competing values of the two. Ideally, archival administration of literary manuscripts addresses the collector's values through preservation, documentation, and security and, at the same time, meets the researcher's need for access and interpretation through arrangement, description, copy services, knowledge of collateral collections, and referrals for permissions.

Even before *Candide* the "best of all possible worlds" was considered a "blue sky" proposition, but in the twentieth century the archivist's mediating role is becoming ever more challenging. As preservation needs have become more critical and the techniques of preservation more sophisticated, the costs of maintaining a collection have risen. Financial prerogatives often permit donors to exercise control over their manuscripts, even after they are placed in the care of archives. As the costs of acquiring collections rise, archives may find it difficult to obtain institutional commitment to the long-term needs of development, curatorship, and bibliographical services. More than good intentions and sound policy are required to reconcile the interests of the collector and the user of literary manuscripts.

Issues that Matter to Literary Researchers

The papers of persons who have made their living and reputation through their writing may offer special circumstances not usual for materials in other types of archives. In literary research, all written products are potentially related to the evolution of the texts that define an author's canon. In addition, collateral correspondence and manuscript materials may have a bearing on the works or their contexts. Thus the issues that are foremost for researchers in literary manu-

scripts include access, arrangement of materials, bibliographic description of collections, reference and photoduplication policies that assist research accuracy, and collaboration among archives that facilitates comparative use of materials.

Ownership, copyright, and restricted use. Written or oral materials of living writers, correspondence between (or referring to) living persons, and correspondence pertaining to active business operations all comprise rich veins for research, but not without caveat. Problems of ownership, legal and informal acknowledgement of the right to privacy, and accessibility to and publication of material have become pressing issues. The archivist must determine the appropriate middle ground between the researcher's purposes and the legal limits of inquiry that must be observed for any living author or work within copyright.

All policies related to access and use ultimately involve ownership and copyright. When ownership of documents is transferred, whether to another generation in a family or to an archives, permission to publish may be extraordinarily difficult for the researcher to obtain unless copyright has been assigned. In the case of correspondence, the recipient of a letter owns the physical document, but copyright (ownership of the literary rights) is held by the writer; if the recipient gives the documents to a publicly accessible archives, he or she has no authority to transfer copyright for what was written by others.¹ Although it is standard practice to register information such as restrictions, rights, publication, and ownership (including ownership of the literary rights that may not have been assigned to the archives), archivists can assist researchers by maintaining updated files.

Naturally archivists must honor the terms

¹For more complete discussion of these issues, see Trudy Huskamp Peterson and Gary M. Peterson, *Archives and Manuscripts: Law* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1985).

under which collections have been developed. However, they should counsel a donor so that restrictions are not applied arbitrarily. The rationale for policies applied to specific collections should be a matter of open record. When collections are acquired, donors should be given an understanding of what constitutes standard research practice, and if necessary, how to delegate or assign authority for publication of the materials. Curators have an obligation to help the donor understand what policies will ultimately support research and dissemination of these materials. Restrictions should be regularly reviewed and modified as conditions change.

Issues of ownership and restricted use should be discussed openly among all parties involved in archival support and use: donors, parent institutions, funding agencies, researchers, and lawyers. Professional organizations should take the lead in setting policies so that there is a consistent basis for decisions in this area. At the same time, new kinds of materials or new circumstances of research ought to find the archivist receptive to the researcher's needs and able to offer material support.

One example of the problem of access restrictions is found in business records within literary archives. Correspondence between an author and editor may have significant bearing on a literary text; yet, because of financial and legal considerations of the ongoing business, restrictions may be imposed on access to, and/or publication of, the information in business records. But what restrictions are reasonable for archives to accept on behalf of future researchers whose questions may as yet be unknown? Most scholars understand the ways that certain restrictions may actually work to their benefit to provide broader access to some materials, but they do not respond well to policy when it seems to block access arbitrarily.

Arrangement. The archivist's physical arrangement of a collection of literary man-

uscripts comprises a valued scholarship. Establishing a dependable sequence of letters dated "Sunday" or faded postmarks on envelopes takes knowledge and experience. However, these discriminations would be more valuable if a rationale for them were recorded. The great problem for the researcher is knowing how a conjecture about missing information (e.g., dating or sequence) was made and by whom. Has the recipient added the full date realizing that the letter would someday be of great import? Has a clerk added the date because of the bundle in which the letter was received? Has a trained archivist studied the context of the document and the collection to make an educated guess? If there is a transcription of an autograph manuscript or a translation of one written in another language, the scholar would like to know whose knowledge is represented. An open record of the archivist's rationale, filed with the document, would enable the archivist and researcher alike to reevaluate decisions on the basis of subsequent acquisitions or additional information; an accompanying invitation to researchers to register any concerns or hypotheses about problems would serve us all.

On one level, arrangement is immaterial as long as the scholar can find the information sought and can be reasonably sure that something has not been overlooked because of an unasked question. Provenance and original order seem as good a way as any to account for the physical location of a document if this is the best way to maintain the integrity of a series.

Description. As important as clear arrangement is, all finding aids are interpretive.² Any single system of arrangement

²Hilary Jenkinson warns archivists not to "turn student" but to be "dispassionate . . . in sorting, in arrangement, in presentation" where the "tiniest modification may have the most far reaching results." Jenkinson, "Reflections of an Archivist," *Contemporary Review* 165 (June 1944): 355-61; reprinted in

inhibits some kinds of access to a collection because no single arrangement can possibly anticipate every inquiry a scholar may have. Considerable knowledge is required to find a system that is most appropriate for a collection.³ What matters most to the researcher is that the finding aids describe documents in as many ways as possible—by provenance, chronology, subject, genre, and author.

A conventional finding aid is limited to describing the single way that the collection was arranged, but a fully developed computer database provides the opportunity to explore multiple “arrangements.” This invites the researcher to pose a broader range of initial questions. Ideally finding aids should include scope notes and summaries of series as well as annotated contents lists, allowing the researcher to “browse” creatively and effectively without disturbing the actual manuscript materials. The researcher needs to let the nature of inquiry determine the best approach to a given manuscript collection. To facilitate this need, the archivist must appreciate the variety of questions that may be asked of a single document and provide many “arrangements” on-line, in addition to the physical arrangement of materials.

Bibliographic databases that implement the USMARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) format offer the possibility of sorting information in many configurations and could be used to generate analytical finding aids. Conversion of existing records and creation of more comprehen-

sive finding aids is expensive, but research libraries could seek the support of scholars and their professional organizations in making this a priority.

Bibliographic description that transcends individual repositories is a vital service to literary researchers. As comprehensive catalogs, checklists, and bibliographies are made widely available online, scholars will be able to conduct global and comparative searches at their home institutions and thus conserve limited time and money for research travel.

The *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)*⁴ provides collection-level records, with added entries if the reporting libraries provide this detail. Although searching and updating of these records is greatly improved now that current records are produced as an online catalog, the usefulness of *NUCMC* is limited by incomplete reporting, whether caused by the reluctance or the inability of an archives to report comprehensively. Although the *Location Register of Twentieth-Century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters*⁵ is also dependent on archival reporting, it offers the scholar brief summary descriptions that provide a basis to assess the importance of the holdings in various repositories to their specific research.

Both the *American Literary Manuscripts*⁶ checklist and the *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*⁷ survey archival holdings for

Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds., *A Modern Archives Reader* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1984), 15. Because any sorting, arranging, or presenting is necessarily interpretive, I would urge that it be explained. Researchers should be aware of the rationale of archivists so that assumptions that governed the original choices can be modified if new information is available that presents a stronger case.

³William L. Joyce, “Archivists and Research,” *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 125.

⁴*National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1959/61-).

⁵David Sutton, comp., *Location Register of Twentieth-Century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters: A Union List of Papers of Modern English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh Authors in the British Isles* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988). The *Location Register* is on RLIN.

⁶J. Albert Robbins, ed., *American Literary Manuscripts: A Checklist of Holdings in Academic, Historical, and Public Libraries, Museums, and Authors' Homes in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977).

⁷Peter Beal, Margaret Smith, Barbara Rosenbaum,

a selected canon of literature. Although canonicity provides a necessary parameter, in principle it limits the discovery of materials and the questions of research. *American Literary Manuscripts* provides a quantitative record of collections for major and selected minor or younger authors, but it does so without contextual information that might help users identify what would be helpful to their work. By contrast, the *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* provides comparative analysis of materials available in scattered collections, allowing the scholar to consider issues of sequence, authenticity, and connections between materials that are not evident by looking at only a single collection or archives.

The drawbacks of such resources are becoming less significant as their virtues can be combined. As these printed catalogs are entered into online networks (e.g., RLIN), they can be updated readily to reflect growing collections and, at the same time, be searched widely, quickly, and comparatively by the scholar and the archivist. A logical extension of computer and telecommunications technology will be for archives to make finding aids for specific collections available online or at least on disk. Then the scholar will be able to conduct a comparative search of pertinent holdings at the global level of archives and at an item-specific level within pertinent collections.

Reasonable reference policies. Understandably, researchers are asked to work in pencil when reading in manuscript and rare book collections, but the quill pen and bottled ink have given way to computers and tape recorders. These newer tools can be invaluable means of recording information efficiently and precisely. Transcription is tiring to the hand and the eye, but the computer allows the fingers to do the work while the eye is trained on the manuscript, thus

reducing the probability of error. When deciphering difficult autograph manuscript material or when more than one researcher is collaborating on a project, a tape recorder is helpful to note alternative readings. Facilities and rules governing reading-room decorum should take these tools into consideration. Researchers appreciate calm, spacious reading rooms, separated from the traffic and daily work of the archivist, as well as areas apart from the reading room in which to consult with the staff or with other researchers.

Copies. Research is a process whose methods of inquiry are often shaped by the nature of available materials.⁸ For scholars unable to complete their research in a single visit to an archives, copies are essential. Questions about manuscript materials often emerge later in the research process. It would be a poor use of archivists' time and good will to be asked to verify materials previously consulted by a researcher. However, return visits to collections may not be practical.

Researchers wish that the shibboleth that collections are empires could be put to rest. No collection should be considered so comprehensive that it cannot be enhanced by other collections. Although extensive financial commitments would be required, it would be very useful to researchers if collections could be shared among archives (on fiche or in copied files), so that collections could be accessible for comparison without the need to visit and revisit distant archives. Copies will seldom supplant the need to consult the original manuscripts (thus they will not result in "mail order archives"), but they can make research more efficient and productive. Because reciprocal arrangements promise more comprehensive and precise scholarship, they ought

and Pamela White, comps., *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*, 4 vols. (London: Mansell, 1980-).

⁸Philip D. Jordan, "The Scholar and the Archivist—A Partnership," *American Archivist* 31 (January 1968): 64.

to be seen as enhancing the value of a collection and the resources of an archives.

Restrictions that apply to publication are frequently extended to photocopying of manuscript materials, with some justification. However, the restrictions applied to publication should be adequate in most cases to preserve the uniqueness of materials without excessive restriction of copying that needlessly hampers productive and careful scholarship.

Duplication of materials requires the same concern for integrity of the original documents that an archivist applies to bibliographic description. Crucial characteristics of the manuscript may be lost or obscured when materials are made available in microform and photocopy.⁹ It should go without saying that sound research demands readable copy. Reproductions are of little use when copy paper bears an obscuring imprint, copies are not checked for clarity or completeness of image, or the reproductions do not identify the document copied. Although we now live in an age of mechanical reproduction, archival copying cannot be done without archival supervision. The other side of this reality is that costs for archival copying already seem outrageous. Creative solutions are needed that meet the scholar's need for a fair copy within the constraints of the archivist's concern for the original document.

Cooperation Between Archivists and Researchers

Even the best finding aids do not reduce the scholar's need for collaboration with a literary manuscripts curator. Literary re-

searchers who have had the pleasure of developing working relationships with archivists recognize that they could not do their research as well without them. Scholars do not expect to have research done for them, but they do value the archivist's knowledge of a collection and of supporting materials that may bear on their research. They appreciate the interest shown by the archivist in their project and methods of inquiry. Discussions with the archivist throughout a research visit, or at least an exit interview at the end of the visit, make it possible to secure copies that become necessary as research continues, to acquire permissions for publication, and to be made aware of newly acquired materials that bear on the scholar's work. Researchers also appreciate the acquaintance that an archivist has with the related work of other researchers. When a scholar sends a complementary copy of a published work to an archives in which research was done, it represents appreciation, not only for the collection but also for the many professionals who support the collection.

Archivists and researchers can and should work hand in hand to develop archival holdings. When individuals hold documents of value, it is in everyone's best interest to prevent random dispersal. Often a researcher has the interest or the opportunity to make initial contacts that identify potential collections. But an individual scholar cannot offer the curatorial protection to assure the owners of manuscripts that their papers will be maintained as desired. Clearly it is in the best interests of the researcher to encourage owners to work with archivists to preserve a collection; but in return, the researcher is justified in the desire that archives will also provide access to all scholars and support to these materials.

Scholars and archivists could also apply their complementary knowledge and skills in collaborative projects to create finding aids that would make more material effectively accessible. Scholars familiar with the materials might be involved in reviewing

⁹Sometimes it is impossible to know from a photocopy whether a letter is two leaves, one leaf recto/verso, or one leaf with four sides. When a writer is in the habit of folding a sheet of paper to make four sides for writing but does not number the pages, then unfolding the paper and photocopying both sides of the sheet does not sufficiently compose the order of the contents. A better copying procedure would be to photocopy side one alone, open out sides two and three, and copy side four alone.

such resources. Their field work with individuals and in other libraries may enable archives to develop collateral collections or alert them to lacunae in their holdings. Archivists and researchers could collaborate in efforts to create and maintain a database of literary copyright holders. Cooperation of this kind would need to be facilitated by a national body or funding agency, but it would serve the researcher and the archivist well. With more flexible and detailed finding aids, researchers could plan their work and be prepared to make the optimal use of archival time.

Researchers appreciate and share the concerns of archivists, particularly in the area of literary manuscripts. All of us face the real shortage of time and funding, and we realize the enormity of the task of making archival collections available for research today while preserving them for the future. New technologies call into question old methods of archival management; mas-

sive quantities of archival material impose new priorities. Researchers hope that archivists will approach the choices that they face with a desire to facilitate understanding of the manuscripts in their care. The nineteenth-century explorer John Wesley Powell said: "The learning of one man does not subtract from the learning of another. . . . It may be wrong to take another man's purse, but it is always right to take another man's knowledge, and it is the highest virtue to promote another man's investigation."¹⁰ If a literary manuscript collection is not a purse but a place where knowledge is pursued, then archivist and researcher can and should collaborate. We both will benefit.

¹⁰Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), 292, quoted in Philip C. Brooks, *Research in Archives: the Use of Unpublished Primary Sources* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 17.