

Understanding and managing rare books

A module on rare books librarianship taught through the Centre for Archive and Information Studies (CAIS) at Dundee University



Anette Hagan
Rare Books Curator
National Library of Scotland
Edinburgh
a.hagan@nls.uk

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Introduction

In the early 2000s, no Scottish library school offered any training aimed at rare books librarians or on historical bibliography. This lack was felt keenly by many, and the Rare Books in Scotland forum (RBiS) (<http://www.nls.uk/about-us/working-with-others/rare-books-in-scotland>), formally established in 2004, continued to voice this concern at its regular meetings. There is a large number of collections of early and rare printed books housed in Scottish libraries, but librarians working with these collections and those setting out on a related career had no opportunity to receive formal training about how to deal with them. Instruction in practical skills concerning acquisition, cataloguing and promotion of rare books, and in the strategic knowledge required to take responsibility for rare book collections in Scottish libraries, was called for.

In 2008, the Scottish Confederation of University and Research Libraries (SCURL) awarded RBiS a generous grant to carry out a research project to develop a framework for a rare books training module.

Developing a teaching framework

In the meantime, discussions had taken place with Dr Patricia Whatley (Dundee University Archivist and Head of Archive, Records Management and Museum Services) and Caroline Brown (Dundee Deputy Archivist and Programme Leader MLitt in Archives and Records Management) about the possibility of integrating a rare books module into Dundee University's distance learning programme. They decided that such a module could be offered as part of the distance-learning MLitt in Archives and Records Management. That meant it could be taught in 13-week terms up to three times a year. The question now was: what content should the module teach?

To ascertain the specific training needs of the rare books community, I conducted telephone interviews with RBiS members and investigated similar modules offered at other universities both in the UK and abroad, as well as librarianship courses offered in Scotland. These enquiries resulted in a wish list, which formed the basis of the SCURL-sponsored project to develop a teaching framework. The large number of topics to be taught that emerged was arranged around four topics and encompassed:

Access

- analytical bibliography
- cataloguing, standards and authority control
- surrogates and remote access
- knowledge management

Interpretation

- copy-specific and non-print information
- resources and finding aids
- history of the book
- the rare book

Acquisition and promotion

- collection development and the book trade
- awareness and exploitation of the collections
- exhibitions and displays
- the web
- customer services

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Preservation and conservation

- handling
- environmental conditions and standards
- threats to the collections
- repairs

The training module: context and content

From this list, which had a lot of sub-bullet points, we developed four teaching units for the planned distance-learning module at CAIS.¹ The module would provide 20 SCQF2 credits and could be done either as part of an MSc or in its own right.

The questions leading to the formulation of the four module units revolved around the definition, description, housing and accessibility of rare books:

- What is a rare book?
- cataloguing and provenance
- collection management
- access and promotion

Dr Brian Hillyard, then Head of Rare Books at the National Library of Scotland, was designated as general subject editor, and Patricia Whatley and Caroline Brown functioned as CAIS editors. Four rare book librarians then set out to each draft the text of one unit. These drafts not only had to cover the actual content to be taught and provide reading lists and learning objectives and outcomes, but they also had to address issues about online delivery and to ensure that students understood and engaged with the content. Since this was going to be a module of a postgraduate degree, student performance would need to be assessed too. That meant devising questions which students could discuss among themselves on an online discussion board with little tutor intervention as well as self-study tasks, introducing assessed tasks at strategic points that could be marked, and developing two written assessments, an essay and a report, of the whole module.

Helen Vincent, then Rare Books Curator at the National Library of Scotland, tackled unit 1 and the specific issues of rare, early and special collections of books and the varying definitions applied by librarians, booksellers and readers. The history and spread of printing in Europe and early printing in the British Isles with some emphasis on Scotland formed a second part of the unit. Another sub-section was the history of the book trade and book collecting in Britain and Ireland. Unit 1 concluded with a discussion of the history of the book as object, taking account of the concepts of bibliography, textual criticism and material culture.

Keith O'Sullivan, Senior Rare Books Librarian at the University of Aberdeen, developed unit 2 about describing specific physical features of rare books and the parts they are made of. This unit first deals with bibliographical descriptions of books including paper, ink and type as well as gatherings and formats before moving to the area of copy-specific features such as provenance marks and how to record them. A discussion of bookplates, heraldry and palaeographical issues leads to the question of how to record ownership marks and other copy-specific features such as annotations and imperfections. Book-bindings and illustrations are covered in detail; this section benefits in particular from the many images used for exemplification. The final section is devoted to the cataloguing of rare books and introduces MARC fields and different levels of cataloguing.

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Unit 3 deals with aspects of collection management. Elizabeth Henderson, Rare Books Librarian at St Andrews University Library, produced an early outline, and the final version was delivered by Robert Betteridge, Rare Books Curator at the National Library of Scotland. An introduction to ethical considerations about the collection management responsibilities of acquisition and disposal, access and preservation gets the ball rolling. Developing rare books collections is the topic of the next section. It looks at different means of collection development such as purchase, donation or deposit and the practical implications of acquiring or increasing rare book collections. The following sections focus on onsite and remote customer services, knowledge management and transfer, preservation and conservation, and issues relating to the security of rare book collections.

The last unit, which deals with access to and promotion of rare book collections, was written by me. It looks at access to the physical items in both a reading room environment and remotely to digital surrogates, which in turn may have licence restrictions imposed on their use. The unit then explores different kinds of surrogates such as photostats and microforms before moving to the topic of digitisation and issues of mass vs boutique digitisation. The next part is concerned with how to raise awareness of rare book collections. It includes a section on exhibition and display themes and label writing. Web page design considerations and techniques for writing for the web form the topic of the last part of unit 4.

The module comes with a study pack containing photocopies of relevant texts the students may find difficult to obtain in a distance-learning environment. There is also a core reading list and a task timetable.

By June 2011, CAIS agreed the draft of all unit texts, and Brian Hillyard taught the first group of students from September 2011 to January 2012; the module has been offered at least once, and often twice a year, since then. Helen Vincent and I took over from Brian Hillyard, and since 2014, Dr Melanie Wood, Special Collections and Archives Librarian at Newcastle University Library, has been teaching the module. She has introduced some additional material on RDA and digital preservation, and updated the reading list with recent publications. In fact, Melanie Wood was a student herself in one of the first groups of the module!

Conclusion

The lowest uptake was three students, and the present course has ten. They have hailed from Great Britain, Ireland and the Continent of Europe, North America and Hong Kong. There have been Scottish students, but the vast majority in each course have been from further afield. The module clearly provides an opportunity to get some thorough training, much of it personalised, on rare books librarianship for people wherever they live without having to make travel and accommodation arrangements; more than that, as a module of the MSc programme of CAIS, it gives valuable credits as part of a recognised distance-learning postgraduate degree for professionals in archive and records management studies.

As one of the initial persons involved, I would venture my mild surprise at the comparatively low uptake by students based in Scotland, seeing as they were the original target audience. At the same time I am delighted that in its 6th year the module now has the highest uptake ever. The present cohort has two students based in the Republic of Ireland, one in Hong Kong, one in the USA and six based in England. It is certainly popular!

Notes

- 1 Centre for Archives and Information Studies at the University of Dundee
- 2 Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework

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