
Rare books collection to finds new home at Cardiff University Library



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Cardiff University library has recently acquired the custodianship of an exciting collection of rare and antiquarian library books from Cardiff Council. This has been achieved as a result of collaborative efforts of the Council, Cardiff University, the Heritage Minister at the Welsh Assembly and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

The collection contains over 14,000 titles of enormous academic and historical value. It touches on many of the cultural and literary trends in Europe from the late fifteenth to the early twentieth century, and covers a balanced range of book production and genres during this period. Collected in Cardiff over two centuries by far-sighted public librarians – from donations, purchases and bequests – it was the foundation of a projected Cardiff-based national library. However, changes in strategy meant that it has not been actively promoted to the public or academia for over 30 years. It is only now being recognised as part of the heritage of the city and a cultural asset to the people of Wales.

Notable items in the collection are:

- examples of 175 incunabula (the earliest printed books from around 1500)
- 500 rare bibles – including a sixteenth-century Latin bible not in the British Library
- a Restoration drama collection whose coverage appears unique
- quarto drama volumes including a rare collection of seventeenth-century Shakespeare
- masterpieces of illustrated books from the eighteenth century onwards

- a large number of high-quality, limited-edition books produced by private and specialist presses in the early twentieth century.

Individual items and private collections were donated by notable members of Cardiff society such as the Bute and Cory families, who played a significant role in the development of the city, and the Rees family of Llandovery, who were influential members of Welsh cultural circles. William Morris and his wife also made donations to the library.

Initial investigations have revealed that a substantial proportion of the items are not held in any other library collection; others are only held in one other library (some in the USA). But it is the grouping of works that is important in giving the collection its great rarity value.



Figure 1: Donation from the William Morris family

In 2006, the Council needed to raise funds for investment in modern libraries as part of its library development strategy – to include the new Cardiff central library, completed in 2009. It therefore decided to sell the collection of rare books through public auction in London. As a result of press coverage, concerns were raised by all 12 chief librarians in higher education in Wales, leading academics and organisations such as the Bibliographical Society, the Historic Libraries Forum and *The Book Collector*, as well as members of the public, that this would be a huge loss to Wales and to the city in which the collection was created. Thus an alternative solution was sought.

Cardiff University approached the Council to ask if it would be willing to transfer custodianship to the university library in return for the preservation and cataloguing of the collections. They also consulted with other libraries in Wales and the National Library of Wales (NLW) to ask if they might consider purchasing the collections independently or in conjunction with Cardiff – with a view to retaining them in Wales. The NLW felt

that the nature of the collection did not align with its current collecting policy but that its provenance and research potential were so important that it should certainly remain in a recognised research library in Wales. They fully supported the aim of acquiring the collection and keeping it in Wales, and saw Cardiff University as 'the natural and probably the only institution capable of achieving that aim'.

In May 2008 the Welsh Assembly Government's agency for Museums Archives and Libraries (CyMAL) had become involved in mediating between all the interested parties, and a process was developed which has ultimately resulted in the collection being acquired by Cardiff University, supported by funding from other partners.

As part of the process, CyMAL funded the brief cataloguing of a 10 per cent sample of the collections so they could be checked against the holdings of Cardiff University Library and the NLW. Subsequently a short-title listing of all items in the collection was created for more extensive cross-checking, and estimates are that less than 5 per cent of the items are already held by the University. Early in 2009 the collection was valued by Quaritch of London, who also confirmed its rarity.

A considerable amount of work then had to be done to secure the funding necessary to acquire the collection for the University, whilst ensuring that the Council realised sufficient funds from this asset in order to undertake its planned investments. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) agreed that if the collection was to benefit collaborative research in the humanities amongst Welsh universities they would consider a bid to their Strategic Development Fund for partial funding, as part of a financial partnership between the Welsh Assembly and the higher education sector in Wales.

In support of the case for purchasing the collection for Cardiff University, the heads of the Schools of English, Communication and Philosophy, History and Archaeology, Welsh, European Studies and Religious Studies and the Centre for Editorial and Intertextual Research wrote statements emphasising the importance of the collection, its relevance to current and future research and the advantages it would bring to the academic community and the people of Wales. Written support for the collections to be retained in Wales was also received from a variety of organisations interested in rare books, as well as the Librarian at the NLW.

Negotiations between the key stakeholders took place over two years in order to raise the substantial investment needed to transfer the collection. By the end of February 2010 the target was reached and the sale was agreed with the City Council on 4 March. In total, Cardiff University contributed £500,000, the Welsh Assembly Government £450,000 and HEFCW £250,000.

Over the coming months the collection will be relocated and housed in appropriate storage conditions in the Special Collections and Archives facility (SCOLAR) in the University's Arts and Social Studies Library. Thus it will be conserved and will remain intact in Wales in perpetuity.

A strategic curation and digitisation programme is being developed to maximise the availability of key items as determined by researchers in Wales. Items will be digitised selectively in order to raise their profile and make them accessible to researchers in other institutions worldwide, thereby facilitating collaborative research. Once conservation work has been carried out, the collection will be accessible to members of the public on request. Ultimately, digitised versions of some of the most interesting works will be viewable on the internet free of charge.

There is scope to promote the collection across Wales via strong links with the NLW, the National Museum Wales and the Welsh Higher Education Libraries Forum (WHELFL). Good relationships have been established as a result of the negotiations and it is hoped that additional financial support for the digitisation and promotion of the collection will be raised from bodies such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and from charities and individuals over the coming year.

The good news for Cardiff University Library is that its existing British and European historical research collections will be doubled and their profile significantly raised. This can only help to strengthen humanities research, attract high-quality academic staff and postgraduates in specialist areas and enable them to formulate grant applications that have a meaningful connection to the library's existing resources – which may enhance its performance in the forthcoming research excellence framework (REF). In particular, it will boost existing research areas such as Shakespeare, Boccaccio and Geoffrey of Monmouth; book editing, conservation and history; illustration studies; Welsh writing in English; intercultural relations; travel literature; and theology – and will open

up new opportunities for conservation research. It will also serve as encouragement to others to donate books and papers to the library.



Figure 2: Example of one of the illustrated early works

The general public will have opportunities to view and learn about the treasures via exhibitions and public lectures, in line with Cardiff University's knowledge engagement strategy and the Welsh Assembly's cultural strategy. Making such rare library resources available to the public will also enable the university to make a significant contribution to the attractiveness of Cardiff as a City.

In the meantime, if other libraries are particularly interested in the contents of the collection, please get in touch and we will try to help. It will be some time before the collections are accessible to researchers but we will keep SCONUL members informed of our progress.