

ILL Number: 227701500



ILLIAD TN#: 382423

Call #: 062 .U58 V.39 1999/2000

Location: SAL3 Stacks

Photocopy Request

Journal Title: University of Edinburgh journal.

Volume: 39 Issue:

Month/Year: 1999/2000 Pages: 237-242

Article Author: University of Edinburgh FRESHWATER, P. B. Article Title:  
COLLECTING BEYOND THE BOOK: EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY LIBRARY AND THE  
EARLIEST UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS

Imprint: [Edinburgh, Scotland] : University of Edinburgh, Graduates' Association

Maxcost: 50.00IFM

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# Collecting Beyond the Book: Edinburgh University Library and the earliest University Museums<sup>1</sup>

Peter B. Freshwater

The establishment and development of collections beyond the book in the historic academic libraries of Scotland has to be seen in the context of the establishment or, at the time, the non-establishment, of museums in Scotland, either in the universities or for the nation. By 1700 the five Scottish university libraries (two in Aberdeen) had been joined by the Advocates Library, founded in 1689 by the Faculty of Advocates of the College of Justice as a library for the Scottish nation. There were no separately established museums in any of the universities until the very end of the 17th century, and even then the museums' existence was episodic and sporadic, and their future uncertain.

Most of the university libraries appear to have included, among their collections, a number of 'rarities' (this seems to have been the preferred term in 17th century Scotland), sometimes as *curiosa*, but more often as objects for the enhanced study of natural history or (latterly) of classical antiquity. In the absence of university museums, there was nowhere else for non-book materials to go; and where else would the universities choose to store securely their ceremonial maces, formal academic robes, and other university insignia?<sup>2</sup> As *curiosa*, rarities often proved of interest to visitors to the city, and brief descriptions are recorded in contemporary accounts of such visits, especially between 1650 and 1800, by which latter time separate museums had been established and at least some of the *curiosa* and specimens transferred to them. In addition, a number of items in the libraries' legitimate book and MS collections achieved a similar status as *curiosa*. These too appear in visitors' accounts and, by and large, have remained in the libraries of their universities. Before 1700 the only Scottish university which had a formal museum appears to have been Edinburgh. This was a collection of natural history specimens assembled by Sir Andrew Balfour and presented to the University some time before 1689, and supplemented by Sir Robert Sibbald in 1697.<sup>3</sup> Balfour and Sibbald had also established the Physic Garden (ca 1675) and the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (1681), and in these are seen the beginnings of the formal study of medicine (as distinct from surgery) in Edinburgh, and of the University's Faculty of Medicine, which was formally founded in 1726. The relationship between the museum and the library is unclear. The original collection may have been placed in the care of the Keeper of the Library, Robert Henderson, who in 1703 was formally appointed curator of the museological collection and instructed to make an inventory of it. Two years later the first Professor of Anatomy, Robert Elliott, was charged upon his appointment to 'take

exact notice and inspection of the rarities of the College' and to give to the Town Council (there was no University Court until 1859) 'an exact inventory of the same'.<sup>4</sup> If either of these inventories exists, it is likely to be among the Edinburgh City Archives.

Between 1650 and 1800 the College Library was on the regular tourist route for visitors to Edinburgh, and appears in contemporary descriptions of visits to the City.<sup>5</sup> What visitors wanted to see, even more than the more spectacular books and MSS, were the rarities acquired by the College and kept in the Library. Jorevin de Rocheford (*ca* 1661) noted merely that the College had quite a good library, but the earliest known visitor's account of the rarities in the Library is that of James Brome (1669), followed by Thomas Kirk (1677) and the Leeds antiquary Ralph Thoresby (1681). Thomas Morer (1689) admired the Library and its rarities but deplored the depleted state of the museum, which was then kept in a room which had formerly been the Library, but which at that time was used as the University Common Room and Commencement Chamber. Joseph Taylor (1705) and Edmund Calamy (1709) also admired the Library including the rarities. Daniel Defoe (1723) described the Library as 'not famous for number of books, is yet so for its being a valuable collection of antiquity, and has some very good manuscripts'. Thomas Pennant visited the University twice, in 1769 and again in 1772. He did not mention the Library at all but, as befits a naturalist, noted in 1769 that 'the *Musæum* had, for many years, been neglected; but by the assiduity of the present professor of natural history,<sup>6</sup> bids fair to become a most instructive repository of the *naturalia* of these kingdoms', but in 1772 that 'the museum is at present totally empty, for such has been the negligence of past time, that scarce a specimen of the noble collection deposited in it by Sir Andrew Balfour, is to be met with; any more than the great additions made to it by Sir Robert Sibbald'. Samuel Johnson (1773) was too concerned with discussing Kennicott's forthcoming edition of the Hebrew Bible with the Librarian, professor James Robertson, to take account of the rarities if, indeed, they were still in the Library. Finally, the anonymous author of *A new guide to the City of Edinburgh* (1792) lists the usual rarities in the Library, and adds that 'the museum contains a good collection of natural curiosities, the number of which is daily increasing'.

William Henderson, Keeper of the Library 1667-1684, and his son Robert, Keeper 1684-1747, were both enthusiastic collectors beyond the book. Some of their more startling items included the skull of the geographer and historian George Buchanan, the bone of which was so thin as to be translucent; a contrasting skull of an 'ideot' with very thick bone; and a number of medical and anatomical specimens such as a horn removed surgically from a living woman's head, an enormous corn cut from a man's foot, and a skeleton said to be that of a Frenchman.<sup>7</sup> Documents regarded as museum objects included an illuminated Aeneid written possibly for King James III (of Scots), the Bohemian Protest against the burning in Prague of the Reformers Jan Hus and

Jerome of Prague in 1415, the draft marriage contract between Mary Queen of Scots and the Dauphin of France, and a testimonial by Cardinal Richelieu which has two contrary meanings, depending on whether the reader is able to see both halves of the document or merely the first. Other acquisitions included maps, three 17th century portolano charts, globes, pictures, mathematical instruments, and microscopes. There is also a reference to a 'writing engine, the first made in Scotland'. Some items are retained in the Library still. Others found their way into museums, especially the University Anatomy Museum and the Royal Scottish Museum.

As Thomas Pennant had noted, by 1770 even the Sibbald Collection at the University had disappeared. However, a new museum, for the use of the natural history class, was already being assembled by the new professor, John Walker. His museum attracted other collections, including James Hutton's collection of minerals, and the natural history specimens of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (founded 1783), but on his death Walker's family took back all the specimens that he himself had procured for the University, as being private property. Professor Robert Jamieson rebuilt the natural history collections in the Museum as well as in the University Library, the former being later transferred to the Royal Scottish Museum. The University still maintains historic Anatomy and Geology Museums, and has recently recreated a Museum of Natural History. Happily these and the University's other historic collections are now identified on the University Website.

Collecting beyond the book continued in the Library into the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The three years 1776-1779 spent at the University by Prince Paul Daschkov, and culminating in his graduation, were marked by the gift by his mother, Princess Ekaterina Daschkova, of a collection of fine commemorative medals. The showplace of William Playfair's magnificent Upper Library attracted, as well as busts of former professors and notable *alumni*, gifts of historic items of furniture including tables associated with Napoleon and Sir Walter Scott, which are now displayed in the Talbot-Rice Gallery. The University Library continued to receive portrait busts, including those of a former University Librarian, the Scots poet Alexander Anderson (otherwise known as 'Surfaceman', author of the lullaby *Cuddle Doon*) and of a former Principal, the astro-physicist Sir Edward Appleton, and life or death masks of Dante and Goethe formally owned by Thomas Carlyle, even though, after the move to George Square, its opportunities for displaying were fewer than hitherto. New College Library preserves five of the original National Covenants signed in Greyfriars' Kirkyard in 1638.<sup>8</sup> The Kennedy-Fraser Collection includes Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's original wax cylinders on which the songs of the Hebrides were recorded. The Reid Music Library has a set of the original 78-rpm records of Pablo Casals playing the Donald Tovey Cello Concerto.

Acquisition, if not active collecting, beyond the book continues to this day. Non-book items acquired during the last 150 years usually come as inalienable

parts of larger book or MS collections or in exceptional circumstances because they inform such collections already in the Library. Professor Adam Ferguson's 18th century writing-desk and coffee-pot accompany his papers. The Corson Sir Walter Scott Collection includes paintings, a copy of the Chantrey bust of Scott, and a cabinet of Scott souvenirs. The Library's Fourth Centenary appeal to *alumni* for University *memorabilia* in 1980 brought in numbers of class and sports medals, velour rugby caps, and souvenir ephemera such as dinner menus and dance cards. In the absence of a University museum, the Library is still to the repository for some *objets de vertu* officially presented to the University, including a pottery bear from West Berlin, presented to Principal Sir John Burnett in 1987, and a brass bust of the Swami Vivekananda, presented to the University by the former High Commissioner for India in 1998 to mark 50 years of Indian independence. An exhibition on Warren Hastings in 1988 encouraged a retired member of University staff to present the Library with an admission ticket to one day of Hastings' trial in Westminster Hall. In May 1992 Mrs Patricia Russell, daughter of the Olympic medallist Eric Liddell, presented to the University her father's Olympic medals. These are housed in the Library together with annotated copies of the programmes of the University's Annual Sports events in 1923 and 1924; they record Liddell's performances over the distances in which he competed in the 1924 Olympic Games, and the one event, the 100 metres, from which he withdrew on discovering that the qualifying heats were to be run on a Sunday, a day which he held sacred.<sup>9</sup>

From the early days of its existence the Library of the Faculty of Advocates included a cabinet of antiquities, mostly of classical medals and coins. It saw this as the basis of a national collection to the extent that the Faculty, with the University, opposed the granting of a Charter to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1783. The charter was granted, however, and the Society's museum became the National Museum of Antiquities, now part of the National Museums of Scotland.

Just as museums are becoming more like libraries in the services which they provide for the public, the museological aspects of research libraries is becoming more widely acknowledged. Many Scottish libraries and archives, including those of the University, have contributed to the SCRAN (Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network) database, and are creating similar databases of their own. Collecting beyond the book remains a valid library activity and the World Wide Web is making it respectable once more.

## Notes

1. The first version of this article was given as a short paper to a one-day conference on *Collecting Beyond the Book* on Saturday 15 January 2000 at Christ Church, Oxford. The conference papers on libraries and collections in Oxford are to be published in a forthcoming issue of *The Bodleian Library*

*Record.* This article is published in *The University of Edinburgh Journal* by kind arrangement with the conference organisers Mr Mark Purcell and Dr Kate Bennett.

2. It should be recalled, however, that the Tounis College mace was stolen from the College Library in 1787. The Town Council chose to believe that the thief was one of their own number, Deacon Brodie.
3. Auctarium Musaei Balfourani E Musaeo Sibbaldiani, sive Enumeration & Descriptio Rerum Rariorum, tam Naturalium quam Artificialium; tam Domesticarum qua exoticum; Quas ROBERTUS SIBBALDUS M.D. Eques Auratus, Academiae Edinburgenae donavit. Quae quasi Manuductio brevis est, Historiam Naturalem. Edinburgi: Impressum per Academiae Typographum. Sumptibus Academiae, 1697. A summary account appears in Grant (Sir Alexander) *The story of the University of Edinburgh during its first three hundred years*. 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1884) vol I, pp. 374-378: Appendix K, *The Natural History Museum of the University of Edinburgh*.
4. Quoted in Grant, Vol I, p. 295.
5. Brome (James) *Historical account of travels over England, Scotland and Wales* (London, 1700). Kirk (Thomas) *An account of a tour in Scotland...* In *Letters of eminent men; addressed to Ralph Thoresby ...* 2 volumes (London, 1832). Thoresby (Ralph) *The diary of Ralph Thoresby, F.R.S. Author of The topography of Leeds. (1677-1724)*. Now first published from the original manuscript by the Rev Joseph Hunter, 2 volumes (London, 1830). Morer (Thomas) *A short account of Scotland, being a description of the nature of that kingdom, and what the constitution of it is in Church and State; wherein also some notice is taken of their chief cities and Royal burghs...* (London, 1702) Taylor (Joseph) *A journey to Edenborough in Scotland; now first printed from the original manuscript. With notes by William Cowan.* (Edinburgh, 1903) Calamy (Edmund) *Historical account of my own life ...* edited by John Towill Rutt, 2 volumes (London, 1829). Calamy visited Edinburgh in 1709. Defoe (Daniel) *A Journey Through Scotland.* (London, 1723). His *Journey through Scotland* was incorporated into *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, which appeared in 1724-1727. Pennant (Thomas) *A tour in Scotland*, 3rd edition (Warrington, 1774) and *A tour in Scotland and a voyage to the Hebrides.* (London, 1772). *A New Guide to the City of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1792). A number of these accounts have recently been reprinted in *The Piper: newsletter of the Friends of Edinburgh University Library*.
6. Dr Robert Ramsay whose title included *Keeper of the Museum*.
7. Finlayson (Charles P.) *Collectors pieces: treasures and oddities of Edinburgh University Library.* *The Scots Magazine*, n.s. 92 (2), November 1969, 104-112.



8. I am grateful to Pam Gilchrist, New College Librarian, for her help with information on the Covenants.
9. The story has been told most recently in the film *Chariots of Fire* (1981), in which the role of Eric Liddell was taken by another Edinburgh graduate, (sadly the late) Ian Charleson, and in *The Flying Scotsman* (London, 1981) by yet a third Edinburgh graduate, Sally Magnusson.

## Closure of McEwan Hall

The University is continuing to develop its plans, for which it will be seeking external funding support, for a progressive refurbishment and upgrading of the McEwan Graduation Hall.

These plans were originally based on the assumption that the Hall would be closed to users — and therefore not usable for University graduation ceremonies — from January 2001, for some 12-24 months. However, the plans have now been revised, so that the first phase of essential minor works, including improvements to fire procedures and escape routes, will be contained within the January-June 2001 period.

This will mean of course that there are unlikely to be any interruptions in the near future to the use of the McEwan Hall for graduation purposes. Use of the Hall, will, for the immediate future, continue to be restricted mainly to core University functions.

Once any further information is available about subsequent refurbishing/upgrading work on the Hall, that will be made known with good notice to both staff and students.

Further information should be available from Jim Neil (0131-650 2078) in Estates & Buildings and Joanna Storrar (0131-650 2240) in Development and Alumni Services.