

The Acquisition of Literary Archives

by **ROBIN SKELTON**

In discussing archival matters in this journal, I feel rather like the operator of a shooting gallery at the fair instructing a collection of Field Marshals. Nevertheless, I will do my best not to be obvious. To start with, in order to deal with the whole question of literary archives, I must make the assumption throughout that the ideal archivist has endless money, endless time, and limitless space. Secondly, I am assuming that the literary archive must be capable of multiple uses by biographers, bibliographers, editors of texts, and social historians of all kinds; in other words, the archive must be as complete as possible in all respects.

The acquisition of the archive of a living author does not differ basically from acquiring other kinds of archives, although it presents some special problems. Many modern literary archives are acquired by donations or by private sales by authors who wish to profit from their waste-paper baskets. In these cases, the initiative may come from the author, or from the archivist who suggests to the author that it might be a good idea to house this material in a library or archives. This is a relatively straightforward process, setting aside all financial considerations.

It is not, however, the whole story. The author who puts the archive together in the first place, or the author's representative, only occasionally understand what is or is not important. The first step in building up an archive of this kind, therefore, is to educate the author. Fifteen or so years ago, I had to explain to an extremely eminent and learned British author how to find the money to renew the lease on her house by selling her manuscripts, worksheets, and notebooks. She was astonished at the value placed upon material that she had considered worthless. Over the years, she has continued to parcel up her materials and sell them to a university that now has an extraordinarily rich and important archive. While giving this advice, I realized that many authors feel the same way. Indeed, one well-known poet, in a condition of near-starvation, was lighting his fires with manuscripts, throwing them into the dustbin, and otherwise destroying them. There was no immediate market for his work that I could discover. Therefore, I paid him a monthly stipend over a period of years, and from time to time he sent me notebooks, manuscripts, and drawings. There was no valuation process involved: it was simply a private arrangement. I was not rich enough to pay what I would have liked, but I did manage to keep him from total poverty until his financial situation improved. The consequence is that twenty years later I have the most important archive of that author's work in existence — so much so that, recently, a doctoral fellow from Cambridge, England, was obliged to

come to British Columbia to study this man's papers. This system of monthly payments is one that could be made to work for quite a number of authors who, impoverished or not, cannot face the task of assembling large collections every two or three years, but who would be happy to post a parcel off every now and then. This also has the advantage to the collector of being a less dramatic drain upon the budget. Of course, not all authors are easy to deal with. Some are bored by the whole notion of collecting together papers that seem to them to have no interest at all. Other authors are monstrous egotists and have inflated notions of the value of their laundry bills. In both cases, it can be useful to explain exactly what can be involved and to point out that a regular source of income might be provided. The late Austin Clarke in old age made a good deal of his income by regular sales of his work. Unlike most writers, he was aware of the value of corrected proofs, collections of reviews, and correspondence.

Reviews can be extremely illuminating. Some authors keep a file of their reviews, but the majority do not, or only keep the good ones that might be of use in advertising later books or new editions of their work. Anyone attempting to collect a thorough and complete archive of an author should therefore hire a clipping service. This is not unduly expensive and most clipping services are reasonably efficient. In theory, all reviews are sent to the publisher of the book and the publisher then sends the review to the author. This works *only* in theory. I have been told of several reviews of one of my own recent books which I have not seen and my publisher has not received. The advantage of the clipping service is that it will also provide news reports on the author's public appearances as a lecturer or reader.

Correspondence is also important. However, most collectors fail to assemble a complete record. The author's archive usually contains only letters received and not letters sent. Yet the author's own letters are naturally of most interest. If the author is willing, you can ask for a list of his correspondents over the years and a statement of support of your efforts to collect or copy these letters. Many authors' friends would not want to part with originals, but are willing to give copies, provided that the author agrees, and sometimes subject to their not being open to public scrutiny for a certain period.

The importance of chasing up correspondents can hardly be overestimated. I had a minor part in the editing of *The Letters of Rupert Brooke* by the late Sir Geoffrey Keynes. The project began in the late forties, but the book itself did not appear until 1968. The delay was largely caused by our inability to extract letters from one of Brooke's most important correspondents. We had, indeed, to wait for a death. Geoffrey Keynes knew Rupert Brooke and had a comprehensive list of his correspondents. In collecting letters, it was important to insist upon getting the most trivial postcards, even picture postcards with nothing but a signature upon them. Brooke's letters were often undated, but the postcards always carried a date-stamp. I was, therefore, able to use the postcards to establish where Brooke was at any particular time. By making a diary of his movements over the years and using internal evidence from the undated letters, I was able to fit almost all of them into the calendar at the appropriate place. However, letters do have hazards. Many authors have a secretary who may have written many of the author's letters. You cannot always tell from the style of the writing. I know that one extremely well known writer

has trained his secretary to write letters in his own extremely idiosyncratic style, and leave them for his own authentic signature. I have several letters from him, and I'm still wondering....

One of the problems in constructing a comprehensive archive has to do with the author's library. When the poet Wilfred Rowland Childe died, I was given the opportunity to select some books from his library to add to my fairly large Childe collection. I could not make up my mind what to pick. Even while I was tackling this problem, I realized that after I and others had made our selections nobody would ever know exactly what the poet had kept on his shelves. This problem was handled extremely well when Theodore Roethke died. I was asked by his widow to advise her on the disposition of his papers. While I looked around his bookshelves, I saw books by Yeats, Blake, Donne. I also saw a Sylvia Plath book and, on picking it from the shelf, discovered that it was a copy given to Roethke by Sylvia Plath herself. This was not only a collector's item, but also a piece of information. The University of Washington's Rare Book Department had the wisdom to acquire all Roethke's books, and to list them. They did not have to keep every book. One does not need yet another copy of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. One does, however, need to know that it was there. I feel strongly that anyone building a thorough archive on a certain author should get a catalogue of that author's library. I was only able to solve one tiny problem about an early poem of Ezra Pound by finding out that he had a certain book in his library and, typically, a book which he had denied possessing.

We are not dealing here, I suppose, with archives proper, but with gathering information. Very few collectors have the time or money to do this as efficiently as it could be done. Some problems are rarely tackled. Let us take the instance of the widely travelled author who uses his travels as material for fiction. Grahame Greene and Somerset Maugham would be good examples. If that author writes of visiting St. Paul's Churchyard in London in the thirties and mentions specific streets, and if you attempt to visit those streets, you are likely to find they are not there any longer, having been destroyed in the Second World War. This means that you must get a map of that area of the correct date if you are to understand the author's peregrinations with any accuracy. But suppose our travelling author speaks of Yonge Street in the nineteen twenties, of Calgary in the thirties, of Hiroshima before the bomb fell? While maps and photographs of these places may sometimes be easy to find, in other cases they are not available, and our archives should try to acquire them.

Photographs can be of enormous importance, but they are not easy to acquire. For information purposes, the snapshot album is more useful than the collection of formal portraits. We also know that negatives get lost and snapshots thrown out. One must somehow add a photographic archive to the written one. This is best done with the author's help, or that of his family or friends. If he is sufficiently important to be considered worth studying in the first place, his friends are likely to keep photographs that can be acquired or copied. However, the author himself is quite likely to think nothing of them and throw out those tedious group photographs of college, school, or university, and the more ridiculous snapshots of picnics and parties. If we were all to create personal archives and keep and catalogue everything, we would have no time to do anything else.

The photographic archive can be of inestimable use, especially if the snapshots have been dated on the back. Sometimes it is necessary or advisable to organize photographs or moving pictures oneself. The poet Tony Connor grew up in the Cheetham Hill district of Salford, and his first three books of poems deal directly and explicitly with the streets, shops, and pubs of this area. On discovering that this part of Salford was going to be knocked down, I took him there on a nostalgic tour and filmed him walking those streets, letting the camera linger on the places that he mentioned most frequently. I like to believe that any serious student of Connor's work is going to have to see this home movie to get an accurate impression of the setting of those early poems.

The use of the movie camera and video-tape leads me to another way of gathering information — oral interviews. At the University of Carbondale in Illinois, there is a most impressive collection of Irish literature and history. Some years ago, the University appointed the late Eoin O'Mahoney as a visiting fellow. O'Mahoney, a Falstaffian figure with an inordinate thirst and a gift for garrulity, was known familiarly in Ireland as The Pope. He was a perfectly splendid and warm-hearted eccentric. He was also an expert genealogist and one of the most entertaining raconteurs and gossip-mongers I have ever met. At Carbondale his job was simple: the librarian placed books and papers in front of him and he would talk for hours about the family backgrounds of the authors, their careers, their comedies, their oddities, their love-lives, and anything else that came to his miraculously retentive mind. I have not listened to this material, and so cannot tell whether or not there may be problems about slander, but the material he provided could have been provided by no other single person.

The Pope was an original and there may be nobody who can match him in his particular skills of memory and raconteur. Nevertheless, the principle is sound. So often there are stories which are in themselves illuminating, even though they appear at first to be trivial. I once asked T.S. Eliot how he envisaged angels. He said mildly, "Oh, the usual thing, you know, with wings." I do not think any Eliot scholar would find this an earth-shattering piece of information but, added to other anecdotes, or in the context of a study of Eliot's Christian vision, it might be worth a sentence.

If one is building up a thorough archive on a person, one should collect anecdotes and recollections by means of a tape-recorder or video machine. I have found it best to sit down with a reel-to-reel recorder that gives you plenty of time, turn on the microphone, and just talk until the people involved have forgotten all about the tape recorder and relax and start telling the real stories. It does not, of course, always work out. For about ten days in 1975, I took tea with Robert Graves and his friend Martin Tallents, together with my collaborator William David Thomas. We were supposed to be making a programme for the BBC in celebration of Graves' eightieth birthday. We hung a microphone around his neck and let the tape run. I have never seen a man do more to a neck mike than did the poet on those occasions. He coughed into it; he spilled tea on it; he buttered it; and he would forget a story half way through and lean across the table and ask Martin to finish it for him, and Martin, totally out of range of the mike, would do so. From all this, we got five hours of Graves' conversation and not one minute was up-to-scratch technically; nothing could be used. We did do the programme — and I'm proud to say it got a Best Programme award — but we put it together from earlier interviews, with me

providing a linking script and a description of the birthday party. Nevertheless, the five hours of talk are still in existence on tape, and give a clear impression of Robert Graves as an old man, sadly moving towards total forgetfulness, and silence.

While on the subject of tape recordings, I should mention poetry readings and talks. Some host organizations, such as Harbourfront in Toronto, make a practice of tape-recording all readings to create a sound archive. A poetry reading in itself may seem a very minor item, especially if there are professional recordings of the poet on disc that are easily available. Such professional recordings, however, rarely include the poet's comments, the anecdotes, the asides. I have a tape-recording made by the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella twenty years ago. The contrast between his opinions of 1962 and those of the present is dramatic.

Television interviews are extremely informative. In many cases, copies of video interviews can be acquired with very little trouble as long as one seeks them out immediately after the interview has occurred. The same applies to radio interviews, but I must emphasize the necessity of moving swiftly. The BBC's policy between the wars of destroying old recordings has led to having only a few minutes of the many readings and talks given by W.B. Yeats. While nowadays the larger television and radio organizations are more aware of the importance of keeping archives, the smaller, local organizations are rarely archive-minded.

It is equally important to act quickly with publishers. Some publishing houses keep all their back-files of accounts and correspondence, but many do not. It is valuable to have both the letters that pass between author and publisher and any statements of royalties and advances. Publishers are not unwilling to sell this kind of material, although the archives of a number of publishing houses, such as Talonbooks, have found their way into public collections.

The value of literary archival items does not always correlate to their usefulness. Tape-recordings for example are relatively inexpensive. Indeed, you may acquire a recorded interview with a writer for far less than a corrected proof of a book or a pile of typescript that reveals no real difference between the typed and the printed text. To the researcher, however, the tape-recording may be infinitely more useful than much written material. Would not a biographer prefer a long taped interview with a poet's mistress to a lightly corrected proof of one of his books? We must not fall into the trap of equating the market value with the utility of the material. A signed first edition of T.S. Eliot is expensive; a brown-paper envelope filled with press-cuttings about Eliot is not, but it would be of much more use to the student of Eliot and his reputation.

Living authors should be invited to collaborate with archivists by commenting upon the material in the archive. This can be of inestimable value, especially as authors (J.M. Synge, for example) frequently fill a notebook partially in one year, discard it for several years, and then return to it and fill it up. There may be no way for anyone to suspect that the notes or drafts are not of the same year, unless the author has changed his handwriting, the kind of pen he uses, or the colour of his ink. Similarly, writers often publish a book many years after it has been written. (I have just published a play that was first written in the fifties.) The date of publication is not a reliable guide to the date of composition.

Having said all this, I come to the difficult matter of whose materials to acquire. If one wishes to acquire a comprehensive archive of any author, one should not leave it until that author is senile. One should begin as soon as it becomes clear that this writer has some standing. Those in authority who decide on the pursuit of this or that author must be made to understand this. They must also be made to understand that when a given archive has grown to a certain size, the author involved will find it difficult to sell his or her work elsewhere. Therefore, the cost of the materials tends to decrease, for the demand has decreased and the supply has not. I speak obviously of writers who continue to be productive and to bedevil their bibliographers and critics with new books and attitudes.

In talking of this acquisition of archives in this fashion, I realize that I may well be altering the normal job description of the archivist. I may seem to be suggesting that he or she should become a new creature, a sort of "acquisitions archivist" with the tenacity of a Lefty Lewis, the infinite patience of a Geoffrey Keynes, and the cunning of a Lew Feldman — combining these qualities with the investigative talents of a Pinkerton. Yet there is a need for this approach to the collection of archives, and I am happy that there are already a large number of subtle and acquisitive detectives among the ranks of Canadian archivists.