

,Catch as Catch Can'¹

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Having been asked to speak on security prevention and actual incidents, I will start with the latter. After some sad stories, I would like to give a more general analysis, and then I will explain our thinking in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek on the steps we can take in order to prevent theft as far as possible in the future.

8 February 2001: the Department of Special Collections in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek is informed of a case of theft in the Royal Library in Copenhagen, by an English-speaking person. No name was given, but the staff in the reading room are on high alert because at that very moment a person with a British passport is consulting rare atlases. This person had already visited the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in October the year before. However, nothing suspicious can be detected from his behaviour, so the reader leaves the reading room – and our Library – unhindered. But, feeling uneasy, some colleagues decide to check the atlases that had been issued. To cut a long story short (it took several days of hard work to check all the atlases the reader had consulted), we ended up with a list of 55 maps missing from 25 books and atlases. A coincidental effect of this action was the discovery of thefts from some other atlases, which must have been the work of a German reader who had earlier visited our Library.

One of the problems in checking all the atlases and books for missing maps was the fact that most of these items have composite descriptions, so it was impossible to decide whether a given map had been missing all along (for instance, had been stolen in the past) or not.

In the meantime, we had, of course, informed the municipal police and handed over our list. We also sent this same list to Dutch antiquarian booksellers and to Europol. Although there was an agreement with the police to keep the theft confidential - at least for a while - this turned out to be impossible. Very soon journalists from several newspapers and television news channels wanted to know every detail of the story. A press release was issued and also put on our website. We decided to give interviews when asked and we were quite open about what had happened.

Months went by and nothing happened, except for the news that 'our' thief had been caught and arrested in Helsinki. Hopes rose, of course: perhaps some of our maps could now be traced? But when Theo Vermeulen, Head of Special Collections, visited New Scotland Yard in London in July last year, none of the 400 maps there turned out to be from our atlases. So we lost, for instance, the famous world map from a 17th-century Blaeu atlas. Never to return, I'm afraid. It probably has already been sold at some small auction in Australia to someone who doesn't realise that he or she is a receiver of stolen goods.

Theft is, of course, a feature of all centuries and all cultures. Whether the number of thefts of items from our collective cultural heritage is rising, I couldn't say, but I would not be surprised if the answer was yes. We only have to look at some of the developments of recent years. I'll try to list them from the very general to the more specific.

First and foremost - most cultural institutions in Western Europe have recently made and are still making major policy shifts in their attitudes towards the public. Museums, archives and libraries have become decidedly pro-active in trying to reach their clients. To do that one of the primary goals is to open up all their collections, and to identify all the items they contain as clearly as possible. Of course, this is necessary for reasons of management, for conservation purposes and to give public access, whether for the general public or for researchers. But the unintentional side effect is that those with much less noble objectives can reach their targets quite easily. 'Our' thief, seeking maps from 16th- and 17th-century atlases and books, probably had no problem at all in identifying exactly those he wanted.

Furthermore, I think that thieves in the world of 'paper heritage' in museums, archives and libraries are professionals. I'll give you another example. This is taken from my former experience as Deputy Director of the National Maritime Museum in Amsterdam. It happened some eight years ago. We were informed by colleagues in the Library of the University of Amsterdam that they had discovered major thefts of whole books and maps out of atlases, all mainly from the end of the 16th century and the 17th century. It appeared to be someone who was quite knowledgeable about early printed material relating to the Dutch expansion. The name that was given - in confidence, of course - came as a shock to us. We knew the person as one of the most regular visitors to our Library. Well, research started into the items that this reader (a Dutchman) had recently consulted, and we discovered the following.

Looking carefully at each piece, only an expert could see how the thefts had been carried out. Our thief had made exact replicas of the maps he wanted to steal, and he had put these replicas back into the atlases in place of the originals. He also fabricated whole book-bindings and substituted these for the real copies. It turned out that we had several of these 'dummies' in our

bookcases! And Amsterdam was not the only hunting ground for this thief. He travelled around a lot. More than ten other institutions with similar materials were visited: archives, museum libraries and university libraries. The problem here was the usual one: how do you prove that this was the actual thief? In this specific case he fell into a trap set up by the Amsterdam police. And although nobody watching him very closely that day could see exactly what he was doing, it turned out that he had again carried out the same trick as before. But that was only proved when he was asked to open his bag and show the contents. A true magician! This story ends very unsatisfactorily. Although it was proved that this man had stolen from so many libraries, he was never convicted because of a judicial failure.

Apart from more open access in libraries and a growing professionalism among thieves, there are other factors that contribute to the increasing crime rate in this area. There are, for instance, more people interested in early prints who can also afford them. Prices have been rising on account of this for a number of years. There is a ready market for these stolen goods. And there is also the perception that crimes of this kind are not a priority for the police. In the case of the theft in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, for example, we always had to ask the police for information. To tell the truth, we are a bit cynical about the way in which our case is being handled. Last time we spoke to the officer responsible, he informed us that due to re-organisation he could only get information about foreign proceedings indirectly. A recent article (30 April 2002) in one of the leading papers in the Netherlands actually gave us more details.

From the first of January this year, the Central Office for Criminal Investigation and Information of Art and Antiques has been closed down: a purely political decision. This Office kept a special database listing stolen art and antique items in the Netherlands, and communicated with other specialist investigative offices all over the world. It no longer exists! From now on stolen art objects must be registered in the national police register. That can only be done in general terms, which means that the identification of specific objects has become very difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, the expertise in the field of art history, art objects, art thefts and the market for stolen goods has been lost. Questions about this shameful decision have been asked in the Dutch Parliament. I do not, however, feel very positive about the outcome.

I have spoken about actual incidents and their aftermath up to this point. Let us now turn to discussing ways in which we can try to protect ourselves as effectively as possible from such thefts. We, of course, realize that people will go on trying to steal our property.

After the theft last year we analysed the situation in the Special Collections reading room. And we took several actions. First, we asked two specialist se-

curity firms for advice. The Head of Special Collections, Theo Vermeulen, went to the British Library to look at the security measures there. And we decided to start thinking about rebuilding and re-equipping the Special Collections reading room.

A number of decisions were taken. Some were immediate short-term measures. We put a uniformed security officer in the reading room itself for the rest of the year. This was not a very popular job. Most officers hated it, sitting still for hours, and complaints kept coming in from our security firm. But in January 2002, finally, a new security camera system with video registration was installed. Theo Vermeulen returned from London with precise information about the weighing scales that performed well in the British Library, and these were put into use at the end of 2001. Readers who wish to consult atlases or other sensitive material must complete a special questionnaire detailing the purpose of their research. Procedures at the desk have also been tightened up: for instance, readers, who already have to surrender their readers' passes, are now also told where to sit in the reading room.

Longer-term measures involve the preparation of a security policy and the consequent implementation of this policy. We have started more detailed registration of all maps and prints in older books, a project that will take a long time. And we have developed specific ideas for the new Special Collections reading room, including a new entrance and different seating arrangements for readers.

And last but not least - we recognise the value of improved communication among institutions that are custodians of valuable paper materials. We should co-operate and try to exchange information as much as possible. The Koninklijke Bibliotheek endorses the establishment of an international group with the aim of preventing and dealing with thefts from our collections.

Let me finish with a practical suggestion. Potential thieves of valuable maps and prints from old books don't only pinpoint libraries in order to carry out their depredations. Museums and archives also belong to their hunting grounds. If we seriously believe that we can profit from mutual information and contact about such crimes, then it would be wise to involve these other institutions from the beginning!

REFERENCES

- 1 I thank Theo Vermeulen, Head of Special Collections, for his help with this article.