

# European Research Libraries and Special Collections

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## INTRODUCTION

An interesting, and perhaps rather unexpected, aspect of current thinking on the future of research libraries has been a new emphasis placed on the role of rare books and special collections. As the delivery of traditional library services, for example collection building and description, becomes more dependent on national or regional consortia, so libraries are considering what will remain to be done at the local and institutional level. Various library “trend watchers” have suggested local activities on which individual libraries may wish to concentrate in the future, including information literacy, customised user support in information retrieval, and so on. A surprising number have also mentioned “legacy” collections of printed material and other special collections as a likely focus of future professional efforts at the local library level.

One aspect of this new emphasis is clearly the perceived need to digitise large quantities of print retrospectively, but the importance of locally-held special collections as resources for teaching and research has also been stressed. Special collections, each with unique materials or assemblages of materials, are seen as “critical identifiers” of individual research libraries. The period is drawing to a close during which the curatorship of rare books and special collections was apparently regarded (at least by some!) as a rather marginal activity within the research library.

Much of the current thinking about the future of special collections within the 21st century research library comes from the English-speaking world, and especially from the United States. The term “critical identifiers”, for example, was introduced into discussions by a task force on special collections set up some years ago by the Association of Research Libraries ([ARL](#)), the umbrella body for research libraries in the United States. In a number of countries on this side of the Atlantic there has been some concern about the need to open up a debate on the issue of special collections in European research libraries and to link up with current thinking in the English-speaking world. During 2003, for example, the Anna Amalia Bibliothek in Weimar and the [Initiative Fortbildung für wissenschaftliche Spezialbibliotheken und verwandte Einrichtungen e.V.](#) invited the author to take part in the planning of a conference on the future of special collections, a conference that took place in Weimar in the autumn of 2005.

The Weimar conference, “[Zwischen Kulturmanagement und Forschung: Sondersammlungen im 21. Jahrhundert](#)” attracted a wide range of speakers and participants from the United States, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, and of course from Germany itself, but also (and perhaps rather unexpectedly) from a number of other European countries. Sessions covered collection development, collection description, digitisation and collection care, but also fundraising and the promotion of collections. There was clearly widespread interest in the topics discussed and indeed enthusiasm for coordinated action. A consensus emerged in discussions at the conference that participants should remain in contact and that a number of follow-up activities should be organised. These have included so far:

- the publication of the Weimar papers <sup>2</sup>;
- a study-tour to the United States by a group of German special collections librarians in summer 2006;
- a workshop in Berlin led by US experts in autumn 2006<sup>3</sup>;
- and finally, the consideration of a possible “statement of commitment” to special collections by European research libraries.

One of the most pressing topics at the Weimar and Berlin workshops was the need to promote the significance of special collections more effectively, in other words, to consider how they could be moved up the agenda of parent institutions and sponsoring bodies. Again, the work of the ARL in the United States was seen as a possible model. [The ARL Special Collections Statement of Principles](#) on “Research libraries and the Commitment to Special Collections” (2003), for example, was regarded by many as a *de facto* benchmark for special collections policy and practice in North America. Many of those involved in the Weimar workshop, felt that this “benchmark” - suitably adapted for the European situation - might well be a useful tool on this side of the Atlantic, for example in making a case for resources to governing bodies.

## **LIBER AS FORUM FOR DISCUSSION AND ACTION**

In this context, LIBER was mentioned as a possible forum for discussion and action. With the support and encouragement of the LIBER Board, an informal working group with members from Germany, The Netherlands and the UK has drafted a statement from a European perspective. The text was drawn up by the author (Graham Jefcoate, Nijmegen), in cooperation with Michael Knoche and Jürgen Weber (Weimar) and David Pearson (London), and with significant contributions from Jan Bos (The Hague), Jutta Weber (Berlin), Bettina Wagner and Claudia Fabian (Munich), Dorothea Sommer (Halle) and others. Special mention needs to be made of the support and advice of our two US-based experts throughout the process, Alice Schreyer (Director, Special Collections Center, University Library, Chicago) and Alice Prochaska (Director, Yale University Library). The importance of their contribution can hardly be overstated.

LIBER members were invited to endorse the draft statement, which had the support of the LIBER Executive Board, at the Annual General Assembly in Warsaw on Friday, 6 July 2007. The Assembly accepted the proposal unanimously. The statement will be included on LIBER's new website and LIBER is planning to issue a press release to ensure maximum publicity for the statement.

Meanwhile, consideration of the future role of special collections in the future research library continues. The LIBER Board has asked Ivan Boserup, Keeper of Manuscripts and Rare Books at the Royal Library in Copenhagen, to lead a small working party to consider the current representation of special collections-related issues within LIBER and to make recommendations to the Board by the time of the next LIBER conference in Istanbul in 2008. A number of colleagues will also be keeping in touch with developments in the United States. The present author, for example, has been asked with Richard Ovenden of the Bodleian Library (and one of the speakers at Weimar) to become a "corresponding member" of a new task force on special collections.

## **LIBER STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES: EUROPEAN RESEARCH LIBRARIES AND THEIR COMMITMENT TO SPECIAL COLLECTIONS**<sup>4</sup>

Most academic and research libraries in Europe hold collections of rare and special materials, which may be variously defined. These encompass a wide range of documentary formats and other media, including historic and modern books, manuscripts and archives, music and maps, ephemera, photographs and sound recordings, and digital archives. As primary sources, or significant accumulations of materials relating to particular topics, they are essential for research across a range of disciplines. They have artistic, historic or research importance beyond their purely textual content that justifies their preservation as artefacts whatever surrogates may be available. They provide important evidence for our material, intellectual and cultural heritage and reflect our human diversity.

Members of the Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche (LIBER), in common with other academic and research libraries internationally, recognise the value and the particular obligations that the stewardship of these special collections represents. We collect, preserve and provide access to them on behalf of our parent institutions and the needs of international learning and scholarship. We regard these collections and our commitment to them as crucial to the fulfilment of our institutional mission.

In recognition of the obligations associated with special collections, members of LIBER therefore commit to the following principles:

- To ensure that the crucial importance of special collections to the missions of our libraries is clearly stated and understood;
- To continue to build special collections, including new collections where appropriate, in line with institutional collection development policies and other commitments;
- To understand and respond to the needs of users; to consult and collaborate with scholars and other user communities wherever appropriate;
- To provide appropriate levels of funding for the proper maintenance and preservation of special collections and for enabling the widest possible access to them for users;
- To make as much information as possible about our special collections accessible online, following established guidelines;
- To ensure the proper security of special collections and to ensure they are stored in conditions that are environmentally sound, following established guidelines;

- To include special collections in overall strategic planning and library development;
- To work collaboratively with appropriate partners on matters relating to collection building, preservation and improving access, including the digitisation of materials and the provision of metadata to appropriate standards;
- To stimulate contacts with other memory institutions (including museums and archives) in order to exchange ideas, develop best practice and promote practical cooperation in the interest of users;
- To ensure that awareness of the significance of special collections, and the competencies needed to work with them, are preserved and enhanced among young professionals, and especially by offering training opportunities and support wherever possible;
- To inform stakeholders in parent institutions and the wider communities we serve about the obligations represented by the stewardship of special collections.

#### WEBSITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

ARL - Association of Research Libraries, task force on special collections. <http://www.arl.org/rtl/speccoll/>

ARL, Special Collections: Statement of Principles. <http://www.arl.org/rtl/speccoll/speccollprinciples.shtml>

Initiative Fortbildung für wissenschaftliche Spezialbibliotheken und verwandte Einrichtungen e.V. (Initiative for Continuing Education in Academic and Research-Oriented Special Libraries and Related Institutions). <http://www.initiativefortbildung.de/>

Zwischen Kulturmanagement und Forschung: Sondersammlungen im 21. Jahrhundert. Organisation, Dienstleistungen, Ressourcen. (Between Cultural Management and Research: Special Collections in the 21st Century. Organisation, Services, Resources). [http://www.initiativefortbildung.de/pdf/2005/sondersammlungen\\_dt.pdf](http://www.initiativefortbildung.de/pdf/2005/sondersammlungen_dt.pdf)

#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Due to be published by Harrassowitz Verlag in autumn 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Moving special collections to the centre: a workshop for special collections administrators and curators”.

<sup>4</sup> This statement of principles for the management of special collections, prepared after consultation with colleagues in European research libraries by a small virtual task force, led by Mr Graham Jefcoate, Director, Nijmegen University Library, was unanimously adopted by LIBER members at the LIBER Annual General Assembly in Warsaw on Friday 6 July 2007.