

## **Advocating the role of the rare books librarian**

All library and information professionals are facing questions about their value to their employers and the communities they serve. Traditionally the roles of archivist and librarian have been separate, requiring different qualifications and with separate professional bodies, but these roles are increasingly starting to overlap in order to compensate for continuing cuts to staff budgets and staffing in academic libraries and elsewhere. It is now not unusual for a librarian or archivist to be responsible for archives as well as rare book collections as employers seek to reduce staffing costs.

As special collections professionals, rare books librarians and archivists both need similar skills and knowledge relating to promotion, digitization, web editing, metadata creation, project management, security and copyright issues, and can successfully collaborate on these activities. Most importantly they also share common public service goals to acquire, preserve and make accessible special collections material to researchers, and it is likely that this overlap in skills and their intersecting public service missions has encouraged the merging of the two roles in some institutions. However, despite these links, there are also very real differences between the two professions, and there is still a strong argument to be made in support of the role of the rare books librarian within special collections departments:

### Professional qualifications and training

Librarians and archivists gain professional qualifications through separate training courses, accredited by their respective professional organisations. They need the specialist skills set they acquire from these qualifications in order to be equipped to make informed decisions regarding the development and management of their collections and creating access to them. To combine the roles of rare books librarian and archivist is to undermine the value of these specialist qualifications and professional credentials.

### Information handling skills

Professional rare books librarians not only possess knowledge and understanding of general library cataloguing and classification practices, but also an understanding of the complex features particular to rare books. This includes knowledge of physical characteristics such as bindings and provenance, and printing techniques, as well as a general knowledge of book and printing history, which the rare books librarian needs in order to ensure that materials are appropriately and effectively catalogued, organised, processed and described.

Rare books librarians, being trained in historical bibliography, are able to understand the differences between different editions, issues, states and copies of the same work – what those differences are and why they may be important. They are therefore able to understand the relative significance of different copies, and the relationships between apparent “duplicates”; institutional expertise in this area can be vital in preventing ill-

advised disposals in stock weeding exercises, disposals which can result in bad publicity for libraries if they become known to the press and the general public.

The nature of the material collected by archives is, in general, fundamentally different from that found in libraries. Rare book libraries mostly collect published material, while archivists collect original unpublished items. However, the differences between most of the material collected by libraries and archives mean that the cataloguing of rare book items requires a different cataloguing scheme from that used to catalogue archives, and the staff responsible for cataloguing this material need to possess the appropriate specialist cataloguing training.

### Knowledge of collections

The provision of an effective and efficient special collections service relies heavily on the expertise and knowledge of its staff. A large rare books collection requires a skilled and dedicated rare books specialist who has the opportunity to develop in-depth expert knowledge of the content of the collections in order to instruct users in the value of appropriate resources and to assist them in locating relevant materials. This specialist knowledge enables the rare books librarian to provide a greater and more efficient level of service to users of their rare book collections, and in the case of university or other academic institutions, helps them to support the institution's core aims in teaching, learning and research. Specialist collection knowledge is also essential for the development of the rare book collections, including selecting material for purchase and digitization, assessing material offered by donation, creating metadata, and selecting material for effective promotional activities, such as group visits, website and exhibition work. Providing effective support for users of rare books also requires knowledge of the history of the book and the book arts, including book construction, illustration techniques, typefaces and paper, and knowledge of the historical publishing environment.

In most libraries the boundaries between the rare books collection and the main collection are not fixed – material that was once treated as normal stock, to be housed on the open shelves and borrowed by library users, becomes rare book material through age, rarity, or a significant provenance coming to light. Therefore, the rare books librarian does not work in isolation, but liaises closely with other librarian colleagues on collection management issues – location of stock, stock weeding, etc. – and is able to do this effectively through a shared professional background and understanding. Likewise, the rare books librarian, because of the importance of matters such as cataloguing, preservation and disaster management in his/her work, can act as a source of expertise within the wider library, and may in fact take a lead in co-ordinating such activity across the library service.

### Self-promotion within the workplace

Special collections is an area of information work which, due to its specialist nature, has acquired an air of mystery, which has perhaps served to foster misconceptions and

uncertainty about what special collections staff, including rare books librarians, actually do. It is the responsibility of both rare books librarians and archivists to invest time and effort in promotion and outreach activities both within and outside their institutions to highlight the value of rare books and archives, and, in doing so, also promote special collections information services and those who deliver them.