

The Irish Hand and Writers' Libraries

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O'NEILL, Timothy. *The Irish Hand: Scribes and Their Manuscripts from the Earliest Times.* Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2014. 4to. Hardbound. Dust jacket. ix, 136pp. Numerous color illustrations, 2 maps. **39 €.**

ORAM, Richard W. (editor). *Collecting, Curating, and Researching Writers' Libraries: A Handbook.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. Small 4to. Hardbound. ix, 218pp. Illustrations. **\$77.00.**

Ask any literate person to name an Irish manuscript and he or she will reply, "The Book of Kells." Ask that same person to name one more and you're guaranteed a deer-in-the-headlights stare. Unless, of course, that person is fortunate enough to have read Manuscript Society member Timothy O'Neill's memorable *The Irish Hand: Scribes and Their Manuscripts from the Earliest Times*. Now I'd at least be able to name and chat about the Cathach, the Book of Durrow and a few others the pronunciation of which I would slaughter.

O'Neill is an Irish scribe or calligrapher extraordinaire who is not only a master practitioner but a formidable scholar on the topic as well. This latest testament to his lifelong study is actually an enlarged, revised edition of a slightly slimmer Manuscripts, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Summer 2015)

volumes are largely religious in subject matter, with a dose of history and genealogy – hardcore stuff – and to make this learned and arcane material fresh and lively is no small feat. The illustrations themselves are large, numerous and top notch, their appeal visceral and immediate.

But O'Neill wisely opens *The Irish Hand* with an enjoyable "The Manuscript Tradition" introduction that in ten 2-column pages takes the uninitiated through the early years of handwriting in Ireland. We've all heard that old saw about "If I'd had more time, I would've written less." Well, O'Neill must have taken a lot of time to condense this much content into such a small number of pages. It's meaty and informative yet readable, leaving the reader with a solid introductory handle and never feeling like a *Cliff's Notes*-type summary.

The 31 famed Irish manuscript volumes profiled here are offered chronologically, and span ca. 600 AD to 1874. All rectos feature superb digital images, the facing page a complete history of its creation, its scribe, its content and significance, and perhaps most fascinating how it survived the centuries and ended up at its current location. A second, smaller section then takes a closeup of several lines from each manuscript, giving a verbatim transcript and translation and offering O'Neill's thoughts and analysis of each scribe's methods and particular talents. This section also offers up five post-1874 calligraphy examples going up through 2014. Fittingly, the last pictured is a 2004 item penned by O'Neill himself ("loosely derived from that of the Cathach"), one of 150 copies he penned of a translation by the late great Irish poet Seamus Heaney of an early Irish poem titled "Columcille the Scribe," signed at the close by Heaney.

The Cathach, the oldest and hence the first manuscript O'Neill includes in *The Irish Hand* (it also happens to be my

favorite), fits Hollywood's image of what a medieval manuscript should look like: A deep creamy color vellum, so worn about its chipped, torn and browned edges that it almost appears round, with rich brown lettering bold and intriguing. This 6th century psalter, whose nickname Cathach means "champion" or "battler," has a romantic history that includes being carried into battle in 1497 in "a special shrine made of wood faced with silver plates" when "the keeper was slain and the Cathach captured." Dan Brown couldn't come up with a better thriller background for this impressively understated piece.

By chance, my second favorite item happens to be the second oldest manuscript included in *The Irish Hand*, the Cathach's next-door neighbor, the circa 700 Book of Durrow. Containing the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the Book of Durrow boasts some wonderfully intricate oversize letters best described by O'Neill:

The decoration... is of exceptional quality, and great variety of design is achieved with relatively few elements. These consist of spirals, ribbon-interlace, animal-interlace and a selection of repeating patterns, dots and diamonds. Red (from red lead pigment), is also occasionally used for writing. It is the colour most frequently seen throughout the book, used for patterns of dots and occasional line fillers. Yellow from orpiment (arsenic sulphide), green from verdigris (copper acetate) and brown (discoloured yellow ox gall) are the other colours. Along with red, they are combined in some designs against a very dark peat-brown background (iron gall ink) and set off by the warm creamy tones of the vellum.

So engrained is the general appearance of ancient Gaelic calligraphy that it's indelibly marked in our society. It's come to form the archetypal impression of what "medieval" script should look like. So appealing and widespread is this image that modern interpretations of it appear on everything from airline logos to drugstore products galore. O'Neill's *The Irish Hand* takes the reader well beyond this stereotype. He demonstrates through this armful of influential manuscripts spanning well over one thousand years how Irish script has evolved and remains even today a lively, influential force in the world of calligraphy.

Does a 1979 New York City telephone directory that once belonged to Famous Author have any value, monetary or research-wise? How about Famous Author's copy of *Rosemary's Baby*, a Book-of-the-Month Club edition lacking dust jacket and bearing no markings whatsoever? Or his pristine 1963 *Illinois Blue Book*? These are among the many hairy issues that make editor Richard W. Oram's *Collecting, Curating, and Researching Writers' Libraries: A Handbook* a bizarrely satisfying read.

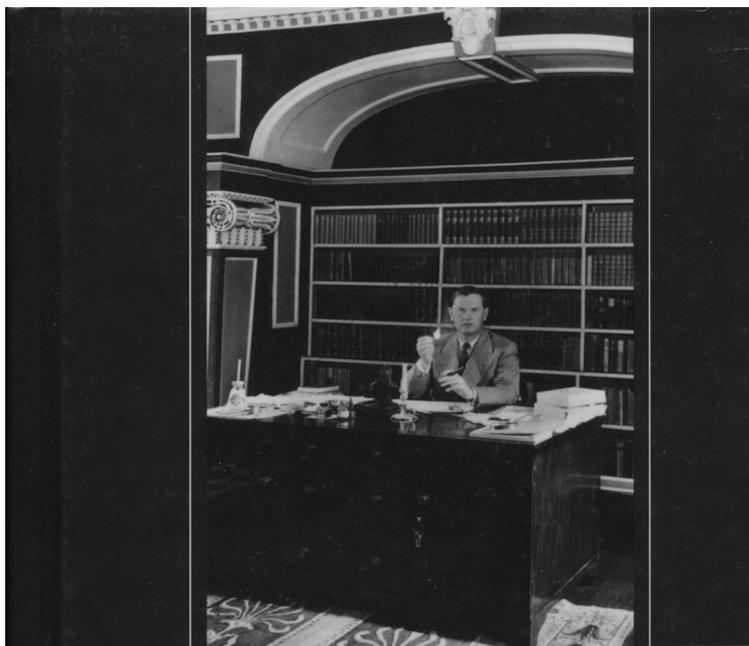
The libraries of authors are funny things. "Special collections librarians may well not have thought a great deal about how these collections are viewed by booksellers and researchers," notes the editor of *Collecting, Curating, and Researching Writers' Libraries*, yet "on the other hand, scholars may not have reflected very much about relevant access and cataloging issues, or about how research in a writer's private library might complement archival work." The subject isn't just *any* book once owned by a famous author, but rather entire working libraries – sometimes merely hundreds of volumes, more often many thousands of volumes. They're the books that helped shape the authors' minds and influenced their work, often annotated in

the margins or otherwise marked, sometimes interleaved with notes, letters and personal items, sometimes inscribed by their authors to the famous author in question – jetsam and flotsam alike. It's the stuff of literary scholar's dreams, the stuff of which many a doctoral dissertation is born. It can also be the stuff of booksellers and special collections librarian's wildest dreams and occasionally their worst nightmares.

Oram's introductory "Writers' Libraries: Historical Overview and Curatorial Considerations" is a delightful, far-ranging exploration of the seemingly straightforward thesis "What is a writer's library?" Sure, it is "generally accepted... to mean a set of books or other printed works owned by the author at a particular moment in time." With scholarly focus on provenance research and author's marginalia and the significance of these things, the simple definition has taken on added meaning and complexity.

Notes Oram, "The examination of a single volume annotated by a writer may offer considerable insights, but the study of an entire library, or even a significant portion of it, may open a much wider window." As Heather Jackson has pointed out in reference to Northrup Frye's library, now at Victoria University, "the examination of the library as a totality can provide unexpected insights into patterns of reading, his process of composition, and even certain habits of mind."

Oram's intro is a fine crash course on the "wholesale destruction" of most 17th century author libraries and the rare exceptions. Portions survive from the libraries of John Donne, Robert Burton, Francis Bacon and John Milton – and don't forget the fully intact library of Samuel Pepys. Many factors had to coincide for there to be interest in preserving author libraries. Not until the early 19th century did "the establishment of an active antiquarian book trade [mean] that there was a



**COLLECTING, CURATING, AND RESEARCHING
WRITERS' LIBRARIES**

A Handbook

**EDITED BY RICHARD W. ORAM
WITH JOSEPH NICHOLSON**

financial incentive to preserve and collect such books. The preservation of authors' books and libraries overlaps... with an increased interest in artifacts associated with authors, such as hair, articles of clothing, and other personal effects... The cult of the autograph letter... the rise of literary criticism, the beginnings of modern source studies and biographical research, as well as the Romantic fascination with objects associated with literary and historical celebrities led to further increase in valuation." By the post-World War Two era, the collecting trend pioneered by the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas seemed to open the floodgates.

The most interesting dilemma Oram examines is the vexing issue of how a special collections librarian should handle pristine, unmarked or only lightly marked volumes from an author's library. Should many feet of valuable special collection shelves be devoted to relatively ordinary books simply because they once belonged to a famous author? Should such books be segregated from the author's best material but maintained in a separate, not-so-special section? No fast, easy answer there – far more fun to consider the other end of the spectrum: "The *crème de la crème* of any writer's library are those books with various signs of use, ranging from the lightly ticked and underlined items to the most heavily annotated ones. The most succulent are those providing us with insight into the author's use of his sources, his interaction with other writers, and even hints at the creative process at work." These and other logistical problems that rarely cross scholars and booksellers' minds plague librarians and make the subject of author libraries an exciting but difficult proposition. Concludes Oram, "It may be that in the future only a handful of institutions may seek out these libraries, and for the most part I suspect they will be larger special collections with literary archives."

Metadata librarian Joseph Nicholson delves into other issues in his “Cataloging Writers’ Private Libraries” chapter. The cataloging and shelving issues that accompany author libraries will numb your mind and cross your eyes, especially from the data-entry perspective, involving collection-level records, item-level records, access points.... When an individual chapter requires its own glossary of terms, get ready. Collectors will be surprised to learn the extravagant lengths to which special collections librarians go to preserve the integrity of an author’s library. Think of all the “stuff,” for instance, one finds tucked between the pages of many books. Well, special collections librarians carefully keep all the “non-book archival materials wedged in their pages, such as concert programs, letters, notes, bus tickets, receipts, and postcards” in order to “[allow] scholars to make important connections between writers’ books and the larger cultural and social environment in which they lived and wrote... to preserve the evidentiary link between books and the ephemera they contain.”

Austin antiquarian bookseller (and ABAA resident wit) Kevin MacDonnell provides welcome comic relief with his “The Bookseller’s Perspective” chapter. His “Day in the Life” opening profiles a “gracefully aging bookseller” who motors to a rural mansion “to inspect the library of a late great author whose writings had defined the sensibilities of two generations.” He briefly inspects the sumptuous library of heavily-annotated books filled with correspondence from other great writers, “made his offer and the heirs promptly accepted without any arguing among themselves, and a week later the bookseller sold the library *en bloc* to a major institution.... The bookseller made a stunning profit (as always), and when the library paid him a few days later, he was soon basking in tropical sea breezes beneath a cabana with his girlfriend....”

In the remainder of this chapter (“Reality Bites”) MacDonnell dismantles “A Day in the Life” phrase by phrase. Ragtag libraries often of questionable salability scattered among various rooms and buildings... squabbling families fighting amongst themselves... these and other pleasantries are the reality of pursuing author libraries from a bookseller’s point of view. MacDonnell addresses down-to-earth factors that only an experienced bookseller who’s handled many author libraries would consider – such as what to do about damaged books and all the loose papers found in books: “repairs and restoration can do as much harm as good if not done to archival standards and not limited to structural repairs. Restorations that disguise evidence of use are an obvious example. Books that have bookmarks, letters, and papers laid into the text should be preserved as they are, but this does not always happen, especially if an overeager bookseller puts loose scraps into archival sleeves or folders in an attempt to please a potential buyer.” MacDonnell’s nuts-and-bolts how-to makes a pleasant, entertaining and informative diversion from the theoretical organizational concerns of special collections librarians.

Amanda Golden’s “Anne Sexton’s Modern Library” chapter and David Faulds’ “A Poet’s Library Times Two: The Library of Ted Hughes at Emory University” chapter not only describe these collections, but demonstrate the kind of valuable research use scholars have made of them. The first half of *Collecting, Curating, and Researching Writers’ Libraries* then closes with “Writers on Their Libraries,” five interviews with authors conducted by Oram and MacDonnell. I was only vaguely familiar with one of the five authors (Russell Banks), but it’s always interesting to learn how authors relate to their books and how they shelve and organize them.

The entire second half of *Collecting, Curating, and*

Researching Writers' Libraries consists of a "Location and Bibliographical Guide to Writers' Libraries," an A-to-Z (Lord Acton through Louis Zukofsky) listing of major and minor authors and the location of their libraries, together with a few comments about the size of each library. While this information does appear in a number of other reference works – some of which rest on shelves behind me as I write this – these other works are often decades or more old and thus outdated. Author libraries are regularly being added to university libraries, so this fresh new listing contains many names not included in older lists and supersedes them all. Believe it or not, even such a list makes interesting reading. Who'd think that the library of Samuel Butler of *The Way of All Flesh* fame, or what remains of it, consists of a paltry nine items at Cambridge University? Or that Virginia and Leonard Woolf's library consists of 10,000 items at Washington State University Library? Just about any librarian, scholar or bookseller may glean useful bits from a perusal.

Collecting, Curating, and Researching Writers' Libraries is a first of its kind, and as such should prove indispensable to anyone concerned with authors, books -- and author's books.