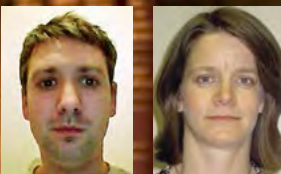


# Rare books in Irish Libraries: an investigation of current challenges in providing access to historical collections

David Parkes and Clare Thornley



## Abstract

Special collections are a long standing part of library history but the changing nature of libraries and their associated technologies have led to new challenges. This article aims to identify the challenges facing the preservation of rare books in Irish Libraries and to determine if these are similar to those discussed in related international research.<sup>9</sup>

Keywords: *Special Collections, Ireland*



## Introduction

In their influential publication, *Exposing Hidden Collections* (2004), Jones and Panitch explored these issues in the light of the changed technological and political context and provided a new and important focus on the role of special collections and rare books. Their work on special collections prompted the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) to set up a Special Collections Working Group which raised awareness of many of the challenges facing the preservation and cataloguing of rare books. These challenges include

- the uncoordinated approach to rare book collecting and digitization efforts
- the existence of 'hidden collections'<sup>10</sup>
- competition for scarce funds
- diminishing budgets

These problems, identified by the ARL bring into question the survival of historic records which are crucial in accurately understanding and

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<sup>10</sup> Hewitt and Panitch (2003) define 'hidden collections' as 'unprocessed archival, manuscript, and rare book materials.'

<sup>9</sup> Based on a Masters in Library and Information Management dissertation (Parkes, 2011), Dublin Business School.

interpreting our past. This research investigates whether these challenges to special and rare book collections are an important issue for such libraries in Ireland and the extent to which new and different challenges may apply to the Irish context.

The production of manuscripts and rare books has been synonymous with Irish culture since the arrival of Christianity. This culture of writing and learning began when Brigid, Finian and Enda introduced monastic life in the sixth century AD. The monks that inhabited these monasteries were central in preserving manuscripts and texts that still exist today such as the *Book of Kells* and the *Book of Durrow*.

This tradition of preserving rare books will be explored by examining the role of libraries today in safeguarding our rare books focusing on three questions.

1. How are rare books defined in Irish libraries and how does this compare with international practice?
2. What is the impact of digitisation on rare books?
3. How widespread and serious are the problems of 'hidden collections' and cataloguing backlog?

These three questions are explicitly linked to the findings of the ARL workgroup, which are represented in their seven-point plan.

1. Enhance access to collections and backlogs, surface "hidden collections." Advocate for and administer funding for projects, and collaborate with RBMS [Rare Books and Manuscripts Section] to develop and endorse guidelines for what constitutes adequate access.
2. Coordinate planning for collecting nineteenth- and twentieth-century materials and those in new formats.
3. Coordinate information sharing regarding digitisation efforts.
4. Define core competencies among special collection librarians and create training opportunities.
5. Promote special collections as fundamental to the mission of the research library.
6. Gather data on special collections operations.

7. Incorporate some of these issues into agendas of RBMS, SAA [Society of American Archivists], and other ARL standing committees. (Hewitt & Panitch, 2003)

The first question on defining rare books provides useful information for point two of the ARL seven point plan to co-ordinate planning for collecting nineteenth and twentieth-century materials. The second question provides useful information for points three and five of the ARL plan to coordinate information sharing regarding digitization and promote special collections as fundamental to the mission of the research library. The third question posed in this article also promotes the first ARL point of enhancing access to backlogs and surfacing 'hidden collections' (op.cit).

## Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted using a survey and two follow-up interviews. The questionnaire was distributed to twenty-four institutions (ten public, seven private and seven college libraries) in the republic of Ireland with rare book collections which were identified from the books *A directory of rare books and special collections in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland* (Bloomfield 1997) and *The libraries directory 1998-2000: a guide to the libraries and archives of the United Kingdom and Ireland* (Walker 2001). The website [www.Rascal.com](http://www.Rascal.com)<sup>11</sup> was also used. Institutions identified included university, public, private and religious libraries with ten institutions replying to the questionnaire. Responses were not mandatory for each question which meant that in some cases results were taken from 8 respondents and others from 10 respondents. To ensure anonymity, it was not mandatory to provide details about the institution or position of the respondent.

The two interviews were carried out with librarians working with rare books in one large and one medium sized academic institution. The survey data and interview material were analysed independently and then merged based

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<sup>11</sup> (Research and Special Collections Available Locally), an electronic gateway to research resources in Ireland).



on Creswell and Clark's (2007) Triangulation Design, which aims to develop a complete picture from both datasets.

## Definition of Rare Books

The definition of what constitutes a rare book has been somewhat elusive but the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), produced the following definition:

**'The entire range of textual, graphic and artefact primary source materials in analogue and digital formats, including printed books, manuscripts, photographs, maps, artworks, audio-visual material and regalia' (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2003: 1)**

Rinaldo (2007) notes the 'intentionally broad' nature of this definition, which essentially covers all primary source materials that librarians deal with on a day-to-day basis. Stephens (2009) notes 'there is a general perception that as Librarians we know what constitutes and defines a rare book, that our heritage book collections are well-documented and their future survival is planned for and secure'. In research on Australian libraries he identifies that 'a quick tour of the collection management policies of many of our libraries reveals considerable variation in the criteria used to identify 'rare', 'special' and 'heritage' printed material' (Stephens 2009). The interviews and questionnaires used in this research explored whether the variation in criteria used to define a rare book identified by Stephens was similar in Irish institutions.

The Irish institutions surveyed identified ten different criteria suggesting that the Irish findings are similar to the broad criteria suggested by Stephens). Below are four examples from the responses to the question: *In your opinion, what criteria are used to define a rare book?*

- No. of copies printed, no. of copies available, provenance, binding, illustration, maps, engravings, value. (University Library)
- All publications printed in or before 1850. Special or limited editions of modern books. Special bindings, books with interesting provenances, important illustrations, manuscripts, posters and other ephemera. Any special or unique feature. (Public Library)

- Our current definition is pre-1850, with occasional exceptions for more recent works of special value through association or unusual format. (Non Publicly Funded Library)
- Older material - of particular historical interest - part of a special collection (Unknown Institution)

These examples from public, private and university libraries highlight the differing views taken by institutions on what defines a rare book reflecting the individual goal of the institution. Age, the most common criterion is, of itself, not easy to define with one institution defining a book rare if it is pre -1900, others if it is pre -1850 and some not providing a specific year. What is important for one institution such as 'limited edition modern books' or 'more recent works of special value', may not be part of the collection policy of other institutions that focus on 'older material – of particular historical interest'. It is clear from these definitions that the classification of a rare book varies between institutions.

This point was reiterated by both interviewees who noted that the definition of a rare book is dependent on the goal of the institution so unless the collection development goals of all Irish institutions are similar it would be very difficult to have one consistent definition for rare books.

It seems clear that for Stephens and for the Irish institutions that the criteria used to define rare books are dependant on the goals of the institution. The fact that institutional goals and definitions of rare books vary in the libraries surveyed suggests that a coordinated approach to rare book collection is limited. This indicates that there is no integrated approach in deciding what institutions should collect which may mean that some areas or subjects are in danger of being overlooked. For this reason it may be beneficial to adopt a more collaborative approach to collections as it would help provide a consistent approach to rare book collection and cultural custodianship.

## Digitization

A further reason identified by Stephens to tackle the question of what defines a rare book is the introduction of digitization because resources that in the past have been used for maintaining and acquiring rare books are now being used

for digitization projects. Stephens also notes there is an impediment to examine this further as librarians are in an age of digitization and focusing resources and energy on 'exciting new ways of providing information', which may 'hamper reflection' and prove costly for some of Australia's cultural heritage.

Hirtle (2002) acknowledges the 'tremendous impact on society of technological innovation' giving the example of the University of Michigan's 'Making of America' collection which circulated a few hundred copies each year pre digitization but in 2002 was being viewed by 5000 people per day.<sup>12</sup> He suggests that as a result of the advantages of digitization special collections print holdings will become less special. Furthermore he states that it is not 'necessary to maintain a middling collection of rare books when access is no longer tied to physical possession, let alone ownership?' He notes that print copies may 'sell for large amounts of money to private collectors, but few libraries can or should participate in the market if most research needs can be met with digital copies. . .'. He also maintains that librarians should focus on providing digital access to rare books and that maintaining and preserving the physical copy of a rare book is not necessarily the role of the librarian.

Asked in the survey whether they agree or disagree with Hirtle's view, six of the eight respondents either disagree or strongly disagree with two respondents unsure. These results demonstrate that the view of Irish institutions in relation to the ownership and preservation of the physical copy of a rare book is contrary to Hirtle's assertions. The findings from Irish institutions correspond to the opposing view proposed by Koda (2008) and Stephens (2009) in that they promote the value of the physical copy of rare books and the role of the librarian in preserving them. Stephens maintains that special collection librarians have a duty in the 'preservation and survival of significant material' and aspects of the current digitization policy may 'threaten the future of our historically significant book collections' as due to a conflict of resources the role of special collections is reduced (Stephens). Koda emphasizes this further, maintaining that the 'raison d'être' for special collections is that their

fundamental collections are 'primary holdings' (2008).

There were mixed views from both interviewees in this area. The first interviewee agreed strongly with Stephens (2009) and Koda (2008). He also suggested that developing a physical collection of rare books helps to distinguish the institution as a research centre citing the example of Harvard, a world famous institution, as having a budget of approximately \$3 million in 2008/2009 for special collection development. He believed that such a policy is essential to distinguish a university as a research facility. Contrary to this view the second interviewee was more inclined towards the argument that access is more important than ownership based on the fact that the institution is primarily a research facility, which is in accord with Hirtle's view.

The second interviewee also observed that technology has not been tested in the long term preservation of historical material and this point was reiterated by one survey participant when asked why it was so important to have the physical book rather than access to a digital copy. 'A printed book is a proven stable platform from which your institution can provide scholarly access to historical text'. One notable example where technology has been unsuccessful in the preservation of cultural heritage described by Blackhurst (2007) was the BBC's attempt to create a Domesday book:

**'The Domesday book, written in 1086 on pages of stretched sheepskin, has lasted more than 900 years but the BBC's attempts to create a new Domesday book chronicling British life in 1986 - capturing fleeting historical records such as adolescent diaries and a video tour of a council house - was more problematic. The £2.5m project, stored on huge laser discs and readable only by a brick-like, mid-1980s vintage BBC microcomputer, became obsolete within a decade. Both the laser-disc player and the software it relied on have long since been abandoned. A specialist team from the national archives had to spend more than a year rewriting the software to rescue it from oblivion.'**

(Blackhurst, 2007)

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12 "The Impact of Digitisation on Special Collections"

## Hidden Collections

Stephens (2009) notes that 'not only are we being challenged to come up with a definition of what might belong in a heritage book collection, but we are also facing the difficulty of identifying where this material actually resides.' The ARL symposium *Building on Strength: Developing an ARL Agenda for Special Collections* held at Brown University Rhode Island in 2001 resulted in the creation of the ARL Task force and a seven-point plan of action. The first point of this plan was to enhance access to collections and backlogs to help surface 'hidden collections' (Hewitt & Panitch, 2003). This point becomes more critical when resources are being focused on digitization at the expense of other areas of the library such as rare book collections. Jones (2004) maintains that 'the cost to scholarship and society of having so much of our cultural record sitting on shelves, inaccessible to the public, represents an urgent need of the highest order to be addressed by ARL and other libraries'. As these items remain un-catalogued and, therefore inaccessible, there is a danger that important historical texts are not being identified and sufficiently maintained. The findings in Irish institutions reflect the findings elsewhere in that it identified that all of the respondents had cataloguing backlogs ranging from 100 to 100,000 items in size.

The point was reiterated when four of the eight respondents said cataloguing backlogs are common with the remaining four suggesting they are universal. The impact of this is highlighted by Jones when she notes that 'un-catalogued or under processed collections are at a greater risk of being lost or stolen' and that 'unique and rare materials are particularly vulnerable' (2004). One survey respondent indicated that this problem is actually increasing due to budget constraints: 'Due to the recruitment embargo the number of professional librarians employed has been reduced by 75% therefore the cataloguing backlog has increased'. The issue of budget constraints is particularly relevant in Ireland in recent years due to the recession and government cut backs. This issue was also discussed in both interviews with the first interviewee stating that their budget was 10% of what it had been before the recession for manuscripts and rare books. This was also reflected in the results from

the questionnaire which identified that the underlying problems that result in cataloguing issues are rooted in the common theme of staff numbers and budgets. This was identified by five of the eight respondents as the most common challenge facing rare book collections in Ireland. In addition, four out of the eight respondents replied that their budgets had decreased in the past ten years with three noting it had remained unchanged and one budget had increased. This challenge was also identified in a 1997 ARL survey, which found that large portions of collections included materials that could not be accessed as they were un-catalogued and contained significant backlogs. The RCC (Research Collections Committee) of the ARL maintained that this raised a concern regarding the vulnerability of special collections budget cuts and highlighted the need to reinforce the necessity of special collections within libraries (Research Collections Committee, 1997).

## Recommendations

The findings of this research suggest that a more concise definition of rare books would be useful in determining what should be preserved, or, at least, that institutions should take a more collaborative approach on selection criteria to ensure that the country as a whole maintains a representative collection. In addition to more collaboration and the pooling of resources, Hewitt and Panitch (2003) propose that the value of rare books to an institution needs to be promoted. Point five of the ARL seven-point plan is to 'promote special collections as fundamental to the mission of the research library'. This was reiterated in the interviews and questionnaires with one respondent noting that 'marketing the uniqueness of certain items will bring in scholars'. The first interviewee proposed that developing a physical collection of rare books promotes the institution as a research centre distinguishing it from other centres. This distinction can also be used to encourage international students to choose an institution.

Promotion through exhibitions of rare material will create greater awareness of its existence and can raise the profile of the institution as a centre of research. This can additionally serve as a revenue stream for the college such

as the example of the permanent exhibition at Trinity College. The other two areas for promotion of the value of rare books are to internal management and scholars carrying out research. Promotion of the collection to senior university management is vital as it is an opportunity to present the value that rare books can bring to the institution in terms of prestige and scholarly interest and can support applications for increased budgets and staff. Engagement with scholars can increase awareness of the research value these collections bring and assist in distinguishing the institution as a research centre thus encouraging an increased profile and further research.

## Conclusion

Patton (2009) maintains that 'the library's vast collections of printed books are in many ways the most tangible witness to the library's past and the rarest of these books its very soul'. The focus on the preservation of these books is more important than ever due to the changing world of librarians as digitization despite its many advantages can reduce our care of non-digitised material. If, as suggested by Patton, rare books, are indeed the soul of the library, then librarians need to identify and tackle the challenges that 'hidden collections' and digitisation present to their preservation to ensure they are protected for current and future generations. Taking a collaborative approach to rare book collection can ensure the safeguarding of our historical material. Librarians must also utilise the potential of digitization to promote and increase awareness of special collections and identify the balance between developing special collections and providing access through cataloguing 'hidden collections' and digitizing existing collections.

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