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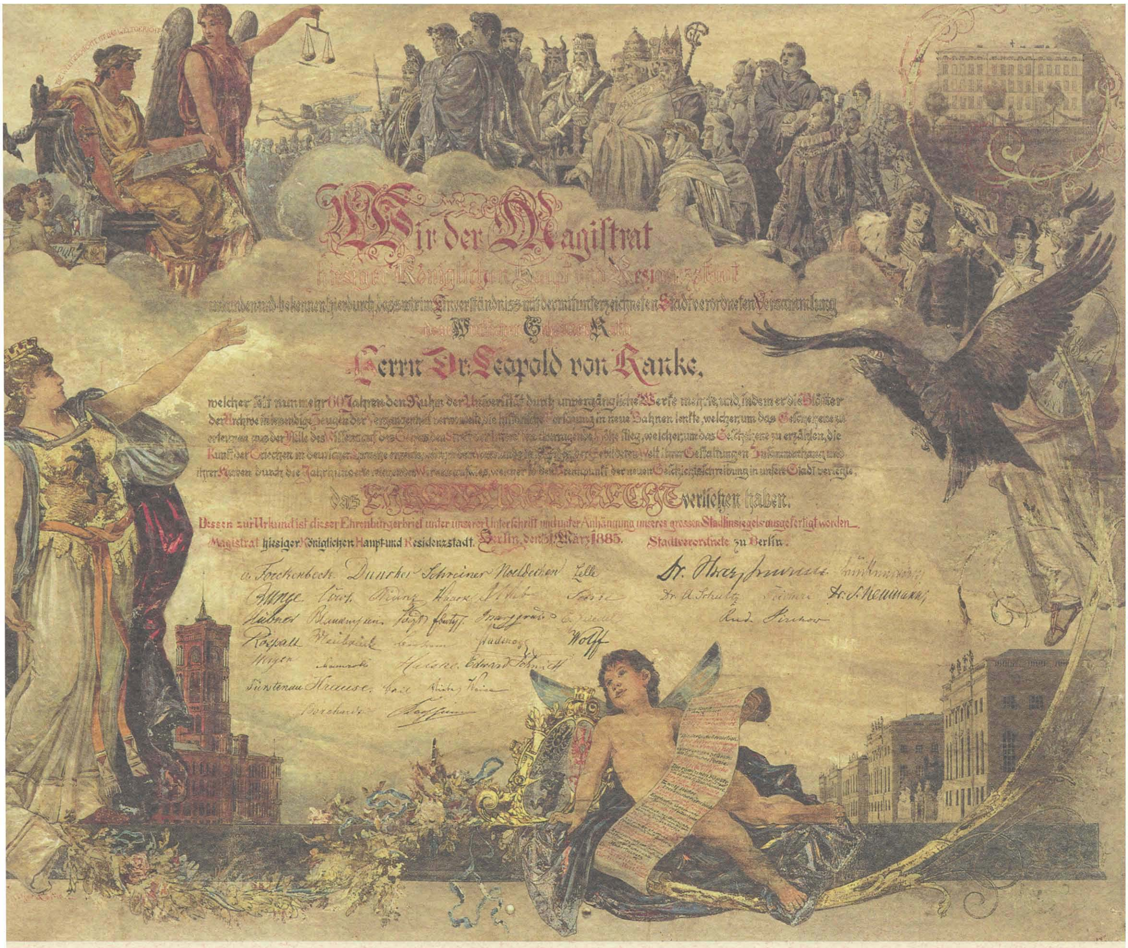

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Manuscripts Processing at Syracuse: An Insider's View

BY KATHLEEN MANWARING

REPOSITORIES OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS have long been places of mystery, awe, and speculation. Formerly, most academic libraries called such departments "Rare Books and Manuscripts." However, in an effort to render them more inviting, these operations are referred to in current practice as "Special Collections," which suggests the unique character of the aggregate of the materials. Syracuse University Library's holdings still include such rare items as Audubon's elephant (sized) portfolio and William Blake's 1789 original hand-colored engravings of *The Songs of Innocence*. Our collections, like those of our sister institutions, are no longer regarded as "rare," but as "special"; that is, our book and manuscript collections constitute *in their totality* a unique research resource rather than an assemblage of individual "rare" items.

For instance, our Department of Special Collections is the repository of the Grove Press Archive, many of which titles appear in our own home libraries. However, the fact that Special Collections houses virtually *all* of the publications (and their respective editorial records) of Grove Press—from its inception in the mid-1950s through the early 1980s, when the business was sold first to Anne Getty and, most recently, to Atlantic Monthly Press—qualifies Syracuse University Library as a research center not only for study of the press's individual titles, but also for the history of the press itself.

Add to the Grove Press Archive the editorial files, internal card files, radio scripts, dime novels, and runs of pulp fiction (*Love Story*

Kathleen Manwaring joined the Syracuse University Library staff in 1968, working in Bibliographic Services as a both a monographic and serials cataloger, until 1984 when she became a manuscripts processor and, later, supervisor in the Department of Special Collections. As a prodigious reader of contemporary fiction with a background in English literature, she brings profound knowledge and appreciation to her work with literary manuscripts and their creators.

Magazine, *The Shadow*) and general periodicals (*Mademoiselle*) that form the Street & Smith Archive, and Syracuse University Library is elevated to the status of a major repository for the study of American publishing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To this combination add the records of the American Book Company, George Braziller, Inc., E. P. Dutton, Galaxy Press, and the imprints of nineteenth-century Albany, New York, publisher Joel Munsell, among others, and Syracuse University Library makes its mark among academic institutions as a major national and international research center for the study not only of American publishing, but also of education, popular culture, and a broad spectrum of literary and social history.

This Library houses major collections not only in publishing, but in almost every discipline for which there is, or has been, a corresponding academic department on campus. Charged with the mandate to create a repository to support research in adult and continuing education, industrial design, journalism, literature, music, philosophy, religion, photography, social and political history, transportation, and the visual and performing arts, our predecessors began in the late 1950s and early '60s to build a legacy of which the entire Library staff and campus community can be proud.

When in 1984 I arrived in the (to me) alien environment of Special Collections (then the George Arents Research Library) after fifteen years of library work, I attempted to quell my initial panic by pondering similarities and differences between manuscript processing and the cataloging of books and serials. The most obvious point of comparison is measurement: while published materials are measured in centimeters, manuscript collections are measured in linear feet (one archival box equals .5 linear foot of paper, most often arranged in folders within each box). Although I had come to Special Collections after several years of cataloging serials—which themselves may endure over long periods of time and extend to several library shelves—I was unprepared for the not-uncommon tendency of manuscript collections to fill not only stack sections, but entire ranges that extend the length of the floor. Collections can contain a single item (e.g., a letter of Johannes Brahms or a mid-nineteenth-century diemaker's ledger) or several hundred archival boxes (e.g., Averell Harriman's New York State governor's papers, which sprawl to more than 1,000 linear feet). And while collections of corporate records (e.g., the American Book Company, occupying 552 linear feet) generally encompass more stack space, the personal papers of journalist Dorothy Thompson (70 linear feet), photographer Margaret Bourke-White (75 linear feet), and architect and designer Marcel Breuer (130 linear feet) need not feel dwarfed in their presence.

Accustomed, as a book cataloger, to the space constraints of the catalog card and the tyranny of the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, I was struck by the lack of uniformity among the department's bibliographic products (e.g., finding aids or inventories). Unlike book cataloging, which rigorously adheres to a standardized protocol, manuscript processing is freewheeling and seemingly lawless. As a book cataloger, one ignores the text and turns quickly to the title page or index to supply the content for a preexisting descriptive structure. However, the work of the processor is to wade into the documentation so that eventually one can *create* the title page and index (finding aid or inventory) for the collection. It is a very different exercise, and one that, unlike book cataloging, requires total immersion in the content.

ARRANGEMENT

Nevertheless, some parallels with book cataloging do exist. Manuscript processing consists of two elements: arrangement and description.[1] Arrangement refers to the organization of the collection within archival boxes; description, to the production of a finding aid or inventory reflecting that arrangement. To continue (and perhaps stretch) the analogy, one could say that book cataloging also consists of arrangement and description in the sense that classification and assignment of subject headings dictates location in much the same way as arrangement of the collection organizes its content and determines its placement within the storage containers on the shelves. Also, in both cataloging and manuscript pro-

1. Fredric M. Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 1990).

cessing, arrangement suggests content. And just as the descriptive aspect of book cataloging represents the physical artifact, the inventory acts as a guide to a manuscript collection's physical features. However, book cataloging has a certain predictability that manuscript processing lacks; books themselves (modern ones, at least) contain more or less standardized elements—title pages, tables of contents, chapters, and indexes—while manuscript collections offer no such uniformity: they are as disparate as human nature itself.

In a sense, manuscript processing has much more in common with the cataloging of serials than of books. Subject to the mercurial dispositions of editors and to capricious graphic design trends, serials, like manuscript collections, are organic, evolving, and uncontrollable. Serials cataloging falls somewhere between the pristine methodology of book description, as dictated by cataloging rules, and the almost hopelessly defiant imposition of standardization on inventory production. Like serials, manuscript collections reflect the often-whimsical choices of their creators; they also extend over time and are thus subject to changes in style and content. Serials cataloging, like manuscript processing, must take into account the historical context in which the object of description evolved.

Unlike the selection of books and other library materials, manuscript collections are only partially preselected. Donors, who most often are the subject of a collection, supply institutions either with documentation that they deliberately choose to open to scholarly inspection, or with "stuff" that their heirs need to de-accession—that is, get rid of, often in a hurry. In the first case there is the danger that a donor will hold back useful material, which will then be lost to future researchers. In the second case institutions can receive such questionable "documentation" as bronzed baby shoes, teeth and hair samples, and cartons of photographs of the family dog. But on balance, curators prefer "unexamined" documentation, which offers the potential for discovery of materials which, given more careful consideration by the source, might have been discarded as too embarrassing or otherwise unsuitable for public perusal. Institutions and scholars often benefit from the inability and/or unwillingness of donors or heirs to examine every item in a voluminous assortment of material that has been collected over a lifetime. Thus, while in a book one is unlikely to encounter anything the author doesn't wish the reader to know, a manuscript collection, by virtue of its very unwieldiness, often contains the unexpected.

Though the methodology of manuscript processing varies from one collection to another, it is always necessary to identify a context for viewing a particular organization or life (and here I will focus on the latter). Yet, even in establishing that context, approaches among manuscript processors vary. For background on the collection, I rely almost entirely on the donor file, which contains a history of the relationship between the donor and the Library. Typically, the file contains a biographical sketch, often in the form of an obituary. Although I have processed manuscript collections after reading biographies of the subjects, I prefer to rely on autobiographical data, both published and unpublished. In general, I work directly with the documentation rather than approaching it with a preconceived notion of what I should find. Although I admire and respect the work of biographers, I regard them, in the context of manuscript processing, as unwanted mediators between myself and the subjects of collections. However, I've worked with many processors who are uncomfortable with the idea of plunging directly into 100 linear feet of unsorted paper; and I, as a supervisor of other processors, encourage the development of individual approaches to the work. No two manuscript processors will produce identical inventories. Also, manuscript collections reflect a lived, rather than a carefully selected, life. Unlike a book, which has a planned structure that fits together because the author consciously selected the elements that form its content, life, governed by an uneasy mixture of choice and chance, is unpredictable, messy, and characterized by loose ends. However, the job of the manuscript processor is not to impose a static structure on the description of an evolving artifact (as perspectives on the collection will vary over time), but to discover and reflect the underlying structure of the individual's life experience. Rather than mold the elements of the collection into a standardized formal structure, manuscript processing illuminates, and in so doing celebrates, the richness and randomness of the human experience.

I regard the first principle of archival work, maintenance of the original order,[2] as a general goal rather than a literal prescription for manuscript processing. Absent the organization that might have been imposed by an observant and consistent secretary, most manuscript collections reflect the chaos inherent in real life. It is therefore at least as misleading to maintain exactly the original order (as likely to have come about by chance as by choice) as it is to impose a preexisting structure on each life. An inherent tension exists between the reluctance to tamper with the original order of the collection and the mandate to make accessible its components. A broad acquaintance with human nature suggests that the personal papers of a particular individual are not likely to be more organized than the contents of anyone else's desk, closet, attic, or garage—from which places such documentation is most often gathered. For instance, a subject's correspondence, particularly as it is accumulated over several decades, is often arranged within a collection alphabetically, chronologically, and by topic. In the absence of inherent consistency, the manuscript processor must choose a method of organization, preferably one that will both reflect the integrity of the individual life *and* facilitate retrieval of individual items by researchers. This is where processing theory rubs uneasily against the practical demands of public service.[3]

Faced with the archival correlative of "Sophie's choice," the manuscript processor must not only take into account the various, and sometimes competing, interests of potential users, but also balance the needs of the researcher with the practical limitations of staff time for both processing and responding to researcher and donor queries.

Like biographers, processors learn much about the public and private lives of their subjects. While from a distance such work may seem to offer possibilities for bribery, or at the least detached amusement, I have found that such a privileged position has a

2. Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, pp. 26, 27.
3. Ibid., 75.

humanizing effect on the processor. Through immersion in manuscript material comes the discovery that regardless of one's achievements or status, no one is immune to human experience: childhood traumas, parental worries, errant children, spousal conflict, misunderstandings among one's friends and colleagues, illness, and loss of loved ones. The processor becomes aware not only of the details of a particular life, but of the universality of the human condition. I have often considered the irony that in uncovering the hidden life of an often remote (in time) and shadowy (i.e., little known or previously unknown) subject, the person one becomes most knowledgeable about is *oneself.* Although manuscript processing is an isolating experience that can extend over a long period of time, boredom is a rare occurrence. Though perusing the documentation is a bit like making a new friendship, it is not *quite* that. For in the growing awareness of the many connections in the subject's life, the processor becomes less like a friend and more like the subject himself or herself; even the subject's friends had only partial views, and were not privileged to know the extent or the depth or richness of the connections in the subject's life.

While plumbing the depths of an individual life, the processor of a collection inevitably forms an opinion about the subject. This can make working with a living donor uncomfortable for both. It is better for a processor to acknowledge the problem of this one-sided familiarity, thereby defusing a potentially uneasy situation and building a relationship with the donor that might, in other circumstances, be considered less than "businesslike." Naturally, donors wonder about the character of the person who is pawing through their correspondence, writings, and other personal documentation. For most donors and their heirs, the letting go of their personal papers is an unprecedented experience, and one that can cause them to feel vulnerable. Therefore, it is important to establish trust between the donor and the processor. Because I work mostly with literary collections, I often speak about or write to donors about my reading interests. I find this puts them at ease, and invites them to inquire about other aspects of my personal life. In this way, I can begin to neutralize the rather unnatural imbalance that occurs when an unknown person has access to personal details of another's life. Sometimes donors will talk about the situation, in which case I admit that, at such close range, everyone's life is interesting, but not more fascinating to me than my own. I find that this reply addresses both imagined and real "voyeurism issues" on both sides of the processor-donor relationship.

In examining the collection, the processor will inevitably encounter inconsistencies in the documentation. These can range from conflicting biographical data (e.g., the Margaret Bourke-White Papers offer any number of birth years on legal documents) to changes in the subject's opinions over the course of a lifetime. While it is the work of the manuscript processor to reveal, or at least not obscure, such variances, he or she is not the omniscient judge of the reliability of the documentation. It is the purview of the scholar to draw conclusions and, if possible, resolve, or at least indicate, contradictions among the records.

DESCRIPTION

Having chosen the least compromising organizational model (among a range of options, none of which quite matches the existing situation) for the collection, the manuscript processor turns to description, the creation of an inventory, finding aid, or other product that results from a particular arrangement. After weeks, months, or even years of exploring, arranging, and, as needed, administering preservation treatment to the hundreds or thousands of documents, the manuscript processor begins to think about the collection in its totality, moving from the particularity of a collection's details to the generality of their categorization. That task must be accomplished through language, the organizing tool of thought itself. The arrangement of the physical materials is mirrored in the language of the inventory. A casual glance at the inventory should reveal not only this physical arrangement of the collection, but, ideally, suggest the corresponding unity of the individual life. In the production of the inventory, the manuscript processor must develop a lexicon, or a "controlled vocabulary," for the collection that is applied consistently in the description. That vocabulary must be flexible enough to unify disparate elements of the collection, while also being transparent to the researcher: the language of the inventory should evolve from the collection's arrangement *and* appear to fit together in a readily accessible pattern.

Often pressed for time, neither researchers nor public service colleagues are free to read a lengthy explanation of the theory behind the arrangement of a collection. In truth, for even a modestly-sized collection of personal papers, a simple list of folders within each box often extends to forty or fifty pages, and many collection inventories comprise a hundred pages or more. If the manuscript processor is successful, the arrangement and description should be at once readily accessible and invisible: the inventory should call attention to the collection, not the manuscript processor.

Feedback is vital to a manuscript processor's training. What at times seems obvious to the processor can be a source of confusion to the researcher, either because of the nature of the inquiry (i.e., the desire to know something that is obscured by the processor's choice of an alphabetical rather than a chronological arrangement) or simply because the processor has made a poor choice among arrangement possibilities. But the noble desire of the manuscript processor to anticipate queries is often short-circuited not only by the competing interests of individual researchers, but also by the changing needs of a single researcher over time—and by the evolving nature of research itself. What might have been an adequate inventory for 1968 seems an inexcusably inept handling of the same collection in the year 2001. Working with researchers affords processors the opportunity to update our processing procedures to generate bibliographic products that will best suit an evolving research environment.

It is impossible to underestimate the impact of computer technology on contemporary manuscript processing. For instance, the basis on which folders (and their corresponding name index cards) are generated has changed with the use of online databases for name verification of a subject's correspondents. For more than a decade, the standard processing procedure has been to check each correspondent's name, as it is deciphered, against both the Library of Congress authority file (containing the established form of a name) and an international electronic database of catalog records. As the processor happens upon a "hit," he or she generates a folder heading for that person's name, even for a single item of correspondence. Prior to 1985, for lack of access to such a database, the production of folder headings was limited to correspondents who generated a sizable number of letters *and* whose names were recognized by the processor.

Yet the impact of technology isn't the only stimulus for changes in processing procedures. When Syracuse University Library began to collect contemporary manuscripts, it was thought that the documentation would be used by biographers who would peruse the collections on-site, proceeding from Box 1 through to the end. We now understand that researchers are more likely to use parts of several collections, and that it is necessary to provide access to individual items. Yet, as is true of all archival institutions, we live with our past. In fact, I have no doubt that future processors will regard our to-them primitive processing procedures with amusement and frustration. Archival service is both informed and limited by our evolving understanding of research needs, which, in their turn, are also changing.

The development of the Internet has offered both challenges and opportunities in the research environment. New protocols for the production of searchable manuscript inventories are being explored and implemented. The application of new technologies in the present environment has forced institutions to reexamine, and move toward standardization of, inventory production in the form of Encoded Archival Description (EAD). Yet the same technology that threatens the highly prized maintenance of a collection's unique integrity has also broadened our traditional user base to include not only scholars, but also pop culture buffs and other web surfers who are unaffiliated with academic institutions. Of course, the challenges of the web environment for manuscript processing cannot be addressed separately from those that affect other library operations.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of archival work is the possibility for development of long-term relationships between researchers and Special Collections staff. This is particularly true for manuscript processors who have the opportunity to examine and explore newly acquired material as well as discover treasures among the unprocessed or partially processed collections. Few events match the thrill of interacting with a researcher who is presently working with a collection one has processed. Suddenly, all the information one has accumulated in working with a subject's papers can be unleashed upon the one person in the world who would most want to know it! Once that connection is established, the relationship can, and often does, flourish over the course of several months, and even years. In this way processors form partnerships with researchers, to the benefit, professionally and personally, of both.

Lest I leave the impression that manuscript processors retreat into a single collection and never emerge, I should mention that there are various levels of processing that generate a variety of bibliographic products. Often new collections, or those for which no inventory was previously produced, receive "partial processing." The resulting bibliographic products are simple box listings of folders, which have been given no, or only "emergency," preservation treatment. Although such collections are rehoused in archival containers, their contents are not relabeled or placed in acid-free folders, nor is there an attempt to remove and replace rusty metalwork with rust-free staples. Depending upon the size of the collection, there may not be adequate time or processing space to determine a formal arrangement: folders are simply removed from shipping containers and placed directly in archival containers, with a list of the folder headings, as they arrived from the donor, generated for each box. While such finding aids lack the planning, consistency, and careful execution of a formal inventory, they prove very helpful when a researcher (or, more often, the donor himself or herself) requests retrieval of an item: one does not relish the prospect of searching through sixty or seventy liquor cartons of unsorted paper to look for *anything*! Partial processing also offers the opportunity for a more careful examination of the collection at a later time, and in the relatively undisturbed state in which it arrived. Thus, when and if a formal inventory is produced, the manuscript processor will have the opportunity to work with the collection in as close to its original state as possible.

The production of a formal inventory is not undertaken lightly: it involves enormous resources in terms of personnel, time, and space, and is most often reserved for those collections for which there has been a demonstrated research interest, and for which no additional material is expected. It is generally acknowledged in the production of a formal inventory that the manuscript processor is unlikely to "pass that way again." On the other hand, the life of the manuscript processor is no less unpredictable than are the lives of the subjects of his or her work. Despite technological advances, it is never easy to incorporate additional material into an existing collection. From the processor's point of view, shifting (both within and among boxes, and the corresponding adjustments to the inventory that result from that relocation) is always done grudgingly, regardless of the excitement surrounding the arrival of a valuable new addition to a collection. Unlike the customary single-handling of book cataloging, there is scant control over how the collection will evolve over time: even the death of the donor offers no guarantee that additional material will not eventually find its way to Special Collections. (While such additions to a collection can surface several decades after processing, it is no less likely that new material will appear while the printer is still warm after generating ten copies of an eighty-page inventory.) Like the creature from the black lagoon that just "keeps coming," a collection once thought to be safely "inactive" can suddenly become "enriched" by additions. As with serials catalogers, manuscript processors exercise no control over the character or growth of the objects of their descriptive effort.

Given the extent of manuscript collections and their ongoing capacity for change, it is important for a processor to accept his or her own limitations. Given the size and long-term nature of processing projects, they are inevitably subject to interruption, and, therefore, inconsistencies, which work to keep the processor humble. Regardless of careful revision, there *will* be mistakes in both arrangement (misfiled documents) and description (inaccuracy because of illegibility or incomplete documentation). Yet, even with careful preparation, the processor can sometimes disappoint the researcher because the documentation that *should* be with the collection is missing, either destroyed intentionally by the donor or heirs or simply damaged by the elements before safe delivery to the archival institution. Manuscript processors never lack for reminders that we live in an imperfect world.