
Visionary Position

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WHAT IS A NATIONAL LIBRARY? There is no simple answer to that question. The National Library of Scotland, which has been a Legal Deposit library since 1710, houses 8 million printed items and each week collects about 4500 more. As well as holding core national collections it is rich in material expressing Scotland's influence on the world, its engagement with "otherness". The inward focus adopted by some national libraries would misrepresent Scotland's politically gregarious history.

When Martyn Wade came into post as National Librarian nearly two years ago, he inaugurated a review intended to transform the institution and its image. Wade's patina may be subdued, but his energy is high-octane. A biker (his is a Honda), he tops up his own tank with adrenalin. He talks targets. For starters, £33 million for the John Murray archive. Fear of change is on his hit-list and staff empowerment workshops on the agenda. A new contingent of high-energy, hot-desking marketing experts are pitching for media attention. An education outreach programme is being fine-tuned to "key" Scottish Executive priorities of lifelong learning, enterprise and social justice. The walls of the George IV Bridge building – popularly dubbed "the coffin" – have been studded with eye-catching display cases announcing what's on.

Catching the biggest headlines is the campaign to raise £33 million to bring the John Murray archive to Scotland. Announcing the Scottish Executive's decision to donate £6.5 million to the cause, Culture Minister Frank McAveety described it as "a link to the critical role that Scots have paid in the development of ideas and imagination through the centuries". The Heritage Lottery Fund has been approached for £22 million and the Library itself must raise £6.5 million to match the Scottish Executive contribution. This assault on corporate philanthropy will be spearheaded by a professional fund-raiser. If fortune favours the brave, a John Murray archive development fund of £3 million will come to the Library from the purchase price.

The archive is a vast collection of papers and correspondence, 150,000 items documenting over 200 years of the great publishing house. It encompasses the "most extensive and important"

Byron collection in the world – most of his original manuscripts and annotated proofs, his surviving journals and around 1200 letters. (It has been widely rumoured that it also contained the laddish Lord's "trophy pubic hairs", but not so.)

The "first John Murray" was an Edinburgh man who worked on an estate near Elgin before heading south to London, where he established his publishing house in 1768. The firm's premises at 50 Albemarle Street became a magnet for generations of thinkers and dreamers brought into print by enterprising Murrays – David Livingstone, Charles Darwin, Jane Austen, David Ricardo, Thomas Carlyle, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sir Walter Scott, John Galt, Thomas Malthus, Benjamin Disraeli, William Ewart Gladstone, Samuel Smiles, Herman Melville, Washington Irving and the artist David Roberts, to name but a few.

Researchers already enjoy some access to the papers at Albemarle Street, causing academic John Sutherland to surmise that the archive might be "a plumless pudding". Others contend that powerful research energies will be released if the archive is placed in the crucible of the NLS, where potential for cross-interpretation and elucidation of collections will be unleashed.

The Murray campaign coincides with a major strategy revision drafted in *Breaking Through the Walls*. The stated aim is to take the Library to the country and bring people into the Library who may not even have registered its existence until now. Events, talks, publications, exhibitions, street theatre, education and electronic communications are being imaginatively deployed to make accessibility a reality. Wade has added more than a spiky dynamism to the process of outreach which was already under way when he took charge. A step change in Library culture is taking place.

The burning question is, will the Library's role as a centre of research be diminished or enhanced in this thrust towards "accessibility"?

Founded "for the encouragement of learning", the NLS is essentially a thinking tool. Like a wondrous ark, it carries into the future selected manuscripts and the cumulative printed expression of Scotland's national identity. Curatorial expertise and understanding of the



collections is pivotal to this ongoing transmission of knowledge. There are concerns that this behind-the-scenes work may be pruned. The British Library obliquely touches on the issue in its response to *Breaking Through the Walls*:

The NLS's draft plan sets out a challenging range of new activities in support of the new vision. We wonder, does the Library plan to reduce or curtail activity in other areas to accommodate the new initiatives or will there be an internal prioritisation process to help manage potential pressure on resources? We recognise the challenge of managing competing demands on resources, and see prioritisation as a key element of a robust strategy; we would be very interested to learn more about your own approach to prioritisation of activities.

Professor David C. Simpson, a former Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Edinburgh, voices concern that “fundamental long-term core roles of collecting, conservation and ... continuity of expertise” have not been given “quite the importance one might have expected”. These and other responses to the draft strategy are posted on the Library's website.

To say that the primary task must be to nurture the Library as a centre of research is not to be elitist. That is its essential role. Reading rooms are quiet for a good reason – it is the

materials on offer, and sometimes the mediation of curators, that really make them user-friendly; the dramas taking place are (largely) internalised.

Intellectual research is not a spectator sport, nor are its tools necessarily visually arresting, but it does bear fruit that can transform the lives of all. Martyn Wade's vision of making the collections known as widely as possible via digitisation is an inspiring, democratic aspiration – and one that is only possible because certain people spent a lot of time quietly, and innovatively, thinking. From small groups of specialists, knowledge spread. Theories spawned technologies, triggering the electronic revolution.

Martyn Wade is a public servant shouldering a complex set of responsibilities. If he brings the John Murray archive to Scotland he will have done the country proud. And if he doesn't it won't be for lack of determined effort. His commitment to responsive, pragmatic management has been clearly articulated.

Obviously priorities and policy will be determined according to a set of values. But what values, and whose?

Responsibility for crystallising and asserting these values should not be ceded to the staff and trustees of the Library. They would be the first to acknowledge that they are merely the custodians, not the owners, of Scotland's national collections. Public discourse must be carried beyond the artificial confines of a “consultation period”. From once sleepy corridors, Martyn Wade has sounded a wake-up call.