

## **GOOD HOUSEKEEPING: AN ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN'S LAMENT**

***Paper presented at the SAPCON Conference: 'Preservation on a shoestring', William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley, 25-28 July 2006.***

I am delighted to be given the opportunity to address this meeting of preservation, archival and library professionals on a topic as important as good housekeeping. I am, however, am also saddened – but not surprised because that seems to be the way the world is going - by the fact that so many of the papers on the programme of the conference of what used to be called the South African Paper Conservation Group Conference deal not with the small actions, like good housekeeping, that make preservation of paper-based materials possible, but with their digitization. I am no Luddite, but I know where my interests lie. I am sure that most of you know the Pedigree dog food advertisement currently being flighted on television, so you will understand what I mean when I say that 'I'm for books'. So it will be of books that I will be speaking primarily. I admit that I am entirely partisan, for both personal and professional reasons.

Much of what I will have to say this afternoon will be anecdotal, and some of it might be amusing, but please do not think for one moment that I wish to make light of a very important subject. As you know I am the University of Cape Town Libraries' Rare Books Librarian. I am also the English subject librarian and an Historical Studies subject librarian. That is my official designation, but I consider myself a curator of the materials under my care whether they are housed in the Rare Books & Special Collections department or on the Humanities shelves of the Library. I see to their preservation and protection. In fact, I have long thought the task of the librarian to be that of a steward of cultural resources and was delighted to see this description used in a number of papers presented at a Library of Congress symposium held in 2000 as one of the events celebrating the Library's bicentennial year.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the contributors to this symposium whose papers were published share my view that we are deluding ourselves into thinking that books as we know them will be replaced any time soon by electronic or digital substitutes. More and more books (printed on paper) are published annually. Often even the recently published titles go out of print very quickly – so one can argue that all books, not only those considered 'rare' or 'special' need to be cared for. Books and other printed materials produced in the last 100 years when poor paper and binding techniques were used need as much protection – if not more – than those printed 500 years ago. You know, of course, that *incunabula* and books published before the 1840s were printed on rag-based acid-free paper, their bindings hand-sewn and, most importantly, they were housed in the colder, and therefore not centrally-heated and more book-

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill, Andrea T (ed.). [2003]. *The strategic stewardship of cultural resources: to preserve and protect: papers from the Library of Congress Symposium "To reserve and protect: the strategic stewardship of cultural resources."* New York: Howorth Information Press.

friendly, environment of Europe, It is not surprising, then, that no less than the director *emeritus* of the Folger Shakespeare Library can assert that despite the critical role played by microform and digital preservation, 'print may well turn out to be the most stable of the technologies available to us'.<sup>2</sup>

I have long drawn inspiration from the words of John Milton, the seventeenth-century English poet and man of letters who, in his *Aeropagitica*, a spirited defence of the freedom of the press, wrote the following: 'For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule whose progeny they are; nay they doe preserve as in a violll the purest efficacie & extraction of that living intellect that bred them....And yet on the other hand unlesse warinesse be us'd, as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the Earth; but a good Booke is a pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd & treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life'<sup>3</sup>. I work in an environment where I see how young minds are inspired by the 'good books' with which they come into contact. However convenient they might find the material they locate via electronic resources or digitization, this almost spiritual connection they make with the book as artefact is something that they never forget.

Of course, I am preaching to the converted. All of you know that research libraries, great or small, are repositories of our social, cultural and scientific heritage. Their holdings are vital to an understanding of the world in which we live, and their rare books and manuscripts are often irreplaceable as research tools for scholars whose role it is enhance our knowledge of ourselves and the environment in which we operate. It is for this reason that these holdings need to be preserved and protected.

The problem is, of course, how to do this...on a shoestring, Librarians, academic or otherwise, who are concerned with the preservation of the book as an object have daily to perform a delicate balancing act between the needs of the book and the demands of the user. The books need to be preserved and protected while the user wants – no, demands - access. The sad thing is that very often the hands-on preservation needs of books are overtaken by the far more glamorous yet expensive and first world approach of digitization and conversion of materials to an electronic format.

There are ways and means, however, of looking after books without crippling the budget, but these need commitment from library management and support from the Preservation Officer and his/her staff as well as support from the library management to this vitally important unit. Sometimes it is the smallest of actions that can have the most lasting effect. I am sure that you all know of Benjamin Franklin's maxim regarding the loss of a horseshoe nail: 'A little neglect may breed great mischief....For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for

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<sup>2</sup> 'Gundersheiner, Werner. 'Learning to blush: librarians and the embarrassment of exposure' in Merrill, p.19.

<sup>3</sup> Milton, John. *Areopagitica: a speech ... for the liberty of unlicens'd printing, to the Parliament of England*. London: Doves Press, 1907, p. 13.

want of a shoe the horse was lost; and for want of a horse the rider was lost, being overtaken and slain by the enemy, all for want of care about a horse-shoe nail'. Of course, the idea is that for the want of a soldier, the battle was lost. We cannot afford to lose our battle.

I have devised a mnemonic to remind us how we can best carry out our mandate as stewards answerable to succeeding generations for the care of collections of accumulated culture and knowledge, and what the obstacles we face as we fulfil this mandate could be. This consists of the 5 vowels, A,E,I,O,U and three (well, maybe four) consonants,

The three consonants are TLC (tender, loving care) which is actually what library materials require but in this instance stands for Time, Library staff and Common sense. We must acknowledge the fact that caring for books so that they will survive into the future takes some time. Time taken now can result in time saved later. T can also stand for training, which is what library staff need to have in order to become book sensitive. L, of course, represents the Library staff, often considered the greatest enemy of the book. C is for Common sense, which is perhaps the most important quality which should be applied at all times when caring for library materials. It seems such a pity that these basic skills and general attitudes are not taught in library schools throughout the country.

For good measure I should throw in an additional consonant, that being P, which represents the Preservation Officer, who together with other members of staff have set up a Programme and devised a Plan to care for library materials. P is also for People who need to use common sense and clean hands when working with books.

As for the vowels, they can represent anything that library staff should be or do to preserve books, but here are just a few words which could be appropriate. I will elaborate on them in a moment.

A = Assertive, Alert

E = Enterprising and willing to Engage with the Preservation Unit and its staff. Also, E for Education - that of both staff and library users - in the needs of the book

I = Intuitive, Innovative

O = Observant

And

U = the User, whose co-operation is essential.

Library staff need to be alert, so they are able to detect any book that needs looking after, the book with torn pages, damaged spine or loose covers. They also need to be assertive and feel sufficiently empowered so that they can accost a user who has, for example, disobeyed the library's no-food rule, or is busy underlining a library book, or has placed a book face-down.

They need to be enterprising so that they can come up with solutions when book drops, for example, damage the books thrown into them. They need to be taught to become sensitive to the book so that they can understand why certain practices and procedures are carried out. Users should also be instructed in these issues, not only when they transgress but whenever library orientation is offered. They should be encouraged to alert staff to a torn or uncut page, or damaged spine and should understand that books need protection from the elements. Staff must liaise or engage with the Preservation Unit whenever a book is at risk and not intervene inappropriately themselves.

Staff need be intuitive, and be encouraged to use their discretion. They should be innovative, just because something has been done 'just so' for decades does not mean that it has to be done in that way forever if another and better procedure come to mind.

They need to observe any action on the part of any user which might compromise a book, such as when the book is placed face-down. In this instance they should encourage the user to use a book mark.

Library staff, however, cannot be expected to become any of the above if they do not feel that they work they do adds value to the institution they serve and is appreciated by their supervisors and managers. They must have a strong sense of pride in what they do, and have a sense of 'owning', albeit temporarily, the resources they care for, they must feel that they are able to participate in decision-making about issues that affect their working lives, and they must feel appreciated and valued.

In the case of an academic library, the student users, whose sojourn in the university environment is comparatively brief, should be considered allies rather than the enemy. This can be done, however, only if they understand why certain rules exist and why certain procedures are put into place. Unfortunately, it is very rarely that staff are afforded an opportunity to explain to them why they should not deface books, bring food into the library, allow library materials to get wet, etc, so indirect (ie. not face-to-face) methods for imparting this information to them need to be sought.

I would like now to turn to the sub-title of this presentation and do a little 'lamenting'. Academic programmes generally make great demands of a university library's staff and stock. The programmes include rookies who are relatively ignorant of library procedures, the more seasoned student who is quite blasé about the library, the postgraduate students whose demands are fairly sophisticated and the academics who often work under pressure and who wants their demands met promptly and efficiently. The vacation periods no longer seem to give staff any respite in catching up with unfinished business from the semester before. Circulation statistics are high and library materials are viewed as commodities moving along a fast-moving conveyor belt. This puts the books in jeopardy to some extent, so they need assistance

from staff at the commencement of the process by which they are absorbed into the library stock.

The University of Cape Town Libraries offers staff a training programme. Regrettably, it is usually only support staff who participate in this programme, although on some occasions some paraprofessionals have attended. This year, rather unusually, two members of the professional staff were present, but unfortunately, heads of department or of branch libraries, let alone managers have ever participated. Some years ago the then Conservation (now Preservation) Committee commissioned a poster entitled *Collection management guidelines for library staff*. Some of the guidelines are outdated, but most are still very relevant and they serve as a useful 'manual' for training staff. They are supposed to be displayed in plain sight in all departments. I shall run through some of these guidelines now, and follow them with my comments when relevant. Under the sub-heading 'TLC for library materials' staff are told to:-

- Leave the repair of books to the experts. Look out for brittle materials, especially when photocopying.
- Never carry a large pile of books in your arms, use a book trolley but do not overload the trolley.

*This is a case, unfortunately, of my not practising what I preach as I tend to carry too many books in the crook of my left arm: the aisles between the bookshelves in my department are very narrow and it is not possible for me to manoeuvre a trolley and myself at the speed that is required by the impatient user.*

*Circulation staff report that they overload the trolleys as they are expected by their supervisors to move books from returns to the holding bays and on to the bookshelves as rapidly as possible.*

- Line book drops with foam rubber to ensure a soft landing.

*I have been told that at least one of the drops in use has lost its springs so that books returned to it are really battered. Book drops, even those that are thickly padded, are not book-friendly, and more appropriate methods of handling returns should be devised. What about something like a cloth laundry basket (made out of padded fabric) that is suspended from a frame or conveyor belts that gently move the returns along?*

- Keep books and food separate, even in workrooms.

*We know that backroom staff eat and drink at their desks. At least they carry the food peels and packaging away with them.*

- Open stiff books carefully, even when new. Do not force them open.

- Excessive heat and light damage paper and speed up deterioration.

*Sadly, some of the top shelves of the stacks are positioned too close to the light, and in some branches shelves are bathed in sunlight.*

- Paper clips and elastic bands are the enemies of books.

*Unfortunately, some habits are hard to break. Although the training sessions have raised an awareness of the damage done by elastic bands and paper clips they are still used. Sometimes, though, books are sent interdepartmentally in envelopes, boxes, wrapped in brown paper or 'tied' together with paper strips, so this is a small skirmish that is being won.*

- Never attach a *Post-it note* to any part of a book. The adhesive causes paper deterioration.

*Post-it notes are still found in books, but largely in those returned by academics. Other objects with adhesives, however, are used on library materials. These include the barcode label so often stuck on the title page of a book or the distributors' label pasted on the front of journals (which could so easily be peeled off at point of entry into the library but become 'stuck fast' as time goes on.*

- Use pencils when working with library materials.

*I do not think that pens need be used at all, except to sign documents, and library staff should get into the habit of having only pencils at hand.*

- Never place a book face-down. Always use a bookmark.

*I'll be discussing bookmarks later.*

- Never attach bookplates, pocket corners or date sheets to decorated endpapers.

*Pocket corners are, of course, no longer used, but processing staff continue to deface decorated endpapers. Circulation staff would welcome some consistency in the positioning of the barcode, which in a way replaces the pocket corner, as this would speed up the issuing and discharging routines.*

- Date sheets are normally attached to the fly-leaf. When, however, the endpapers are decorated, apply adhesive minimally to the edge of the date sheet and affix it to the verso of the fly-leaf.

*Staff need, of course, to know the constituent parts of a book so that they can identify the endpapers, the fly-leaves, the fore-edge, the spine, and know what a verso is. Again, sometimes a small action (like the replacement of a horseshoe nail) which takes only seconds to*

*accomplish, can extend the life of a book for years. The seconds gained in cutting out routines that preserve a book need to be weighed against the benefits of a simple procedure which could be considered time-wasting, but should be seen as necessary.*

Under the sub-heading "Library practices" the following guidelines appear:-

- Basic house keeping is important. Report insect infestation as soon as possible.

*Fortunately the library's kitchens and workrooms are fumigated regularly and Goliath Gel is used as a general fumigant. Areas where rare and special books are housed are environmentally controlled and all areas of the Library are dusted and vacuumed regularly.*

- Shelve books upright, never on their fore-edge. Keep the books loose enough for easy removal, but not so loose that they will flop on the shelves. Do not shelve the books hard up against the back of the shelf.

*One of the benefits of these training sessions has been that large books are no longer shelved on their fore-edges but on their spine. This, however, creates problems for both the shelver and the user, as the spinemarks are obscured. The processing staff have to come on board here as they need to mark a large book that might be shelved on its spine on the bottom right-hand corner of the front cover. As for not shelving them too tight or too loose: both of these practices occur in different parts of the Library. In areas where space for book are at a premium, books are very tight on the shelves. Regrettably, in a department like mine there is a dearth of bookends, so books do tend to flop around on the shelves. I must admit, though, that we have just completed a massive re-shelving exercise and it is hoped that a solution to this problem will be found shortly.*

- Do not remove a book from the shelf by pulling on the spine with your finger, rather push its neighbours away and grasp it between thumb and forefinger.

*Well, I have no doubt that our Binder could report that many books with broken spines still come to the Bindery for repair.*

- Oversized books should be shelved lying flat. Books that do not easily fit onto the standard shelves should be shelved separately.

*In most departments this is never achieved as no provision is made for oversized shelving except for reference works like atlases. This is a tragedy and, again, can only be accomplished with the co-operation from the staff in cataloguing who would indicate the size of the book on the record and note that it is shelved separately.*

The final sub-heading reads 'For attention in Conservation Department':-

- Uncut pages must be cut by Conservation Department staff.

*UCT Library's Binder, its Preservation Officer and his colleague will be retiring in 2007. I understand that this is the scenario facing other libraries in South Africa in respect of preservation and bindery staff. A huge amount of expertise will be lost when master craftsmen like these leave. We can only hope that succession planning has been put in place and that the void that their departure will create will be rapidly filled. Books in this country will otherwise be greatly imperilled.*

- Send a wet book to the Conservation Department as soon as possible. If this is not possible immediately freeze the book.

*UCT Libraries has a disaster management programme in place, so wet books are generally properly handled. What we need to do is to make the users aware of the need to protect books from getting wet, be it in the rain, in the boot of a leaking car or being read in the bath. I was absolutely delighted when an academic staff member returned to me a book he had borrowed – wrapped in plastic to prevent it from getting wet on a cold, rainy Cape Town winter's day.*

Many of these guidelines are based on common-sense and the principle that a little intervention now can prevent great harm later.

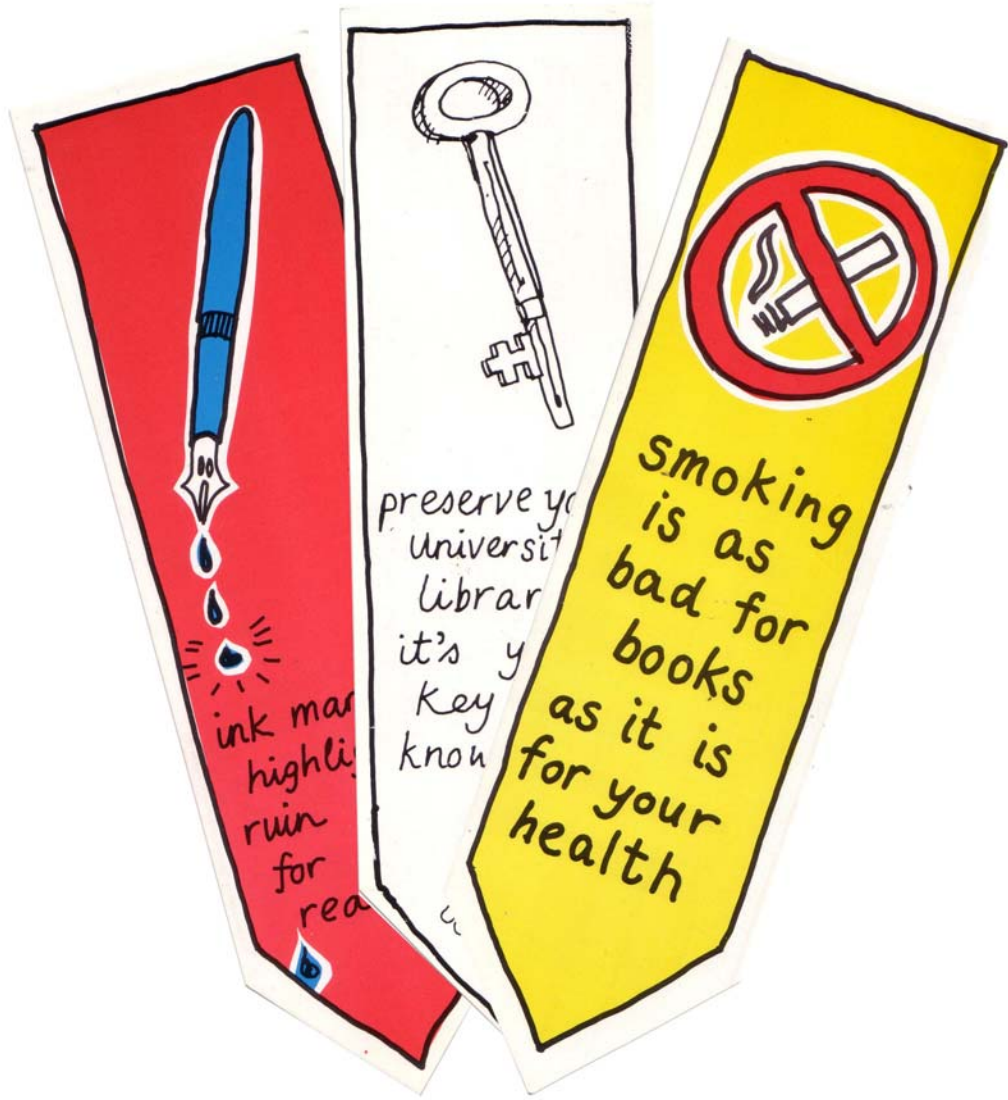
We should also operate on the principle that many books have the potential of becoming 'rare' or 'special' and treat all of them with the required care. One of the most disheartening of my duties is to select books from the open shelves or branch libraries for transfer to Rare Books & Special Collections. Just a few weeks ago I came across a two-volume set which had originally been bound in full calf, beautifully decorated by one of England's top binders. One volume had been rebound in library binding, the other was so badly worn that the decorations were almost invisible.

What of the users? Many of them have not been exposed to books of the quantity that they encounter in an academic library. They have become alienated from the book because of the predominance in their lives of the television and the computer and the entertainments that these offer. They have not even been properly taught how to turn a page, thinking that 'finger-lickin' is good. UCT is a privileged institution, but there are many young South Africans who have not been exposed to books at all. As part of our education campaign the then Conservation Committee designed some bookmarks for users, each of which contained a friendly message introducing principles of TLC for library materials and a positive 'vibe' about the role of the Library and its staff in their lives. Some of these bookmarks are shown at the end of this paper. The image in the middle of the first 'set' displays the verso of the bookmark, which reads 'preserve your university's library – it's your key to knowledge'. These bookmarks have been discontinued, but like our poster for

staff, should be updated and made available. Any message, subliminal or more direct, that can convey to students a book friendly ethos should be used repeatedly.

My lamentations need not be excessive, though. Improvements are being made, and with the co-operation of all role-players I believe that the state of the book in UCT Libraries will ultimately be a healthy one. Ours is a sacred trust, as our holdings provide future scholarship with the means for scholarly enquiry. Members of the public who contribute either directly or indirectly to the acquisition of library materials for this scholarly enquiry expect nothing less from us as stewards of our cultural and intellectual heritage.

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ink marks  
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Smoking  
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