

THE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

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In recent years the Bibliographical Society (hereafter the Society) has been regularly approached for advice regarding a number of libraries and book collections which have either been sold and dispersed or threatened with dispersal.

The Society recognises that the dispersal of libraries has always taken place and that weeding and disposal are necessary and appropriate aspects of a responsible collection management policy. However, the motivations behind dispersal must be sound and transparent and in all cases the Society urges caution and recommends adequate consultation.

The following guidelines reflect the sorts of considerations libraries should take into account when assessing the desirability and appropriateness of disposal. These are also the areas the Society would consider when deciding whether to make a statement of concern or otherwise to advise or intervene in public debate on behalf of the Society's membership, in line with its Declaration of Purpose as a public Registered Charity:

- **Collection integrity:** collections of books are frequently purposeful, reflecting the personality of a private collector or the motivations of an institution. Individual books within a collection are intimately interconnected; removing books from a coherent collection can damage that collection and diminish both its research interest and our potential for understanding its creation and use. Libraries should consider retaining copies from 'foundation' or 'named' collections, even if these copies are duplicated elsewhere within the broader collections.
- **Current relevance:** in an increasingly digital library environment, there is a tendency to assume that physical books have been superseded, that 'old' equates to 'irrelevant'. Printed books and manuscripts of all periods can have major cultural, historical, social and religious significance which may not be immediately apparent. As material objects, books and manuscripts also have an inherent power to inspire and educate. Libraries should consult widely before drawing conclusions about relevance or obsolescence.
- **Legal right to sell or disperse:** there are frequently legal stipulations which might prevent a library from dispersing specific bequests or donations. Any library seeking to dispose of material will need to ensure it has legal title to the items. Many libraries are governed by formal bodies, or are bound by legal regulation, which may have an impact on decisions to disperse. Parish libraries, for example, may be overseen on a day-to-day basis by a PCC, but require diocesan authority to act, whilst also being bound by the 1708 Parochial Libraries Act. Other libraries may be managed by a charitable trust, and as such bound by

the regulations of the Charity Commission, the regulator of charities in England and Wales.

- **Ethical responsibility:** even where a library may be able to demonstrate legal right to sell or disperse, there are often ethical considerations which may override the legal. If, for example, a collection has been on deposit for many years with an institution which is making it accessible for public use, the legal right to disperse might need to be weighed against the moral argument that dispersal is not in the wider public interest. Some libraries have a moral obligation to preserve and maintain a collection for future generations.
- **Proceeds:** proceeds from sales should be used responsibly in a way which supports a long-term public and library-related interest, rather than to generate short-term revenue or fund non-library projects. It is sensible to seek the advice of several experienced booksellers or auctioneers before proceeding with any sale to ensure that valuations reflect the current market.
- **Public access:** it is highly desirable for books to be publicly accessible. Where possible, material for disposal should be offered free of charge or other restriction to public institutions. Where items are of significant cultural, historical or research value, or where the primary motivation for sale is financial, it may be appropriate to offer material to other libraries. Sales by private treaty are underpinned by the understanding that both parties benefit. Sellers are guaranteed a sale, whilst minimising the risk of bad press; buyers are offered a fair and agreed price.
- **Reputational risk:** libraries should consider the potential reputational damage of dispersal. Disposing of items or collections can place other deposited collections at risk. Sales and disposals can lead to a loss of confidence in a library, and owners can and do withdraw deposited collections in response to sales. Reputational damage can also adversely influence potential benefactors.
- **Duplication:** duplication is frequently and correctly used as a justification for the de-accessioning of printed material. Identifying what constitutes a duplicate, however, is more complicated than it appears. Prior to the mechanization of the printing press individual copies of an edition may display textual or typographical variation. As a rule of thumb, the earlier the date of printing, the more likely and significant this variation. This should be a factor in identifying duplicate material.
- **Copy-specific features:** much modern research centres on the use, trade, movement and ownership of printed books. Such research relies on evidence beyond the text – the study of a book’s binding, its annotations, its decoration or illumination – features which are specific to individual copies. Hence, when

assessing a book for disposal these copy-specific features must be taken into account.

- **How to sell:** If a private treaty sale is not possible, then consider the respective merits of selling through a bookseller or at auction.

The Society would recommend that any library considering dispersal adheres to the following five rules:

1. Be open and consult widely. Be aware that consultation can be a lengthy process and allow sufficient time for proper debate.
2. Seek appropriate and timely expert advice. Ensure that this advice comes from independent and impartial sources.
3. Ensure the selection of items for disposal can be justified against the criteria above.
4. Be sure you have a legal right to dispose of material.
5. If sale is the chosen method of dispersal, have a defined and clearly budgeted proposal for the proceeds of any sale which demonstrates how the dispersal benefits the wider public good.

Where the Society can help:

- The Society can offer informal advice at any stage.
- The Society may be able to assist with identifying appropriate alternative repositories for unwanted material or material at risk.
- The Society may be able to intervene in cases where it deems a dispersal not to benefit the wider public good.

The following advisory documents are particularly recommended:

CILIP Rare Books and Special Collections Group Policy on the Disposal of Rare Books and Manuscripts:

<http://www.cilip.org.uk/rare-books-and-special-collections-group/policy-statements/disposals-policy-rare-books-and>

The Rare Books and Special Collections Group unites librarians responsible for collections of rare books, manuscripts and special materials, with other interested individuals. The group promotes the study and exploitation of rare books, encourages awareness of preservation, conservation and digitisation issues, and fosters training

opportunities related to the maintenance, display and use of collections. The principles outlined here can assist in managing sales of material from special collections libraries. The Museums Association guidelines for disposal of material:

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=15852>

The Museums Association is a membership organisation for everyone working in museums, galleries and heritage. Its mission is to enhance the value of museums to society by sharing knowledge, developing skills, inspiring innovation, and providing leadership. The Association has compiled a detailed and extremely useful document which offers support and advice for museums when making decisions to remove items from their collections. The guidelines and associated toolkit consider a range of factors to help ensure that any disposals benefit museums, their collections and the public. The guidance is supported by additional information, case studies and advice in the disposal section of the MA's website:

www.museumsassociation.org/collections