

Perspectives on special collections

Australian readers interested in the *Role and future of special collections* should take heed of the subtitle of this collection of essays before purchasing. That is, these are very much the perspectives of those who are responsible for the large British and American research collections, and the issues which they face will not necessarily have much in common with their local counterparts.

To read Mary Clapinson (the beautifully titled Keeper of Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library) pondering the acquisition of the original score of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, or Clive Hurst (also of the Bodleian) on the value and fate of their 42-line Bible, may only serve to remind Australian librarians of the gulf between the special collections for which they are responsible and those held in overseas collections.

This emphasis on the rare and the precious in these collections is exacerbated by the editorial style of this collection of six papers

originally delivered at a seminar held at Oxford University in 1992. The papers seem to have been transcribed directly from the presentations as they were delivered, and they therefore retain a generally discursive and leisurely air, with an emphasis on anecdotes related to the acquisition and expansion of important items or parts of the collections.

Many of the anecdotes are interesting, but more as intriguing asides on how some of the world's leading research collections have come to be, rather than for any particular relevance to managing special collections in this country.

There are points of comparison between the overseas and local situation which emerge. Learning to manage with diminished budgets and reduced expectations is a theme which will ring true (and not only for special collections librarians), and there is also some thought given to the role of special collections in a changed technological environment.

It is unfortunate that more space is not given to this latter theme. The final paper in the volume by Douglas Greenberg (of the American Council of Learned Societies) opens up the issue of technological change by highlighting the conflicting impacts that will result for special collections. But his words come as something of a coda to the main discussion, rather than a starting point for a discussion on what for many users is the exciting opportunity to take special collections beyond the walls of the libraries in which they are housed.

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