

The provision of training within Scotland for rare book librarians

The membership of the Rare Books in Scotland (RBiS) forum has identified the provision of training within Scotland for rare book librarianship as a major concern. It has been discussed at every 6-monthly meeting since March 2004, and a sub-group,¹ appointed in March 2005, reported on this issue to the forum on 5 April 2006 (details: <http://www.nls.uk/professional/rarebooksinscotland/minutes.html>). RBiS is keen to promote discussion among relevant policy-making bodies with a view to bringing about agreement on the requirements for such provision in Scotland and planning how best to meet those requirements.

The need for training

On a **practical level**, there is an increasing need for skills in the acquisition, care, cataloguing, promotion and use of rare book materials, in order to meet the demands of

- in general, the increased role of rare book material in university teaching
- in particular, the growth of the study of the history of the book
- the sustained growth of project work (e.g. digitisation) within libraries based on their rare book material
- the continued filling of posts wholly or partly concerned with rare books

Evidence of this need is provided by the take-up of workshops arranged by RBiS.

On a **strategic level**, given the important collections of early and rare printed books that require to be managed within Scotland (in, for example, archives repositories as well as libraries) and noting that *Scotland's Culture* (p.38) states that "The Executive attaches high national priority to the maintenance and improvement of standards in both non-national museums and in libraries", training should be available in Scotland for those who are going to be responsible for rare books in Scottish institutions. Scottish courses have no modules – even optional – in historical bibliography like those offered at University College London or the University of Wales Aberystwyth. This is made doubly unsatisfactory by the fact that the Students Awards Agency for Scotland states that support is not available to students who want to study for a postgraduate diploma in librarianship outside Scotland.

Meeting this need

While there is an important role to be played by the National Library of Scotland and other institutions with experienced staff in helping to provide "continued professional development" – for example, through the workshops offered within the framework of the RBiS forum – this is not a substitute for relevant modules in undergraduate or post-graduate courses, which would

- help to ensure the widest possible knowledge about the book in an age when e-resources have reduced the critical understanding of books themselves
- provide library professionals taking up their first appointments with a useful foundation; this is particularly helpful for small institutions without in-house expertise
- have the potential to attract trainee librarians into this field; occasionally these modules might be a decisive factor in attracting somebody into the profession at all
- have the potential to help retain promising young professionals in Scotland, by reducing the possibility that if they leave for their training, they do not return
- have the advantage of providing training within the context of the Scottish printed heritage and, in passing, of imparting information about that heritage

Conclusion

A range of optional modules in rare book librarianship needs to be made available at undergraduate and post-graduate levels, including distance-learning. While it is important for these modules to be widely available, they are not going to be subscribed to in such large numbers as to make it economical for each teaching institution to develop its own modules. The most sensible way forward would be to prepare modules for common use in all HE/FE institutions offering courses in information management, records management or archives, though clearly such a joint approach will require considerable discussion.

Practising rare book librarians have a role to play in contributing their knowledge and skills to these courses (including offering placements), but the professional expertise in creating and delivering modules lies with the Library/Archives Schools.

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