

## THE RCS LIBRARY: A JOURNEY

From its foundation in 1868, the Society amassed a library on the British Empire, the Commonwealth and member countries, together with smaller collections on the empires of rival nations. The RCS Library today contains over 300,000 printed items, over 700 archival collections (including manuscript diaries, correspondence, pictures, cine films, maps, scrapbooks and newspaper cuttings) and over 800 photograph collections. These contain well over 100,000 photographs.

Long-standing members will be familiar with the background to the library's transfer in ownership to Cambridge University Library in 1993, and many will have contributed personally to the appeal launched in 1992 to save it for the nation. More recent members may be surprised to learn about the Society's rich academic history and the trials faced by its library. This article sets out to provide a brief history and to inform members about the work taking place in Cambridge to conserve and enhance access to this unique and truly remarkable library.

Two bombs hit the RCS's Northumberland Avenue building in 1941, the most devastating on the night of April 16th. One member was killed, three people injured and the building severely damaged. Areas of the library were ruined and an estimated 35,000 volumes and 5,000 pamphlets and documents were lost. Recovery was difficult; appeals were made in the press and collection centres were established across the Empire. The War Damage Commission eventually awarded the library almost £22,000 but various decisions by the Society's Council led to the purchase of new volumes rather than the replacement of the lost stock (Rees 1968, pp.198-200<sup>1</sup>).

The post-war years saw growing uncertainty for the library. Financial troubles once again loomed large on the horizon. In 1968 a major collection was sold to the National Library of Australia. However, it was the 1988 Tysoe Radley Report that marked the beginning of the end. Commissioned by the Society to advise on achieving financial viability, the report suggested the library was "a dead thing" (Barringer, 1994, pp.3-4<sup>2</sup>). Debate and dispute followed but by 1991 it had become evident that the Society's financial problems were far more pressing than generally envisioned. Apart from the building itself, the library was the Society's major asset. In May 1991 the Society's Council agreed that, were it to become necessary, they would sell the library. By late October postulation had turned to reality and it was announced that the library was to close by the end of the year (Barringer 1994, p.5).

The public announcement led to a flood of press attention. This, in turn, led to a growing fund raising campaign - an effort large enough to freeze all immediate plans for sale. In May 1993 'The Appeal to Acquire the RCS Library for the Nation' handed a cheque for £3m to the Society.

Housing the library was a significant concern. The collection required considerable space and staff attention. Thoughts initially turned to London. However, Cambridge University Library soon emerged as the preferred choice. Cambridge had existing

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1 Rees, T.R. (1968), *The history of the Royal Commonwealth Society 1868-1968*, London: Oxford University Press.

2 Barringer, T.A. (1994), 'The rise, fall and rise again of the Royal Commonwealth Society Library', *African Research and Documentation*, no. 64, pp.1-10.

strengths in Imperial and Commonwealth Studies and, perhaps most importantly, had just added a spacious new extension. The move began on July 26th 1993 and lasted a fortnight. The Society's then Librarian, Terry Barringer, records that 700 metres of bubble wrap were used along with 1,500 metres of heavy-duty sticky tape (1994, p.2 and pp.7-8).

While the future of the collection is now assured, the move to Cambridge is by no means the end of the library's story. Although new publications are no longer added to the RCS Library, they are added to Cambridge University Library's main collections. In fact, English language publications from Commonwealth countries form an important part of the Library's purchases each year. It also collects scholarly works published outside the Commonwealth, especially in English, French and German, but also in Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Dutch which complement the RCS Library's collections. These include rare photographs and archival collections as well as published books and journals. The University of Cambridge's Squire Law Library also collects extensively in Commonwealth countries with a common law tradition, including the major jurisdictions of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and South Africa. The University's Centre of South Asian Studies and African Studies Centre also hold rich libraries and archives which complement the RCS collections.

Donations have always formed a very important part of the RCS Library's collections and since its move to Cambridge, the RCS collections have been enriched by the donation of over 100 archival collections of photographs, manuscripts, correspondence, memoirs and published accounts. Details of these deposits may be found on the National Register of Archives, hosted by the National Archives at Kew,<sup>3</sup> as well as on Janus, the Cambridge archives portal.<sup>4</sup>

The challenge facing Cambridge University Library is to preserve the RCS collections in the best possible conditions and to deliver a range of services of the highest quality to promote the collections, to enhance public access to them and to facilitate and encourage academic research based on them. The RCS library supports the University Library's mission to deliver world-class library and information services to meet the need of the local, national and international scholarly community and to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

The University Library aims to achieve this by preserving the collections and identifying those in need of specialist conservation; by identifying, recording and researching the collections; by increasing public knowledge of the collections through retrospective cataloguing, cooperative projects, publicity, websites, exhibitions and publications; supporting users of the collections and providing an enquiry service; making publicly available copies of rare and unique materials – through microfilming, digitisation and other web-based education projects; and by acquiring small archival collections of historical importance which complement and enrich the RCS collections. The achievement of these aims requires the development of a highly motivated, knowledgeable and skilled staff but also a significant amount of fund-raising from external sources.

To date a huge amount has been achieved towards this ambitious vision. Nearly 40,000 online descriptions have been created for published material in the collection.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/default.asp>

<sup>4</sup> <http://janus.lib.cam.ac.uk/>

This includes the internationally significant Cobham collection on Cyprus, rare books in all subject areas, Commonwealth literature, monographs on Africa and Canada; periodical holdings, and, most recently, historically important runs of official reports, published in the colonies and Commonwealth. Records for all these items may be found in Cambridge University Library's online catalogue<sup>5</sup>, and special web-pages have been written to guide users how best to search for official publications.<sup>6</sup>

With the exception of the recent project to catalogue official publications in the collection, all the cataloguing of published works was funded by an external grant from HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for England. A breakthrough was made last year when the Trustees of the Appeal to Save the Royal Commonwealth Society Library for the Nation agreed to release the outstanding £600,000 from the residue of the appeal to fund work to increase access to the collections. Work this year has concentrated on cataloguing rare runs of colonial Blue Books and monographs and serials published by government bodies in Africa, Malaysia and Hong Kong. Yearbooks and Directories will follow shortly.

Funding to increase access to the library's rich pictorial and archival collections has come from a mixture of bodies. The RCS Photograph Project<sup>7</sup> began in January 2002, funded by a generous legacy from the estate of Frederick Causley Goodyear, the RCS Trust Fund and a donation from the Overseas Service Pensioners' Association. Additional financial assistance from the East of England Museums Libraries Archives Council (EEMLAC) and the Overseas Service Pensioners' Association enabled the library to publish the RCS Photographers Index<sup>8</sup>. Then in 2003 an exciting new project to make the archive and manuscript catalogues searchable across the internet was funded by the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation of New York and the Smuts Memorial Fund.<sup>9,10</sup>

Exhibitions have also been hosted to celebrate the survival of the RCS collections. The Great Collections, Cambridge University Library (25 July to 24 October 1998), was accompanied by publication of *Cambridge University Library: the great collections* / edited by Peter Fox (Cambridge University Press, 1998, ISBN 0521626366). In 2007 web-pages were produced to accompany smaller exhibitions on slavery and opium.<sup>11</sup>

A huge amount of professional conservation work has been undertaken on the collections since they arrived in Cambridge. The photograph collection has been completely re-boxed in acid-free containers and individual images sleeved in clear inert plastic. Glass plates and lantern slides have been individually wrapped in acid-free paper, interleaved by inert foam and protectively boxed. Thousands of volumes of official reports have been cleaned by hand using smoke sponges to remove war-time debris and thousands more items cleaned using a specially purchased museum book-cleaner.

Preservation of rare and unique items in the collections has also been enhanced by major microfilming projects. Funding from the Mellon Microfilming Project and

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<sup>5</sup> <http://ul-newton.lib.cam.ac.uk/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/deptserv/rcs/rcs\\_op\\_project/index.html](http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/deptserv/rcs/rcs_op_project/index.html)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/rcs\\_photo\\_project/homepage.html](http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/rcs_photo_project/homepage.html)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/rcs\\_photographers/index.html](http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/rcs_photographers/index.html)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Newsletters/nl22/#6>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Newsletters/nl34/#rsc>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/deptserv/rcs/projects.html>

HEFCE NFF sources has enabled the library to provide readers with robust working copies of very delicate and fragile periodicals and pamphlets. Adam Matthew Publications have published microfilm and digital copies of unique RCS archival sources relating to the British Empire and Africa which are now available to scholars around the world.<sup>12</sup>.

In 1993 the RCS library was used by 116 individual researchers and the RCS librarian, Terry Barringer, answered c. 250 research enquiries received by letter and a further 280 phone enquiries. Today annual visitor numbers hover around the 500 mark but the significant growth in use has been in distant enquiries. Last year the RCS Librarian answered 1388 email research enquiries and the trend is continuing upwards as more people learn about collection. Visits to the RCS catalogues on the University of Cambridge's Janus server<sup>13</sup> have increased from about 5,000 a month in June 2004 to 40,000 a month in June 2007, with the cumulated number of hits over that period topping the million mark.

It is hoped that this article will have given you a taste of the challenges faced by Cambridge University Library today in its work to preserve the RCS collections in the best possible conditions, whilst also promoting public access to them and facilitating and encouraging academic research based on them.

If you would like to learn more about ways you can help the RCS Library, please contact the RCS Librarian, Rachel Rowe at Cambridge University Library. Email: [rcs@lib.cam.ac.uk](mailto:rcs@lib.cam.ac.uk) or by post to Cambridge University Library, West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DR.

For more information on using the collections in Cambridge, please see the RCS Library's web pages: <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/deptserv/rcs/index.html> or phone (01223) 333146.

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<sup>12</sup> Africa Through Western Eyes and Empire Online  
<http://www.ampltd.co.uk/search/search.aspx?mainsearch=royal+commonwealth+society>

<sup>13</sup><http://janus.lib.cam.ac.uk/>