



COLLECTIONS AND ACADEMIC LIAISON (CAL) – SUMMER 2023 UPDATE

In this newsletter from CAL, we look at how offensive material is dealt with by our department, to help add to the conversation being started by the CUL Decolonisation Working Group. We then include a reminder about issues to do with Russian/Belarusian imports and a repeat invitation to contribute blog posts relating to Ukraine (images from recent posts make up the banner at the top of the page). Our newsletter ends as normal with a [list of our staff](#) and their responsibilities. Do get in touch with us if you have questions about any of the things we work on.

ACQUIRING AND CATALOGUING OFFENSIVE MATERIAL

The latest [CUL Decolonisation Working Group update](#) talks about offensive, possibly harmful modern books in the catalogue. Since CAL purchases the majority of books bought by the UL each year, we thought it might be useful to talk a little bit about how such material is treated in the main UL in terms of our department's work.

The last overarching collection development policy for the main University Library and its "dependent" libraries, produced in 2009/10, stated:

"The University Library upholds the principle of free speech and does not discriminate against material on the grounds of race, religion, sex, political controversy or social acceptability. Serious books or periodicals falling within the normal criteria for selection but expressing opinions or containing illustrations which might be considered blasphemous, offensive or distasteful are acquired, subject to any legal restrictions."

What the DWG is helping us all think about by starting this conversation is how to formulate and make clear to our readers the approach for Cambridge University Libraries in the third decade of the 21st century.

It is also important to acknowledge at this point that offence and harm can be common or personal reactions. While some matters are obvious to all of us, we need to bear in mind throughout this work that we cannot conclusively predict what might cause offence to others, nor is there always consensus about a given issue – so we must be careful not to focus only on the obvious but also allow for concerns that might not be clear to us at all.

It is useful to start our thinking on the basis of existing practice and real examples, and the main UL is an obvious place to start to look for this, given the size of its collection development operations. There are two big parts of this – what the UL collects and how the UL catalogues, classifies, and presents material. We'll just focus on print books at this stage.

There are three main intake streams for the main UL: Legal Deposit (by which we have some ability to select and we can also chase proactively for certain titles), purchases (selection done either directly by staff or by vendors following strict guidelines), and donations (over which we have varying levels of opportunity to select). The Department of Collections and Academic Liaison is directly involved in purchases and donations, and we do still collect material that we know that all or some might find offensive or harmful. We do this sometimes because it has been requested (in which case we engage the requester in an appropriate conversation about the title and their interest

before we move to acquisition) and sometimes because it is an example of views and attitudes that are common whether we like it or not and therefore need to be present in our research collections.

In recent years, for example, we have acquired a few WW2-era Nazi pieces as a small part of an otherwise unrelated donation. We have bought a horrible anti-Semitic title in Greek for a postgraduate's research, carefully discussed with them. Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and infiltration into Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and up to last year, we have bought lots of Russian books that undermine Ukrainian sovereignty – these we have bought not as critical material about Ukraine but as primary sources about *Russia*. So how do readers see these examples in our catalogue?

Sometimes it *is* clear (or clearish) from a book's catalogue record or classmark that there is something not right. The UL has a small number of classification options for extreme material. There are two specific Nazi collections - CCA-CCC.25 and CCA-CCC.26 – and there is also the broader class Arc (short for Arcana). As explained in the 1945 staff classification manual, Arc was set up to hold three types of material: “indecent books ... scientific works, forensic medicine, etc. ... books suppressed by law or withdrawn by their authors or publishers”. What is “indecent” is of course a matter of some subjectivity and one that has changed with time, as [a brief description of Arc on the UL website](#) and the materials it points to shows. It is not a large collection and certainly in recent times, we put only really extreme material there, normally following discussion with other cataloguers to ensure as consistent an approach as possible – extreme in its graphic content or its written content.

If a book is not considered a rare candidate for Arc (or more rarely still for the Nazi collections), then it will go to an ordinary classmark. The choice for the classifier boils down to: borrowable or not borrowable; if borrowable, then open shelves or closed shelves. The choice they take is not just about content but also about the physical nature of the book (eg very slim books or heavily illustrated ones are not generally made borrowable). What this means is that, bar Arc and the Nazi collections, there will be nothing about the classmark of a book that can reliably tip the reader off that the book might be offensive.

The newly received Nazi material went straight into one of the Nazi classes. The Greek anti-Semitic title was made briefly borrowable in agreement with the reader because it was ordered and catalogued in Covid times when the reader would have had only very limited access to it while needing it for their dissertation. On its return, we reclassified it to Arc. The anti-Ukraine Russian books are simply in the most common closed-access borrowable class.

The options for the cataloguer when dealing with a book they understand is problematic are few to non-existent. There are only rare standards that allow the cataloguer to express a judgement. There are a few exceptions, such as the heading 'Antisemitic literature' but even this is given a definition in the Library of Congress authority file that narrows its use: “Here are entered collections of works reflecting antisemitic views or policies as well as discussions of such works. This heading is not used for individual works, which are entered under headings appropriate to the content, genre, and/or form of the work.” (our emphasis)

It's important to note, especially for non-cataloguers reading this, that while most cataloguers will pick up graphic content as they work, since they need to flick through a book to provide its physical description, picking up on written content is not so straightforward. Cataloguers do not read a book cover to cover to catalogue it. They will look at its title page, its cover, and its table of contents. If the book has not been flagged to them as problematic or does not immediately suggest itself as such to them, it can pass through their hands without concern.

There is so much more to talk about here, and CAL will certainly take part in the conversation that the DWG is getting started, particularly to help capture the decision-making process we take when it

comes to acquisitions. It would be lovely to collect only “nice” material, but sadly that would not be representative of the world we all live in and which our readers study.

We sometimes write about offensive material in our blog, although there is no way of linking such posts up with the catalogue records for the material they discuss. Here, for example, is a [2022 post about the anti-Ukraine Russian material](#) which was picked up shortly after in a [University Affairs article](#).

BOOK SUPPLIES during Russia’s war against Ukraine

Do please continue to get in touch with Mel (hlgb2@cam.ac.uk) if you have questions about Ukrainian book supplies. In terms of Russian and Belarusian book supplies, we still need to go through a triage process with the Finance Division before placing any orders. Please contact Mel if you want to order any material published/printed and/or being sent from Russia or Belarus.

UKRAINE in blog posts

Our department has continued to write [weekly blog posts about Ukraine](#). **Might you like to contribute a post?** We are always happy to have guest posts from across the University. Have you bought material about Ukraine since Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022 that you would like to promote through our blog? Has your library helped Ukrainian students or visitors in ways that some of us could learn from? Do get in touch! slavonic@cam.ac.uk

GUIDE TO COLLECTIONS AND ACADEMIC LIAISON (CAL)

An introduction to the department for anyone who doesn’t know us. CAL is responsible for the selection and acquisition of physical books and ebooks in English and in European languages from around the globe, ie English means Anglophone material, French means Francophone, etc. This [2020 blog post about the countries we acquire material](#) from might surprise you!

We also deal with most donations coming into the UL, we do a lot of cataloguing, and we promote the modern and historical collections for which we are responsible including via our blogs: <https://ebookscambridge.wordpress.com> and <https://europeancollections.wordpress.com>

We work a variety of hybrid and home-based patterns, so do get in touch via email or on Teams. If you’re not sure who to contact, try Mel first (hlgb2@cam.ac.uk).

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Mel Bach (also Head of Department), assisted by Ula Dench and Francisco Garcia (Francisco works 4 days a week at MMLL and 1 day a week at the UL)