The Peal Collection as a Literary Archive

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The W. Hugh Peal Collection not only provides an avenue for the study of literary history, but it also represents, through its individual components, an opportunity to examine some important aspects of the history of collecting. The designation "library" means in a literal sense a gathering of books; the word "collection," however, normally suggests greater significance by implying the purposeful selection of materials related to a governing theme. In some respects it might be contended that the Peal Collection goes still further by assuming features of the "archive," a term not normally applied in its strictest sense to bodies of material of this kind.

The archive, as a rule, is generated by an organization, and its contents comprise the constitution and by-laws, the minutes of the board of trustees, the annual reports, the routine correspondence, the publications and records of that organization. The unity of an archive is taken for granted, and the uniqueness of its arrangement is dictated by the development of the organization itself.

Although the archival purist is always eager to stress the difference between a library and an archive, it may still be argued that the Peal Collection constitutes in some important respects a kind of literary archive. This is particularly plausible where Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, and Lamb are concerned, because they are the chief figures in the Romantic movement in English literature. Their association was not a casual one. Indeed, their affiliation was in some ways sufficiently structured to suggest an organization and a program. One might point to Coleridge and

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Southey’s projected utopia of Pantisocracy on the banks of the Susquehanna in America and, shortly afterward, the radical literary program of Wordsworth and Coleridge as outlined in Wordsworth’s “Preface”—a kind of constitution and by-laws—to the second edition of the _Lyrical Ballads_ in 1800, complete with its redefinition of poetry and poetic language. There was a strong bond between these individuals, reflected in their publications as well as in their correspondence; and so, perhaps, it is not amiss to consider the gathering of their interrelated books and personal papers as an archival pursuit.

Now, the word “collection,” like the word “archive,” spoken by the knowing, also implies a certain unity. There are, for example, great author collections—a Milton collection, a Johnson collection, a Frost collection; and, of course, there are the related collections of “ana”—Miltoniana, Johnsoniana, and Frostiana. There are collections by subject, collections by illustrator, by bindings, by printer, by provenance, by date, by large-paper copies, copies on blue paper, copies on vellum, copies with alluring errata slips—the possibilities are infinite. The University of Texas holds a splendid collection of forgeries by Thomas J. Wise. C. Waller Barrett has collected presentation copies of books from authors to their mothers. I am aware of a notable collection, assembled over a period of forty years, comprising not 101, but 102, copies of the same book, Swinburne’s _Atalanta in Calydon_, said to have been issued in 100 copies in 1865. As a last resort, of course, there is the “high spot” collection, which will admit anything so long as it is expensive. The important point here is that a collection of this type is assembled by a conscious collector; such collections, unlike the archive, do not create themselves. They are a work of the imagination, based on insight and a special perception of implicit structure. Equally important, they are a reflection of individual taste. What will become evident here is that Mr. Peal’s task as a collector was in some respects a problem not so much of assembling as of reassembling materials which, had it not been for certain informal collecting practices, might have remained together in cohesive original units.

But before exploring further what might be regarded as some archival aspects of the Peal Collection, it may be worth saying something in capsule about the development of collecting—the collecting, of course, of both books and manuscripts, but chiefly of manuscripts. Even after the introduction of printing there were
important collectors who commissioned fine manuscripts of classical and medieval texts. These collectors regarded printing, which initially attempted to capture the appearance of writing, as an inferior product, a degradation of the manuscript form. Although by the early nineteenth century—the time of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, and Lamb—the production of fine illuminated manuscripts had long been discontinued, the collecting of them remained an important patrician activity. Throughout the century there were great collectors, not least among them the Duke of Roxburgh, the Earl of Ashburnham, and, foremost, Sir Thomas Phillipps, the greatest manuscript collector of all time. (Three of Sir Thomas Phillipps’s manuscripts are in the Peal Collection.) What it is important to note about the manuscripts pursued by the collectors of this kind, however, is that they were not accomplished by their authors—Plotinus, Virgil, Theophrastus, or Thomas Aquinas—but by skilled copyists, calligraphers, and artists, who may or may not have been significantly literate. The conscientious collecting of what today is called an autograph manuscript, or holograph, created with the implicit authority of the writer, was only beginning to take shape. These are the fundamental documents to which biographers, editors, historians, and other scholars now turn for the sources of our cultural past. Yet the treatment of these source documents in the nineteenth century and before is somewhat alarming. With this in mind, the trained contemporary archivist can appreciate to an even greater degree the tremendous achievement of Hugh Peal in bringing together his extraordinary research collection, and especially so when one understands the extent to which Mr. Peal was undoing what a century of previous “collectors” had done through misguided practices of dispersal and, in some cases, mutilation.

Much research and reflection on this absorbing topic was accomplished by A. N. L. Munby, late librarian of King’s College, Cambridge. Munby’s study of nineteenth-century collecting activity, The Cult of the Autograph Letter in England, was published by the University of London in 1962. His insights are rich indeed, and many of the trends and practices which he identifies throughout the past century and a half are of the keenest interest in understanding the Peal Collection as a “collection” or, to press further, as a kind of archive.

The collecting and sale of contemporary literary manuscripts,
quite common today, was only in its infancy in the early nineteenth century. According to Munby, the first major example of the sale of contemporary literary manuscripts is thought to have been the auction of the holographs of thirteen of Sir Walter Scott’s Waverly novels in 1831, the year before Scott’s death. The fact that this development centers on one of the giants of the Romantic era is not without significance for the Peal Collection, which is surely one of the foremost gatherings of autograph material of the early English Romantics.

In 1830 Charles Lamb published a volume of poetry called *Album Verses*. (The dedication copy is in the Peal Collection.) The very title—*Album Verses*—is suggestive of new thinking about autographs and collecting, for the text represents a selection of poems which Lamb had written to provide an example not only of his wit, but of his hand, for his friends. There is an original manuscript of one of these verses in Lexington now, composed for Mrs. Thomas Wilde in March of 1829. Munby himself quotes it:

> Had I a power, Lady, to my will,  
> You should not want Hand Writings. I would fill  
> Your leaves with Autographs—resplendent names  
> Of Knights and ‘Squires of Old, and courtly Dames . . .

Nothing could better illustrate a new trend in thinking about the contemporary literary manuscript, which in the days of John Dryden and Samuel Johnson was, after being printed, consigned quite literally to the pie pans of a pastry cook, to the making of paper curling strips for a lady’s hair, or to the wrapping of meat cuts in a butcher shop. But what was waste paper to the eighteenth century took on a new meaning in the Romantic nineteenth; what was once trash became a talisman, a relic, if you will, to be treasured as an actual extension of the individual.

There doubtless remained many like Lamb, who tossed a Wordsworth or a Coleridge letter without a qualm and usually kept nothing of the letters he received; there were at the same time others who worked systematically to assemble examples of the handwriting of eminent persons. A letter in the Peal Collection from Sara Coleridge, the poet’s daughter and a notable poet herself, well illustrates the practice. Writing to her brother Edward she states that she soon hopes to send him a letter of the poet Aubrey De Vere and also one by Tennyson. She states, too, that
she is sure to obtain for him one by Southey and that she will also try for one by the poet George Crabbe.

What is particularly notable here to the modern collector and archivist is the emphasis on the singular—"a letter of Mr. De Vere," "one of Mr. Tennyson," "a Southey letter," and "one of Crabbe's." In fact, the collector of this period considered two letters by the same figure an embarrassing duplication. The goal was to assemble a wide-ranging array of innumerable autograph documents by different hands. This practice is, of course, teeming with mischief for the current collector and scholar, such as Hugh Peal, who discovers that whole correspondences of the great have been conscientiously dispersed and traded off like baseball cards instead of being retained together as a cohesive, meaningful group.

Perhaps more disconcerting is that, prior to the development of the manila folder and the archival Hollinger box, the accepted way of organizing a collection of autograph letters was to arrange them thematically—members of Parliament, scientists, royalty, authors, or military leaders; paste them onto paper sheets of uniform size; and have them bound up together. Munby gives us a quick picture of this kind of collecting by enumerating the manuscripts of William Upcott, an early practitioner of this technique who actually called his home "Autograph Cottage." According to one list, Upcott noted two volumes of British sovereigns from Henry V on; five volumes of European sovereigns beginning in 1319; seven volumes of foreigners distinguished in literature and science; thirty-three volumes of notes by celebrities of all periods and nations; four of bishops and archbishops; and onward to the sum of 298 volumes, which was merely a portion of his total holdings. The Peal Collection contains a few examples of this practice, including one volume in old blue morocco labeled Lord Byron's Friends and Contemporaries, with over thirty letters by George Canning, Jeremy Bentham, Joanna Bailey, James Hogg ("The Ettrick Shepherd"), and others.

Depending on the ambition of the collector, an engraving or sketch of an author might be placed alongside his letter. This was an age when the man of letters was still a public hero, and access to a kind of literary iconography was as important to communing with an author as possessing an original letter. At this time, too, clues to the personality were sought in the study of physiognomy and phrenology. The Peal Collection contains an interesting bit of correspondence from Coleridge bearing closely on this topic.
Addressing the copperplate engraver Francis Finden about reproducing one of several portraits, Coleridge writes of one image that it shows an “unhappy pensity of the Nose & idiotic Drooping of the Lip.” He thus clearly displays a concern about the defects of his own character, an anomaly of brilliance and indifference. Very much to the point, Coleridge writes to Finden in the third person, “A friend of S. T. Coleridge’s wrote under a portrait of him—‘A glow-worm with a pin stuck thro it, as seen in broad daylight.’” Elsewhere the poet described himself as “indolence capable of energies.” Coleridge probably knew and feared that the engraving would be placed in countless albums with some terribly revealing fragment of manuscript, perhaps even that pathetic note to Joseph Cottle in the Peal Collection, mounted on an album leaf and reading: “O to feel how infinitely worthless I am, how poor a wretch, with just free will enough to be deserving of wrath, & of my own contempt.”

It has already been hinted that autograph collecting, as opposed to acquiring intermediate manuscripts of ancient authors, was not considered the nineteenth century’s highest level of connoisseurship. And now, to descend into the lower circle, as it were, of an already déclassé avocation: you may remember that collectors of this period wished only a specimen of an author’s hand, and that an extra letter merely provided negotiable tender for acquiring a truant monarch or a fugitive archbishop. Consider the potential, however, of even a single letter when matched with an enterprising collector and a pair of scissors. A few square inches of manuscript pasted into an album with a certificate like “A true specimen of the hand of Sir Francis Bacon” would suffice for many who could not read Greek or Latin anyway. In the Peal Collection you may find, for example, six lines of verse roughly trimmed up with shears and decoratively chamfered at the corners, pasted onto a bright blue strip with the authoritative note, “holograph of S. T. Coleridge.” Equally precious are the notes which Coleridge wrote into his books, or perhaps more characteristically into those of his friends, several examples of which have been detached from their sources and preserved by a careful collector of the last century. These, incidentally, will appear in the multi-volume edition of Coleridge’s Marginalia now in the course of publication. Less recoverable to the editor of someone like Dickens, however, would be the letter of 9 August 1858, recorded by Mr. Peal in his own meticulous catalogue as
Coleridge fragment as preserved by a collector

having “signature and one or two lines cut away.” As early as 1824, notes Munby, the British collector John Anderson complained to Dawson Turner of detached signatures as “only melancholy evidence that there is a species of vandalism existing, even in the nineteenth century.”

We can no longer delay discussing the great culmination of the Romantic and Victorian temperament in the storage and display of literary memorabilia, a kind of album-in-excelsis, which is the extra-illustrated book. A book which has been extra-illustrated, of course, provides the viewer not only with the printed text of a work, but also with engravings or drawings, perhaps tinted by hand, not integral to the original publication. In addition to graphic supplements, the extra-illustrated book can be an arresting and beautiful artifact comprising in small compass a rich exhibition of authentic literary and historical material. There are a number of fascinating examples of the fine extra-illustrated book in the Peal Collection, and I can cite for you William Dean Howells’s Literary Friends and Acquaintance, 1900, with a total of twenty-six autograph letters bound in from Emerson, Lowell, Longfellow, Holmes, Howells himself, Julia Ward Howe, and others. The publisher James T. Fields’s Yesterdays With Authors, 1882, contains fifteen letters, including ones from Dickens and Thackeray, as well as 250 portraits, a bit of Wordsworth’s hair from September 1849, and a photograph of the tombstone of Dickens’s canary. The most spectacular instance is William Coxe’s Memoirs of the Life and Administration of Sir Robert Walpole, which contains 105 autograph letters, signed documents, and clipped signatures, as well as 164 engraved portraits. Because of
these additions, the original three quarto volumes have been extended to a very substantial four, bound *de grande luxe*, in full red morocco with doublures of blue goatskin and white watered-silk endleaves.

There was, of course, some occasional resistance to the practice of dispersing what remained of bodies of autograph manuscripts, and in the Peal Collection you may find an excellent example in a letter of 1845 from Hartley Coleridge, the great poet's son. Writing to a resident of Bolt Court, London, Dr. Johnson's old address, the younger Coleridge declares that he has no clipped signatures of his late father which are not already promised. He has been forced to refuse such even to ladies; and, besides, he notes, his few relics must be of greater value to himself than to others. It is apparent that Hartley Coleridge's demurrer is largely sentimental in its reluctance, but by turning in the Peal Collection to a letter of Lady Ritchie, the daughter of Thackeray, we begin to find a more justifiable rationale, although the letter itself ends in compromise. Lady Ritchie cannot, she says, give stray pages which spoil the wholeness of remaining manuscripts; nevertheless, she sends an envelope which displays Thackeray's "peerless even writing." It is ironic that both Hartley Coleridge's and Lady Ritchie's letters appear themselves once to have been mounted in albums. But, in any case, Anne Ritchie's letter, written in 1905, shows a new outlook, a disinclination to disperse manuscripts, not from greed or sentiment necessarily, but from a sense of the propriety and correctness of keeping the material together.

With so much emphasis on the systematic dispersal and studied heterogeneity of literary papers during this period, it is surprising to find that there are any number of substantial series of letters which did survive intact. Perhaps this is because they accumulated in the hands of people who were not "collectors." A splendid case involves Lamb, already mentioned as a tosser of letters, who did preserve an unusual series from Thomas Manning at the author's request. On 11 October 1810 Manning writes:

*Just going to leave Calcutta for God knows where! Very strange in mind, cannot write. Give one of these boxes of India Ink to Mary. . . . I'll write you before I am out of the bounds of civilization.*

Shortly afterwards Manning became the first Englishman to enter
the Forbidden City at Lhasa in Tibet, where, disguised, he
interviewed the Dalai Lama. He also wrote the first English-
Tibetan dictionary. All thirty-one letters of Manning to Lamb are
in the Peal Collection.

One discovers from this too quick survey that the autograph
collectors of the Romantic and Victorian ages have had no small
impact on the condition, organization, and formation of
manuscript collections today, and that while our debt to them is
large, their impact has not in every respect proved favorable.
Unarmed, as is the archivist, with special powers of replevin,
individual and institutional collectors must do as best they can to
bring together for researchers significant bodies of original and
related research materials. There may be a greater tendency now
to offer and acquire groups of materials on the market *en bloc*;
when transferred in this way groups may at least become the
subject of careful study before they risk division. Once spread
about, very difficult problems result, such as that posed by the 400
sets of Emerson’s works in the autograph edition, each with a
manuscript leaf bound in. What editor of Emerson today could
possibly examine even half of these sources for establishing and
editing a text by modern standards? The prospect is not a happy
one.

Quite apart from the literary and research significance of the
Peal Collection, questions with archival overtones such as
organization, processing, access, and related acquisitions suggest
themselves. Should albums of manuscripts be disbound? Can
letters pasted into books be deacidified? Should manuscripts
inserted into books be removed and treated separately as
manuscripts? Should photographs be removed from related
manuscripts? There are actually several examples of manuscripts
being created on the pages of books, such as Lamb’s verses, “I
was not trained in academic bowers”; this one cannot be handily
disbound, since it is on the verso of the title-page to the second
volume of George Dyer’s *History of the University and Colleges of
Cambridge*.

These absorbing questions aside, however, the physical makeup
of the Peal Collection has much to tell us about the social
expression of intellectual life and the prominence of *belles lettres* in
nineteenth-century England. In addition, it has much to say about
“taste and technique” in collecting, as John Carter termed it, and
also much, as well, about the acquisition and organization of such
materials in the private collections and research libraries of the twentieth century. (Nothing is said here of the antiquarian book market, which exercises a major influence, too, on the movement of such materials, sometimes as collections, often otherwise.) Thus the Peal Collection’s finely bound volumes of letters; its carefully kept manuscripts and occasional documentary fragments; its specimens pasted to the reinforcement of delicately colored paper stock or ingeniously inlaid into pierced paper mattes; its labeling with the fine scrollwork of Victorian penmanship; its engraved portraits and locks of hair—all add contextual meaning beyond any verbal literary content. The study and exhibition of these artifacts can prove as important to cultural historians as any printed transcriptions of the written word. Because of its archival cohesiveness and comprehensiveness, the Peal Collection clearly embodies a significance over and above its component parts, which, reassembled, communicate a presence of the Romantics and Victorians which will attract scholars for years to come.