Preservation: a Bitter Harvest

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THE nineteen-eighties were years in which preservation became a major theme in libraries around the world. Neglected after the Second World War and almost completely obscured by the unremitting pressures of the «information explosion», preservation seemed to emerge all at once in crisis form as an urgent priority in a decade when British and American libraries were already having to learn how to live with severely reduced funding. Since the arrival of the crisis there have been many reasons advanced about the neglect of what was a traditional library responsability. Whilst all were in their way relevant, none really excused the somewhat shameful culpability of the library profession. Moreover, but for the growing concern generated in the seventies in the United States about the ravages of the brittle book syndrome, which was already attacking books in many American libraries, but was still on the distant horizon of those in Europe, the world-wide action to stimulate preservation awareness and restore it to its place in library administration might still be a matter for the future.

Even so, the concern generated in the United States was slow to spill over into Europe. In fact, it was slow to receive the attention it needed in the United States itself despite warnings going back into de nineteenth century. It was only the realisation by librarians, archivists, government and the public at large that the record of the Nation's heritage was actually at risk that action was taken. This is all the more surprising since the extensive literature on preservation published in the United States in

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the Sixties and Seventies leaves no doubt that there was real awareness of the problem, that the «brittle book» phenomenon was anticipated long before it appeared. It was only when the evidence began to mount on library shelves, showing that the brittle book had actually arrived, that emergency action was taken.

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The brittle book, posing a genuine threat to the national archive of printed work, brought also a new dimension to preservation, or conservation as it is still frequently called. Hitherto it had been concerned essentially with the restoration of delapidated stock on library shelves, not necessarily always volumes of great antiquity, and with the treatment of new acquisitions being incorporated into a library's holdings. This remedial or preventative treatment provoked no sense of urgency and despite rising published output could by and large be contained. The brittle book posed an entirely new problem. It resembled a terminal illness, a built-in self destruction factor in all those books printed on acidic paper. Preservation was no longer concerned with selected items which may simply have been badly bound or battered by heavy use but involved all the products of numerous publishers issued literally over several generations and on an international scale. Since a very high proportion of the books published in the machine printing era, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, had been printed on wood pulp paper, the size of the preservation problem quickly outstripped the accumulated needs of the output of the previous four centuries of print. When the huge increases in output of the information conscious age of the last forty years deluged libraries, a preservation problem of unprecedented magnitude was very quickly established.

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The failure of the profession to prepare for this disaster is inexplicable in view of the very early predictions that it was sure to come. In Britain, no less a figure than W. E. Gladstone, sometime Prime Minister, is urging the need for good binding practice as long ago as 1890 and warning of the enormous problems ahead[1]. The American literature of the second half of the nineteenth century makes frequent reference to problems future librarians would have to face as a result of the paper

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used in printing. A. R. Spoffard, Librarian of Congress, is writing on the «Binding and Preservation of Books» in the 1876 Report of the U. S. Bureau of Education[2]. Later, in his retirement, he is writing that «every librarian or book owner should be something more than a custodian of the books in his collection. He should also exercise perpetual vigilance with regard to their safety and condition»[3]. Another later Librarian of Congress, J. R. Young, commented in 1898: «Under modern conditions of paper manufacture, the press sending forth from day to day so much that is perishable... the question may well arise... how much of our collections will become useless because of the deterioration and desintegration of the paper used in the cheapest forms of our literature». Librarians know all too well that this paper was used not only for «the cheapest forms of our literature». Librarians know all too well that this paper was used not only for «the cheapest forms of our literature», but was widespread. B. B. Higginbotham[4], in her splendid account of the early days of preservation history in the USA, records that «Preservation, as a term and as a concept, was already well established in American Library thinking» by the end of the nineteenth century. Her quotation[5] of the «admonition» to all readers using bound newspapers at the Boston Athenaem illustrates just how serious the concern was among American librarians in 1897.

«Handle with great care

1. The paper on which newspapers are printed is generally of poor quality and grows brittle with age.
2. Most newspapers are difficult or impossible to replace if worn or injured, and, unlike other publications, they will never be reprinted. Only a very small number of copies exist anywhere.
3. Future generations of readers have a claim on these volumes, which should be respected.

Therefore, handle carefully.»

There was no diminution of concern in the next century. The U. S. Bureau of Standards and the British Royal Society of Arts were both investigating preservation problems in the early years of the twentieh century and this interest did not abate. In 1930 the British Library Association established a Sub-Committee to consider the problems of preserva-

tion inherent in the papers being used. Their report, *The durability of paper*[6], went unheeded by both the library profession and the book trade. Numerous other examples of this kind could be cited. Many individuals were also at work but for the most part they laboured alone and genuine pioneers in paper preservation, like W. J. Barrow, never lived to see their prophese fulfilled or their researches vindicated. In retrospect there can be no doubt that the crisis of the brittle book could have been contained, though not averted, if some attention had been paid to the numerous warnings both from individuals and institutions. However, as Miss Higginbotham[7] rightly comments: «It is not surprising that the libraries at mid-[nineteenth] century showed only a passing concern with preservation. In 1850 publishers still bound largely by hand. Although deterioration in the quality of book papers had begun to accelerate, most collections were small and grew slowly; no significant number of poorly made volumes had yet accumulated on library shelves and aroused serious concern about library preservation. Twenty-five years later, however, quite a difference in preservation attitude prevailed». Though the «difference in preservation attitude» certainly did prevail, there is no evidence at all that this extended to action. On the contrary, the quality of book production in the trade deteriorated significantly in the years that followed compounding the brittle book problem, the foundations of which were still being laid.

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To some extent it is true to say, certainly down until the end of the First World War, that the steady growth in book production, still for the most part in Europe appearing in apparently sound cased bindings, disguised the situation. Moreover, the fact that book-binding was a reasonable and respectable trade to espouse, based on good apprenticeship schemes, was also an important factor since it meant that help was readily at hand. Indeed, it was not until the end of the Second War that the wholesale disappearance of binderies, large and small, took hold in Britain. Prior to then, there were numerous binders, skilled on both trade and craft binding, to whom libraries could turn. The fact that the near demise of this age-old skill coincided with the extraordinary growth in published output world-wide was as much cause as effect of this phenomenom which suggested that a sort of self-renewing book would emerge offsetting any losses arising from the acknowledged built-in obsolescence. There are all too many statistics measuring in the most obvi-

ous way the impact of the information «explosion». In 1950, the first year of the publication of the British National Bibliography, some 13,000 new titles a year were listed. Over the next two decades the number grew at round 1,000 new titles a year but by 1975 the annual list had expanded to 35,608 entries. By 1982, only seven years later, the total had reached 48,307, by 1990 it exceeded 63,000 and there is no sign yet of any reduction in output. Indeed, a Consultative Paper published by the British Library[8] warned that «the annual output of UK publishers is forecast to rise dramatically into the 1990's during the next decade», a forecast which now mercifully does not seem to be likely to be realised in full.

There are many more obvious measures of growth. In the average University Library in Britain *Chemical Abstracts* took up 7 inches of shelf space in 1943, in 1953 — 17 inches, in 1973 — 66 inches, in 1983 — 113 inches, and to-day well over 12 feet. In 1962, some 24,000 Abstracts in Physics were published, in 1988 143,000[9]. In 1978 Ulrich's records 60,000 periodicals in print, to-day there are 133,000. «The Library of Congress estimates that 77,000 volumes in its collection move from the 'endangered' to the 'brittle' category each year»[10]. Virtually every regular library user, let alone librarians, can point to similar growth in output in their own field of activity. To say that it exacerbates the preservation problem is to understate it massively. This extraordinary rate of growth has been complemented and complicated further by an unprecedented expansion of the potential readership in academic libraries. The creation of so many more universities in Britain and the introduction of so many polytechnics stimulated use of libraries in Higher Education in a way equalled only by the growth in reading generally, following the Industrial Revolution and the Education and Free Public Library Acts of the late nineteenth century. Further, the need specifically for scholars to be seen to be publishing as a measure of their competence and ability has aided and abetted the publication deluge which libraries now wrestle to control. Unless an alternative method for assessing academic competence is devised soon, such as the refereed acceptance of an article for a database rather than for a periodical might comprise, the situation can only deteriorate further. In Britain, the British Library has acknowledged that it can no longer handle the Nation's published output alone and is looking to the other five de-

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posit libraries to share the burden. The Copyright Libraries which operate the Copyright Agency, of which the British Library is not a member, have long experience of working together in acquiring copyright deposit material so that the mechanisms for further co-operative activities are already in place.

The findings of the *Report* brought home to the UK library community the seriousness of the preservation situation. It was not confined to the British Library. The need was national and embraced all kinds of library. Lack of conservation awareness, the disappearance of binderies, the removal of the topic from the curricula of Library and Information Schools, the lack of any kind of emergency planning, the low level of professional concern and a rapid decline in ancient bookbinding skills — all the findings combined to urge immediate action.

The progress made in Britain during the last decade reflects in many ways the response to the crisis of many European libraries. The disaster at Florence in November 1966 shocked the world but seemed to have no obvious long-term implications for British librarianship. The first real jolt to deeply embedded complacency came in the late 1970s when the extent of the British Library's preservation problems, estimated in terms of many millions of pounds, was revealed. The huge cost envisaged was a fact of library life which could not be ignored and the first Head of Conservation in the British Library, appointed in 1976, was faced not only with the consequences of generations of neglect but also with the disturbing discovery that the brittle book was making its presence felt in many areas of the British Library too. His report to the Advisory Committee of the Reference Division of the British Library in 1978 initiated a level of preservation activity which continues to the present day. Moreover, the extreme concern emanating from the British Library touched virtually every kind of library in the United Kingdom. The conference organised by the Society of Archivists and the Institute of Paper Conservation in Cambridge in 1980, though still marked by a low level of library participation, hinted nevertheless at increasing library awareness. In 1982, the British Library Research and Development Department commissioned a project on preservation based in the University Library of Cambridge. The report of the project, known in Britain as the *Ratcliffe Report*, was published in 1984. It exhausted two printings and went out of print within the year[11].

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There has been a very considerable increase in the literature on Preservation following the *Ratcliffe Report*, all clearly reflecting the progress made towards dealing with the «brittle book» crisis. For the first time British Librarians have now

written preservation policy statements and have produced so-called «Disaster Plans» to meet those emergencies of fire and flood which are still all too common in libraries. The building of a new home for the British Library, bringing together for the first time many of the various parts in one place, has kept preservation very much to the forefront of the minds of librarians. Even the controversy surrounding the British Museum Library Round Reading Room and the new building at St Pancras has had its advantages bringing libraries and librarianship into rare prominence in the national press. This has been important not least for library design. Recognised along with environmental conditions as bearing on preservation problems as early as the late nineteenth century, library design is now a major conservation factor in any discussion on putting up a new building or extending an existing one. Most libraries now aim ko keep stock at recommended temperature and humidity levels, as specified in the *Report*. In order to assess the long term impact[12] of the *Report*, a review of libraries on the same lines as the *Report* has recently been carried out in Loughborough. This update provides hard evidence of the revived interest in preservation in the Library and Information Schools, where preservation has found its way into so-called «core» subjects. This update shows a very different picture from the *Ratcliffe Report* of 1984. Many libraries have developed in-house courses for staff and readers on the handling of stock so that preservation awareness is constantly being stimulated. The recent extention of the remit of the National Preservation Office into Security[13] as the logical extension to preservation os also a timely reminder of its whole *raison d'être*. A recent seminar on security organised by the National Preservation Office was significantly oversubscribed.

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These activities in Britain are indicative of what has become a worldwide concern. *IFLA's Principles*[14] have enjoyed a very wide distribution and are clear evidence of the priority now accorded to preservation internationally. IFLA and UNESCO held an Internacional conference for Preservation in Vienna in 1986 under the auspices of the Conference of Directors of National Libraries. At the CSCE Cultural Forum held in Budapest in 1985 conservation of and access to materials held in libraries and repositories both in the East and the West was one of the few areas of agreement to come out of the Confer-

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ence discussions. There have been a series of international meetings in Europe on the topic, most recently in Berlin in October 1990. The preservat movement has achieved an international momentum which must be maintained of the brittle book syndrome is not to blot out substantial periods of the world's cultural history. Not least among the beneficiaries are the underdeveloped countries, particularly in the tropics, where conservation of any kind poses enormous problems. It is of interest that the United Kingdom, which has been caught up in so much of the library development to be found in libraries in the United States, is perhaps the first of the European countries to find the brittle book in significant numbers on the shelves of the large academic libraries. In mainland Europe, where the American influence on the design of libraries has been less marked, the arrival of the brittle book is somewhat delayed and the preservation emphasis, in Germany at least, is still weighted heavily in the direction of manuscripts and early printed books.

Important as all this progress in revitalising the preservation responsabilities in libraries is, it is nevertheless clear that traditional means will be unable to contain the brittle book syndrome. The published output of almost one and a half centuries exceeds the traditional conservation capacity available and a variety of other non-traditional means of preserving the content but not the format are already being brought to bear on this preservation backlog. Mass deacidification on the affected items has been experimented with in various countries since the enormous extent of the brittle book disease was recognised. At the time of writing various commercial processes in the USA, Canada and the UK are being put forward: none of them is cheap. Moreover, there is still inevitably an experimental element in the processes on offer. The British Library method claims to strengthen the artefact not simply do deacidify it. None of the proposed schemes can, however, repair fully the damage done. They can only halt the decay.

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In such a situation rescuing the content has become all important. The microform master programme, whereby the contents of britlle books are transferred to microform, was confined initially to major national libraries but it has received an immense boost in the last two years by

very large injections of funds from the Mellon Foundation. The Mellon microfilm project, as it is now known, is to-day fully established and accepted in Britain as well as the United States and it is shortly to be extended into Europe. Already in Britain, many thousands of books have been filmed and their content at least is secure. This treatment involves selection, in the context of the still growing published output, the selection and retention of stock has been adopted as a policy by the British Library, thus departing from its historical objective of seeking to acquire and preserve everything published in the United Kingdom. To ensure that the national archive of printed books is still secured, this archival rôle is now being shared with the five other deposit libraries in the British Isles, each taking responsability for certain areas os publications. This is in itself of historic importance to librarianship in Britain since it is an acknowledgement that no one library can nowadays hope to be self-sufficient, not least in the field of preservation. The concept of the universal library has gone. The Library of Congress is making similar provision in the United States.

To-day most of the publications being produced across the world are still printed on acidic paper. They are the brittle books of the future and commonsense determines that such output must cease if our successors are not to be faced with the preservation problems now plaguing libraries to-day.

In emphasising the paper problem nothing has been said about the problems of «perfect bindings», about the hostile glues sometimes used, about the attitudes of the trade, which inevitably has some interest in built-in obsolescence and about so much else that undermines preservation.

Although the present actions will repair some of the mistakes of the last 150 years, the library profession will have to recognise that not all that is printed can or will be saved. The selection and retention exercises overtly concede that principle. What of the futurte? To-day most of the publications being produced across the world are still printed on acidic paper. They are the brittle books of the future and commonsense determines that such output must cease if our successors are not to be faced with the preservation problems now plaguing libraries to-day. The importance of ensuring that non acidic, «permanent» paper is used for all printing purposes, except the purely domestic, cannot be over emphasised. In the USA a logo identifies such paper and in Britain a British

standard for «permanent» paper should be published before too long. The fact that it costs no more to print on acid-free paper than it does to print on highly acidic is gardually persuading publishers to use the paper.

Desk-top publishing is simply compounding the brittle book problem by extending the printed output on acidic paper and largely removing any kind of bibliographic control.

A great deal more could be said. In emphasising the paper problem nothing has been said about the problems of «perfect bindings», about the hostile glues sometimes used, about the attitudes of the trade, which inevitably has some interest in built-in obsolescence and about so much else that undermines preservation. It can be said, however, that the library profession in the Western World is at last fully aware of the problem, is seeking to contain it and has made good much of the ground lost in the last fifty years or so. It is nevertheless unlikely that the key to the solution lies in the hands of librarians or the book trade. It has to be the use of new media. Only they have the capacity to meet these continually expanding information needs. Desk-top publishing, which reflects the determination to «get into print» as well as the new facility

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to do so quickly is simply compounding the brittle book problem by extending the printed output on acidic paper and largely removing any kind of bibliographic control. It can certainly provide no answer and can only make a serious situation worse. The solution must lie in the greatest use of databases and on-line facilities. This would eliminate so many miles of little read paper from the shelves of all great libraries.

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Notes

[1] W. E. GLADSTONE, On books and the housing of them. *The Nineteenth Century*, vol. 27, 1890.

[2] U. S. BUREAU OF EDUCATION, *Public libraries in the United States of America: their History, Condition and Management*. Washington D. C., 1876.

[3] A. R. SPOFFORD, *A book for all readers: designed as an aid to the Collection, Use and Preservation of books and the formation os Public and Private Libraries*. Second edition. New York: Putnam, 1900.

[4] B. B. HIGGINBOTHAM, *Our past preserved: a history of American Library Preservation, 1876-1910*. Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall & Co., 1990. In this article much of the information relating to the USA during that period derives from this source.

[5] *Idem*, p. 43.

[6] LIBRARY ASSOCIATION, Special Committee, *The durability of paper: report*. London, 1930.

[7] *Op. cit*, p. 8.

[8] BRITISH LIBRARY Bibliographical Services Division. *Consultative Paper: Currency with Coverage*. London: BL, 1987.

[9] P. METZ & P. M. GHERMAN, «Serials pricing and the rôle of the Electronic Journal». *College & Research Libraries*, July 1991, Vol. 52, No. 4.

[10] U. S. COUNCIL ON LIBRARY RESOURCES, *Brittle books: reports of the Committee on Preservation and Access*. Washington D. C., 1986, p. 8.

[11] F. W. RATCLIFFE, *Preservation policies and conservation in British libraries: report of the Cambridge University Library Conservation Project*. London: BL 1984. (Library and Information Research Report 25).

[12] Cf. J. FEATHER & A. LUSHER. *The Teaching of conservation in LIS schools in Great Britain*. London: BL, 1988. (British Library Research Paper, 49).

[13] The title of the Office is now: *National Preservation Office: a national Focus for Preservation and Security in Libraries*.

[14] J. M. DUREAU & D. W. G. CLEMENTS, *Principles for the preservation and conservation of Library Materials*. The Hague: IFLA, 1986.