

Mike Kelly

## INTRODUCTION

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THE 45TH ANNUAL PRECONFERENCE of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries was titled “Ebb & Flow: The Migration of Collections to American Libraries.” From June 21–June 24, 2004, on the campus of Yale University, speakers addressed a variety of topics around this theme. Plenary speakers addressed the migration of books to North America during the colonial period, the development of university library collections in the nineteenth century, the epic collecting of J. Pierpont Morgan, and the post-World War II antiquarian book trade. Alice Prochaska, Yale University librarian, opened the conference with a talk that identified the pivotal point in history when the migration of cultural materials changed forever—World War II. The systematic removal and destruction of books, archives, and works of art by the Nazis as they swept across Europe was unprecedented in world history. In addition to this carefully orchestrated assault on the cultural repositories of their enemies, the Third Reich drove countless refugees to carry away what little they could as they fled for their lives. The ravenous collecting of a J. P. Morgan fades to insignificance when compared to the wholesale discombobulation of cultural property wrought during World War II.

Among the many fine papers presented at the RBMS Preconference were several case studies of migrations of individual collections and various efforts to repatriate and restore cultural property. This issue of *RBM* contains a selection of these short papers, along with an additional contribution from Tanya Chebotarev. Anne Rothfeld directly addresses the aftermath of Nazi looting during World War II in her analysis of the Offenbach Archival Depot, the single largest book restitution program in history. Some of the conditions under which more than three million books were sorted at the depot are familiar to any of us working in cultural institutions—insufficient staff and insufficient funding. Add to

this the acute difficulties of the crippled European infrastructure, and the achievements of the depot are even more extraordinary.

Two themes raised in Anne Rothfeld's piece can be found throughout the articles in this issue. First, despite the good work done through the Offenbach Archival Depot, the restitution of cultural property displaced during the war is far from complete. It is difficult to imagine a point at which all competing claims will be settled or when all displaced items will even be identified. Individual objects continue to appear on the market and raise questions of provenance and restitution, such as the book of sixteenth-century German drawings recently sold by Sotheby's and claimed by the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart.<sup>1</sup> Even when questions of provenance are clear, repatriation is rarely a simple matter, as Tanya Chebotarev makes clear in her paper on the Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture. Sorting out questions of ownership of cultural property is a challenge that will always be with us.

A second, and much more optimistic, theme uniting these articles is the emphasis on collaboration among institutions and government agencies to find new solutions to an old problem. An outstanding example of this spirit of cooperation is described in Jerry Heverly's account of the Pittsburgh-Konstanz Archival Partnership. In this case, the collections at stake are the personal and professional papers of emigré philosophers who sought refuge in the United States as the rise of National Socialism made life in the intellectual centers of Berlin and Vienna unbearable. Through a novel exchange of personnel, training, and microfilms of archival materials, access to the collections in both Pittsburgh and Konstanz was improved as was the expertise of the curators involved. Collaboration and reformatting seem to be one way out of the repatriation labyrinth.

Digitization offers a means of virtual repatriation that Tanya Chebotarev cites as a possible solution to the claims on the Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture. An example of this approach in action is the Afghanistan Digital Library Project currently under way at New York University under the guidance of Professor Robert D. McChesney. Working in conjunction with NYU's Department of Middle

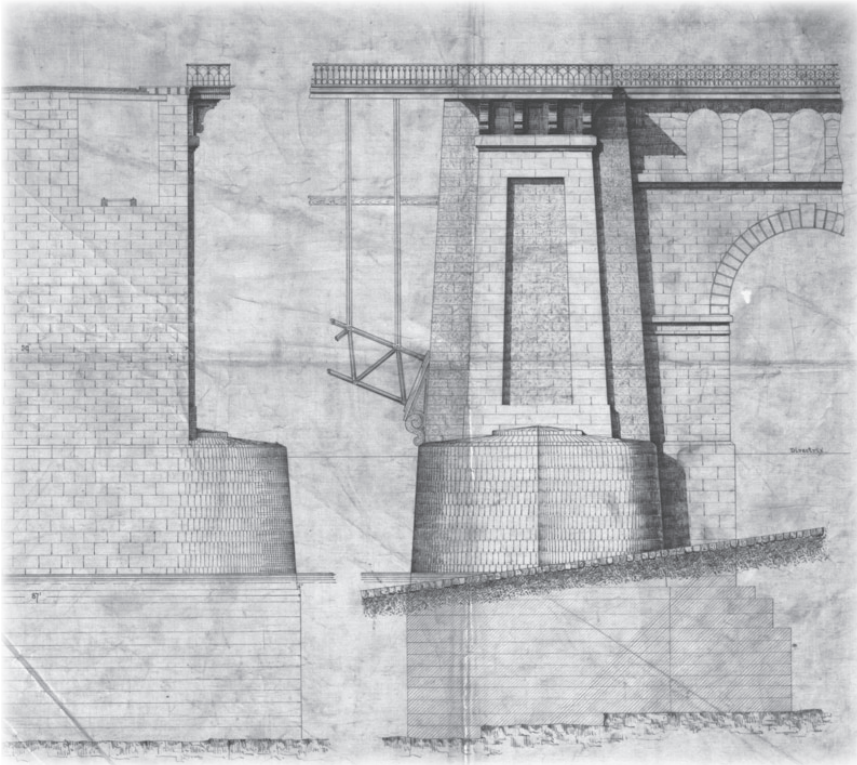
1. As reported by Diane Torioian Keaggy, "Germany Demands Return of Rare Book Found Here," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 22 January 2005.

Eastern Studies, the Center for Near Eastern Studies, and the Center for International Cooperation, the NYU Digital Library Team has begun digitizing every available Afghan imprint published between 1870 and 1930. The ultimate goal of this project is access to a body of published materials that have been subject to systematic destruction at the hands of invading armies and the Taliban government. Although the repatriation of original printed books to Afghanistan may be a laudable ideal, the ongoing instability in the region makes it difficult to guarantee the security of these materials, let alone provide international access to them.

Whether via microfilm or the very latest high-end digital imaging, it is important to recognize that virtual repatriation will always be a compromise. Existing and emerging technologies provide options for virtual repatriation that can, at the very least, provide access to the content of materials scattered across the globe. Although public debates and court cases regarding the ownership and physical disposition of displaced cultural artifacts are not to be taken lightly, as a community of professionals we must balance our concern with the physical object against our mission to provide access to its contents. Is it more important for a single Afghan scholar to be able to read a long-lost text in a library in Kabul or for an infinite number of scholars—and the merely curious—to have access to an image of that text online?

Given that the profession is still coping with fallout from the displacement of cultural materials during World War II, the extent of the displacement and destruction caused by recent wars and military actions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans may not be known for decades. The example of András Riedlmayer, leader of the Bosnian Manuscript Ingathering Project, is truly inspiring.<sup>2</sup> He has taken on the difficult mission of documenting the destruction of archives and libraries in the Balkans, with the aim of restoring and rebuilding these archives wherever possible. Rather than responding with despair and resignation, especially when faced with wholly avoidable catastrophes as in Baghdad, librarians, archivists, curators, conservators, and their colleagues in other fields have responded with creativity and determination. The case studies presented here provide food for thought as we seek balance between our professional responsibility to care for original cultural artifacts and our duty toward the demands of multiple user communities.

2. Details of this effort to identify and restore archival material that exists only as photocopies held outside the Balkans can be found online at <http://www.kakarigi.net/manu/ingather.htm>.



# **Bridging the Gap:** *Education and Special Collections*

The 46th RBMS Preconference will be held June 21–24, 2005, in St. Louis, Missouri and will explore a crucially important issue in our profession: the rift between the growing variety of educational roles played by special collections librarians—as teachers, advocates, interpreters, impresarios—and the shrinking opportunities for formal training and continuing education available to prepare special collections librarians for these roles. See <http://library.wustl.edu/units/spec/rbms> for program details as well as registration and housing information.