## People Power: models of engagement for diverse special collections

Clare Button
Project Archivist 'Towards Dolly: Edinburgh,
Roslin and the Birth of Modern Genetics'
Project
Centre for Research Collections
Division of Library and University
Collections
Information Services University of
Edinburgh
clare.button@ed.ac.uk

Grant Buttars
Deputy University Archivist
Special Collections
Division of Library and University Collection
Information Services, University of
Edinburgh
grant.buttars@ed.ac.uk

As one might imagine, Edinburgh University Library Special Collections contains a vast array of material, from the magnificently varied and priceless items amassed by antiquarian David Laing to the library of eighteenth-century economist Adam Smith to shelf after shelf of university matriculation registers. In order for these collections to be as widely available as possible, our approach as curators needs to be imaginative, innovative and flexible. Four very different special collections will be discussed below, with reference to the different ways in which they are promoted, used and disseminated both among, and with the aid of, specific academic communities, the student body, volunteers and the general public.

The 'Towards Dolly' project, funded under the Wellcome Trust's research resources scheme, has expanded the library's special collections remit into the relatively new field of science. The project involves cataloguing and making available the archival and printed collections relating to animal genetics in Edinburgh, from nineteenth-century natural history up to the cloning of Dolly the sheep at the Roslin Institute in 1996. The holdings

include personal papers of scientists, institutional records and publications of the Roslin Institute and predecessors, a collection of rare books dating from the 1570s onwards and a stunning collection of 3,500 glass slides. Creating succinct, accurate and relevant metadata which best describe and surface this material can frequently prove challenging to non-subject specialists. Invaluable interpretative work has been provided by the involvement of individuals from within the genetics community itself (including staff from the Roslin Institute). Many of these individuals, many without prior involvement with libraries and archives, have been able to provide vital context for items like laboratory notebooks, experimental data and historic photographs. This involvement has been stimulated via academic involvement on the project board but also through the active use of social media and public events that promote the project within the science community and beyond. The involvement of scientists themselves has proved invaluable for purposes of identification and interpretation of genetics-specific material, but it has also engendered a healthy sense of engagement and identification with the material. Perhaps most gratifying (and unexpected) has been the use and consultation of some of the published and experimental material to inform current scientific research. This has encouraged us to think differently about our science collections: in this field, nothing is ever safely out of so-called 'current use'. The 'Towards Dolly' project has not only broadened what might be thought of as our 'usual' collecting remit (generally humanitiesbased) but also illuminated the enormous crossdisciplinary potential of scientific and medical collections, whose potential can be unleashed through the involvement and expertise of specific academic communities.

The Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) archive, which came to the library in 2011 following the college's merger with the university, contains a wealth of correspondence, photographs, films and artwork from staff and students spanning the institution's long history. A dedicated archivist has been in post since 2012 and in this short period has created strong and sustainable relationships with ECA staff, alumni and the current student body. Innovative and flexible approaches to curation has encouraged the active use of the archive, both inspiring and documenting new creative work as well as fostering personal connections to the institution's history. For example, a recently digitised film from the collection of the 1945 Revel – the elaborate annual Christmas celebrations held in the college's sculpture court

- has been used as part of the college's current teaching programme. After viewing the film, ECA students were encouraged to examine past uses of the sculpture court as space for graduation and commemoration, for exhibiting as well as socialising. Dissemination of key material from the collections in this way allows historic archival items to become a tool for engaging with and reinterpreting the past.

Material from the ECA collections has also been used to inspire new creative works. First-year animation students at the college were invited to explore the archives in order to draw out particular facts or stories from the institution's history. Their discoveries then became the basis for '13 Truths and 1 Lie', a series of fourteen 30-second films which was shown at the Edinburgh Filmhouse early in 2013. As with the 'Towards Dolly' project, the ECA collections create innovative ways of promoting collections, which challenge preconceptions of what 'special collections' can do.

In addition to student participation, we are increasingly utilising volunteers and interns in new and creative ways, striving to match as far as possible the tasks undertaken to the individual's own interests and experience. One of our current volunteers initially approached us to facilitate the transfer of the records of the Scottish Musical Society. Following a very useful discussion, it became abundantly clear that her knowledge of the society was immeasurably greater than ours and she duly volunteered to assist with their cataloguing and basic preservation. The acquisition was itself significant as the society, which operated from 1879–1900, played a leading role in getting music elevated to faculty status at the University of Edinburgh in the early twentieth century. To be able to get the collection catalogued and preserved ready to be made available to researchers so soon after acquisition was a real bonus. The expertise of this particular volunteer has subsequently been used to the benefit of a number of other collections here, and is just one story of the two-way relationships we foster with non-staff collaborators to promote our collections.

Ultimately, engagement is at the heart of what we do, whether it is through our volunteer programme as above or through working with other individuals or groups external to us. Our recent Carmichael Watson project (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Leverhulme Trust) is a good example of this. The project is based on the hugely significant collection of

folklorist Alexander Carmichael (1832-1912), who collected oral folklore (charms, songs, sayings, stories) from the Gaelic-speaking communities of the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The project used cataloguing, digitisation, transcription and translation, alongside an active programme of promotion, to open out the material not just to a wider scholarly field, but also back to the communities from which it was originally collected. In its most recent phase, the project also 'reunited' the papers held at the library with Carmichael's collections of objects (including tartan, brooches and a stool belong to Bonnie Prince Charlie!) at the National Museum of Scotland and the West Highland Museum, creating a comprehensive online resource. Throughout all phases of the project to date, the team have maintained constant contact with people in the Highlands and Islands, a model which will continue as we further develop this and other collections.