

National Library of Scotland: The John Murray Archive

The second workshop of the Edinburgh Summer School 2013 took place on the 23 August at the National Library of Scotland. The curator David McClay gave us an insight into the John Murray Archive which is an enormous collection of correspondences, manuscripts, and business papers collected by the publishing company John Murray. It consists of over one million items gathered by seven generations of the Murray family and records the communication between the publishers and some of the most significant people of their age. The archive does not only contain documents from authors who are famous for the literature they have written—such as Jane Austen, Walter Scott, and Lord Byron—but also from writers who have made a name for themselves with science, politics, and exploration. The huge network that they kept with these intellectuals is illustrated vividly in a permanent exhibition at the National Library.

After giving us a brief introduction into the archive's history and how it found its way into the hands of the NLS, David McClay continued with showing us objects from the collection. I realised that all these different items in the archive can tell the whole story behind the authors, their books, their writing, and also how their publishers are involved in the whole process of bookmaking. I did not know much about publishing in that time so his explanations—for instance on how novels were published in several parts that would be collected as leaflets by the reader to be bound as a book later on—were very interesting. The items themselves were fascinating as a samples of a material culture that has vastly changed since then, and the different handwritings are definitely worth seeing for anyone with an interest in palaeography. We had a wide variety of different formats to look at; Mr McClay brought along bills, personal letters, lists, and business correspondences related to Austen, Scott, and Byron. I found it captivating to see those documents as a proof that the authors we study in our literature classes are not simply some vague historical figures who were silently writing in their chambers but real people with their own lives, needs, dreams, quirks, and problems who had a distinct influence on their contemporary world. Today, the connection between them and us can be (re-)established, no matter whether we pick up their books as a reader or look at their legacies as scientists.

Another exhibition was dedicated to one of those illustrious characters: until today, the Scots missionary and explorer David Livingstone remains a prominent figure. He is remembered for his extensive travels to Central Africa. While his cartographic work was an important contribution to geographical science, his travel literature and illustrations strongly shaped the European imagination concerning Africa. After the main part of the workshop we had some time to roam and browse through the exhibition, and Mr McClay was happy to answer any questions.

All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed the workshop. Thanks to the competent guidance of the curator, we were able to get a brief glimpse of both the intriguing material and the work that is done by the library to not only preserve but to make it accessible to the public.

Further information

<http://digital.nls.uk/jma/index.html>

<http://digital.nls.uk/jma/gallery/title.cfm?id=22>

<http://www.nls.uk/learning-zone/geography-and-exploration/themes-in-focus/david-livingstone>