

“Raising an Ebenezer”: Archives as a Means of Religious Remembering at Wheaton College

Abstract

By definition it is the purpose of archives to collect and preserve materials that document the work and activity of persons, organizations, and cultures for the benefit of those who follow. Such materials can prove to play an active and vital role in the process of remembering, through the telling of stories. This activity can support a library's endeavors to connect with users in this dimension of its services, and to fulfill its mission.

The present essay provides an overview of such initiatives at Wheaton College.

Archives and Remembrance

The English Dissenter Robert Robinson's eighteenth-century hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”¹ contains a phrase that may sound a little strange to the ear of a contemporary listener. “Here I raise my Ebenezer, Hither by thy help I've come ...” appears in the hymn's second stanza, and is intended to affirm the faithfulness of God over time. Quite understandably, many hearers will think of “Ebenezer” as a personal name — perhaps having in mind the primary character of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. But Robertson's “Ebenezer” hearkens back instead to the Hebrew prophet Samuel, who “took a stone, and set it between Mispheh and She, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.”²

Thus an “Ebenezer” is a memorial, facing backwards. And yet it encompasses an inherent future promise. I believe that Wheaton College's Archives & Special Collections serve a similar purpose.

The holdings of the Archives and Special Collections of Wheaton's library provide significant insight into the story of American Christianity, particularly Evangelicalism. Its holdings consume over 2.5 miles of shelving, and cover a wide range of formats and topics.

A Community of Witnesses

Over the years I have had the privilege of attending dedication ceremonies for many of the collections of papers and documents in Wheaton's Special Collections. I consider it a privilege, because, while on such occasions the College is formally receiving a great resource for research and curriculum support, from my perspective as an archivist I receive a kind of “blessing” as I make the acquaintance of the friends and family of those whose artistic and/or scholarly legacies are being recognized. Therein is a circle of grace displayed. In our role as archivists or curators we thus participate actively in a community of practice.

As a manuscript repository with a faith-based mission, the Wheaton College Archives & Special Collections endeavors to collect and acquire the papers of individuals and organizations that have strived to put their faith to work. Their faith has informed what they do and who they are. As with the biblical narrative earlier referenced from the Book of Samuel, these papers, letters, and diaries tell a story, and our patrons are enriched by the retelling of that story.

¹ Methodist Episcopal Church, and Methodist Episcopal Church, South. *The Methodist Hymnal: Official Hymnal of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Bryan, 1905), 19.

² I Samuel 7:12 in the King James Version.

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Just as the donors have sought to “live a life worthy of their callings during their lifetimes,” their legacies — as found in their intellectual output — have lives of their own. As researchers leaf through the papers of any number of our donors — Madeleine L’Engle, Frederick Buechner, Malcolm Muggeridge, or Kenneth and Margaret Landon to name a few — they are likely to recognize something of those authors’ experience of faith. These papers do not stand alone as a static corpus from an individual, but represent instead a dynamic testimony of someone who was a member of the body of Christ. The papers or records thus approximate the “Ebenezer” of I Samuel (and of Robert Robinson’s hymn) that declares, “Thus far the LORD has helped us.”

The faith of those whose legacies reside in our collections has been expressed in many ways and in many different settings: some as authors or poets, others as visual artists, etc. Their stories speak of love and loss, of God’s grace amid hardships, and of the simple joys of life. In that respect, their stories are our stories, and they are part of His ongoing story, as well. Our donors, through their collections of materials, testify to their experience of God’s never-ending faithfulness.

History of the Collections

It is difficult to point with precision to the exact founding of the Wheaton College Archives & Special Collections, but there are way-markers along the path.

In 1947, Julia Blanchard, retiring librarian and granddaughter of Wheaton’s founding president, was appointed archivist. This appointment helped pave the way for the gathering of various resources into a College Archives that would be important for Wheaton’s centenary in 1960. In 1965 the beginnings of what is now the Marion E. Wade Center, which houses the papers of seven British authors (including C. S. Lewis and other “Inklings”), were made in Wheaton’s library. Around this time, and certainly by the end of the 1960s, significant gifts of rare books came to Wheaton’s library from William Sanford Akin. Akin was a former publisher’s representative and librarian at Chicago’s Union League Club, and was known as an inveterate book collector.³ It is said that when he traveled, his wife knew which bookstores she could telephone when she needed to get in contact with him. Akin’s donation provided the seminal gift that firmly established Wheaton’s Special Collections.

These resources have been curated by a variety of people over the decades. What began as the work of volunteers and retirees was, over time, entrusted to paid staff with partial responsibilities for archives and rare books. In the mid-1980s Wheaton’s library, now named in honor of Wheaton’s third president, J. Oliver Buswell, hired a full-time staff member in its archives to supervise a cadre of student employees. This was augmented over the next decade with additional staff to oversee the growing collections, which since the mid-1970s had grown to several dozens of archival record groups and over one hundred special collections.

Noteworthy Collections

It presents a challenge to know what to include, yet it is worthwhile to highlight a few specific holdings of the Wheaton College Archives & Special Collections. As noted above, Akin and his wife provided a generous donation of rare books to Wheaton College in memory of Wheaton’s fourth president, V. Raymond Edman.⁴ This collection includes two sets of Samuel Pepys’s Diary, both first editions; a first edition of Johnson’s *Dictionary*; over one hundred editions of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, including a Victorian edition with wood taken from John Bunyan’s Elstow church embellishing the cover; and an edition of J.W. Cunningham’s *Sancho, or The Proverbialist*⁵ (1811), inscribed by Charlotte Brontë as a presentation copy to her husband, Arthur Nicholls, which also contains his marginalia written after her death.

For readers of the present journal, other early collections of interest include the papers of Madeleine L’Engle, Malcolm Muggeridge, and Frederick Buechner, each of whom wrote (one way or another) for a living and, served as interpreters of the Christian faith in very different ways.

³ Akin’s donation contained thousands of volumes. Of his pursuits Akin remarked, “Bibliomania...is not a hobby but an incurable disease, painless except financially.” Asked the cure for the disease, he responded “Death!”

⁴ <http://a2z.my.wheaton.edu/college-presidents/v--raymond-edman>

⁵ http://vufind.carli.illinois.edu/vf-whe/Record/whe_235290/Description

For L'Engle it was her way of writing about good and evil that attracted readers young and old alike. Following her success with *A Wrinkle in Time*, she served as writer-in-residence and librarian at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City for nearly thirty years.

Muggeridge worked as a journalist for many years and constantly sought to challenge the *status quo* in its varied manifestations. He achieved some notoriety early in his career, from journalistic pursuits as varied as disclosing to the Western world the grim realities of Stalin's genocidal policies in Ukraine during 1932 and 1933, or making light of the ongoing foibles of Britain's Royal Family. His later writings focused more closely on moral and ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and the rights of the disabled. Muggeridge's pilgrimage from hedonist to Evangelical Christianity to being finally received into the Roman Catholic Church makes him a figure of widespread interest.

In the case of Frederick Buechner, conversion was quite sudden. While attempting to launch a career as a novelist in New York City, Buechner stumbled upon the "extraordinary sermons" of George Buttrick at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, which played a crucial part in Buechner's turning to Christianity. This led him to enroll at Union Theological Seminary, and become an ordained Evangelist in the Presbyterian Church. His reflections on faith and life have appeared in numerous works of fiction and nonfiction including *A Long Day's Dying* (1950), *The Magnificent Defeat* (1966), *The Hungering Dark* (1968), *Wishful Thinking* (1973), and the Pulitzer-nominated *Godric* (1981).

In addition, the Wheaton College Archives & Special Collections contain the works of other writers, poets, playwrights, and directors, including Margaret Landon (*Anna and the King of Siam*), Susan Howatch (*Starbridge* series), Calvin Miller (*The Singer* trilogy), Luci Shaw, Jeanne Murray Walker (*America's Best Poetry*), Robert Siegel (*Whalesong* trilogy), Alan Thornhill (Moral Rearmament playwright), Coleman Luck (*Equalizer* and *Gabriel's Fire*), and Norman Stone (*Shadowlands* BBC).

Other collections encompass the writings and activities of other noteworthy Christians, including Kenneth N. Taylor (*The Living Bible*), Francis and Edith Schaeffer (L'Abri Fellowship), Louis Evans, Sr., C. Everett Koop, Jacques Ellul (French sociologist/theologian), David Aikman (*Time* journalist) and Wesley Pippert (United Press International).

Political figures whose papers are housed in the Collections include Indiana Senator Daniel R. Coats, House Speaker Dennis Hastert, and former missionary and State Department officer Kenneth Landon. Contemporary social justice issues are documented well in the papers of urban pastor William Leslie, or of sociologist David Moberg, along with the records of *Sojourners*, *The Other Side*, and of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Other Collections

- *The E. Beatrice Batson Shakespeare Collection* includes several early editions of Shakespeare's plays, a facsimile copy of the 1602 Geneva Bible, and important resources for the study of Shakespeare's era.
- Wheaton's *Hymnal Collection* comprises over five thousand hymnals, and documents American Protestant hymnody from the mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries.
- With the closure in 2004 of the *Billy Graham Center Library*, Archives and Special Collections assumed responsibility for that Center's sixty-thousand-volume specialized research collection of materials on evangelism and missions. Included in this transfer of resources was a substantial rare book collection with histories of early missions work, bible translations, etc. such as the first Hawaiian New Testament, as well as works written by Richard Baxter and Jonathan Edwards. In the last few years the print holdings, and recently art holdings, of the Billy Graham Center Museum have been transferred to the Wheaton College Archives & Special Collections.

Conclusion

With this wealth of resources, there are many stories that may be told. In 2009 the Wheaton College Archives & Special Collections undertook several initiatives to ensure that the stories we told were told well, and could help direct researchers and other interested individuals easily to our archival holdings. A primary initiative was the implementation of an

archival management system (<http://archon.wheaton.edu>) that is capable of providing clear, uniform, and authoritative information about our holdings.

Another significant effort was the addition of a blog (<http://recollections.wheaton.edu>) through which staff could tell and re-tell stories from the Archives & Special Collections. As facts are sleuthed out for blog posts relating to Wheaton College's history, findings are edited and placed in an online history compendium, *Wheaton History A to Z* (<http://a2z.my.wheaton.edu>).

A Facebook site serves as one way to direct interested users to this content. As these initiatives have gained a foothold, the benefits to patrons is readily apparent, as illustrated (for example) in a sampling of recent scholarly publications emerging from the Archives & Special Collections (see Appendix, below).

Appendix: Recent Examples of Scholarly Use of Wheaton's Collections

- Worthen, Molly. *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Habegger, Alfred. *Masked: The Life of Anna Leonowens, Schoolmistress at the Court of Siam*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2014.
- Gasaway, Brantley W. *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice*. University of North Carolina Press, 2014.
- Herbel, Oliver. *Turning to Tradition: Converts and the Making of an American Orthodox Church*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Osborne, Myles. *Ethnicity and Empire in Kenya: Loyalty and Martial Race among the Kamba, C. 1800 to the Present*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Marcus, Leonard S. *Listening for Madeleine: A Portrait of Madeleine L'Engle in Many Voices*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.
- Schafer, Axel R. *Piety and Public Funding: Evangelicals and the State in Modern America*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Swartz, David R. *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Dochuk, Darren. *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism*. Norton, 2011.
- Laats, Adam. *Fundamentalism and Education in the Scopes Era: God, Darwin, and the Roots of America's Culture Wars*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Williams, Daniel K. *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Heltzel, Peter. *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race, and American Politics*. Yale University Press, 2009.
- Casey, Shaun. *The Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy Vs. Nixon 1960*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Daly, Lew. *God's Economy: Faith-Based Initiatives and the Caring State*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.