

### 3.5 THE ARCHIVES & RARE BOOK COLLECTIONS, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS DEPARTMENT - THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA LIBRARY

Report submitted by Ms Mary Samut-Tagliaferro

#### INTRODUCTION

Like most academic and research libraries the University of Malta (UoM) Library holds “legacy” collections of rare and special materials. The Archives and Rare Book Collections, together with its sister collection - the Melitensia Collection - form part of the UoM Library’s Special Collections Department. The collections found here have a strong Maltese content but not exclusively as is the case with the Melitensia Collection. In common with other academic and research libraries, the UoM Library is committed to collect, preserve and provide access to its special collections on behalf of its parent institution and the needs of learning and scholarship everywhere.

#### THE ARCHIVES COLLECTION

##### A Description

The archives collection, used in teaching, research and in library displays, is housed in its own department, which it shares with the Rare Book Collection. Though modest in size, (ca. 900 items), the archives collection provides a depth and richness to the Library’s holdings that belies its small size. The Archives, which has at its nucleus the UoM’s own legacy collections, houses amongst its holdings a number of prestigious collections including some of importance to Malta’s ‘collective memory’ - foremost amongst these are the poems and papers of Malta’s national poet, Dun Karm Psaila (1871-1961).

Over the years, the collection has grown through purchase, donations and bequests to one that is today particularly rich in the works of Maltese literary authors of note such as Rużar Briffa, Ninu Cremona, Laurent Ropa, P.P. Saydon, Francis Ebejer and Gużè Aquilina to name but a few. The archives also house an interesting miscellany of other works besides which cover a range of subjects and a diversity of material types such as: the travelling journals of the well- known

19th century educationalist Canon Paolo Pullicino; 18th century anonymous church sermons and panegyrics written in Maltese; papers, field-notes and photographs relating to Maltese archaeology; a collection of glass slides which cover a kaleidoscope of topics, peoples and places including Malta (some signed and described by Sir Themistocles Zammit and probably used to illustrate his lectures); a collection of maps of Malta; early photograph albums of Maltese topographical interest; the music library of composer Charles Camilleri; a collection of papers covering Malta’s pioneering efforts in tourism known as the John C. Polacco Papers, and the complete archive, including legal documents, of an old, distinguished Maltese family - The Bonavita Papers.

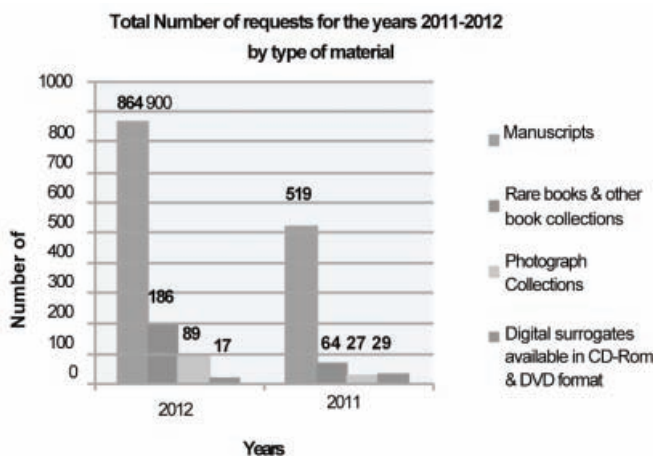
##### Recent Accessions

In 2011-2012 the Archives were further enriched with donations of papers and books from a number of generous benefactors including: maritime historian Joseph Muscat, natural history and folklore writer Guido Lanfranco and from poet and author Eng. Maurice Mifsud Bonnici. An interesting collection of audio tape recordings of interviews with well- known Maltese authors, (many of whom are already represented in the collections thereby serving to complement the holdings), was kindly donated by Maltese-Australian Roderick “Rigu” Bovingdon, who is himself no stranger to Maltese literary circles. Also, during this period, the archives of the Malta Library & Information Association (MaLIA), founded in 1969 were permanently transferred to the UoM Library.

#### READER SERVICES

##### Reading-Room Patrons

The Department welcomes visitors including outside researchers and keeps a record of their identification data for statistical purposes but, more importantly, to enhance security within the reading-room area. The Department is frequented mostly by students and members of academic staff, who together make up the Library’s target audience, but outside researchers including groups of schoolchildren, (accompanied by their teachers), foreign researchers and the general public at large also regularly call on the service. Statistical data shows that most reading-room patrons are Faculty of Arts students.



### **Reading-Room Requests**

In 2012 a total of 1,156 items (639 in 2011) were delivered to the reading-room. As shown in Fig. 1.0 below archival materials continue to register the most requests. The spike in demand registered in 2012 compared to that of the previous year can possibly be attributed to a combination of factors including: the quick processing of new material, the drive to place the Department's hidden 'treasures' on the Library's catalogue and persistent marketing of the Library's strengths. While the use data collected is helpful for comparative purposes and in confirming the section's popularity, (possibly due in part to holding material unavailable elsewhere), it offers only a limited insight into patrons' needs since these are greater than demand and use.

### **Handling of research questions**

In 2012 the service handled 192 questions (212 in 2011) relating to the service and its holdings, 20 of which were received from researchers residing abroad namely from Italy, France, United Kingdom and the United States. Questions range from quick ready reference to more complicated research questions, which required the librarian to carry out research on behalf of the patron. Most requests for information are either made onsite or reach the service remotely via electronic mail but telephone requests remain popular among the more mature patrons.

## **ENHANCING 'VISIBILITY'**

The section recognises the need to continue to strengthen its online presence. The webpages are currently being updated and time is dedicated throughout the year to the processing of material. Although cataloguing priority is given to recent accessions so that they can be made quickly available for consultation, attention is also given to backlogs of under- described material. The manuscript collection, formerly on card-catalogue, was retro-converted in 2008 and is available on the Web OPAC (<http://www.um.edu.mt/library/>). The Web OPAC provides global access and serves to enhance the visibility of otherwise little known resources. To aid patrons navigate the collections, a number of hard-copy retrieval tools also exist, mostly in the form of indexes and bibliographies.

## **MARKETING HOLDINGS**

### **Group Visits**

During the period under review, the Irish Ambassador to Malta H.E. Mr. Jim Hennessy paid two visits to the Department. On both occasions the purpose of his visit was to view the collection of Anglo-Irish literary works, (made up of primary source documents and ca. 1,000 prized editions), known as the David Elyan Collection - named after the bibliophile and scholar who collected and later donated the collection to the Library.

Members from The Emerald Society of Malta and from The Irish-Maltese Circle led by their President Mr. Michael Higgins also visited the section specifically to view the collection. On both occasions, a display showcasing choice items from the David Elyan Collection was organised to welcome the visitors.

The Department also hosted a group of ca. 25 schoolchildren from the Boy's Secondary School, Kulleġġ Sant' Injazju, Tal- Handaq, who visited the Department, accompanied by their teachers, primarily to view the Dun Karm and Rużar Briffa Collections. Also, throughout 2011-2012, specialised tours were given on request to groups of UoM students highlighting material of interest to their area of study.

## **EXHIBITIONS**

The Department is responsible for organising the Library's busy exhibition programme and curates as well as hosts a number of exhibitions throughout the year. In 2012 a total of 6 exhibitions were held in the Library (5 in 2011).

Some of the exhibitions sought to showcase and bring to the attention of users hidden or little known resources held in the special collections such as the exhibition mounted in 2012 dedicated to the Library's photographic collections. (An increased interest in these collections was registered for that year (Fig. 1.0) but this may have been coincidental). Exhibitions were also organised to commemorate important anniversaries such as the one held to celebrate the literary contribution of author and politician Ġużè Ellul Mercer on the fiftieth anniversary of his death entitled, "Il-kontribut letterarju ta' Ġużè Ellul Mercer, 1898-1961" (2011).



In 2011 and in 2012 the Department as in previous years mounted exhibitions to coincide with important events in the Library's calendar e.g. Freshers' Week, Discover University Open Week and Libraries Day. On such occasions the Library is en fête and prepares to welcome an influx of visitors with events and activities organised for the occasion, including exhibitions intended to showcase the Library's "treasures" and heighten interest in the University and in its Library's holdings e.g. "Treasures of the UoM Library."

Following the success of the art exhibition organised in 2011 by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) and hosted in the Library's Foyer, the Department curated an art exhibition of its own in 2012 with works on loan from the headquarters of the International Ocean Institute (IOI) Malta entitled "Children & the Sea," which was well received and evoked much interest.

It is also gratifying to note that increasingly academic staff and students are approaching the Department either with ideas for exhibitions which they would like the Library to curate or because they wish to curate a library exhibition of their choice e.g. The exhibition "Anastasju Cuschieri: 50 sena wara mewtu" (2012) was organised by the UoM students of Maltese together with the Għaqda tal-Malti and the exhibition "400th Anniversary of the Crusca 'Vocabolario', 1612-2012" was curated by Prof. Joseph Brincat from the Department of Italian who is himself a member of the Accademia della Crusca.

Although the Department continues to curate various exhibitions each year, the hosting of exhibitions is encouraged since they add variety to the exhibition programme not only in the subjects covered but also in the material displayed and serve to heighten the Library's profile and enhance the library-patron relationship. The Library plans to revive the digitisation of exhibitions last undertaken in 2007.

## DIGITISATION

In contrast to previous years no new digitisation projects were undertaken over the two years under survey but the Department hopes to renew its digitisation programme in the near future. To date the Department has created three digitised facsimiles of important collections from its manuscript holdings. These are: i) Dun Karm Psaila (1871-1961) Malta's national poet: digitized facsimile of the Dun Karm Papers held by the University of Malta Library (2003); ii) The Acta Academiæ Melitensis Registers, 1800-1945 (2005), (which form part of the institutional archives), and iii) Il-poeżiji u kitbiet oħra: kopja digitali tal-manuskritti ta' Rużar Briffa (2008).

## PRESERVATION

In 2012, the Library, ever-mindful of its responsibilities towards the preservation of the material under its care, installed a unit in the stacks to stabilise temperature as well as humidity. The project to re-house and box the collections is ongoing.

## CONCLUSION

As borne out by this report, the Archives & Rare Book Collection of the University of Malta Library is no longer a hidden resource known to a few cognoscenti but is slowly emerging in readers' consciousness as an important collection of works in its own right with its own individual character, as defined by its holdings.