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Discovering Dymock: student-archive creative collaboration at the University of Gloucestershire

The August 2013 edition of *ARC* introduced the Dymock Poets Special Collection to readers. Renowned twentieth-century writers Lascelles Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke, John Drinkwater, Robert Frost, Wilfrid Wilson Gibson and Edward Thomas formed a literary commune in the Gloucestershire village of Dymock during the summer of 1914. The Special Collections and Archives at the University of Gloucestershire holds the Dymock Poets Special Collection, housing archival, ephemeral and secondary-source material on the poets and their lives. Deposits of material have been received from a vast array of sources, not least from the extended families of the poets themselves. It has grown not only from a gathering of writers in a particular place at a particular time, but from the proceeding century of interest these people created. It remains a growing collection thanks to both the Edward Thomas Fellowship and Friends of the Dymock Poets, and the continued academic and creative interest in the poets themselves.

A desire to increase student use of the collection coupled with a conference on the Dymock Poets hosted by the University in June 2015 led to a collaboration between the Special Collections and Archives and the MA programme in Creative and Critical Writing. Students worked to box-list some previously uncatalogued material donated by Myfanwy Thomas, Edward Thomas's daughter, while using the wider collection to write a play about the poets. The play, "Voices from the Forest", was then premiered during the conference at The Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham, and later toured. It formed an assessed part of the HM7105 module, Creative Commissions and Proposals.

The first phase of the project commenced in the autumn semester of 2014. Students took their first steps into the archives, not knowing what they would encounter. They were shown the collection and taken through the box-listing process that would be their focus for the first two months. At first, the students were overwhelmed with the sheer volume of information to be worked through. They reflected on this process in journals that tracked their progress and helped them to think forward, toward the writing of the play. One student remarked:

“Archives, by the definition of preserving works, are involved in a conversation on the legacy and mortality of various writers... while searching through the letters and research papers, we were eagerly hoping for new information or something previously uncovered. A collection with an established readership, like the Dymock Poets, has the challenge to find something that wouldn't be old news.”

By November, the students started to think about how they might write a play about the poets, informed by their box-listing experience. A methodology was reached where students would take one poet each and focus on their lives, works and legacy in the writing of a short piece. These pieces would be then ‘knitted’ together and form a play. In order to avoid copyright issues, the students decided not to represent the poets themselves in the play and instead focus on their legacy. The aim of this approach was to create a play which focused on the thriving future of the poets in contemporary culture and to introduce the poets to a new readership and audience.

The real writing began when each student found a spark which ignited their creative thinking. One student discovered an anecdote of Brooke skinny-dipping with Virginia Woolf as children that captured her imagination. Another became fascinated with Drinkwater and his decision to move from Essex in order to write, just as she had done. By January, the students had an initial draft - a series of monologues woven together into one narrative, a journey into the Dymock Poets and their legacy. The writing was then honed and edited and a final version of the script premiered during the conference.

The project marked a significant milestone in the utilising of the special collection by students at the university. It also signifies, more broadly, the importance of archives to the construction of new creative works. As one student said:

“The process of writing from archived material should be encouraged in this modern era. Having the ability to return to paper clippings, to touch and experience 'slices' of history, creates an opportunity... It should be known to aspiring writers that archives are not just great for finding facts but are also these fantastic hives of inspiration that can only prove to further the mode of writing.”

We very much hope to continue our collaboration in future years and increase student access (both undergraduate and postgraduate) to this collection and others as valuable creative resources. The box-listing exercise will contribute towards plans to catalogue the collection onto our new AtoM software over the next six months.

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