

“We Have Met the Enemy . . .” Collection Security in Libraries

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Between 1979 and 1986, American libraries reported thefts and missing materials, including: rare books valued at \$500,000 from Harvard's zoological library; 400 books worth \$6,000 from the University of New Hampshire; \$20,000 in rare science books from the DeGolyer collection at the University of Oklahoma; \$1.1 million in plates, engravings, maps, books and manuscripts from the University of Georgia Library *in two separate cases*; \$130,000 in rare books and manuscripts from George Washington University; more than \$100,000 in incunabula from Boston College; \$200,000 in rare documents from the Thomas A. Edison National Historical Site; \$25,000 in books from the general collections at Berkeley; \$50,000 in rare numismatic books from UCLA—to name the more widely reported examples. During these years, the Crerar Library thefts were also discovered, and James Shinn was “flourishing” at most of the major research libraries in the country (the theft at UCLA was attributed to him, for example).

Who were the thieves? Those who have been identified run the gamut, beginning with outside professionals, such as Shinn, and lesser amateurs, such as Michael Kunashko, apprehended in the Berkeley case. My colleagues and I are more concerned, saddened, and perplexed, however, by the number of students, professors, staff members, and librarians who are implicated in these cases. The University of New Hampshire thief was a graduate student, for example. In the first case at the University of Georgia, a professor of history was apprehended; in the latter case, just now unfolding, a former rare books librarian appears to be a suspect. The head of Special Collections at Boston College offered incunabula

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from his library's collection for an unauthorized sale at Sotheby's in New York (I am particularly interested to see how this case is prosecuted and defended). The case of missing books at George Washington University involved the university librarian himself. Beyond the motive of theft for profit, what other motives drive these people? Covetousness? Retaliation or revenge? Who can recognize the thief in our midst?

A more pertinent question among librarians might be: What are librarians doing about collection security, specifically protection from theft? At the 1979 RBMS Preconference held in San Antonio, I was one of four panel members on a seminar entitled "Theft Reporting Systems and Marking for Security." Thomas D. Burney of the Library of Congress and I had just completed draft guidelines for the marking of rare materials, prescribing in what places in incunabula, medieval manuscripts, rare books, prints and general manuscripts we thought libraries should place marks of ownership. These guidelines were further modified as an appendix to wider RBMS "Guidelines for the Security of Rare Book, Manuscript, and Other Special Collections."¹ At the 1979 RBMS Preconference, we were supposed to review our guidelines publicly and hear reactions from those attending our session. Our co-panelists, covering the "Theft Reporting Systems" part of the seminar, were Laurence Witten and John Jenkins, then president and vice president/president-elect of the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America.

In retrospect, I was glad Dan Burney and I made the first presentation of the seminar. Larry Witten and John Jenkins listened politely, and when their turn came, they calmly distributed the ABAA's "Ethic and Security Resolution."² In it, the ABAA recognized the increasing number of thefts of antiquarian books and related materials and stated among its first policies its willingness collectively to act in a responsible and ethical manner with libraries and law enforcement agencies to recover stolen property. The ABAA also prescribed to libraries that they clearly identify their property, promptly notify law enforcement authorities and the ABAA upon the discovery of missing materials, and allow lists of missing materials to be published. It went on to state:

The Association voices its concern that libraries and others have not consistently been forthcoming in promptly identifying to ABAA and booksellers in general materials missing from collections. . . . It is inequitable for libraries and individuals to expect ABAA members to cooperate fully in apprehending thieves and in returning stolen items to their owners if those libraries and individuals take less than all affirmative steps to assist in the apprehending of thieves. . . . The rights of a library or individual in circumstances where thefts are not made known would seem to be outweighed, at least in equity, by the rights of the unsuspecting bookseller who makes a bona fide purchase for value of any such stolen item.³

Several images come back to mind about the aftermath of that seminar. Figuratively, the broadside resolution, earnestly presented, conjured up Martin Luther nailing his theses to the door of the All Saint's Church in Wittenberg. The ABAA protested the catholicity of academic research libraries, whose cant had been, "Hide your losses so your donors will not withdraw; or, so an adverse administration will not use your misfortune as an excuse to cut back 'luxurious' special collections programs; or, so other thieves will not think your library an easy mark; or, so you will not be publicly embarrassed." The real image of the aftermath, however, was the agitation of my fellow librarians. It seemed that the ABAA put librarians in an adversarial relationship with booksellers. In retrospect, and sad to say for academia, our own lack of security and cover-ups of thefts had put us in a position to which the ABAA was reacting.

The ABAA's resolution stirred RBMS to action. RBMS made its ad hoc Security Committee a standing committee with the charge to develop and disseminate appropriate guidelines to secure library collections, to serve as a resource for libraries who have experienced a theft, to serve as a liaison with other organizations (especially the ABAA) whose interests were deterring the theft of library materials and vigorously promoting the proper prosecution of library thieves. Since 1979, the Committee has published several sets of guidelines in answer to the concerns of the ABAA and with the hope of improving libraries' collection security. The 1982 guidelines cited above spell out key steps that not only special collection departments, but also libraries should take to improve security, including appointing a security officer, writing a security policy, surveying all aspects of the repository including collections, staffing patterns, reader control, and taking preventative measures against theft. The ABAA incorporated most of these policies and the marking guidelines in its own publication in 1982.⁴

By 1982, the ABAA and the RBMS Security Committee had also coordinated theft reporting activities with the FBI and the U.S. Customs Agency. *AB Bookman's Weekly* agreed to publish lists of missing books and other library materials at the modest cost of one dollar per entry, and Dan and Kathy Leab had developed an online database called *Bookline Alert: Missing Books and Manuscripts (BAM BAM)* as an even more expedient way of reporting missing items.⁵ Since 1982, the RBMS Security Committee has also published more detailed "Guidelines Regarding Thefts in Libraries,"⁶ and drafted a descriptive form for FBI agents to use in the field to describe recovered library materials. RBMS turned beyond the Security Committee to another means of securing collections by forming an ad hoc committee to develop guidelines for identifying rare materials in general collections for transfer to special collections or secured stack areas. These were published in 1985.⁷

One would think from the previous discussion that the concerted effort by RBMS from 1979 through 1986 would have helped toward solving the serious

problem of library thefts, that library thefts would have diminished, and that more thieves would have been apprehended and prosecuted. Yet during these same years, library thefts not only appeared to be on the rise, but also seemed more audacious than ever, as the list of thefts in the introduction above suggests. The epidemic proportions of library thefts prompted a special conference at Oberlin College in the fall of 1983. The conference summary confirmed much of what we suspected about a library environment conducive to theft: the failure to share information about losses, open access to valuable collections, poor library designs, failure to prosecute thieves, and so forth. Among its recommendations, the conferees suggested realistic measures, such as positive identification of library users, permanent marking of materials, more vigorous prosecution of thieves; and some not so realistic ideas, such as closing the general collection stacks. One participant suggested that 25-35% of the thefts were "inside jobs," such as those mentioned above. Closing stacks would not have prevented these thefts.⁹ Three and one half years after the conference, I am left wondering, for example, why the latest University of Georgia theft can occur in spite of our best efforts to prevent it. Something still is lacking among libraries and their institutions.

In the fall of 1982, the RBMS Security Committee conducted an informal survey to determine whether libraries had begun to adopt the policies published the previous March and whether they were marking their library materials accordingly. The results showed that libraries "lagged behind" in developing security policies against theft, their efforts directed at other aspects of security such as life-threatening situations, disaster planning, and physical conservation of their collection. Few libraries had appointed a security officer or had written security policy regarding theft. At the time, the policy regarding marking was only suggested, and responding libraries divided over whether to mark at all. Of those who did mark their materials, only one-fourth followed the RBMS guidelines.¹⁰ In 1983, I did a similar survey for the Association of Research Libraries as part of an Office of Management Studies SPEC Kit. Of the 118 libraries polled, only 31.5% had appointed a security officer. 87% were marking their general collections, but only 32.6% marked their rare materials. 71.9% believed they could determine the status of an item in their collection; that is, whether it still belonged to the library or whether it had been withdrawn. Only 14.6% had written a security policy.¹⁰

Perhaps some practical problems have prevented libraries from embracing the RBMS guidelines. Costs seem to be the major obstacle in most cases. Most medium to large libraries now have electronic detection equipment and treat general collection books. When the theft occurred at the University of New Hampshire in 1981, however, the University Library there had no surveillance equipment. And James Shinn had among his "burglary tools" an electronic sensing device to detect tattletapes in books, which he simply removed in the stacks

prior to taking the books away, to which one of my colleagues has referred waggishly as "an undocumented circulation." On the serious side of this problem, what else can be done?

The other security measures mentioned above, such as a survey for rare materials in the general collections which are openly accessible, or the closing of that open access altogether, are prohibitively expensive. To use UCLA as an example, fewer than 10% of its library's more than 6 million volumes are identified rare books housed in one of the university's special collections. The library has taken steps to secure some of the general collection in need of further protection by placing these non-rare, but scarce or costly, books in a non-circulating reading center or in its stacks annex cage. Perhaps that reduces the general collection to 5 million volumes. Think of the task force necessary to review the remaining collection for rarities following the RBMS transfer guidelines. To close the stacks would require as much as a 40% increase in the current staff to provide readers access to the collection, given the library's use rate. Under its present budget, UCLA would have to forego most of its collection development to meet the ideals of its security needs. Since academic libraries' collections are organic, not inert, this implied financial trade-off is unrealistic and unacceptable.

So what are the solutions to the collection security problems facing libraries? I believe we in libraries must pursue four aspects of collection security with greater effort than before. First, we cannot simply throw up our hands at the size of our general collections and make no attempt to survey them for materials needing our care and protection. This area of our collections, after all, provided James Shinn with most of the materials he stole. If we cannot survey the entire collection through a designated transfer project, then we should combine the effort with other projects. At UCLA, again, participation in the Eighteenth Century Short Title Project brought thousands of rare British imprints from the general collections to staff attention. The RBMS Security Committee recommends that libraries *not* forego a bibliographic project for a security project, but consider both simultaneously. At least it is a start.

Second, libraries must mark their materials properly to be able to make positive identification and claim for recovered property. Again numbers are against us: to continue the UCLA example, how do we begin to mark the 18.5 million manuscripts in my department alone? My answer has been that we mark everything newly acquired, that we mark previously accessioned materials as they are requested for use, and that we commit an additional small amount of time to work through the rest of the holdings regularly. We must start somewhere. RBMS also recommends that special collections departments take the time to provide copy-specific notes in the cataloguing of their materials as another means of identification besides the marks of ownership. The latter, as we know, can be obliterated, but descriptions of worming patterns or the quotation of selected marginalia, for

example, could lead to the positive identification of a work that had been altered. Time and money are involved here too because this attention to detail will slow down the cataloguing process. Without additional staff to keep pace, this process becomes another trade-off: do we describe fewer books with more detail, or do we catalogue more books and reduce the backlog of those without description? Libraries with automated catalogues should seriously consider a minimal record, an automated accessioning process, which can be replaced with more complete description later. There have been several cases where stolen materials could not be legally identified as belonging to the claiming institution for want of ownership marks and records of cataloguing description. In a case at Wayne State University several years ago, the convicted thief was paroled after serving three years of a ten-year sentence. He immediately returned to the court, successfully laid claim to all library materials whose ownership had not been clearly determined, and proceeded to open a bookshop in the midwest.

Third, libraries must press their institutional administration to prosecute thieves. This takes planning ahead of time rather than scrambling after the fact. The administration must be educated so that they do not fall back on the old approach that prosecution is not worth the institution's time and money, especially if the stolen materials have been recovered. Neither is dismissal "punishment enough" if the thief is an employee. Many employee/thieves have probably left one library under a cloud to steal again under the blue skies of another. We want these people in particular not only out of our profession, but also prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. They pose the greatest threat to the integrity of a collection because they can circumvent the system through access to restricted areas, to unprocessed materials, to records which they can alter, and in some cases even to budgets which they can embezzle. There is no security system or policy in libraries that can deter a criminal who knows the system and is a participant in it, short of an atmosphere heavy with suspicion or paranoia. As one colleague who wrote to me recently over the University of Georgia case asked, "Who guards the guards?"

An institution's administration can provide a strong deterrent to inside thieves (and outsiders as well) by prosecuting them. The process can go two ways: the institution itself can be the plaintiff, or it can assist in the collection of evidence for a state or federal prosecutor. The former may indicate a stronger backing of the library, but time and expense may dictate the latter course. Getting the institution to pursue prosecution is a strong weapon in the battle against library theft.

The three foregoing points—recognition and protection of rare materials, marking, and prosecution of thieves—can be accomplished if librarians and administrators will follow the guidelines RBMS has developed. The latest set of guidelines regarding library thefts prescribe steps to take before and after a theft

occurs. It also offers model legislation for strengthening laws concerning library thefts, designed to assist legislators. Changing the law pertaining to library thefts remains the most difficult obstacle. Most state laws are too lenient and the penalties too light. Many states still place library thefts in the shoplifting category, a misdemeanor. Yet cases such as Shinn's offer some hope when we see professional thieves receiving sentences commensurate with their crimes.

As with other areas of the law, though, we witness a double standard. The insiders who are caught, the students, faculty, staff, and librarians, have been treated as white-collar criminals who have "made a mistake." They are given suspended sentences, community service work to perform, and counseling. We must not only change the law to reflect the felony of major library thefts, but we must see that equal justice is served under the law. In the example with which I am most familiar, the George Washington University case, the person was also involved with the science books missing from the DeGolyer Library at the University of Oklahoma, where he had worked before. In fact, the FBI made its case on the possession and interstate transportation of stolen goods when it found the Oklahoma books in the person's home in the course of pursuing the George Washington case. The university and the government spent countless hours collecting evidence through audits and collection surveys. The sentence: suspended, with community service assignments and weekly reporting to a court-appointed psychiatrist. Now, three years later, he is working in a library again.

RBMS can continue to write guidelines to assist our libraries, but only the libraries and institutions can take the appropriate action. The next step for ACRL would be to mount an active campaign through its state chapters to get legislation passed across the country which will treat library thefts for what they are: felonies, not misdemeanors. I am not referring to the \$25 book which is charged out and not returned due to loss or oversight; these situations can be handled usually without legal prosecution. I am speaking of the cases mentioned here and others that, unfortunately, will occur in spite of what we do to prevent them. We need laws comparable to the crimes, we need fair penalties under those laws, and we need equal justice. We must convince our legislators that a rare book valued at \$10,000, stolen from a library, is a crime comparable to theft of a \$10,000 automobile or a \$10,000 diamond stolen from its rightful owner. The shoplifting laws and the slap-on-the-wrist penalties will no longer serve. Most of all, we librarians must act to accomplish these changes.

NOTES

1. ACRL Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, Security Committee, "Guidelines for the Security of Rare Book, Manuscript, and Other Special Collections," *C&RL News* 43 (March 1982):90-93.

2. Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America, "Ethics and Security Resolution," *AB Bookman's Weekly*, 8 October 1979, 2252-54.
3. *Ibid.*
4. John H. Jenkins, *Rare Books and Manuscript Thefts: A Security System for Librarians, Booksellers, and Collectors* (New York: ABAA, 1982).
5. For more information about BAMBAM, write directly to Dan and Kathy Leab, P.O. Box 1236, Washington, CT 06793. The RBMS Security Committee would be interested to learn how many libraries are making use of BAMBAM, not only to report missing materials, but also to check routinely for materials they are contemplating acquiring.
6. ACRL Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, Security Committee, "Guidelines Regarding Thefts in Libraries," *C&RL News* 47 (November 1986):646-49.
7. ACRL Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, Committee for Developing Transfer Guidelines, "Guidelines on the Selection of General Collection Materials for Transfer to Special Collections," *C&RL News* 46 (July/August 1985):349-52.
8. "Oberlin Conference on Theft Calls for Action," *Library Journal* 108 (15 November 1983):2118.
9. Peter E. Hanff, "Library Theft Prevention," *C&RL News* 45 (June 1984):289-90. Revisions to the 1982 guidelines will make marking mandatory.
10. Association of Research Libraries, Office of Management Studies, "Collection Security in ARL Libraries," *SPEC Kit*, no.100 (January 1984), p.2.



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