

An encounter with Darwin in Scotland

By **Emily Landriault**

Similar to other library programs, the Dalhousie University's School of Information (SIM) program has a 100-hour practicum component. The school's website (sim.management.dal.ca) provides information about this practicum component, including a list of the locations where past SIM students have done their practicums. About four years ago, as I was researching the different MLIS programs in Canada, I came across this list and saw that one of the locations was the National Library of Scotland. I have to admit, when I was accepted at both Western and Dalhousie, I thought back to that list, and the possibility of working at the National Library of Scotland (even if it was for only 100 hours of unpaid work) helped me to make my final decision. Once at Dalhousie, and with the help of Professor Emeritus, Dr. Norman Horrocks, and the Dean, Dr. Fiona Black, I was able to arrange the details of my practicum with the National Library of Scotland.

It was with much anticipation that I ventured abroad for three weeks the summer after the first year of my MLIS. "The National Library of Scotland is one of the leading research libraries in Europe," reports the library's website (nls.uk/news/press/murray0304.html). "It houses eight million printed items and has been a Legal Deposit library since 1710. Every week it collects more than four and a half thousand new items." I should mention that I had previously spent a year living in Scotland and was therefore less interested in doing tourist activities and more interested in working in the library. In completing my practicum application, I had listed one of my interests as

archives, and as a result I ended up working on the John Murray Archive. The Archive is a large and historically significant collection (fonds), newly acquired by the National Library of Scotland (nls.uk/jma/index.html). There have been seven John Murrays since the 1700s, the second and third of whom published manuscripts by the likes of Jane Austen, Lord Byron, and Charles Darwin. In 2006, with the help of the Scottish government and a fundraising campaign, the National Library of Scotland purchased the entire archive. Says the library's website: "The letters, journals and manuscripts date from 1768 through to 1920. In total there are more than 150,000 items."

I was placed under the supervision of the project manager of the John Murray Archive, who was responsible for the promotion and exhibition of the archive, as well as its website. As he was not a librarian, I was periodically sent to other departments to work more closely with librarians, archivists, and curators. Everyone I met was extremely welcoming and enthusiastic, and the overall morale of the organization seemed to be quite high. There were two reasons, I suspect, which contributed to this feeling. First, the library employees worked on flex time, which meant that they had to work a certain amount of hours a week, but could do so whenever they wanted, provided it was between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. And second, because of this system, and because we were in Scotland, drinking a few pints on a very leisurely lunch break was not uncommon! As a Canadian of small stature, I have to confess that it was a little difficult for me to participate in this practice.

Where some hearty Scottish library employees seemed to be completely unaffected and work-ready after two pints, I knew that if I tried to do the same thing, I would be falling asleep on priceless archival documents! As with many of the buildings in Edinburgh, the National Library is built into the arch of a bridge. This means that the building has many more underground levels than it appears to from street level. On my first two days of work, I was taken down into the depths of the third and fourth basement levels, and shown some of the gems of the archive. In Canada, I've had the opportunity to see some amazing special collections, including first-edition Oscar Wilde plays and a book gifted to the Library of Parliament by Queen Victoria in memory of her late husband. In the John Murray Archive, however, I was allowed to see the letter in which Darwin pitched the idea of *The Origin of Species* and the diary of Lady Caroline Lamb, in which she referred to Byron as "mad, bad and dangerous to know."

When I spent time with the curator of the archive, I was given what I felt were amazing tasks and responsibilities. I was given a box full of letters written by the Scottish poet James Hogg, and directed to put them in chronological order, foliate them, and make an inventory. Although it was an easy task, the tiny, intricate nineteenth century writing was a challenge to read. My next task was to organize a large stack of Charles Darwin's letters, which were not bound in chronological order. I was to find the chronological order of the letters and to make an inventory; this proved an unexpected challenge. I quickly learned

that Darwin, who studied and collected a large amount of species, not only felt a need to start many of his letters with the phrase, "I am much obliged ...," but also felt no obligation to date any of his letters. I was therefore left to match each original letter to transcripts found in the Darwin Online Correspondence Database, where previous research had been done to determine the dates that the letters were written. I couldn't help but marvel at the fact that the National Library of Scotland was letting a lowly Canadian library student play/work with such a valuable and significant volume of letters.

The whole experience of being in Scotland and being allowed to work with historically important archives was highly rewarding. In my second year at Dalhousie, as I compared my practicum to those of other students, I found that my experience had been unique. It had allowed me to learn both about libraries and about myself in a way that others who had remained in Canada hadn't. And for the rest of that year, first-year students were coming up to me, wanting to know how they too could do their practicum at the National Library of Scotland.

Emily Landriault

is a Reference Librarian with the Library of Parliament.