

On the Vulnerability of Rare Books and Manuscripts

Six kinds of risk stalk humanity but disaster management consultant GUY ROBERTSON offers tips to mitigate them.

STROLL INTO THE FOYER of the British Library and up the stairs to the Sir John Ritblat Gallery. There you will find one of the world's more valuable collections of books and manuscripts, including a Gutenberg Bible, the Lindisfarne Gospels, and Shakespeare's First Folio. Among the non-written artifacts on display, allow Jane Austen's writing desk and spectacles to enthrall you: after all, she relied on them when she wrote *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*. Stand in awe before one of four original copies of the Magna Carta, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* sketchbook, and the Diamond Sutra, the earliest printed book with a date of CE 868. The gallery contains samples of literate activities from many different periods and cultures, and allows visitors to view them free of charge.

Before you leave, examine the *Beowulf* manuscript. From this, we derive editions of the best-known Anglo-Saxon epic, which is a foundational work for studies in early English. Notice the manuscript's charred edges. It was a volume in the Cottonian Library, which was stored in Westminster at the ironically named Ashburnham House. On October 23, 1731, a fire erupted and caused severe damage to the library. Sadly, more than 200 volumes were damaged or lost, despite heroic efforts to save them. At one point, people on site threw volumes out the windows. The *Beowulf* manuscript survived, albeit it in fragile condition.

What remains of the corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature—all of it in manuscript form and much in fragments—would fill three standard-sized document boxes. Much more existed during the period bracketed by the Roman withdrawal from Britain in the early 5th century CE to the Norman Conquest in 1066. But the fate of written artifacts can be harsh, and all books and

manuscripts are vulnerable to an abundance of threats. Over time, much of a written culture can vanish, leaving no more than fragments of literary interest and miscellaneous documents relating to daily life and public endeavours.

Despite such grim reality, we can postpone the destruction of our precious collections for many centuries, and in some cases facilitate the survival of important works from one civilisation to the next. To do so, we must identify the risks that prevail in any location, keeping in mind that not one square centimetre of this planet is risk-free. There is always a combination of risks that threaten our physical assets, including rare books, manuscripts, and other valuable artifacts. Each location has a "risk profile" that includes everything that might damage or destroy them.

SIX KINDS OF RISK

We recognise different kinds of risks, all of which can threaten any book or manuscript, any small private collection or large university library. The most common and most frequently reported is *natural risk*, which includes severe weather, earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, and pandemics. While recent climate change can lead to disasters and the loss of priceless collections, weather events such as high winds and heat waves have posed threats to written works since the beginning of literacy. Ancient Mesopotamia's risk profile included flooding from the region's great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates. And now, modern cities are increasingly threatened by the rivers that flow through them. Londoners worry about the Thames and the possibility that it might overflow its banks; citizens of Florence fear a flood of the Arno that could be worse than the one that destroyed so much of the city and its treasures in 1966; and

the people of Greater Vancouver worry about another flood from the Fraser River that could submerge large areas and disrupt transportation, communications, and normal life for months. Regardless of age or size, every human settlement is at risk from nature, which can strike in numerous different ways. Rare books and manuscripts are vulnerable to wildfires and flash floods, but also to bookworms that prefer warm environments, vellum, and high-quality paper.

Technological risk is as old as the wheel, but in the digital age we have become intensely aware of threats arising from the workings of technology, as well as external threats to the technology itself. We rely on technology to thrive and survive. When information technology breaks down, we can lose essential data, including the catalogues and inventories we need to control our collections. Technological risk also includes meltdowns in nuclear plants, dam failures, toxic chemical spills, accidental sprinkler releases, and power outages. A power outage can cause the environmental controls in a rare book room or archive to fail during a heat wave. The results, especially after an extended period without stable humidity, can include damage to fragile paper and bindings as well as the growth of pests such as silverfish, which devour paper and glue. It is worth noting that prevailing risks often exist simultaneously and worsen the effects of each other. Hence a technological risk such as a power outage can work together with silverfish, a natural risk, to damage books and manuscripts.

Proximity risk involves whatever is close to that shelf of first editions or vault containing incunabula. What's nearby? What's next door? Your university's new library is a magnificent structure that features foundations designed to withstand earthquakes and a backup power generator that will allow environmental controls in the rare book department to function for days after a power outage, but the chemistry building beside it is at risk for fires, explosions, and toxic spills, any of which could damage the library and its contents. Heavy precipitation can cause a sewer backup that floods basements where rare books and special collections are stored. They could sustain serious water damage. Proximity risk includes any natural and

technological risk that prevails in the vicinity of a rare book or manuscript, or a collection of them.

A *security risk* involves illicit or criminal behaviour such as theft. Security experts note that biblioklepts come from a variety of backgrounds, and profit from the sale of stolen items is not the only motive. Some are knowledgeable collectors of the sort of items that they steal. Some are angry at the institution from which they steal, and seek what they consider to be revenge. And some simply enjoy the act of theft: the challenge, the thrill, and the process of making off with the treasure.

Accurate statistics on thefts from libraries and private collections are difficult to compile because so many thefts are undetected and unreported. In any case, many stolen books and manuscripts disappear permanently, and thefts of valuable items occur frequently. Every day, somewhere in the world, a library or private collector loses a cherished volume, for which any insurance payout is inadequate recompense. Sadly, stolen items that are recovered have often been mistreated: battered, torn, or otherwise vandalised. Sometimes thieves simply discard items that they cannot sell or no longer find interesting.

Happily, however, some stolen items are recovered in good condition. In 2001, two journals of Charles Darwin were reported missing from the Cambridge University Library. The journals contained Darwin's early musings about natural selection; one journal featured the famous Tree of Life sketch that details the notion that species are descended from common ancestors. It took two decades before the library reported the theft to the police. And then, to the relief of the Cambridge librarians, in March 2022 the journals were returned anonymously to the library in a pink gift bag with Easter greetings attached. Would that most stolen items reappeared in similar fashion.

Aside from physical risk, there are threats to collections from political financial and personal factors that have indirect effects. Such threats are forms of *enterprise risk*. For example, a government might reduce funding to public and academic libraries, which would be forced to reduce their collections. During the "weeding" process, valuable items can be discarded or lost.



A badly damaged copy of a biography of Lorenzo de Medici, published in London in 1797, following a fire at the owner's house. Water damage is evident on the endpapers, and the binding shows fire damage. The spine has burned off altogether, a typical form of fire damage in libraries. (Guy Robertson photos)

Or library cutbacks will lower the quality of storage space, and collections will suffer from unstable humidity, insect infestation, and general neglect. Enterprise risk most often arises after other unfortunate circumstances.

Finally, there is *human-caused* risk, which frequently involves human error, or what has been called “the whoops factor.” Collectors have left items on buses and trains, and airport lost-and-found departments often store rare volumes on the same shelves as laptops, abandoned luggage, and tacky souvenirs. Eventually such volumes are donated to charity or sent to a recycler. Nobody is perfect; everyone makes mistakes, and human-caused risk leads to losses that are embarrassing and expensive as well as irreparable.

Along with the different kinds of risk that increase the vulnerability of rare items, we must consider the *likelihood* that a negative event will damage or destroy them. Every collection is unique, and risk will vary from site to site. University librarians who locate their rare book departments in the basements of buildings with powerful sprinkler systems risk losing valuable materials if, either intentionally or accidentally, sprinklers are activated and gravity pulls large amounts of water into basement areas. Sprinklers can save lives, but they also damage physical assets. A regularly inspected and well-maintained sprinkler system is less likely to release water than one that is neglected, but any sprinkler system involves a risk to items within its range. Leaky roofs can cause similar grief.

WHY SHOULD WE REDUCE RISK?

Hence the combination of vulnerability to risk and the likelihood of damage to and loss of our collections might discourage us. And if everything will inevitably dissolve into molecules in future, why should we attempt to preserve our collections? In the end, what’s the use? In fact our books and manuscripts—and by extension the institutions and individuals that own them—are elements of what Charles B. Osburn and other library theorists have called our *social transcript*, which can be defined as the all-embracing record of our culture over time. As generations pass, new generations need their social transcript as a reference point to know

where they stand in the world. Certainly, social transcripts will disappear sooner or later, but as long as their respective cultures survive, social transcripts will retain their value and usefulness.

To protect our books and manuscripts, we must strive to mitigate the threats to them. The first step is to determine the full risk profile of our collections and wherever they are housed. Different forms of risk will prevail at each site and threaten each collection in various ways. Developing a clear idea of a risk profile is an important step in mitigating the threats that it comprises. An incomplete analysis of a risk profile can lead to ineffective protective and preventative measures, and leave valuable items vulnerable. But a comprehensive risk profile can lead to emergency (or disaster) planning that could render many threats negligible.

Emergency plans come in numerous forms, and have a variety of titles. A university library has a disaster plan; another university has a contingency plan; a nearby college has a business continuity program. Such plans can contain advice concerning ways to identify risks and to declare emergencies. Damage assessment procedures are common, along with strategic alliances. The latter are invaluable for the rescue and conservation of rare materials. Libraries should establish strategic alliances with moisture control vendors, who can quickly provide technicians and conservation specialists to stabilise the condition of damaged books, manuscripts, and any other valuable assets housed on a site. While moisture control vendors are most often called in to deal with flooding and water damage, they also work on items damaged by smoke, fire, and toxic materials. Larger vendors can provide containers and trucks for emergency moves to secure locations.

Moisture control vendors serve private collectors as well as libraries, archives, and other information organisations. Insurance companies maintain lists of vendors for their customers, and anyone who owns even a single rare item is wise to make sure that a vendor is available to conserve it in the event of a disaster. It is worth noting that moisture control vendors are best suited to emergency conservation and not necessarily to advanced restoration that includes the repair of torn leaves and the replacement of bindings.



*The aftermath of an April 2021 fire at the University of Cape Town Library.
(Photo courtesy of the University of Cape Town Libraries)*

Mitigation measures include the removal of rare materials from risky locations such as potentially damp basements and upper floors under leaky roofing, adequate security procedures to frustrate thieves, and backup power sources for environmental controls. Private collectors should store their collections inconspicuously, in ways that do not attract the attention of burglars. And while some collectors enjoy showing off their prized items to visitors, they should resist the temptation to do so at social events that lead to coffee rings on precious bindings and food stains on title pages.

These plans and measures can protect our rare materials for centuries and longer. In some sense, it is our duty to ensure that our social transcript survives for as long as possible. In future, the protection of our social transcript might involve the storage of alternative—probably

digital—formats on the moon, or Mars, or in a distant galaxy. In such locations, they might survive indefinitely. It is likely, however, that at some point, even digitised materials will deteriorate. But you cannot fault the human race for trying, and for many generations, our beloved books and manuscripts will have been well worth the effort. Anyone who doubts this should spend a little time in the Sir John Ritblat Gallery.

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~ Guy Robertson is an internationally respected emergency management consultant and planner and the author of several books on disaster planning and risk mitigation. In addition to his work at TMC IT & Telecom Consulting Ltd., he is an instructor at Langara College and a director of the Alcuin Society.