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Citation: Price, L. (2017). The Special Collections Handbook (2nd edition). Reference Reviews, 31(6), pp. 8-9. doi: 10.1108/rr-04-2017-0088

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1108/rr-04-2017-0088>

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Special collections handbook

Journal:	<i>Reference Reviews</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Review
Keywords:	

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Reference Reviews

The Special Collections Handbook (second edition)

Alison Cullingford

Facet

London

2016

xvi+332pp.

ISBN 978 1 78330 126 3 (paperback)

Keywords: libraries; special collections; archives; library and information science

This revised version of the 2011 first edition gives a vastly updated account of special collections, an area of the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) sector that has seen much movement in the past few years, what with the rapid pace of technology, and the advent of many new and exciting projects which have been enabled in great part due to those technologies. As an update, this is well worth replacing the earlier edition in order to keep current with these fast-moving changes. It also is also offers practical advice for a profession which has increasingly had to face the malaise of shoe-string budgets, restructuring and volunteerism.

This second edition is structured much as the first, focusing on all aspects of special collections, with over 100 pages of new material. Two new sections have been added: one on digitization and digital libraries, and one on organizational resources. As found in the previous edition, sections are thus arranged: special collections care; emergency planning; special collections objects; acquisitions and development; cataloguing and metadata; digitization; legal and ethical issues; user services; marketing and communications; widening access; organizational resources; fund-raising. The text finishes with a useful list of references and practical go-to resources, from union lists to organizations that can help with ascertaining provenance. The new sections are welcome – digitization is a vital component of the 21st century library, often expected, if not now a requirement. The section on organizational resources, while drier, deals with important issues such as workflows, staff management, and the perennial problem of space, of which there is rarely enough. In addition, throughout the text there is an awareness of non-traditional formats that have gained more attention in recent years – such as zines and comics – and this is also welcome.

As previously stated, the changing landscape of the library and information professions warrants constant appraisal of current practice, and this handbook shows an obvious awareness of this. Its great strength lies in the case studies scattered throughout the text, both illustrating the book’s main points and giving invaluable insight into how other institutions have tackled various problems or made certain projects work. There is always much to be gained in seeing how others in the field go about tackling thorny issues, or in learning from the experiences of fellow colleagues and institutions – in what has succeeded and what hasn’t. This handbook’s case studies enable the reader to see what opportunities are available in making the best out of our collections, to think outside the box, and to implement best practice. At the very least, learning about Senate House Library’s aborted 2013 attempt to sell four original Shakespeare Folios, or the 2014 fire that cost the Glasgow School of Art its Mackintosh Library, makes for interesting reading.

As a practical handbook, this volume should be on the shelf of every special collections library – it should, indeed, be on the shelf of every library. There is much that all librarians may glean from it, whether their institution houses a special collection or not. It is worth every information professional understanding how special collections work, in order to facilitate organizational communication and understanding, to see whether there are opportunities for collaboration, or simply to understand how special collections function within a wider institution. Its practical guidance on topical issues such as impact and metrics, fundraising, and item theft are of use to librarians and information professionals of all backgrounds or expertise.

Lastly, this book, along with Bawden and Robinson's (2012) *Introduction to Information Science*, should be recommended reading for any Library and Information Science student, particularly those hoping for a career in special collections. Whilst not all LIS students will want to take this route in the profession, many will likely deal at some point with special collections, and it is important to have a broader understanding of how they fit into the discipline, especially when such collections are becoming more visible – especially online – due to technologically-influenced movements such as digitization, online exhibitions and crowdsourcing. These are trends that face the information profession as a whole, and the holistic approach of this book, and its awareness of the wider profession, means that it has much to offer to all who work in the field.

References

Bawden, D., & Robinson, L. (2012) *Introduction to Information Science*. Facet Publishing, London.