

*An Open Letter to Cardiff City Councillors and
to the Assembly Members and Members of Parliament for Cardiff*

**Destruction of an Important Part of
Cardiff and the Nation's Heritage**

I am writing to you in my capacity as Secretary of the Cardiff Welsh Bibliographical Society.

It has come to our attention that Cardiff City Council intends to sell many of the rare books in Cardiff Public Library, in order to refurbish the new library building in the centre of Cardiff. We understand that Bonhams of London are at present preparing lists of the Library's books for sale by auction.

From the end of the nineteenth century until the Second World War, an enlightened Cardiff City Council created in the City Library a research collection of national and international status – a collection befitting a capital city.

The City Library holds one of the most important collections of Welsh books and manuscripts outside of the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth; but it also has many thousands of rare books from the 15th to the 19th centuries, together with manuscripts from the Middle Ages, which are not 'Welsh' as such, although many of them have strong Welsh connections.

These truly remarkable collections include a notable collection of rare atlases; a good cross-section of 'incunabula' (i.e. early books printed in Europe pre-1501); an important collection of early printed Bibles; key English and European texts from the Protestant Reformation; a substantial collection of scarce political tracts from the Civil War; rare books on natural history, geography, and so on, and so on.

In other words, Cardiff City Library has a rich research collection of international prestige and importance.

It is probable that Cardiff is the only capital city in Europe without either a National Library or a National Archives. But at least it had the magnificent collection of the Cardiff City Library. **That collection is now in danger of being damaged irreparably as a result of a little-publicised decision by the Council made in 2007.**

The decision to sell many of the Library's rare books was made following the recommendations in a document entitled 'Disposal of Surplus [*sic*] Library Stock' (11/01/2007). The document contains such statements as: 'they [the rare books] are unsuitable for use by anyone other than academics and specialists' – as if Cardiff did not have a substantial academic community and aspirations to be an international city of learning!

As the document admits, most of these valuable books – especially since the Library was moved from its old building in the Hayes in 1988 – have been lying in stores, uncatalogued, and their existence almost unknown to all but a few specialists. Who

knows but that Cardiff would have been the cultural capital of Europe in 2008, if these rare books had been treated and promoted as they deserve!

But rather than ensuring that these valuable collections be catalogued, and exploiting these assets in a way that would substantially enhance Cardiff's prestige as a city of culture and learning, the Council has decided to sell them, thereby losing the substantial long-term benefit – both cultural, academic and cultural – that would come to the city through their presence there.

It is true that many of the approx. 18,000 rare books the Council intends to sell are not 'Welsh' as such; but as a collection they are a significant part of the cultural history of Wales. And of course, all libraries which aspire to 'national' status include a good cross-section of books from outside their country, in order to place their culture in an international context. Indeed, selling the rare English and Continental books in Cardiff City Library would be a cultural disaster to Cardiff and Wales comparable to the National Museum selling 'La Parisienne' and the rest of its French Impressionist art collection!

Many of the items to be sold were gifts, donated to the City Library by benefactors for the long-term welfare of Cardiff, its citizens and the nation. Although the Council may (perhaps) have the legal right to sell these treasures, it certainly does not have the moral right.

We urge you, therefore, to do all in your power to overturn this shameful decision to sell an important part of the heritage of Cardiff and Wales, an act which will damage irreparably Cardiff's standing in the world of culture and learning, both nationally and internationally.

Yours sincerely,

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We urge readers of this open letter to write to their Councillors and to their Assembly Members and Members of Parliament, pressing them to do their utmost to prevent this disgraceful sale of rare books and to ensure that the Council promotes its rich library collections in a way befitting of the capital city of Wales.