

The Mass Observation Archive

University of Sussex Library

Guidance on donating personal papers

Over the years, many people have donated small collections of personal papers to the Mass Observation Archive. We have been very pleased to accept such collections as they complement the material collected by Mass Observation going back to 1937. Once donated to the Archive, the papers become the responsibility of the Trustees who undertake to provide the best possible home for the new collections. These notes are intended to guide people who are thinking about offering either their own papers, or those of a friend or relative.

Please check through these notes before deciding whether you wish to offer the Archive your collection. If you DO NOT get back to us after reading them we will assume that you have decided against offering them. Please also note that the Trustees reserve the right to transfer the collection to a more appropriate repository should circumstances change and in the light of professional and scholarly advice.

What we are interested in accepting

We place an emphasis on unique personal writing and collections in contrast to printed/published material which is usually available in other libraries and archives. We also prefer to have unedited material *written at the time*, and not re-written later. The kind of material which we would like to consider includes:

- Diaries of any kind covering the years 1930 to the present day. They may be hand-written or typed; they may be recorded in commercially printed diaries or plain note books. They may be detailed or sparsely recorded, have gaps or be continuous. Many people change the way they keep diaries over the years, so a variety of forms and entries is perfectly acceptable.
- Personal letters covering the period 1930 onwards. However, please see note 5 overleaf on problems of copyright.
- Scrap books where there is considerable annotation and input from the person putting the book together. A scrap book with no captions would not be as interesting as one with, although if it formed part of a collection of diaries and/or letters, we might like to have it anyway. 1930 onwards. Loose newspaper cuttings would not normally be accepted.
- Photograph Albums also roughly covering the years 1930 onwards. Again, captions make the album more valuable to us.
- Printed material only if it forms a part of a larger collection of written personal material. Items which have been accepted as part of a larger collection include ration books, identity cards, various kinds of personal documents such as certificates and awards, membership cards, programmes, invitation cards, greetings cards and telegrams and similar documents.

What we would NOT normally accept

It is very important that we do not "poach" material which ought more appropriately be donated to another archive. We aim to accept material which is similar to or is sympathetic with the Mass Observation material and which researchers would reasonably expect to find with us. We would probably refuse the following:

- Collections of printed/published materials on their own, or without personal commentary and annotation.
- Papers arising from employment, including letters, unless they were part of a larger personal collection.
- The papers of an institution, organisation or pressure group.
- Papers with a strong local or specialist flavour which might be better in a local record office or specialist archive.

- Papers generated by people not living in the United Kingdom. We would like to consider material which is not in English, although we would normally only accept material from people who have been mostly resident in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Some questions you need to consider before donating your papers

We would like to have, in written form, your response to these questions. This will guide the Archivists in years to come in their care of the collection.

1. Are you ready to part with them?

Make sure that you are really ready to part with your collection. They will probably have a sentimental value for you or for other members of your family. Some people like to keep papers in case they wish to write a family history or an autobiography. We do not want to accept papers (and even invest time sorting and listing them) which have to be returned. It wastes our time and yours, and our resources are very stretched. Remember that you can visit them, however! All that we ask is that you fit in with our usual researcher opening times and make an appointment in advance.

2. Do you own the collection yourself?

If the papers are not your property, then you cannot donate them, and we cannot accept them. We need to be assured that the papers do belong to you. That is, that you created/wrote them yourself or that you have bought them, been given them or had them bequeathed to you.

3. Do you want to donate or lend your collection to the Archive?

We prefer permanent gifts (donations) rather than loans. Accepting papers makes demands on our resources, and once we have invested time and care in them, we prefer not to lose them.

4. Are you willing for the whole collection to be made available for research?

Some of our collections remain untouched for years; others are consulted almost as soon as they arrive. It is very hard to predict the likely interest in any one collection. However, you do need to decide whether you are happy for researchers to read your papers. Is there anything sensitive or personal which ought to be held back for a specified period of time? If so, we can discuss an embargo on public access for a few years, for your lifetime, or for even longer. My preference is for all the material we accept to be as open as possible, but of course, we would respect any special conditions which seem necessary.

5. Who holds copyright?

This is different from *owning* the collection. The copyright holder is normally the author (diary-writer, letter writer), and their permission must be sought before anything can be reproduced in a publication. For example, you may own a batch of letters but if they were written to you by your spouse, then it is your spouse who holds the copyright during his or her lifetime. Copyright subsists for 70 years after the death of the author. If you are not the author yourself, you may be the legal heir or executor.

6. Are you happy for quotation to be made?

Many researchers only wish to read the material, but some will also request photocopies and/or permission to quote extracts in published works. If you are the copyright holder, you need to decide whether you can delegate this decision to the Archivist, or whether you wish the researcher to contact you for permission. Our usual practice is to pass on requests (we do not give out addresses). Most donors of papers delegate this decision to the Archivist for requests to quote in academic works (theses, dissertations, scholarly journals or books). We can ask for all identifying information to be disguised in the extracts published. This protects your privacy. On the other hand, you may well wish to be named, and thereby credited.

7. Can you arrange to keep in touch with us?

If you impose any special conditions on your donation which involve contacting you, we need to be sure we can find you. We ask that you take responsibility to send us changes of address, or

that you tell your solicitor, executor or family and friends about your agreements with us so that they can be kept in the picture. The Archive cannot undertake to trace you if a request to publish is made and we do not have a up-to-date address. The onus is on you!

8. Can you provide background information or help with preliminary sorting?

Historians need context. The more background you can provide about how the papers came to be written and about the people involved, the more useful they are to researchers. We really appreciate any help you can give with putting the papers in order (e.g. letters in date order). We always ask whether an information sheet can be included which lists key dates (births, deaths, marriages, divorces, changes of jobs, changes of address) and any other explanatory information which would help make diaries or letters more understandable. A list of important or often-mentioned people is usually essential too. If you have the time and inclination, we also like to have something about why diaries or letters were written, who read them, and why they were kept. Many researchers are as interested in the *form* of writing (and motives, styles, readership) as in the content of the papers.

9. Can you bring the papers to us yourself?

It is not easy for us to arrange transport for new collections, so we always ask whether the donor can deliver the collection in person. This has the advantage of giving you the opportunity to meet Archive staff and see the Archive itself. Small collections may be entrusted to the post. Please let us know the size of your collection (measured roughly in box-files or the equivalent).

10. Are you in a position to contribute financially to the Archive?

Accepting small collections does cost money: the papers need to be tidied and listed, filed and boxed, and even storage space is expensive! The Archive is a Charitable Trust and although it receives some support from the University of Sussex, it is an independent unit which relies heavily on external grants and charitable funds. One way of helping, if you are able, is to join our Friends Scheme. The annual subscription is as small or large as you can manage, and all help is very gratefully received. In return you receive our *Newsletter*, invitations to our Open Days and a 20% discount on any publication produced by the Archive. Let us know if you would like to join. Please note, however, that making a financial donation is not a condition of donating your papers.

I hope all these questions do not deter you from offering the Archive your papers. We very much appreciate the interest shown in our work by diary-writers and holders of personal papers. It is very important that we have a proper understanding of our arrangements with you, one which will survive to guide future generations of archivists and researchers.

Please contact us at once if you have any further questions.

Dorothy Sheridan, Director.

22 August 2008

Mass Observation Archive
University of Sussex Library
Brighton, East Sussex BN1 9QL
Tel: 01273-678157
moa@sussex.ac.uk
www.massobs.org.uk