

‘Paradise Lost’: A Theft from Helsinki University Library

by ESKO HÄKLI

BACKGROUND

Traditionally, research libraries in the Nordic countries have followed the policy of being open, public libraries. They have been rather reluctant to apply restrictions even to the use of their rare materials. In this liberal atmosphere, libraries and, above all, their staff have based their own behaviour on trust. They have believed that their users are honest and will not cause any damage to the collections, much less display any criminal intent. Serious abuse of this trust – if we exclude the everyday behaviour of university students – has been extremely rare, and this has encouraged staff in these beliefs. Thefts and mutilation of items from the collections have seldom occurred.

This background explains, at least partly, why the thefts last year in my Library were such a serious shock, and so upset some members of staff. We had to admit that we were no longer living in a paradise, or in a safe haven. As a result of the globalisation of crime, the world had lost its innocence even in remote Helsinki.

THE ACTUAL INCIDENTS

From 21 to 23 February 2001 the Library’s Special Reading Room was visited by an overseas reader, who wished to see atlases from the well-known Nordenskiöld Map Collection. On Wednesday 21 February he ordered four items, which he consulted on Thursday. Then he ordered further items and consulted them on Friday, the last day of his visit. He left the country on Saturday. Six rare maps disappeared during his visit.

How did this happen?

The Library had received a warning from the Royal Library in Copenhagen on at least two occasions. A week before the actual incidents occurred, we had even received the name of the person in question. But because the key person in reader services was on sick leave, the message did not reach the relevant staff in time.

As a result of the first message, the staff were, however, already aware of the risk, and special arrangements were made. The reader was issued with only one volume at a time, and additional staff were placed in the Special Reading Room to keep a close eye on his activities, one of them, in fact, sitting behind him. He also had to show his passport, a requirement which hitherto had not been customary in the Library. It turned out that the visitor was Mr. Melvin Nelson Perry from the United Kingdom.

Because nothing alarming seemed to have occurred, the volumes were not checked immediately after use but simply put into a safe. When the second message from Copenhagen dated Monday 26 February finally reached the staff, it was discovered that the English gentleman had been exactly the same person about whom the Library had been warned. The volumes were checked immediately and six maps were found to be missing. The police were contacted and given all available information. A search warrant was issued through Interpol. The Library distributed the information to the Art Loss Register, the Map Collectors Society and the antiquarian booksellers' organization. Contact was made with a number of libraries in other countries, and a notice about the incident, with a list of the stolen maps, was put on the Library's homepage. To my surprise, this list seems to be the only one made public by libraries which were victims of the same epidemic of theft.

The theft became a public matter because the police informed the media. It is sad to say that the Library has hardly ever received as much publicity as it did in this case. If you go to the website of the Institute of Historical Research, London¹, you will find links to news releases published in the international edition of the leading Finnish daily newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat. These give fairly reliable coverage of the incident. The Library immediately began to revise its security measures in parallel with the police investigations.

To cut a long story short, the Finnish police issued a request to the UK authorities for Perry's extradition. He was arrested by the UK police on 16 March, but he was soon released on bail of £10,000. During this process two of the stolen maps were returned to the Finnish embassy in London. On 6 August 2001, Perry voluntarily returned to Finland and was taken into custody. During that time two more maps were returned, which Perry used as proof of his willingness to co-operate with the police. It was striking how similar his

behaviour was to that of the well-known map thief from the United States, Gilbert Bland, alias James Perry, described by Miles Harvey! Bland bargained with the court, too. Like Bland, Perry also expressed remorse for his actions, and promised to help recover the two remaining maps, or to replace them with similar ones. But, at the same time, he also blamed the Library, alleging that the lack of security measures had made him a thief. Believe that if you will! To remove the maps, he had used a small knife meant for sharpening pencils. He had then mailed the maps to himself to England in order to evade customs and police controls. By this means, too, stolen maps can be transmitted to another part of the world at the speed of airmail, not in weeks or months. The court proceedings also contain another interesting piece of information: Perry said that he had not been aware that the Library had been warned in advance.

Perry received a prison sentence of 18 months (without probation) and was ordered to pay compensation of 310,000 Finnish marks (about 52,000 Euros), which was much less than required by the Library. Because the sentence was less than two years, he was not immediately taken into custody. Of course, he left the country and disappeared. Both the Library and the police were completely frustrated. I must stress, however, that the police took the case extremely seriously, as in the end did the courts. Because Perry has lodged an appeal, the case has not yet been closed.

As a result, two rare maps are now missing and can be regarded as definitively lost. They are:

1. ‚Mappamundi’ by Claudius Ptolemaeus from *Cosmographia*, printed in Venice 1486, and
2. ‚Nova Belgica et Anglia Nova’ from Johann Blaeu, *Atlas maior*, Amsterdam 1662.

You could, of course, ask whether we are sure that only these two maps are missing. Yes, we are, because with the help of the printed catalogue we have made an inventory of the whole of the Nordenskiöld collection. This task involved a great deal of staff time, and, all in all, the whole incident took about 1,000 hours.

Our impression is that Perry cannot have been the brains behind the exercise. He must have been working for somebody else. He himself would be most unlikely, for example, to have such a large amount of money available at short notice for bail. This ‚somebody’ must have had a special interest in precisely those maps that were not returned. But what kind of person is this ‚Mr Some-

body'? Or are we perhaps dealing with a criminal organization? Miles Harvey gives a rather gloomy picture of some map dealers operating on the international market. They seem not to be very meticulous about the provenance of the maps they sell, and their customers seem even less so. The market is uncontrolled. Maps are sold largely as decorative objects, not as scholarly items, and private buyers hang them on their walls where no investigator can find them. On the other hand, every map dealer with any knowledge of the history of cartography must know that a 1486 Ptolemy map turning up suddenly on the market is likely to be suspect. Some years ago, a copy of Ptolemy's *Cosmographia* from the same period, 1482, was auctioned at Sothebys for a price of US-\$ 1,267,500. (A copy of this edition can also be found in the Nordenskiöld collection!)

SOME COMMENTS

It is easy to be wise with hindsight, and to say that

- Perry should not have been permitted to consult the original volumes since he could not present any evidence of doing serious research.
- I should have distributed the warning with Perry's name to several members of staff instead of relying on just one person; if Reading Room staff had known the name, I am sure that the theft would not have taken place. The way the staff dealt with the case deserves praise. The security measures in the Reading Room were not as careless as Perry alleged. Of course, he was right in the sense that he should not have been permitted to have access to the Library's map treasures. And I also have to admit that the Library's security organization was not up-to-date.
- each map in the atlases should have identified with a visible stamp or another form of identification to make the maps less attractive as sale items.
- psychology also played a major role in this case. Perry gave the impression that he was a trustworthy English gentleman, and so the staff's attention relaxed. On the other hand, supervision was very thorough, and an ordinary thief would not have had any success.
- of course we can also raise the question of whether it is wise to publish an analytical printed catalogue of such a rare collection and distribute it world-wide; my answer is definitively yes, it had to be done. Libraries cannot serve their purpose by concealing their resources.

The support of the Royal Library in Copenhagen is an excellent example of the importance of open information, which was a great help to us. I am sure that we would have lost many more maps without their warnings. And the thief would not have been caught, because passports were hitherto not checked or their details recorded. The latter was the crucial factor in this case. Without exact information about the passport and its number, the police would never have been able to identify the thief. Unfortunately, all the libraries we contacted were not as helpful.

REVISION OF THE LIBRARY’S SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS

Point of Departure

The Library has undergone a major construction project and its premises, both stacks and public areas, have been substantially extended. The rearrangement of services is still in progress. Users often complain that it is difficult to find the locations and the collections they need. The combination of two old buildings, connected by a corridor under the courtyard, is rather complicated. But if an occasional reader from abroad can easily find his way to the most remote corners of the buildings, it cannot be too incomprehensible for regular users!

From a security point of view the problems are, of course, quite different. The large and complex conglomerate of reading rooms and open access areas housing 400,000 volumes, not just the Special Reading Room, would require permanent supervision. This is, however, beyond the Library’s resources. Other means have to be found.

On the basis of our experience, the overall concept of the reading rooms must now be revised. Unfortunately, this requires both construction work and new furniture, which, of course, cost money. But the Library cannot continue to be as generous to its present users as it used to be.

The main changes so far relate to the use of the Special Reading Room. In practice, they make the work of all users more difficult. Access to collections in the Special Reading Room is now much more complicated than before. Users now have to consult special materials separately from other parts of the Library’s collections, which, I must admit, is not very user-friendly.

The measures, which have been taken after a thorough analysis of the situation and a reassessment of responsibilities, can be summarized as follows:

1. Strengthening controls at the entrance to the Library and in reader areas in general, e.g.:
 - patrolling in all reader areas
 - improvements to the Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) security.
2. Arrangements in the Special Reading Room:
 - additional staff as superintendents: two staff members present between 1000 and 1800 hours; the Reading Room staffed at all times
 - the regulations for delivery of ordered material have been changed: delivery time is now one day to allow checking of the items in advance of issue: they are also checked after use
 - the furniture in the Reading Room has been rearranged and material is issued to readers within three categories: 1) personal, individual supervision at the user's desk; 2) designated desks for certain types of material close to the Reading Room attendant; and 3) other tables with an unobstructed view from the attendant's desk. There are fourteen seats in the Reading Room.
 - a new security camera has been installed.
3. Revision of the rules for the use of the Special Reading Room
 - permission to use the Special Reading Room now requires a written application. The applicant's identity must be checked. A separate reader's ticket is issued specifically for this Reading Room.
 - the reader's ticket must be shown every time the user wants to consult material from the collections
 - access controls at the entrance and the exit, and new rules regulating what is permitted to be brought into and out of the Reading Room, have been introduced; and dedicated lockers are placed outside the Reading Room for personal belongings which may not be taken into the Special Reading Room even if they are permitted in other controlled areas of the Library.
 - the use of surrogates (facsimiles, microfilms, digitised versions) is being increased.
4. The rules for the treatment of materials issued to users have been updated.
5. Permanent contact with the police has been established.
6. Additional parts of the collections in open access areas have been treated with magnetic strips for electronic control at the Library's entrance.

7. Restrictions on lending general research literature have been extended; publications printed before 1900 can only be consulted in the reading rooms and may no longer be borrowed.
8. Staff training in the revised security arrangements has begun. Police representatives have given staff practical guidance and training.

PROBLEMS

Some planned measures are still awaiting implementation, e.g.

- changes requiring construction work and the installation of new technical devices
- restructuring of reading rooms and the introduction of new supervised areas; for example, the use of material taken from the stacks to general reading rooms cannot yet be appropriately controlled.
- classification of collections in line with their security needs; only those collections that must be consulted in the Special Reading Room have been dealt with.
- better implementation of the register of items issued to readers in the Special Reading Room.

A major upgrading of security arrangements would require additional staff in different parts of the system, which the Library, unfortunately, can only afford on a very limited scale. The present problems have been caused, at least partly, by the necessity to streamline the organization and the staff structure in earlier years. This necessity came from substantial cuts in the salary budget imposed on the Library. Now that particular rationalization has had to be abandoned, but much of the knowledge of important traditions (‘the collective memory’) has, unfortunately, been lost.

We should also discuss the effects and the use of the various measures. For example, what use are security cameras? In our case, passport control was the key to the police’s success. Of course, equally, no thief wishes to be photographed. But when the thief pays only a short visit to a foreign country, a photograph may be of rather limited usefulness.

STAFF AND TRAINING

The use of physical collections requires staff with expertise. Security aspects, in turn, require staff who are entirely reliable. General developments in the library sector, including an exaggerated emphasis on electronic media, have not helped us to meet these requirements. Dealing with collections on paper has been labelled as largely old-fashioned and outdated, despite the fact that these collections represent a fortune on the commercial market, the value of which, in many cases, far exceeds the value of the buildings in which they are housed and consulted.

I have to admit that to some extent it has proved difficult to encourage clerical staff to understand clearly the necessity for strict security measures. For the time being, the procedures still contain too many weaknesses. Improvement in this field requires extensive training in many subjects, e.g.

- the history and value of the collections; if you do not know the historical value of the collections, how can you understand the need for their security?
- the Library's policy and the conditions of use for different collections
- the correct way to handle collections.

We should not forget that staff are not only an asset, but unfortunately also a security risk. We must, therefore, ask ourselves the following questions:

- how are new staff recruited? In many libraries salaries are rather low, and they do not encourage ambitious people to seek work in libraries. Selection of the right people is, therefore, a crucial issue.
- how are new staff trained and familiarized with the Library's requirements?
- how are staff access rights and responsibilities defined, e.g., the right to access different areas of the Library?

In practice, we are referring to the culture and the organization of the Library.

FINAL POINTS

The police advised us that after an actual incident takes place, there is a risk that staff quite soon feel that the danger is over and relax again. It is, therefore, important to keep internal security organization in place, well-trained

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and alert. This requires considerable effort, not only on a single occasion but on a continuous basis.

The Library should make it clear to the public that strict security measures are followed, without, of course, revealing the details. The psychological effect is an important part of prevention. Should Perry have known that libraries were warning each other? I believe that it would have been better had he known. The existence of the international security network for libraries should, therefore, be made public, while keeping the details confidential.

NOTE: After this text was written the Court of Appeal has confirmed the prison sentence of 18 months without probation. Legally the case is, therefore, now closed.

REFERENCES

- 1 <<http://ihr.sas.ac.uk/maps/europethefts.html>>