

,Thieves in Our Cultural Heritage': Crime and Crime Prevention Measures in the Royal Library, Stockholm, 2000-2002

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THE STORY

It is almost like the introduction of what promises to be a thrilling crime novel. Unfortunately, the outcome is extremely deplorable. In February 2001 a crudely drawn copy of a map was found on one of the reading room tables at the Royal Library in The Hague. They chose to send it to their colleagues in Copenhagen, who immediately passed it on to us in Stockholm. When we received the faxed map, we noticed that our Library was marked on the map in relation to Döbelnsgatan (one of the smallest streets in Stockholm!) and Åhlens, the large department store located in the centre of the city. The reason why Döbelnsgatan, in particular, had been marked on would come to light later on. This took place on 14 February, and it led to one of the most depressing incidents I have had the misfortune to experience during my time as National Librarian.

Up until then we had naively assumed that the Royal Library had somehow been exempt from the series of thefts that, by all accounts, had swept across European national libraries. The first stirrings that something was awry – though not at the Royal Library in Stockholm – was at a dinner party given on Sunday 5 February for the executive managements of the Royal Libraries of Denmark and Sweden. The Head of the Royal Library of Copenhagen, Erland Kolding-Nielsen, informed us that their Library had been subjected to a map theft. They had just narrowly failed to catch the thief, but one of their security cameras had captured him on film. From what we knew, the perpetrator went by the name of Nelson Perry, and there were also photographs of him.

Back in Stockholm, we maintained our deceptive complacency for another nine days, carrying out routine checks of our most rare and treasured atlases, but we found nothing to alarm us. Nevertheless, the mystifying map sent to us

from the Royal Library in The Hague, and the fact that Helsinki University Library had been afflicted by a most serious theft, made us persevere with our own investigations. This was when disaster struck us. It appeared that at least six different atlases, of which the earliest was an Ortelius dated 1579, and the most recent a 1633 Mercator, had had material removed from them.

Confronted with this new information, the staff reconstructed from reader application slips that a certain Nelson Perry had visited the Library on numerous occasions during the autumn of 2000 and in January 2001. Some of the staff had retained a fair recollection of him as impeccably well-mannered, courteous but always in a hurry. However, views about his appearance differed from those of our Danish colleagues. At the Royal Library in Stockholm, he was described as being of a darker complexion with black hair, and so it appeared that the man in the photographs could not be the same person who visited the Library on 24 January, when orders for a number of atlases were placed. Two reader application slips from this particular Library visit still exist.

The police had entered the scene at this stage, and they took the view after deliberations with their international colleagues that 'our' thief was most likely not the same as the one who had caused havoc in Copenhagen. It was, according to them, more likely to be two different individuals, either working together or somehow co-ordinating their shady dealings. On 7 March 2002 Inspector Carl-Henrik Alkeborn paid the Royal Library a visit. He was initially in charge of the investigation and confirmed that the latter assumption, involving two thieves, could very well be the case. Enter Joseph Bellwood.

Throughout the international joint effort on investigating the stolen maps, a certain Nelson Perry was identified. Information received from the National Library of Scotland indicated that his 'real' name was Melvin West. Mr West had been apprehended in 1995 and sentenced to four years' imprisonment for thefts at the British Library and Cambridge University Library. In other words, he was at large again.

A few days later it was confirmed that the person who had inflicted himself upon Helsinki appeared to be identical to Joseph Bellwood. Previously arrested for thefts at various libraries in Britain in 1996, he had also been sentenced to a four-year prison term.

We were now dealing with two thieves, which did not help matters. When we consulted our registration files, we were made painfully aware that both persons had paid us several visits throughout a six-month period. They were both registered as readers under their own names. Bellwood had received his reader's ticket in August 2000, whilst Perry had chosen to register on each visit to

the Library. We could thereby establish that Bellwood had paid us several visits during the summer and autumn of that same year. On one occasion, 26 August, he had placed orders for three atlases, all of which showed signs of mutilation. Three weeks later, on 16 September, he paid us yet another visit and placed an order for the original of Jan Huygen van Lischotens *Itinerarium* dated 1644 – a particularly rare and valuable work containing several strikingly beautiful plates. Be that as it may, his order aroused our suspicions, and the Head of Loans remained apprehensive keeping a vigilant eye on proceedings. For obvious reasons the reader never bothered to sign for the book. Returning later that autumn he placed the same order again. It met with an equally poor result. ‘Ordered twice. Not collected’ is what Gudrun Oettinger, Head of Loans, had noted on the order form. And that crudely drawn map sent to us from the Royal Library in The Hague, which contained the address Döbelngatan, was finally explained. This was, no doubt, the address Bellwood used when he stayed in Stockholm.

By 7 March 2002, the media had latched on to the various thefts. News coverage, especially on the radio and certain daily newspapers, was extensive. Aside from the question of how much the maps were valued at, the most frequent question related to the matter in hand: what measures would be taken to prevent this from happening again? The former question we managed to avoid answering, although we did imply that their value could not be expressed in monetary terms, and that the thefts were to be seen as a serious threat to our country’s cultural inheritance. We went on to explain that we had immediately increased the Library’s level of security, although we would not go into further details about what measures were to be taken. No doubt, the reason for this tremendous media attention stemmed from an incident the previous month when the National Museum in Stockholm was ‘scooped’ by the press as the location where the ‘theft of the century’ had taken place (paintings by Rembrandt and Renoir were stolen). Press focus on similar events attracted much attention at the time. I declined an offer to appear on the TV programme, *Wanted*, as one possible approach to assist in reclaiming the maps. With hindsight, one may well ponder what consequences all the press and media reporting had on events. My personal opinion is that they were not all negative. It became only too obvious that public awareness of the value of our common cultural inheritance had increased significantly, as had public concern about such pivotal cultural institutions as the Royal Library and the National Museum.

Summing up the ‘thieving rampage’, we established that almost 40 maps had been removed from their rightful places. We cannot be absolutely certain that all the depredations were committed by the same thief, or that the damage had all occurred on the same occasion. But there were indications that pointed to

the same type of method. Fortunately, most of the booty was traced during the autumn, and our resident specialist on maps, Göran Bäärnhielm, has been able to identify ten maps at Scotland Yard. These maps will in due course be returned to their rightful location.

TAKING MEASURES

Besides counting our losses, what measures did we take? Well, shortly after the thefts had been confirmed, the Heads of the affected departments, Magdalena Gram and Anders Burius, and their staff met to discuss what guiding principles and measures should be adopted when dealing with any such incident in the future.

From the notes taken on 8 March, a number of suggestions were put forward on how to make immediate security improvements for items at particular risk of theft from the Special Reading Room. Issues debated concerned the improvement of procedures and re-routing of parts of the premises to prevent similar attempts. The main objective was to ensure thorough identification of readers and to make access to original material more difficult. One step would be to necessitate special permits for especially valuable and rare objects, issued only by the Department Heads.

As far as the Special Reading room was concerned, there were certain 'hidden' areas that would have to go. Witness statements confirmed that thieves deliberately chose these areas since they could operate without running the risk of being observed. Reading Room attendants would have to execute random security checks, and readers breaching rules would risk suspension from the Library. These suggestions were immediately implemented in principle.

In the longer term, the consensus was that the Royal Library should implement more forceful measures. Security cameras were included on the list of requirements prepared by the staff, as was a complete alteration of the premises with increased security procedures.

The proposals put before the Library's Board of Directors in April were on the following scale: the installation of three security cameras to provide coverage of concealed areas; the need for regular staff to be on hand for readers, necessitating further security staff, in other words, additional recruitment; secure premises. Leaving the premises should not be possible without passing through security, with a special locking device for release by security staff to let readers through. It was felt that security staff should be seated on a podium

or similar elevated position by the exit to retain a vantage point for observation. The premises would have to be reconstructed in order to enable differentiation between different categories of readers and materials.

Questions were numerous and answers were expected. As we are well aware, security cameras cannot be put into operation at the drop of a hat. Permits need to be approved by the County Administrative Court. Recruiting staff requires time. Extra funding must be provided in budgets. Planning projections take time as well. The Royal Library does not own the building, which makes it necessary to negotiate with the owner for approval. Even that involves funding.

An issue that kept recurring was how had a theft of this kind been possible? Within the vision that my colleagues and I had devised for the National Library and its re-inauguration in spring 1997, we had included the need to give increased priority to future security matters, restricting access to original material and applying security regulations to any reconstruction work. Alas, how soon we were to be proved right!

Threats to the Royal Library have always been considered minimal and justifiably so. It is relatively seldom that thefts of a significant kind have been discovered, and when they are, they tend to be in the nature of a missing page or two from a newspaper, or readers not returning their books in time. But the risk of actual theft from the Royal Library stacks is considered to be non-existent. I would like to suggest that it is as difficult to steal a book from our underground stacks as it is to unburden a bank vault of its contents. Only when the item is brought out of the stacks in response to a reader's order (or for in-house reasons such as binding, preservative measures, etc.), do threats begin to loom. During the night the building is surrounded by what is referred to as 'shell-protection'. There are alarms inside the building that trigger at the slightest movement, for instance, if anyone is 'left behind' in the Reading Rooms.

During the day the Library's security is provided by experienced and trained security staff, who inspect the contents of visitors' handbags, briefcases, backpacks, etc. Security staff also patrol the Library on a regular basis. Elevators and other points of entry to staff areas and stacks require magnetic cards and individual codes. Staff are not, however, routinely subject to such security checks at present.

Security controls - and not only to the Royal Library's inner areas - are very thorough. This fact is constantly at the fore as visitors complain of excessive security controls and fondly reminisce about the idyllic 1960s. Security mea-

asures must, of course, be balanced with attainable and desired results. Under no circumstances must the Royal Library turn into an impenetrable and hostile fortress.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

But how does a Library protect itself from the unscrupulous reader? In this particular case, the thief's technical knowledge proved exceptional, as I am sure Erland Kolding Nielsen would also testify. Would our proposed measures prove satisfactory? Are they correctly aligned to all possible threats?

The Royal Library's request to install security cameras was approved by the County Administrative Board, but was appealed against by the Attorney-General on the grounds that they did not conform to the individual's need for civil rights. The County Administrative Board then made a volte-face and went along with the Attorney General. The Royal Library in turn appealed against the County Administrative Board's decision to the Administrative Court of Appeal in November of last year. To this day (10 April 2002) there is still no verdict in the matter. In other words, we have had to do without security cameras pending the outcome, while as citizens we are constantly watched in all kinds of shops. This paradox is difficult to understand since the Royal Library's mission is to secure our common cultural heritage, while in a food store it is usually a matter of prohibiting the pilfering of sweets.

The Special Reading Room for rare and sensitive material is now completed along the principles we proposed last spring. It has taken approximately a year to get everything in place, but we can now view the results in the form of separate rooms for maps, pictures, large-format material and manuscripts. The Special Reading Room attendants will be situated by the exit. The information and circulation desk will be situated in the centre. The all-important depot for material taken up from the storage vaults waiting to be issued to readers has been extensively extended, thereby increasing security. Despite radical changes, the character and splendour of the Special Reading Room, with its cross-vaults and flow of light and sense of space, has been preserved. These are still early days, and so evaluation of the new order and possible reactions from our ever-sensitive researchers will have to wait.

The actual rebuilding and additional equipment has cost us in the region of 1 million Swedish crowns (110,00 Euros). Add to this the costs for increased manpower with approximately 500,000 crowns (45,000 Euros) per year. This

is an impressive sum for a National Library in these days of harsh economic conditions.

It remains to be seen whether these measures will suffice.