

,Golfiana': A Theft from the National Library of Scotland

by ANN MATHESON

The American writer, Paul Gallico, once commented: 'If there is any larceny in a man, golf will bring it out'. This case study deals with the theft of three golfing pamphlets from the printed collections of the National Library of Scotland in the autumn of 1993. Unusually, in the context of theft, it is a story with a happy ending, but my account deals with our experiences in dealing with the incident, and it illustrates some of the points that we will wish to discuss at this conference. The central character in this particular drama has since become known in other research libraries in Europe. His name was Perry, although as we discovered in the aftermath, he turned out to have a plethora of names and identities.

From our perspective in the Library we assigned a high priority to security and to our stewardship of the national collection. In setting our policies we tried to maintain a balance between ensuring the security of the collections and reasonably convenient access for the full spectrum of researchers who used the Library. We had given a great deal of attention to the security of the Library's printed collections, and regularly took advice from the UK National Security Adviser on all aspects of our security policies. We had documented policies, strictly observed; regular stock-checking, and an Annual Closed Week. A recent inspection of the collections by the UK's National Audit Office had commended the Library's policies. Access was also carefully regulated: admission to the reading-rooms was by reader's ticket; any material required for use in the reading-rooms had to be placed in transparent bags; and, on exit, all material carried by readers was inspected item by item by security staff at the turnstile before they were permitted to pass through and leave the Library.

So, in the light of such care, how was it possible for a thief posing as a reader to walk away with items from the collections without detection? The central events unfolded on the morning of 23 September 1993, when a reader in the Library's Main Reading Room reported that she had seen a reader sitting near

her appear to cut pages from the book he was consulting, and then place them in a newspaper folded over in front of him. She did not report what she saw until she left the reading room: by that time the reader had already left the Library.

The staff immediately checked the items issued to the reader at this seat, a person who had given the name ,M Perry'. Checks revealed that the reader had made only two separate visits to the Library, on 12 August and on 22 and 23 September. He had registered as a short-term reader on both visits. On the first, he gave his details as ,Mark Perrie' with an address in London, and a temporary address at Queen Margaret College, Edinburgh; and on the second, he gave similar particulars but signed himself ,M Perry' and gave an address in Epping, Hertfordshire. The location ,Epping' was, however, to turn out to be significant in unravelling the plot, although, in fact, both street addresses were found, on investigation, to be fictitious. On the first visit, the reader Perry gave his occupation as ,researcher' and his subject of research as ,golf'; and on the second occasion, he again identified himself as a ,researcher', but gave his subject of research as ,18th- and 19th-century sport'.

The book application slips confirmed that the reader had requested three volumes of 19th-century pamphlets. From each of these a single item was found to be missing. All three were golfing pamphlets:

1. *Letters on Golf by a Parish Minister*. Elgin, 1889.
2. George Fullerton Carnegie. *Golfiana*. London, 1868.
3. *Regulations for the Society of Golfers at Blackheath*. London, 1828.

They were all slight pamphlets, of small dimensions, unbound and produced cheaply at the time, very much the printed ephemera of their day. The reading-room staff were able to provide a good description of the reader named Perry. He was described as in his late 30s/early 40s, about 5 feet 10 inches, well-built with black wavy collar-length hair. He was thought to have had a London inflexion in his voice. Two other factors, which had not attracted attention initially, also came to light. The reader Perry had selected as his seat the only one in the reading-room with a clear view of all its entrances; and on both visits he had telephoned in advance to reserve the material.

Realizing that we had a theft on our hands, we took three immediate actions. We contacted the local police in Edinburgh to report the theft; we telephoned the Antiquarian Booksellers Association; and we informed our fellow research libraries in Scotland in case the thief was operating locally in Scotland and might visit them. The police acted swiftly, came to the Library and took

details. The ABA acted swiftly and took immediate action. Additional precautions were taken inside the Library to prepare against a possible return visit by the thief.

Recognizing that there is a very active national and international market for any material relating to golf, and, in particular, the strong role of private collectors in the golf market, we steeled ourselves for the permanent loss of this material. Then on the evening of 16 November 1993, while I was still at the office, I received a telephone call from an American dealer who asked whether we had 'lost' three golfing pamphlets. I said that we had, and he explained to me that he thought that they had just been offered to him.

The person offering the pamphlets told the American dealer that he had seen a local newspaper advertisement by a dealer offering bric-a-brac and collectibles. He described himself to the American dealer as a bookmaker, who did a bit of dealing as a sideline. He had gone to the dealer's house where, quite by chance, he had noticed three golfing pamphlets among the bric-a-brac. He alleged that he had bought the three pamphlets from the UK dealer for £8,000, and now offered them to the American dealer for £11,000. The American dealer had indicated that he might be interested in principle and asked for details of the three items to be faxed to him. When the fax arrived, it was signed by a 'Melven Perry' with an address in Epping. The American dealer was suspicious that three rare pamphlets on the subject of golf had suddenly come up together, and so he rang a number of dealer contacts across the United States. In the course of these contacts, he was tipped off about the theft from the National Library of Scotland.

The American dealer recommended that a strict security cordon should be maintained. The following day he telephoned me to confirm that the name of the bookmaker who had faxed him details of three golfing items was a 'Mr Melven Perry' from 'Epping'. This was the first confirmation that the person offering the items for sale and the so-called 'reader' who had visited the Library were one and the same. After careful consideration and numerous tactical exchanges between us by telephone, the American dealer some days later rang me to say that 'Mr Melven Perry' had contacted him to say that he was anxious to return the material, having now realized that it had been stolen from the National Library of Scotland. The American dealer told him to return the items to the police: they, in turn, would return the pamphlets to us.

The following day, I took a telephone call from a person who said that he had inadvertently bought some books that had been stolen from the Library. He appeared agitated, and said that he had tried to contact the police officer handling the case in Edinburgh to return the books, but had failed (this was a

fiction). He said that he was very anxious to return the material, and asked for the details of the address to which he should send it at the Library. He also said that he would telephone again on Monday in order to discuss compensation from the Library for the financial loss he had incurred. Not surprisingly, we never heard from him again!

That Saturday morning I was in my office, and in the post delivered to me was a package addressed to me with my name spelled incorrectly. Inside were three items. There were no enclosures and there was no identity on the package, which had been sent from London by first class delivery. I took the three items out of the package, and when I looked at them, I was shocked for a moment since I did not recognize them. When I looked more closely I realized that all three pamphlets had been passed through a bindery, and were now bound in blue and green leather, with titles blocked on the front covers, appropriately 'antiqued', no doubt to enhance their antiquarian credentials. An attempt had been made to bleach out the library stamps and the pressmark, but the impressions were still visible to the initiated eye.

I contacted the American dealer to confirm that the material had been received, and invited him to visit the Library on his next trip to Scotland. When he next came to Scotland and visited the Library, we had an extensive post-mortem on the incident. We had no idea then that the person who had removed items from our Library was also carrying out depredations in other libraries.

In March 1994 a colleague in the British Library, with whom we had been in touch at the time of the incident in our Library, telephoned me to tell me that a reader apprehended in Cambridge University Library was likely to be the same person who had removed our material. He had been caught passing through the security barrier in Cambridge University Library, and when the police were called and carried out their investigations, they discovered in the boot of his car a large number of prints from volumes of *Vanity Fair*, other prints and a notebook, in which a member of Cambridge University Library staff noticed pressmarks he recognized as those of collections in the British Library. It was subsequently found that prints had been removed from volumes in the British Library's collections. The person apprehended in Cambridge University Library was charged in Cambridge under English law and stood trial on 22 May 1995 for the theft of a *Vanity Fair* album from Cambridge University Library, and a copy of *Thyranthoza Iconographia* from the British Library. He was charged under the name 'Melvin West' or 'Nelson Perry' or 'Dr Lee Thomas Cook', although he had also used numerous variants as aliases. The case was adjourned until 23 June 1994, when he was sentenced to four years' imprisonment.

So, what were the key factors in the theft of the golfing items and their return? And what lessons did we learn from our analysis of this incident?

In terms of the circumstances of the theft, there were a number of significant factors:

1. The items, ephemeral to our predecessors, had become valuable to a 'specialist thief' because of the specialist market that had developed for *goliana*.
2. The thief chose a time in the morning, and positioned himself to have a clear view of all reading room entrances.
3. He secreted the material on his person (probably in the men's lavatory) before he went through the security barrier.
4. He had ordered the material by telephone in advance, and thus left no evidence of his handwriting on the order slips.
5. He had requested a short-term ticket.

In retrieving the material, the significant contributory factors were:

1. The Library's policy of retaining book application slips allowed the material to be quickly identified.
2. The staff made a major contribution by their observance and the level of detail about the thief they could provide.
3. The thefts were reported quickly to the ABA and the ABA reaction was prompt and effective.
4. The specialist golf dealers in the United States had a good level of collaboration and a successful informal reporting mechanism.
5. The Library showed openness and flexibility in its co-operation with the American dealer and was willing to take his advice.
6. The American dealer was very experienced and knowledgeable about the way in which golfing memorabilia is offered on underground networks.

There have been major changes in the conditions in which major research libraries now need to work, and the risks to the security of collections have increased. We have all the old risks but we also have some new ones.

1. Good security in libraries is labour-intensive, and requires adequate staffing levels to maintain effective security measures. Staffing levels have been under pressure in recent years.

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2. More material held in general collections in national libraries is becoming of interest to potential thieves, encouraged by greater publicity about the contents of library collections in the press and the media.
3. The competence of thieves has increased, and they can utilize the advantages of the global world equally as well as libraries. Like libraries, thieves can now easily operate outside national boundaries.

Based on the lessons we learned from our experience, and in the light of subsequent events, our main recommendations would be:

1. We should develop more effective national and trans-national co-operation among libraries through a robust security network.
2. We need to encourage libraries to be more open about thefts, and to share their network of information with one another.
3. We need to encourage and sustain a 'security culture' in libraries, and maintain a reasonable balance between access and security.
4. We need to develop mutual trust and co-operation with the book trade, recognizing that we have a common goal – security – and a common enemy – theft.
5. We need better technology to assist us in detecting theft – especially at the level of the individual. How do we deal with thieves who secrete material on their persons?
6. We need better communication between libraries and the police and the law. How do libraries establish when a thief sentenced to a term of imprisonment is released into the community; and how do we square the overall benefit to libraries and society with individual civil rights?

However effective we think our individual security systems are, as our one-time Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, used to say: 'The unexpected can – and usually does – happen'. Our best defence must lie in better national and international communication and co-operative effort to maximize the obstacles in the path of potential thieves.