

Alison Cullingford. *The Special Collections Handbook*. London: Facet, 2011. xiv, 210 p. ISBN 9781856047579. £54.95.

Reading the pre-publication information for *The Special Collections Handbook*, it was difficult to believe that the book could possibly live up to its promise: in around 200 pages to cover the core aspects of the management of heritage collections.

Alison Cullingford has met the challenges inherent in her chosen subject with an openness and pragmatism familiar to all readers of her blog, Collections in a Cold Climate, <http://alisoncullingford.wordpress.com/> As she says in the handbook's introduction, "This book cannot solve the problems faced by Special Collections librarians, but I hope it will help them to understand these problems, to set priorities, to manage effectively, and, above all, to try new ideas." (p. xiii).

This is a book that is focused on action. Even the chapter titles mostly start with verbs: "*Emergency planning* for Special Collections; *Understanding* objects in Special Collections; *Acquiring and developing* Special Collections; *Widening access* to Special Collections; *Influencing and fund-raising* for Special Collections" (p.v-viii, my italics).

Other chapters cover "The care of Special Collections; Cataloguing, description and metadata in Special Collections; Legal and ethical issues in Special Collections; User services in Special Collections; Marketing and communications in Special Collections," but even here the sub-headings quickly resume the present participle trend, mostly "Understanding"; "Working"; and "Managing" (p. v-viii).

This may seem a pedantic observation, but a textual analysis of the words we use to label our work sometimes does indicate an underlying philosophy, and here that is best summed up by the term "proactive." The handbook makes suggestions for adding to collections (through oral history and digitization projects, for example); for working with donors and benefactors; and for advocacy and fund-raising. These really are the heart of this book.

Of course, it is a Facet publication and, typically of the publisher's style, it contains a plethora of case studies and real-world examples. The theoretical underpinnings of Historical and Analytical Bibliography are explained from a very practical point of view which can seem reductive but which are probably accessible for people who are brand new to the subject. Similarly, Preservation and Conservation are contracted into one overview of the basics of physical care of the collection. It is the nature of a short book on a large subject to conflate specialisms and favour a general approach.

The author compensates for limitations of space with copious links to online sources of further information, and with a companion website at <http://specialcollectionshandbook.com/> Organised in categories relating to each of the chapters, this is a good solution to the lack of specificity that short wordcounts have occasioned in some key places. It also provides access to online material for those who do not own the book, and an opportunity for links to be kept up-to-date. It would be good to see more information here pertaining to the more cramped areas of the book – those mentioned in the last paragraph, but also legal and ethical issues and cataloguing, which are touched on very lightly in the handbook itself.

Overall, *The Special Collections Handbook* provides a way into the subject area for those who are new to it, and although those of us with experience may sigh over the ellipses within our particular areas of expertise, the breadth of coverage means that we are likely, as promised, to find a new idea (or two) to try.

Anne Welsh

Lecturer in Library & Information Studies, University College London

Wordcount: 550 words, excluding bibliographic details, reviewer name and affiliation