

**Bertram
ROTA**



Celebrating One Hundred Years

1923-2023

November

Archives

Part II

Here are further recollections of some of the particularly memorable or bizarre adventures in my pursuit of archives.

The first was a case of my having been sent to visit a playwright by Dr Staley of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin with a view to assessing his papers and making an offer for them. I had been driving around the village where he lived for a while, unable to find his house. I stopped the car and rang him, twice. “Good morning, it’s Julian Rota, I’m just having a little difficulty...” On the first call he hung up straight away, on the second said, “Now, look, I’ve told you, I’m not doing it for a penny less than £150” and then slammed the phone down again. I was expected that day but he had assumed that I was from a newspaper for which he had been asked to write an article. Eventually, by a process of elimination, I found the house, which was so surrounded by trees, bushes and other greenery, that it was completely invisible from the road.

I made my way through the gloom to the front door. There was no answer so I went round to the back and knocked and rang again. Still no response, but the back door was open so I tentatively put my head round the door and called “Hello? Hello?” Silence. I stepped in a little further. There he was, stood at the kitchen sink, with a pink toothbrush which looked as if it had been made for a giant – it was at least a foot long – in his mouth. “Good to meet you at last,” I said, “how are you?” “Terrible. My wife has been bitten this morning.” “Oh no, I am so sorry to hear that, how awful.” “Yes, by the cockerel. *Again.*” Then he asked if I would like a coffee. He stared at the machine for a while, looked across at the taps, then ... “It’s no good, I have absolutely no idea how to do this. Wait here while I fetch my wife.”

The archive was huge, fully occupying a large room, and after I had been working through it for a couple of hours, I was offered lunch. It was explained to me that neither of my hosts drank alcohol. “You cannot write if you drink alcohol. There will never be any structure.” “What about Dylan Thomas?” I wondered. No answer to that except that he made a few squiggles, which looked pretty random to me, on a scrap of paper and thrust it towards me saying, “There, that’s the structure of a play.” He went on to tell of his dream of the night before, which had involved the production of a Greek tragedy at which the entire audience, like the cast, were dressed in period costume. This was a good thing, he thought, and went to prove that “all children instinctively understand the complexities of Greek tragedy.”

I spent around six hours going through the papers, notebooks, and correspondence, and in due course I produced a report and assessment for Dr Staley. Before I left though, I sat down with the playwright and made him the offer which I had been authorised to do (with some upward leeway). It was, to the best of my recollection, something in the region of £36,000. He picked up one of the smallest of his notebooks and waved it about. “You can tell Staley that for that amount he can have just *one* of these.” So that was the end of that.

Another playwright I visited told me early on, without any apparent hint that he was joking, “I’m better than Shakespeare of course, so I must be worth more than him.”

A third, my dealings with whom were especially civilised, all our conversations being in the evenings in his study over a bottle of white wine, was eventful to say the least. We talked about politics and much else besides. I remember in particular our agreeing how awful it was that the populace of the UK had become the most surveilled in the world. Parenthood too. I was fairly new to it. “It’s amazing,” I said, “it turns out that they have their own personalities, views and opinions!” He laughed indulgently at my inexperience. “Well they do, they do.” In my ‘tactful middleman’ role I felt forced into what was at best a white lie, confirming that the valuable manuscripts, which were on loan to the eventual purchaser, were indeed being well looked after. In fact I had seen them incompletely listed by hand on a scrap of paper, gathering dust on an open shelf in

the same open shirt box in which they had been delivered. It was a fabulous archive, rich almost beyond compare, and we achieved a very large sum for it. That was only after some very tough negotiations and, I believe to this day, given that the creator was perfectly happy for it to go abroad, intervention at high governmental level, including a long overdue letter from the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair. The payment was to be made in two halves, with a year in between to allow funds to be raised. The second payment was late and became later and later. In the end my client rang. "My dear Julian, would you kindly ask the library, have they got my f***ing money or haven't they?" Which was fine actually, empowering me to get a bit tougher with the purchaser and ensure payment in relatively short order.

An author whose archive we had valued and sold to another major British library in 1983 had since produced a similar volume of work again. His wife called me one day, in tears. The intention was that this second part would be, extremely generously, donated to the same institution. She had been trying for over a year to get anything more than a token response, let alone confirmation of arrangements to have the material collected or sent. It seemed no one wanted to take responsibility. I had an idea. "Why don't I come down and value it for you? I suspect that will light a fire under them." I did just that and sure enough, things moved pretty quickly after that.

Finally, this is the story of the archive of Dame Hilary Mantel. I name her because she fully expected me to write about it at some point. Firstly my father and then I had been visiting her every five years to take away, list, value and send each tranche to the Huntington Library (a truly wonderful place) in California. Payments were then made directly to Hilary, so our fees were based on time engaged. For the most part, each transaction went relatively smoothly. For one part though the Huntington offered a very low sum indeed, saying pretty much that that was all the money they had. I recommended not accepting that and Hilary mentioned to me that another dealer was "snapping at her heels", which I passed on. The full sum we had suggested was quickly found.

I think it is fair to say that Hilary and I got on very well. Certainly we made each other laugh in our e-mails and there was always a warmth to our dealings. She visited me at our home to drop off an additional box of papers just a week before her shockingly sudden death. I felt a very real sense of loss.

What turned out to be the very final part of the archive was ready for me to collect, when Covid struck. As restrictions eased though I was able to drive down to Budleigh Salterton again. Hilary had kindly agreed that Naya, our eldest daughter, could join us for lunch since she was about to begin a degree in History at Edinburgh University. Who better to learn from? With great grace and in very few words, she imparted profound thoughts about the nature of historical truth. Naya and I combined the trip with a visit to the Donkey Sanctuary at Sidmouth with a view to promoting my own book, *Animal Trust*, about which Hilary had been very complimentary, and researching for a sequel (coming soon). That was its own rather tortuous experience as it unfolded ...

After lunch though, we followed Hilary and her husband Gerald to an outdoor storage space on scrubby wasteland. The container was opened and Naya and I carried, under strict supervision, around twenty boxes to the car. I remember Gerald's being adamant that we would never fit it all in – but we had done this before. Just before we left, Hilary looked worried. "I can't find Ben's head."

When Ben Miles played Thomas Cromwell in an adaptation of the *Wolf Hall* trilogy, a replica of his head had been made for the execution scene. He had asked Hilary to store it for him on the basis that his young children might come across it and be terrified. Hilary continued, "I know I put it in a box, and I know I labelled it in huge letters. He had to breathe through a straw for hours whilst it was made, he won't be happy if he has to go through that again." I asked if she was sure it couldn't have been in one of the boxes we had already loaded. "No, that's quite impossible." We drove away leaving Hilary and Gerald to continue their search.

For reasons I have never been able to fathom, but apparently related to the pandemic, the Huntington instructed me that I must supply a copy of every single piece of paper in advance of shipment, with the contents of each envelope, folder, notebook, e-mail and box file listed in detail. The shipping boxes were to

be labelled in great detail too. It took me a full week. It was pretty tedious (in spite of the great interest of the contents of course), and frustrating in the sense that it seemed so utterly pointless. I worked quickly with the aid of specially purchased rubber finger pads, a copy stand and a camera with a remote control, to produce over 7,500 photographs and a 16,500 word document. Additionally, I bought some good watermarking software, planning to use a thick, bold “HM” monogram to obscure some of the content – otherwise we would simply be handing over a free version of the archive, albeit digital. When it finally came to shipping time, I asked how best I should send the images. I was told that none of it was any longer required. Mine not to reason why and ah well, I was paid for my time.

I worked my way systematically through the boxes. I was relieved when it came to the very last one (unlabelled). As I picked it up, I knew something was awry. The weight felt wrong. I more or less knew what was coming. I cut the tape, opened the flaps and there was ... the head. It was extremely lifelike and bloody, gruesome.

I e-mailed Hilary straight away with the subject line “You’ll never guess what I’ve found!” She was very apologetic and we agreed that she would come to collect it in due course. This was towards the end of October (2021), so I jokingly asked if we could at least keep it until after Halloween. “Yes,” replied Hilary, “you can decorate it, dance around it, terrify your neighbours...” I confess I did have a bit of fun with it, asking family and friends to take a look inside a box which I said didn’t seem to fit in with the rest of the archive and which I did not know how to catalogue.

I was honoured to be invited to attend Dame Hilary’s memorial service. Ben Miles’ eulogy included this anecdote, although he blamed the whole thing on an “over-zealous archivist” which isn’t quite what happened – either way, it’s a pretty good story.

There are many more, which perhaps will emerge next year if I continue (on a less frequent basis). I have hugely enjoyed writing these reminiscences, not so much the sense of pressure as the end of each month has approached. As for December, it is pretty much written inside my head at least and so will be out in plenty of time before Christmas.

Julian Rota