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Reference Work in Special Collections: The Impact of Online Finding Aids at Florida State University Libraries

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Online finding aids enhance reference service in libraries and complement printed guides.

Reference service at our institution has changed through using an online finding aid along with a printed reference source. Librarians and archivists who use print with finding aids enrich users’ research experiences.

**KEYWORDS**  bibliographies, finding aids, information seeking strategies, inquirers, reference services, research
THE SHAW CHILDHOOD IN POETRY BIBLIOGRAPHY AS A REFERENCE TOOL

John Mackay Shaw kept bibliographical notes on the books and complementary materials he collected over fifty years. After he moved his collection to Florida State University (FSU) in 1960 with almost 6,000 books, he prepared these notes for the publication of *Childhood in Poetry: a Catalogue, with Biographical and Critical Annotations, of the Books of English and American Poets Comprising the Shaw Childhood in Poetry Collection*. From 1967 to 1980, Shaw’s bibliography grew to become an eleven-volume author list with a keyword poem title index. Prior to the cataloging of the Shaw Collection in the early 2000s, Shaw’s printed *Childhood in Poetry* bibliography was the main access point to the collection.

Efforts to discover more complete information in the bibliography and the subsequent compilation of an orderly list of Shaw's complementary materials led to the development of the online finding aid now in use. Figure 1 shows the first listing of Shaw’s notes on poet Alfred Noyes as they appear in the bibliography. The final listing for Noyes in the first volume of the bibliography is shown in Figure 2. All three supplements to the bibliography published between 1972 and 1980 contain additional information about Noyes and his work.
FIGURE 1

NOYES, ALFRED, 1880-1958  See also 4810  5806  8010

In matters poetic, Noyes provided a link between England and America. His dates might also suggest a link between the old and the new in poetry, except that he clung tenaciously to the older concept of a lilting lyric and deplored the tendency of his contemporaries to experiment with free forms. Hamilton W. Mobley, in introducing the Noyes collection of 1906, wrote some lines that might as truly have been written fifty years later: "No singer can refresh us in these days who cannot bring from his pipe the sounds which have set the feet of children flying in every generation; nor can any singer command our thought to whom the deeper undertones of life are inaudible. Many things might be said of Mr. Noyes's use of the imagination, of his charming fancy, of his good luck with phrase and epithet; but if he speaks to his generation with both beguilement and authority, it will be because the heart of the child and the mind of the man are in him."

5418. THE LOOM OF YEARS. By Alfred Noyes. "I broder the world upon a loom,/I broder with dreams my tapestry;/Here in a little lonely room/I am master of earth and sea,/And the planets come to me." London, Grant Richards, 1902. First edition, dj. 115p. 12.4x11.1cm. Gray boards, vellum back.

Typical Passages: Sea foam: Take my song and let it be/As foam upon the sea/Dumb with sorrow let it die;/It is not more frail than I. In old Japan—-From Wonderland to 'Yea or nay/The junks with painted prow/Dream on the purple waterway,/Nor ever meet a foe/Though still, with stiff mustachio/And crooked oghan;/Their pirates guard with pomp and show/The ships of old Japan. The symbolist: Help me to seek: I would not find,/For when I find I know/I shall have clasped the hollow wind/And built a house of snow. In the heart of the woods: In the cold sweet voice of the bird, in the sigh of the flower-soft sea,/Sure the heart of the woods is the heart of eternity,/Ay! and the passionate heart it is of you and me. Michael Oaktree: And he had dandled me upon his arm/When I was little; he had carried me/High on his back to see the harvest home./*** He had retained his childhood: Death for him/Had no more terror than his bed. He walked/With wind and sunlight like a brother, glad/Of their companionship and mutual aid.

Volume Also Contains: The song of re-birth.

FIGURE 2


OTHER BOOKS: The Golden Hynde and other poems, 1908; Lucifer's feast, 1909; The wine press, 1913; Searchlights, 1914; Ghosts of the new world, 1917; Dick Turpin's ride and other poems, 1927.
Dr. Shaw remained curator of the collection at FSU until he announced his retirement in 1980. Shaw answered queries from his deep knowledge of the collection and from his staff’s growing familiarity with the *Childhood in Poetry* bibliography and the collection’s complementary materials, which at first only Dr. Shaw knew how to access. After Shaw’s death in 1984, the Special Collections staff used FSU’s online catalog and the Shaw bibliography to answer queries. In addition to reference interviews conducted in person, Shaw and his staff handled correspondence requests, using the Shaw bibliography and the online catalog, as in these examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Request</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photocopies of two poems, “Gossip” and “The tenth commandment,” with an enclosed reference to a page in the Shaw bibliography (Anderson, February 10, 1977).</td>
<td>According to Shaw’s handwritten note on the letter, the copies were sent. The note includes the dates of three October issues and the page numbers from which the poems were copied (Shaw, February 16, 1977).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Orlando Public Library, request for succeeding lines of a poem whose first three lines are given (Robinson, November 19, 1975).</td>
<td>Using Shaw bibliography, located and sent letter with poem photocopied from the book reference requested in the letter (Shaw, November 24, 1975).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### COMPLEMENTARY MATERIALS IN THE SHAW COLLECTION

Dr. Shaw’s interest in first and rare editions, and in other books associated with “childhood in poetry,” led him to collect not only the books, but many other items, unpublished as well as published, such as articles, audio-visual materials, catalogs, correspondence, illustrations, manuscripts, memorabilia, original artwork, photographs, programs, proof sheets, as well as his original notes. In processing these materials from 1997-2000, Special Collections staff identified three categories of arrangement:
BUILDING A FINDING AID TO SHAW COMPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

While the Shaw bibliography and FSU’s online catalog were the most appropriate descriptive tools for accessing the Shaw Collection books and periodicals, the staff determined that an archival finding aid would be the most suitable companion to the bibliography and the best method to facilitate access to these complementary materials. Furthermore, the finding aid would provide the most complete information about a subject to students and scholars around the world. Because several discovery systems were used, it took a period of four years (2007-2010) to develop an efficient and effective finding aid.

In 2007, the Digital Library Center digital archivist created a finding aid template. The finding aid was encoded using the Encoded Archival Description (EAD) standard, and content was entered in the template using the text editor NoteTab. After some initial training, the staff created finding aids, through NoteTab, to all of their archives and manuscript holdings (including the Shaw Collection). To present the finding aid on the web, the Digital Library Center exported the EAD content through a stylesheet using DigiTool, an ExLibris digital assessment management system. In addition to FSU’s own instance of DigiTool, another version of DigiTool was maintained at the Florida Center for Library Automation (FCLA)--subsequently called the Florida Virtual Campus (FLVC) at the University of West Florida. FCLA’s DigiTool
was also the discovery system for “Archives Florida,” a statewide database of finding aids describing the contents of some of the

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collections of organizational records and personal papers held in other Florida archives. Although this part of the DigiTool workflow process went smoothly for collections of digital objects at FSU and at other Florida libraries, the staff learned that it was not a practical tool for creating archival finding aids. There were too many false and irrelevant search results and it was not clear where in the particular collection searched the content could be found.

By 2010, more and more Special Collections repositories began using Archon, a platform for archival description and access. After researching a variety of archival discovery systems, FSU Special Collections decided that Archon provided a user-friendly way for archival staff to record descriptive information about collections and digital objects and for end-users to view, search, and browse that information on a public web site. A particular advantage of using Archon is that its public interface always shows the most current information because it is updated automatically when archival staff add or edit records using an “administrative interface.” In addition, the search results provide the context of the information sought—the collection name, box and folder numbers, and any detailed descriptions. FSU Libraries decided to use Archon for processing new archives and manuscript collections. However, while Archon proved to be an effective discovery tool, the bulk of FSU’s archival collections were described in the DigiTool system.

From 2013-2014, FSU’s new digital archivist in its Digital Library Center (now a unit of Special Collections), collaborating with FLVC’s technical unit, coordinated the migration of all finding aids from DigiTool to Archon at FSU to create one portal of archival discovery.
Concurrently, FSU’s Special Collections staff is engaged in a major Archon cleanup project to assure information consistency and accuracy and to enhance discovery of its archival collections.

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THE ARCHON FINDING AID: SEARCHING FOR SHAW MATERIALS

To access the Shaw Collection finding aid and perform searches:

- Go to the main FSU Archon Page fsuarchon.fcla.edu
- Type <John MacKay Shaw Collection> into search bar at the top left and click “search.”
- Click “Records and Manuscripts,” and on the following screen click “John MacKay Shaw Collection.”
- On this next screen, review the information about the collection and click “Detailed Description.”
- On the next screen, type the search term in the “Search Box List” box.
- On the next screen, click <Series, Boxes, folders> to obtain the box and folder numbers where the subject(s) will be found. Clicking on the search term within the list of <Series, Boxes, Folders> will lead to the location of the content in the finding aid and the amount of material that is in a particular folder.

To return to the search box page, or to go back as far as the user desires, click the return arrow at the upper left. Two clicks takes the user back to the search term box. To end the search session click the “X” box at the upper right.

REFERENCE QUERIES: TYPICAL SEARCHES USING SHAW BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FINDING AID

The following sample reference requests received by Dr. Shaw and his staff show how requests were handled using the Shaw bibliography and the FSU Libraries online catalog. These
examples further demonstrate how the finding aid, if it had existed at that time, would have complemented the search results from the bibliography and the online catalog:

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**Request** Albertine Hooks (Hooks, July 31, 1974) Piedmont Doll Club, Greensboro NC requesting pages from *St. Nicholas Magazine* describing directions for making “pen wipers,” referred to in *Antiques of American Childhood* by Katherine McClinton. She also wanted other information about dolls. She enclosed copies of pages from *St. Nicholas Magazine* and several copies of the club’s two-page newsletter.

**Response**: Shaw’s initials written on top of Hooks’ letter indicating that he sent pages about “pen-wipers” and list of doll poems. These were the sources consulted:

**SHAW Number**: T814.2  
**FSU online catalog**: *Antiques of American Childhood*: NK1125 .M332

A search through the finding aid, had it existed, would have yielded this result:  
**SHAW finding aid** (if available then): Box 92, Folder 16 (article about “doll books”)

**Request**: Request from Frank Clements (May 17, 1970) for information about the Shaw Collection that’s related to the topic of his article, “Children’s Literature: Details of Schemes of Work in the study of children’s literaturat in colleges of education and university departments of education.”

**Response**: Letter from Shaw (June 1, 1970) answering Clements’ request, by enclosing “Usage of the John MacKay Shaw Collection;” clipping taped on letter. Prior to the creation of the finding aid, Shaw and his staff would have used the bibliography and identified the following sources:

**SHAW Number**: T1076.1  Rush, Shores and Shaw: *Special Collections, What They Mean to librarians, professors, and collectors*. 1972.

**SHAW Number**: T1153.2  Susan Dawson: *The Childhood in Poetry Collection, nd* (tape of Shaw interview plus tray of 67 slides).

**SHAW finding aid** (if available then):  
Box 93, Folder 5: “Collecting: Children’s Literature Research Collection, 1974-1979  
Box 90, Folder 23: “Children: Journals and Articles.”  
Box 76, Folder 25: “Poetry for Children of Two Centuries.”  1979

**CONCLUSION**

A collection with an online catalog, a printed bibliography of its published items, and a finding aid to its archival materials not only facilitates basic reference service; it also promotes research in the Special Collections environment. The finding aid points to the location of specific items in the collection, thereby enlarging the answer to a query, perhaps even leading the
scholar beyond his or her point of entry. Shaw's *Childhood in Poetry* bibliography and the archival finding aid work together to provide thorough answers to the questions of scholars. Margaret Landesman (2005) observed that the growing variety of formats assumed by “reference collections” requires that librarians and archivists lead the way in directing scholars to the sources they need:

> Users frequently need more, rather than less, assistance to find needed sources and information.. The needle in the haystack was hard enough to find when there was only one haystack. Now the number of haystacks is multiplying. (p. 19)

**LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

The Shaw bibliography and the accompanying finding aid to its complementary materials have enhanced reference service to literary researchers. We look forward to exploring the following activities as ways to sustain the effectiveness of these guides:

- Selectively digitize documents that are linked to the search results in the finding aid.
- Investigate the possibility with Cengage Learning (which absorbed Gale Research) of merging the Shaw bibliography and the finding aid.
- Maintain statistics of queries and responses as a basis for measuring the impact of the finding aid on collection usage.
- Do exit interviews with users to assess the effectiveness of the catalog and finding aid as reference tools in helping them locate information.


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Clements, Frank. Letter from Clements to John Shaw, June 1, 1970, John MacKay Shaw Collection.

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