

Keele book sell-off squanders heritage

Sir— Your readers may already have heard about the secret sale, by Keele University, of the Turner Collection of more than 1,400 mathematical and scientific books. Its loss was discovered in November by a researcher wishing to use the collection, which had been donated to the university by a private collector for this purpose.

Staff were forbidden to let anyone outside the university know about the sale. But we at the British Society for the History of Mathematics have discovered that the university's council allowed the sale — cheaply and in great haste — after being assured that the collection would not be broken up or leave the United Kingdom.

Within weeks the collection had been sold to a dealer, who has applied for export licences for 11 of the most valuable books.

We urge anyone who cares about this to write quickly to the Rt. Hon. Chris Smith MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (2 Cockspur Street, London SW1Y 5DH, UK; fax (0)171- 211 6249; chris.smith@culture.gov.uk), pressing for the export licences to be denied. Please also express your concerns to the Rt. Hon. David

Blunkett MP, Secretary of State for Education (Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT, UK; fax (0)171-925 6000; dfee.ministers@dfee.gov.uk) about this loss of an educational asset.

The Export Licence Unit says there is no provision for objecting to the export of a collection of items. This would permit the export of the Lewis Chessmen as a collection of single items or of a Gutenberg Bible as a collection of pages. Indeed, several of the Turner volumes containing diverse books bound together have each been listed as a number of separate items.

We believe that the UK government should require public institutions selling assets of national importance to do so publicly, so that other institutions have a chance to keep them in the United Kingdom. The government should open up the export licensing process to public scrutiny and should permit the Export Licence Unit to consider a collection as a whole when appropriate.

The Turner Collection contains several items of importance to this country's national heritage, including eight books

that belonged to Isaac Newton, with his own markings; a page out of a Newton manuscript; and a book from the library of King Charles I with his signature. It was also one of the very few collections to have a published catalogue, which greatly enhanced its value to researchers.

Despite Keele's claims that no other library wanted to buy the collection for a suitable price, it had not been offered to any that we have contacted.

The British Library calls the Turner Collection 'one of the most important research resources in its field outside London, Oxford and Cambridge', and says: 'The dispersal of the collection, or its loss to this country as a research resource, would be a matter of profound regret both to the British Library and to the wider library and research communities.'

There is no doubt that other institutions would offer this important collection a home if it were reacquired for the nation.

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Green campaigners undermine the IWC

Sir— Pete Wilkinson describes the "hype, half-truths and posturing" of environmental groups, and gives the example of the Brent Spar incident (*Nature* 396, 511–512; 1998). Similar tactics have been successfully used by such groups to manipulate public opinion and government policy on whaling issues since the early 1970s. While these campaigns have raised millions of dollars from public donations, most of the widely held beliefs concerning whales promoted by these organizations are untrue.

The influence of these organizations has seriously compromised the institutional and scientific credibility of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) by disregarding the advice of its scientific committee that some stocks of whales are at sufficient levels to sustain a harvest and that it is possible to set quotas at safe levels.

Pressure from environmental groups has also convinced governments to dismiss the well-documented needs of coastal communities and to ignore the object and purpose of the whaling commission's parent treaty in relation to the sustainable utilization of whale resources. This has set a dangerous precedent for international cooperation on other environmental and

resource-conservation agreements.

Wilkinson's proposed solution to environmental problems — "the union of all major stakeholders [including Greenpeace]" — and his suggestion that their representatives are capable of learning to be "arbitrators, conciliators and negotiators, catalysing action from governments, industry, scientists and communities," are absurd. Greenpeace's relentless protest against the killing of any whales, including its most recent actions against the Japanese whale research vessel that had caught fire en route to the Antarctic, demonstrate that it is incapable and unwilling to assume this kind of role.

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Don't put research in a goal-based straitjacket

Sir— Changes in the structure and funding of science in New Zealand have received considerable attention in recent years. Following the restructuring of government science into business institutions, fuelled by competitive funding, comes a proposed reorganization of university research (see *Nature* 396, 502; 1998). Existing funds will

be channelled into a national competitive funding pool, targeting "high quality research with a strategic focus". In 3–5 years this could make up 80% of all research funding in tertiary institutions.

The apparent similarities between this Tertiary Education Research Fund and the centrally managed funding pool that supports government science are alarming. The government appears to be taking the dangerous course of putting its faith in a single allocation strategy.

Imposing strategic goals on university research, whose main strengths derive from unfettered enquiry, will stifle innovation. Experience shows that individual initiative, rather than centrally managed science, is at the root of most ground-breaking research. A system that restricts creativeness will suppress innovation.

We contend that science and New Zealand will be best served by a diversity of funding streams and strategies. The role of individual creativity should not be overlooked in the rush to force strategic and managed science across the whole spectrum of funding. Research is too great an asset to destabilize it with changes that will prevent innovative potential from being realized.

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