

Clip 1: Depositing the Sampson Low collection at the OU

Narrator: [00:00:00] "If anybody cares to hear a simple tale told simply, I John Ridd of the parish of Oare in the county of Somerset, have seen and had a share in some doings of this neighbourhood, which I will try to relate in order. My father, being of..."

Peter Evans: Hello, well those were the opening lines of R. D. Blackmore's famous novel 'Lorna Doone' which first appeared in 1869. The book was published by one Sampson Low, and this week's Open Forum comes from The Open University's London office where a collection of Sampson Low's correspondence has been handed over for students of a growing area of research – book history. Sampson Low corresponded with leading Victorian figures such as Cardinal Newman, Anthony Trollope, Charles Dickens and Mrs Gaskell.

George Low, a direct descendant of the publisher, decided it was high time to stop the precious letters gathering dust in the attic, and despite offers from American universities, handed them over last month to The Open University. OU lecturer and staff tutor Dr Simon Eliot is Director of the newly established Book History Research Group and he introduced the event.

Simon Eliot: [00:01:11] I think it's more than an interesting academic occasion, I think it's a very appropriate occasion. Sampson Low was not only a major Victorian and early twentieth century publisher, but he was greatly interested in education. One of his major triumphs was to edit 'The Publishers' Circular' which was a major trade journal for the only mass medium of the time, namely books and newspapers. And within two years of establishing 'The Publishers' Circular', which was established in 1837, Low had introduced an education issue. Each year you had an education issue. By 1845 there were two education issues a year. He was concerned with the notion and extension of education and knowledge.

George Low, before being translated to higher things at Longmans, was in fact, an editor at The Open University. His wife has done, in fact completed an OU degree, and his son Sampson is currently studying under an ex-OU Professor now [at] the City University. So in a sense there's a lot of family connections with The Open University so I like to feel that the archives have moved from one congenial home to another.

Peter Evans: [00:02:26] We're here today seeing the handover of the Sampson Low archive. Presumably you haven't had a chance to look at it in any detail, but what you've seen so far, what are you deducing from it?

Alexis Weedon: Well they have some very interesting letters from people who were very well known in the nineteenth century. There was one there from Mrs Gaskell who's saying that she is so overwhelmed with visitors that she couldn't actually reply to her nice publisher who has just sent her a cheque. And there's also some from Dickens and quite a lot of others. Very interesting reading, it really makes the people come alive.

Peter Evans: Is it going to have any repercussions, any interest for your own research?

Alexis Weedon: Yes it does tell me what kind of agreements they had with their publisher. Whether they were making a decent living. Some publishers didn't pay that much, others

paid quite a lot, and things are much better for the author now, I think. They did band together and produce a society for authors which helped them to defend their rights and gave them various guidelines of how to deal with publishers. Some people worked extremely hard on, and the well-known case of course is Walter Scott, he tried to pay off his publisher's debts by writing and writing and writing, poor chap. Yes things are much better for the author now. [00:03:43]