



W. Clark Gilpin spent part of his sabbatical leave from the University of Chicago doing research on letters from prison in the McAlpin Collection at the Burke Library

Research in the McAlpin Collection on Letters from Prison

“The letter from prison is an important, but frequently overlooked, form of Christian literature. The Apostle Paul penned the charter documents of the form, but famous twentieth-century prison letters came from the hands of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Within this long Christian literary tradition, some of the most dramatic and theologically profound letters from prison were written in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Both in the Christian tradition as a whole and in that period in English history, prison letters have been acts of testimony, a bearing of witness by persons who have believed themselves to be unjustly incarcerated for their fidelity to conscience and religious principle. In England, writing such letters was itself a dangerous work of resistance against church and state. Consequently, prisoners usually had to smuggle letters out of prison to confederates who could arrange for their secret printing and distribution. At different moments in English history, various religious communities fell athwart the law, and prison letters thus came to be written by Protestants, Catholics, Puritans, Quakers, and Baptists over the years from approximately 1520 to 1700. My current research will provide the basis for a social and theological history of these English letters from prison, interpreted against the background of Christianity’s larger tradition of prison writings.

“During the winter of 2001, this research interest brought me to the McAlpin Collection of British History and Theology. Housed in Union’s Burke Library, the McAlpin Collection is one of the world’s preeminent and most comprehensive collections of works in British theology and religious history printed between 1500 and 1700. The collection’s archival depth enabled me to move systematically through a wide range of books and tracts, a very important asset since many significant prison letters are not “announced” in a book’s title or apparent subject but instead are found embedded in the text or appended at the conclusion. I knew the types of documents I was seeking but did not know all of the places they might be found. The McAlpin Collection proved to be a very large haystack with lots of needles. The Burke Library staff, especially Michael Boddy, Seth Kasten, and Library Director Sara J. Myers, provided invaluable assistance to my explorations, and my eight weeks could not have been more enjoyable and productive.”

– W. Clark Gilpin, The Divinity School, University of Chicago