

THE *Current*

April 20, 2016

Jim Logan

Pages Out of History

Imagine life as a musical, one where the news, rumors, scandal, history, satire, tales of sexual adventure and even obituaries were delivered in song. Everywhere you went you'd hear people singing — in groups at the tavern or alone walking down the street. Think of it as a Renaissance fair produced as a musical.

But it's not some Broadway fantasy. It was real, and UC Santa Barbara is working to preserve the remnants of that era: English broadside ballads, *the* mass media of England in the 16th and 17th centuries. Printed on one side of large sheets of paper — hence “broad-side” — in a heavy black typeface and illustrated with woodcuts, each listed the name of a popular tune, to which the ballad would be sung. They were meant to be sung in groups, and were hung in homes, taverns and other public spaces, and sold on the street for a penny or so.

No one has done more to make these time capsules available to the public than the [English Broadside Ballad Archive](#) (EBBA) at UCSB. Now a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) will help scholars in their ongoing quest to digitize and catalogue all known copies of 17th century broadside ballads. The \$260,000 award to [Patricia Fumerton](#), EBBA director, will go towards adding some 900 pre-1701 ballads to the archive, which to date contains more than 7,000 ballads and 5,000 recordings. This most recent grant, combined with third-party contributions, totals \$538,000, bringing to \$3.5 million the total amount awarded to EBBA.

Fumerton, also a professor of English, stressed that the collections and resources grant is a team achievement. "I am not the only one who deserves congratulations for this wonderful award. I may be principal investigator of the grant, but it takes many dozens of collaborators across a wide spectrum of the UC to make EBBA possible," she said.

NEH reviewers, in their evaluations of Fumerton's grants, often comment that they are impressed by how the professor of English strives not only to add artifacts to the archive but to improve and update EBBA. "We at EBBA never rest upon our laurels but are always trying to improve the database," she said. "I especially aim to make the database user friendly for scholars, students and the general public."

It's not easy work. Although millions of broadside ballads were produced from the 16th century through the early 19th century, the few thousand that remain are housed in libraries across the U.K. and U.S. Sometimes poorly catalogued, finding and authenticating them is a chore. "It's tedious work, and it's absolutely exhausting," Fumerton noted. "It's arduous going through these things. One day everything looks like a ballad and the next day nothing does."

Finding them also requires what Fumerton calls "detective work." At Harvard's Houghton Library, for example, 148 were catalogued. Although Harvard's collection goes back to its early days in the 17th century, the current library was built in the 1950s. As it turned out, Fumerton found 1,220 ballads in the library's archives during a two-month fellowship. "That's the case in 80 percent of what I find," she explained.

The ballads to be added to the archive come from the Chetham Library, Manchester; Manchester Central Library; the Society of Antiquaries, London; and the Beinecke Library, Yale University. In addition, the approximately 1,880 broadside ballads held at the Pepys Library, Cambridge University, will be re-filmed in high-resolution color and re-archived. The digital images currently on the site were made from relatively poor resolution black-and-white microfilm.

The new grant, the sixth from the NEH, will also fund transcription of the early modern recordings, with text underlay and upgrading of the database to include such features as user-friendly visualization tools.

The next NEH grant proposal, due July 2017, will focus on the pre-1701 broadside ballads other than those already archived in EBBA (from the Roxburghe collection),

which are held at the British Library, London. Fumerton said that she expects that to be some 2,000 printed ballads, many of which are rare and unique. “It will be a challenge,” she noted, “but I’ve got a great team backing me.”

EBBA was founded in 2003, and Fumerton expects her final NEH grant proposal for 2020-22 to focus on a sweep of the many small holdings not yet archived that are held in college libraries across the U.S. and U.K. to ensure all of the estimated 11,000-12,000 English broadside ballads from the pre-1701 period are captured. “Doing the legwork for that grant proposal will be the biggest hurdle of all,” she said.

Fumerton said she heard she was the recipient of the award in a surprise phone call from a representative of Congresswoman Lois Capps. The representative said the NEH had allowed Capps’s office the honor of being the first to tell her she had won. “I was flabbergasted,” Fumerton said. “I was doubly honored to both win the grant and be congratulated on winning it by our local congresswoman.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.