
Finding Aid for the Robert Ernest Cowan Papers, 1876-1942

Collection number: 232

UCLA Library, Department of Special Collections
Manuscripts Division

Los Angeles, CA

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Robert Ernest Cowan Papers,

Date (inclusive): 1876-1942

Collection number: 232

Creator: Cowan, Robert Ernest, 1862-1942

Extent: 28 boxes (14 linear ft.) 3 oversize boxes

Repository: University of California, Los Angeles. Library. Department of Special Collections.

Los Angeles, California 90095-1575

Abstract: Robert Ernest Cowan (1862-1942) wrote bibliographies of California history and the Pacific Coast, and worked as a librarian for William Andrews Clark, Jr. from 1919 to 1933. His collection of books and manuscripts form the nucleus of the UCLA Department of Special Collections' holdings in Californiana. The collection consists of correspondence, catalog, bibliographic materials, account books, an early diary, photographs, ephemera and memorabilia.

Physical location: Stored off-site at SRLF. Advance notice is required for access to the collection. Please contact the UCLA Library, Department of Special Collections Reference Desk for paging information.

Language: English

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Restrictions on Access

COLLECTION STORED OFF-SITE AT SRLF: Open for research. Advance notice required for access. Contact the UCLA Library, Department of Special Collections Reference Desk for paging information.

Provenance/Source of Acquisition

Gift of Robert G. Cowan, 1954-1982.

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Robert Ernest Cowan Papers (Collection 232). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Biography

Robert Ernest Cowan was born in 1862 in Toronto, Canada; came to San Francisco in 1870; student at University of California at Berkeley 1882-84; San Francisco bookseller from 1895-1920 and author of bibliographies of history of California and the Pacific Coast; librarian for William Andrews Clark, Jr., 1919-33; moved to Los Angeles at Clark's request in 1926; Cowan's collection of books and manuscripts form the nucleus of the UCLA Department of Special Collections' holdings in Californiana; married Marie Margaret Fleissner in 1894; only child was Robert Granniss Cowan; died in 1942.

Extended Biographical Narrative

Mr. Cowan was born in Toronto and came to the United States in 1870. From 1882 to 1884 he was a student at the University of California. He was a bookseller in San Francisco from 1895 to 1920 and beginning in 1919 was librarian for William Andrews Clark, Jr. This position he held until shortly before Mr. Clark's death in 1934.

Cowan was not, strictly speaking, a historian, although he published articles from time to time. The work for which he remains known was the compilation of several bibliographies. His contributions to the bibliography of the history of California and the Pacific Coast are the foundations upon which all others have worked. His earliest comprehensive bibliography was published in 1914; his finest work, *Bibliography of California 1510-1930* was published in 1933, printed in three volumes by Mr. Clark's printer John Henry Nash.

It appears that Cowan offered his personal library for sale late in 1933. In November of that year, the President of the University of California, Robert Gordon Sproul wrote a note to the Librarian of the University of California at Los Angeles, John E. Goodwin, asking for Goodwin's opinion of the worth of the library, both as a scholarly resource and investment. President Sproul wrote: "...inquiries are made in the interest of the Library at the University of California at Los Angeles and should be regarded for the present as strictly confidential. Goodwin's reply was practically immediate. His judgment was: We are not often placed in a position where we are ready to declare that an offering is worth whatever may be required to secure it for the University. The President and the Regents were not easily convinced. In a note to himself, written in October 1935, Goodwin wrote: I have assisted in the purchase of libraries involving far greater cost but of less obviously demonstrable worth, but I have never expended one half the effort that has been required to buy the Cowan Library. Fifty thousand dollars was the price eventually paid for the 3,000 volumes, 5,000 pamphlets and numerous miscellaneous maps, newspapers and manuscripts. The announcement of the purchase was made March 13, 1936. Articles appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on March 20 and the *Bruin* March 26.

Included with the collection was the original manuscript *The Cruise of the Dale, 1846-1849*, by Thomas Crosby Lancey. Hubert Howe Bancroft termed it the most important and valuable document relating to the conquest of California. In addition to the manuscripts included with the sale of the library, a second group of manuscripts collected by Cowan was sold to the Library in 1945 by his son, Robert G. Cowan. There was controversy as to whether the collection of books should be housed in the Clark Library, which by that time had been given to UCLA, or in the stacks. Goodwin felt that it was too far to ask students to travel. Goodwin, then, and faculty members such as John Caughey with interests in using the materials for their work and their classes, prevailed. Thus, the books were given the same treatment as any in the stacks. The valuable Cowan pamphlets were stapled into pam-binds and placed on the shelves for circulation. This treatment was even more unfortunate, because, as J. Gregg Layne described the collection: The Cowan books were in as fine condition as the most exacting collector might desire for they were collected by a fastidious man who loved his books. With the beginnings of the Department of Special Collections, in the late nineteen-forties, steps were taken to recollect the materials in an area of maximum protection and preservation.

There is no way of gathering together all of the Cowan items, but those which the Department has are marked in the copy of the Cowan bibliography in the reading room. At the time of the sale, Cowan estimated that seventy-five per cent of the titles in the 1933 bibliography were in the library. All Cowan items have bookplates so stating their provenance. Many books contain Mr. Cowan's own distinctive bookplate, depicting the San Carlos.

Early cataloging of the Cowan manuscript collections was done by the staff of Special Collections: Andrew Horn, Neal Harlow, Ed Carpenter - and primarily James Mink, now head of the Department of Special Collections. The bulk of the manuscripts was given exhaustive descriptive cataloging. They were first cataloged as two collections, since they were acquired by the library at two different times. With the changes in cataloging policy in the Department over the years and also changes in policies of storage for security and preservation, it was decided to treat the manuscripts not as a Cowan collection, but as collections or items of individual interest, retaining the Cowan provenance. The list on the next page gives the dispersal of all the groups of manuscripts and individual manuscripts which came to UCLA Library ex libris Robert Ernest Cowan. There is a list of the second collection of manuscripts in the Collections File, but there does not seem to be a complete list of the first. It is to be assumed that those manuscripts not in the second list came with the first purchase. The provenance of newspapers, prints and maps is less easily established. There seems to have been no note made as to the disposition of the Cowan maps included in the first purchase.

Part of Goodwin's efforts when discussing the purchase of the Cowan Library with President Sproul involved justifying Cowan's estimates for items in the Library. As can be imagined, it was no easy task. Many items were checked on an individual basis, but at the same time, he noted, as a general appraisal, a quote from Mr. [presumably Ernest] Dawson: Nothing superior to be had anywhere in the world. Could not be bought in ten years for a quarter million dollars. The Cowan has the very best items. The number of booksellers' queries to UCLA which can be answered by saying Special Collections has is a belated vindication of Goodwin's foresight. Though even Dawson, Goodwin and Cowan himself should be surprised at the increase in value. Cowan estimated much of the pamphlet material at low prices. In quick checking, a pamphlet estimated by Cowan at five dollars was recently offered by a bookseller at six hundred and fifty. A one hundred dollar item at the time of purchase was offered for eighteen hundred. And so it would be with most items.

This, of course, is the worth to collectors. The value to scholars cannot be as easily noted, but as items disappear from the market or simply disappear, their being together in this library in southern California is a unique resource of increasing value to researchers. Because of the superb nucleus of Californiana of the Cowan Library, Special Collections has as its policy continued collecting in this area, though now the emphasis is primarily on items of southern California interest.

Scope and Content

Collection consists of correspondence, including letters from John Henry Nash regarding the publication of Cowan's bibliography and letters from William Andrews Clark, Jr. regarding early Clark Library policies and procedures. Includes catalog, bibliographic materials, account books, an early diary, photographs, ephemera and memorabilia.

Organization and Arrangement

Arranged in the following series:

1. Correspondence (Boxes 1-14, 19-20, 23, 26-27).
2. Catalog of collection except for manuscripts (Box 15).
3. Bibliographies (16-18).
4. Manuscripts (Boxes 22-23).
5. Personal records (Boxes 21, 24-25).
6. Ephemera and memorabilia (Boxes 28, 31).
7. Photographs (Boxes 29-30).

Indexing Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

Subjects

Cowan, Robert Ernest, 1862-1942--Archives.
Nash, John Henry, 1871-1947--Correspondence.
Clark, William Andrews, 1877-1934--Correspondence.
William Andrews Clark Memorial Library--Archives.
Bibliographers--California--Archival resources.
Librarians--California--Archival resources.
Private libraries--California--Los Angeles.

Genres and Forms of Material

Photographs.

- *California bibliographers: father and son* [oral history transcript] / Robert G. Cowan, interviewee. UCLA Oral History Department interview, 1979. Available at the Department of Special Collections, UCLA.
- [Robert Ernest Cowan Library and Bibliographical Lists \(Collection 2046\)](#) . Available at the Department of Special Collections, UCLA.
- Robert Ernest Cowan, Californiana (Collection 2048). Available at the Department of Special Collections, UCLA.

Correspondence [v.d.]

- Box 1 **1887-1897.**
- Box 2 **1898-1903.**
- Box 3 **1904-1910.**
- Box 4 **1911-1914.**
- Box 5 **1915-1917.**
- Box 6 **1918-1925.**
- Box 7 **1926-1929.**
- Box 8 **1930-1931.**
- Box 9 **1932-1933.**
- Box 10 **1934-1939.**
- Box 11 **1939-1942 and miscellaneous.**
- Box 12 **From named persons 1898-1928.**
- Box 13 **From institutions, 1900-1937.**
- Box 14 **1919-1934.**
- Box 23 **1895-1940.**

Scope and Content Note

Including from William Andrews Clark, 1919-32; copy out-letters from Cowan; manuscripts of his writings both typed & handwritten.

- Box 19 **Special correspondence, 1936-1940.**
- Box 26 **Correspondence from Cowan to his wife, 1898-1922 & from various to Cowan, 1906-1934.**

- Box 15 **Catalog, Cowan collection except for manuscripts, August 1904.**

Physical Description: Typed and handwritten on slips.

- Box 16 **Bibliography, notes, correspondence & lists, 1900-1920; various book lists.**
- Box 17 **Various book lists, bibliographics & biblio notes, including some relating to The California Bibliography.**
- Box 18 **Notes & lists including 1 folder marked Bancroft Bibliography.**
- Box 20 **[Unsorted].**

Scope and Content Note

Clippings, miscellaneous correspondence, lists & 1 folder of book bills, 1925-1935.

- Box 21 **Printed items by & about Cowan (?) Financial records, bound volumes. 1876-1942.**
- Box 22 **Manuscripts & related materials: various writings of Cowan.**
- Box 24 **Various account books; book want list for UCB, 1893-1904.**
- Box 25 **Diary, 1876; various printed works & chippings owned by / mentioning Cowan (?).**
- Boxes 27-28 **Unarranged correspondence, manuscripts, ephemera & memorabilia.**
Physical Description: (folded)
- Box 29 **Photographs; Cowan's grammar school certificate.**

Box 30 **Photographs.**

Box 31 **Metal plaque, apparently awarded to Cowan as an Honorary Member, by The Book Club of California, 1923.**

Box 32 **Certificate of hon membership of Society of California Pioneers. October 2, 1929.**

Physical Description: (folder)