Looking Back at J. G. Ballard in the British Library
David Ian Paddy

Blowing One’s Nose in the Archive
I became a reader of J. G. Ballard in the 1980s. Surely there are others like me, who first came to this strange, dark and yet comic visionary writer not down the expected pathway of science fiction, or from the release of Steven Spielberg’s film adaptation of Empire of the Sun, but via the enticingly subversive volumes put out by the independent press Re/Search. The San Francisco-based publisher specialized in an underground culture particular to the moment, appealing to those jazzed by the outer fringes of punk and its alliance with the likes of William S. Burroughs and Genesis P. Orridge. Though these volumes had little ostensibly to do with science fiction, their diagnostics of “industrial culture” certainly tapped the same roots of interest as the nascent cyberpunk movement while leading back to the sharp edges of the genre explored by the writers Harlan Ellison assembled in Dangerous Visions.

This is to say that as I was engaged in those initial readings of Crash, High Rise and the stories in The Terminal Beach, my first impressions were certainly being shaped and framed by the Re/Search anthology from 1982 that was devoted exclusively to the work and personality of James Graham Ballard. A very particular version of the author was being fabricated in those pages, one that must have looked quite different from the version that appeared, for example, in the pages of Michael Moorcock’s New Worlds magazine in the 1960s. The Re/Search Ballard was hewn in a post-punk environment, less the writer of science fiction than emcee of the most dangerous nightclub in town, offering up with total ease and élan shocking observations on a vast array of taboo topics.

The persona I encountered in that volume was the one I accepted as the truest picture of the man I would continue to read for decades to come. In other words, what he said there, for all I knew, had to be true. One bold view in particular that matters most to this current essay can be found in the lengthy interview that kicks off the Re/Search volume. In a section given the heading “Archivism,” Ballard offers publishers V. Vale and Andrea Juno opinions on the act of archiving the work of contemporary writers. It is worth quoting this at some length (though I feel as if in the context of the Eaton Journal of Archival Research in Science Fiction, this requires some kind of trigger warning):

I’m not very good on the archival side of things. I throw away my manuscripts. You’ve got to understand, I can’t take all that stuff. I hate that instant memorializing—your used beer mats and used typewriter ribbons and tax returns—little shrines erected in some university library around the handkerchief in which Graham Greene blew his nose in 1957. One can have too much of that. That’s ‘Eng. Lit’ carried to the point of absurdity.

As he continues, the notion of the literary archive gets mocked even further:

I don’t keep bibliographical information about me around—frankly it’s of no interest to me whatever. All those things that obsess archivists, like different variants of a paperback published in 1963 (on the first 10,000 run something is deleted from the artwork, or
the Berkley medallion is not on the spine)—that sort of thing is of interest to bibliographical people. But it leaves me cold! There’s too much of that going on.

He then takes a turn to make a dig at Kingsley Amis:

The funny thing is that Amis told me that he’d kept not just the manuscript of the preliminary notes for Lucky Jim, but the pencils and pens that he’d written it with. I thought, Christ—this is the author, one of the original ‘Angry Young Men’ who refused to join the system! That’s life. Keeping the pens—that’s going a bit far, isn’t it?

By the end of this section, though, Ballard does make one concession:

But don’t get this wrong—in America and particularly in American academic institutions, the archivists’ departments (simply because they’ve got so much money to spend) are buying all this stuff all the time. Even a writer like myself, who (let’s be fair, is hardly known at all in America and doesn’t figure in any kind of critical landscape at all)—I get invitations. In fact a man who called himself the archivist at Wyoming University wrote a very nice letter to me asking, ‘Have you got any material I can have?’ I wrote back a friendly note saying that I hate that whole archivist approach. And he, to his credit, said ‘I understood and I sympathize, but as a professional archivist it’s my job to write around.’ (34)

In this last point, Ballard qualifies the bluntness of the earlier statements to claim that he does in fact think archiving is valuable; it is not the literary archive itself that he attacks. The distinction he makes is that while such collections are clearly valuable for the likes of Hemingway, Shaw or Shakespeare (his examples), he wonders about the esteem given to contemporary writers. Will anyone, he asks, in fifty years even remember who John Updike was? Or, implicitly, himself? The problem he raises, then, is with the archive of the contemporary.

Such ideas fit a larger picture that is consistent with many other views expressed by Ballard. It is worth noting, for instance, the frequency with which he voiced his dismay of his English literary peers for continuing to write novels in what he felt was an outdated mode, as if they were still composing in the nineteenth century. In the essay “Fictions of Every Kind,” he stated pithily, “The future is a better key to the present than the past” (205). Again and again, he argued that the future is a better model for understanding society and means for creating fictional characters. The problem, then, of the archive of the contemporary, from this perspective, is that the archive looks back, honors the past, perhaps even worryingly museumifies it, whereas the work he had set for himself needed to leave the past behind. Having said all this, it should be noted that the next novel to emerge after this interview was Empire of the Sun, the semi-autobiographical work that looks back, however imaginatively, to his childhood in Shanghai.

Whatever we might make of these arguments, the point here is that from reading this interview an image was firmly set in my mind. “Ballard” and “archives” were two words that somehow could never occupy the same sentence. He was the
man who kept no notebooks and may have even burnt the drafts of his own manuscripts. There would surely be no handkerchiefs with the initials JGB to be held with dust-resistant white gloves.

Time jumps forward. In 2007, I delivered a paper, “Empires of the Mind: Autobiography and Anti-imperialism in the Work of J. G. Ballard,” at the first international conference on Ballard’s work, hosted by Jeanette Baxter at the University of East Anglia. In 2008, on the basis of this paper, I was offered an opportunity to propose a book on Ballard (more on this in a moment). The writing for this book began in 2009. At this point, I still assumed, naturally, it would not involve any archival research.

Then it all changed. First, there was the tragic news of Ballard’s death on April 19, 2009 (he had informed readers in the last pages of his memoir, Miracles of Life (2008), that he had been diagnosed with cancer). Not that long after, in June of 2010, the Ballard estate announced that it was making a donation to the British Library as part of an Acceptance in Lieu scheme (rather than pay £350,000 in taxes). According to a BBC article at the time, “Ballard archive saved for nation,” Ballard had expressed his wish to his daughters Fay and Bea to have his papers donated to the British Library. The contents of this archive eventually became available to British Library Readers in the Manuscripts Reading Room on August 1, 2011.

No archive? Everything burnt? So much for first impressions and the thumbed nose. After all that time, and the assurity of the image of Ballard the anti-archivist came the revelation of a sizable collection. There was an archive after all. Now to see if there was a handkerchief.

What Can Be Found Within
The BBC article, “Ballard archive saved for nation,” informs us that the collection was estimated to consist of fifteen storage boxes, covering nearly twelve meters of British Library shelf space. Drafts and transcripts of Ballard’s novels take up the largest portion of the collection. Most of these are typescripts, and a majority are heavily annotated with handwritten changes and commentary. Although these manuscripts will most likely be the center of attention for researchers, there is also a great variety of other types of material to be investigated. For instance, there are files on personal and family matters, correspondence, a variety of photos, interviews, exhibition-related materials, commentary on his work, posthumous letters of sympathy and notepads. I’ll cover some of these items in greater detail in a moment.

Chris Beckett, curator of historical papers at the British Library, has been in charge of the Ballard papers, and he has also written a number of essays that stand as the defining statements thus far on the collection. His essay “The Progress of the Text: The Papers of J. G. Ballard at the British Library” is the best introduction to what the collection is and is not. For instance, Beckett tells us that while readers will find drafts or typescripts of every novel—excepting Ballard’s first effort, The Wind From Nowhere, and The Unlimited Dream Company (the first two drafts of which can be found in the Harry Ransom collection at the University of Texas at Austin)—there are virtually no drafts of Ballard’s numerous short stories or of the “condensed novels” of his signature experimental work, The Atrocity Exhibition.

Perhaps a bigger gap for some, though, is indicated by Beckett’s statement that “their contents will disappoint the customs officials of biographical research” (3). Much has been revealed and released, but Ballard the person remains guarded.
There is very little here in the way of the biographical and, as Beckett notes, what is there was not necessarily placed by Ballard himself. Material related to Ballard’s time at the Ley’s school in Cambridge (where he went on his arrival in the UK after leaving Shanghai) was unearthed and donated by researcher Raymond Tait, while a huge amount of material related to the Lunghua prison camp in Shanghai was sent to Ballard by a reader of Empire of the Sun.

As already stated, transcripts of his novels dominate the archive. A majority of these are typewritten with layer upon layer of handwritten revisionary commentary. As such they offer readers and scholars wholly new directions in approaching Ballard’s work, as they give us some of the best vistas on his writing process. This is to say that the entire venture of genetic criticism has now been opened to the reader of Ballard. Once again, Chris Beckett has published the first and best pieces of scholarship so far on the archival manuscripts and what they might tell us about his writing and revision process. He has published three essays in this mode, one devoted to an unpublished short story, the second to the draft and screenplay of Concrete Island, while the third concerns the draft of Crash. In his piece on the untitled short story, Beckett provides an excellent example of genetic criticism showing how we might date such an abandoned piece, which seems to have been hastily placed amidst the donated papers. He goes on to show how this story can specifically be contextualized in relation to the stories that appear in the collection Vermilion Sands. The essay on Crash, in contrast, is devoted to analyzing the layers of commentary and what they tell us about how Ballard composed and re-envisioned that controversial work. As should be clear, this is only the tip of the iceberg, and there is so much more that can be done in this direction.

**Adventures in the Reading Room**

In 2008, Paul March-Russell contacted me to see if I would be interested in writing a book on Ballard for a new series: SF Story Worlds for the Gylphi press, out of Canterbury, England. The series presents new perspectives on the history of science fiction and its impact on the wider world. The first collection to be published was Thomas Van Parys and I. Q. Hunter’s Science Fiction Across Media, which was followed by Carl Freedman’s Art and Idea in the Novels of China Miéville.

Forthcoming are Nicholas Ruddick’s Science Fiction Adapted to Film, The Science Fiction of Iain M. Banks (a collection of essays), and Conor Reid’s The Science Fiction of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Of relevance here, Gylphi has also published, in a separate series, essay collections on China Miéville and Adam Roberts.

The aim of my book, The Empires of J. G. Ballard: An Imagined Geography, was to situate Ballard and his work in an historical and international context. Rather than pairing him exclusively with other science fiction writers (say, Philip K. Dick) or cult authors mining subversive terrains (say, William S. Burroughs), I wanted to see what it would mean to read him alongside such “worldly” authors as Graham Greene. The work begins by addressing an article Ballard wrote in 1978 for Magazine Littéraire, in which he professed his admiration for Greene, Anthony Burgess and Lawrence Durrell. According to Ballard, each of these writers “are not only emigrants in the literal sense from England itself, but have taken a large part of their inspiration from the world at large […] who seek their imaginative fortunes elsewhere than in their own countries” (“Memories of Greenland” 137-8).

Using the essay on Greene as a springboard, I look to Ballard’s biography to raise a series of questions about his work. How might his childhood in Shanghai—
especially life in the International Settlement and the later collapse of Western powers in the wake of the Japanese invasion—have affected the outlook that shapes his fiction? How did his subsequent move to England in 1946 (a country that he perpetually described as an alien land) affect his view of Englishness? How might his fiction be looking at the politics of this world, especially the transformation from imperialism to globalization? Where did Ballard set his fictions, and what do these settings say about his imagined map of the world? I argue that a longing for a cosmopolitan ideal and a critique of Englishness, which is consistently depicted as parochial and provincial, shapes his body of work. At the same time, his works critique imperial thinking, not just in the limited sense of the British Empire, but in its late twentieth-century transformation into a kind of “psychic imperialism” through new electronic media and forms of consumerism, on the one hand, and globalization, on the other. In his later works, he weighs the desire for a cosmopolitan worldliness against an imperial globalization that homogenizes the world in a new form of parochialism.

It is worth noting at this point that this project was already heading in a way that broke from those first impressions I laid out at the start of this paper. I argue that despite the presentation of his self and work as always being about the future, there is also in his work a deep sense in which the past is always present and is something that never entirely vanishes. Recidivism is rampant, as is an uncanny return of repressed forces. The project, therefore, was going to involve some looking backward. I was situating Ballard less in the future and more in the history of the twentieth century. It is thus proved only fitting that for a man who told us that he was only focused on the future, there would be a past, in the form of an archive.

Because the news about the archive appeared when I was already a few chapters into the drafting of the book, I knew that the work I could do there would have to be very focused. The rest of this section will discuss the specifics of what I looked at and was able to make use of with the focus of the project in mind. I will conclude by giving some hints as to other resources within the Ballard collection that might be of possible interest to other researchers.

While Chris Beckett is correct to note in “The Progress of the Text” that the archive isn’t necessarily a treasure trove for those questing insights into Ballard’s biography, the materials that are there proved immensely useful to me. Basic materials like birth certificates, his parents’ marriage license and documents from his time at the Cathedral School and “Tudor House” at the Lunghua Academy (certificates, programs from sporting events, and reports on his progress in his coursework) provide entry-level access to Ballard’s childhood in Shanghai, while being able to look at two of his passports opens a small window on some of his later worldly travels. Other material gathered by Raymond Tait was also invaluable, particularly a series of letters exchanged between George Osborn, headmaster of Lunghua Academy, and W. G. Humphrey, at The Leys School, Cambridge, as well as letters from Ballard’s parents to Humphrey. In these we see the case being made for the young Ballard’s admission to the Leys School as well as the story of his transition from Shanghai at the war’s end to a new life in distant England. A particular treat for me was his father’s description of the future author as “a somewhat unusual boy,” who has grown up entirely amidst an international community that also made him somewhat “intolerant of national customs and traditions” (James Ballard, letter to W. G. Humphrey).
Oddly enough, perhaps, I spent a great deal of time with a copy of a Boy’s Own Paper from May 1937. When I asked Chris Beckett about this item at the time of my visit, it was not clear if the copy of this paper was Ballard’s own or something sent to him by a reader. Either way it proved to be of great interest as I examine Ballard’s childhood reading in the book’s opening chapter, with a particular focus on the colonial elements of his education. In his memoir, Miracles of Life and essays like “The Pleasures of Reading,” Ballard repeatedly mentioned the role of magazines like Boy’s Own in his youth, and the strong tension between the imperial, patriotic messages of its pages and the reality of the collapsing empire around him. This particular Boy’s Own fit the bill marvelously as it featured several overtly typical elements on the importance of the British Empire and a boy’s duty to working for its cause.

Anyone interested in doing research on Empire of the Sun, especially its historical context, will find a plethora of documents here. After that novel was published, a number of people contacted Ballard. Included in the collection are a series of letters from people who were interned in the Lunghua camp with Ballard and his family. While there are some letters that thank Ballard for bringing this history to the greater public’s attention—the story of the Europeans who were held in the camp after the Japanese takeover of the International Settlement in Shanghai following the bombing of Pearl Harbor—the great majority express dismay and anger at the inaccuracies of Ballard’s novel. Some cannot believe that he seems to praise the character and actions of the Japanese while simultaneously mocking and maligning the English people in the camp. What we are witness to here are the opinions of people who have no familiarity with Ballard’s body of work and were most likely expecting something more realistic in the manner of a docudrama, not the work of imagination deploying an inner space perspective on biographical memory.

Striking in a different manner are a series of documents sent to Ballard from Margaret Braidwood, whose deceased husband Bill had been at Lunghua and close friends with Ballard’s father. The documents she includes are a rich historical record of life in the camp—from descriptions and drawings of the buildings, narratives on the population and committee reports from the British Residents’ Association. In a letter from Braidwood she indicates that Ballard had recommended she donate the materials to the Imperial War Museum. Overall, the materials provide a vivid and detailed portrait of numerous aspects of daily life in Lunghua that can help fill in the background or provide a contrast to the one Ballard portrays in Empire. They also stand as the one significant portion of the archive that could be of great use and interest to a researcher with no interest in Ballard’s work whatsoever.

As stated earlier, I stayed fairly well focused on materials that related to Ballard’s personal life, however thin some of this material might have been. However, there were other areas to which I also devoted a great deal of time. One of the most remarkable treasures in the whole collection, something that received a bit of media attention at the time of the revelation about the archive, is a set of five small spiral-bound notepads, roughly 4” x 6” in size. Here can be found the notes toward the final, incomplete projects Ballard was working on before he died, thus from roughly 2007 or 2008. Four of the notepads are taken up with one novel in development. By the second notepad, he begins to use VUS as shorthand for this project, which goes through a variety of title changes, “War vs US,” “US vs The World” and, most completely and dramatically, “An Immodest Proposal, or How the
World Declared War on America.” Overly written in the context of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the premise that gets developed over these pages concerns a US that invades a Middle Eastern country, ostensibly for democratic reasons but ultimately reveals its true ambition to be the control of the oil in the region, which then has a devastating economic effect on the European economy. Although Britain is initially sympathetic to the US, they eventually join the rest of the world in waging war on the US.

These notepads offer a fascinating window into Ballard’s thought processes, giving us a glimpse of how he might have gone about developing premises for his novels. As notes—with Ballard testing and rejecting ideas along the way—they, of course, offer a quite different angle on the writing process from the drafts and transcripts that dominate the collection. It is also interesting for scholars to see in these notes the way Ballard makes direct connections and references to earlier works, testing the new idea by noting how it links to other pieces like Running Wild or Cocaine Nights, for instance.

For me, personally, the VUS premise helped in the writing of my fifth chapter which concerns Ballard’s treatment of the United States in his fiction (focusing primarily on the novel Hello America, but also the loose-trilogy of post-NASA stories, “News From the Sun,” “Memories of the Space Age” and “Myths of the Near Future”). In these works from the early 1980s, we can see a deep ambivalence in Ballard’s treatment of the States. On the one hand, he is deeply critical of its empty consumerism and hyper-military forcefulness, but, on the other hand, he admires its Wright Brothers’ spirit of adventure and future-looking direction, which was, for him, in strong contrast to England’s heritage-seeking obsessions. By the 2000s, though, when Ballard was jotting these notes, all such ambivalence has vanished, and the story ideas show a real anger; only the negative traits remain. America is a “hamburger and comic-book culture” that gets compared to Nazi Germany and imperial Rome (Working notes for projected writing, fourth notebook, D6). As a way to help reinforce the claims of the chapter, these notes were remarkable for the forthrightness of Ballard’s statements on the imperial nature of the contemporary US.

In the fifth and final notepad, there is also a brief reflection on the possibility of writing “Atrox 2”—that is, Ballard speculates on the possibility of writing a kind of sequel to The Atrocity Exhibition. Looking back to the fragmented society of the 1960s that also forced people like himself to forge radical new connections across disparate materials, he wonders if the present is at all similar, if a similar kind of work could be written today? Ballard seems to conclude in the negative and the thoughts go nowhere else. Still, this brief reflection helped provide me with a useful coda for my third chapter, which focused on The Atrocity Exhibition, and the ways in which it was a pure product of its time.

Because of the nature of the work I was doing, I did not spend a great deal of time looking at the drafts and transcripts of the novels to make detailed analyses across the variations. However, I did look at a handful of the manuscripts and was able to make brief observations that proved useful for my research. Here are two examples. In my second chapter, I look at the legacy of certain colonial narratives that may have shaped Ballard’s imagination in his early natural disaster novels, and so I looked at the typescript of The Drowned World, which is incomplete. What was notable for me, however, given the loaded racial imagery of that novel was to spot where Ballard had made handwritten marks to ensure the capitalization of “Negro,”
but also where, in one passage, the word "archaeopsychic" is written in as a substitute for "racial." More remarkable was a long handwritten note that was part of a synopsis Ballard had written for High Rise. In this note Ballard overtly compares the behavior of some of the tenants in the high rise—those using chaos as an excuse to wield petty power—to the behavior of some of the English people in the Lunghua camp. Such a reference never made it into the novel, but it helps us see how long before he wrote Empire of the Sun, he was seeing in his imagined material the real-life experiences of his Shanghai background.

I was also able to make use of other kinds of material in the archive that were not directly part of the actual fabric of the novels but influential in the shaping of those works. A clear example of this is that one can read Ballard’s book report-like notes on Robert Paxton’s Anatomy of Fascism. Although these were located in a separate file, they are quite clearly related to the writing of his final published novel, Kingdom Come, which concerns the rise of fascism in contemporary suburban England. Such notes, in which we can observe Ballard’s response to Paxton’s analysis, provide a different lens on Ballard’s writing process.

A curiosity in the collection is an undated document, filed under “Occasional Prose,” given the provisional title (by Beckett), “Brief comments on 6 crime novels.” Presumably composed in the mid-1960s, this single sheet is an unexpected bit of satire in which Ballard, assuming the voice of a Publishers Weekly-type reviewer, gives quick evaluations of works like Kafka’s The Trial and Crime and Punishment as if they were newly released crime novels. Although slight and anomalous, I found the piece of some relevance as my seventh chapter looks to Ballard’s turn toward crime fiction in his final set of novels. Here we see something of Ballard’s early, rather dismissive attitude toward the genre, in contrast to his more serious deployment of it later in his career as a means of examining violence in a globalized context.

To conclude this section, let me simply note that there was obviously a great deal of other material that I looked at that was pertinent to my research but which finally did not make its way into the final book. This includes such interesting family correspondence as a letter from Ballard’s wife in 1964 when they were on holiday in Spain. Mary notes how Spain triggers associative memories in Ballard of Shanghai and they are both struck by the international nature of the people traveling around them. Originally I had made reference to the unused Vermillion Sands story, but dropped it in the final edit as it was too digressive for the point being made at the time. There was also, in the files of photos, a publicity still of Ballard when he was on the set of the filming of Spielberg’s Empire of the Sun, in which he is dressed in a John Bull costume, complete with Union Jack vest. Ballard made reference to this image in his semi-autobiographical work The Kindness of Women, which I did make reference to. For a moment, staring at the strange image, I toyed with the idea of using it for the book’s cover.

**The Joy of the Archive: Looking to the Past, Looking to the Future**

Academics are supposed to aim for a kind of neutrality in their work, and we should ideally don a blasé façade as we set to the serious nature of our tasks. Archives, so the image supposes, are serious spaces. But in truth there is always something personal about what we do, and I have to be honest about the sheer thrill of being in the archive, about the frisson produced by being in the presence of the objects of a writer you adore. That’s his handwriting. I’m holding his passport. These are his
notebooks! While I may not be talking about an early folio of Shakespeare’s or Virginia Woolf’s diaries, if you’re a long-term admirer of a particular writer, there is a pure and simple giddiness that can come from being in the archives. Even the archives of the contemporary.

It was especially exciting in my case to feel like such an early visitor to the collection. It was easy to imagine myself as one of the first to hold this or that document (an illusion, of course, but an illusion that added to the joy). And there are, of course, the usual challenges. The long stretches of looking, reading, waiting, the day that doesn’t add up to much. And there is, as ever, the struggle with handwriting. My personal notes deciphering those final notepads, for instance, are filled with bracketed question marks. As we know, it takes practice, one becomes accustomed, but there remains something about fixing our eyes on the peculiar texture of this writer’s hand that excites and perplexes.

Sometimes the joy is in the small things, in the unexpected items that may not matter that much to your project, but fascinate nevertheless. The majority of readers in the Ballard collection will most likely focus on the typescripts, but there are numerous other little treats sprinkled throughout worth spending some time with. For instance, and here’s an odd one, there is a brief correspondence with a representative from Cadillac, including a press pack for the BLS 2.8 V6 Saloon. The car was to be delivered to Ballard’s home and he was going to test drive it for The Guardian, but ultimately he canceled when he was disappointed to find that the Cadillac was not going to be one of the American behemoths he loved so much, but a mere compact, no bigger than a Ford Granada.

There is also the charming item, “The Domesday Book of Shepperton,” a series of three school exercise books by Ballard’s daughter Bea, written when she was twelve-years old. This is her childhood account of the history and geography of their town of Shepperton, with notes about their house and the local population. At one point, Bea declares that they don’t really have any “proper skinheads” in the neighborhood. The one work of her father’s that she makes mention of is his film script for When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth. The whole thing is like an alternative vision of her father’s ever highly imagined Shepperton.

Given that my book opens with the importance of Graham Greene to Ballard’s writing and geopolitical outlook, it was wonderful to find in the correspondence files a typed letter from Greene to Victoria Petrie-Hay at the publisher Victor Gollancz expressing his praise of Ballard in general, but of the new work, Empire of the Sun, in particular, and agreeing to be quoted as saying so.

Another thing pertinent to my own work, but that should be amusing to all, is some correspondence from 10 Downing Street. I began my article “Empires of the Mind” with an account of the irony of Ballard being offered the C.B.E. (Commander of the Order of the British Empire). It was an offer he refused. Here in the archive is the correspondence from William Chapman, Secretary for Appointments. Readers can see Ballard’s copy of the letter with his handwritten put-down: “Now, is it Tony or Cherie [Blair] who’s my biggest fan?” There is also a copy of his rejection letter: “I confirm that I DO [or] I DO NOT wish my name to be considered for the proposed award.” There is a squiggle across the box for I DO, and a large tick across the box for I DO NOT.

One also can find elements that are much more moving. There are, of course, those notes toward projects that never were. In addition to the VUS project, there are two loose sheets proposing a children’s story, “The Mirror.” Then there is the file.
devoted to "Conversations: Jonathan Waxman and JG Ballard." Waxman was the physician who worked with Ballard on his cancer treatment. Although ultimately too ill to complete the project, Ballard had seriously considered a book based on these conversations that would have dealt with religion, life after death, cancer, Ballard’s period studying medicine and what illness reveals about our selves. Given that sentimentality is not an emotion one tends to associate with things Ballardian, I must mention that I found myself saddened at a number of times reading through the notepads, as he would stop midstream in his brainstorming to make self-doubting remarks, wondering if he was just repeating himself, if he had another project in him or not. At one point he stops to guess at his legacy: Empire of the Sun, novel and film, Crash, novel and film, some recognition for the last three novels. The brainstorming continues, but, farther along into the notepads, the notes become fewer, and the pages are reduced to aimless squiggles and doodles.

One final thing to remark upon is that I emerged from the archives with a strong desire to see someone produce a full scholarly edition of Ballard’s non-fiction. In the archive, one can look at the essays that would eventually be assembled into his only collected volume of non-fiction, A User’s Guide to the Millennium, which has become such a vital source for Ballardian scholars. What one finds in the archives, though, are mostly Xeroxes of the original essays sent to Ballard by the editor David Pringle, with Ballard’s annotations of these copies. In looking at these notes, one becomes quickly aware of how Ballard edited those essays to avoid repetition across the articles or to refine points he wanted to make, or to change titles. This is why we would seem to be in need of a proper scholarly edition of Ballard’s collected essays. Not only have there been many essays published since User’s Guide appeared, but that volume was also organized thematically rather than chronologically, and a complete edition could make use of the archives to note the differences between the original essays and how they were amended for User’s Guide. Now we just need someone to do the work.

The archive lets us into Ballard’s past, but it certainly opens us up to a new future as well. The drafts, typescripts and notepads let us view his writing process in a way we did not have access to before. But there is much else in there as well, and much work to do. There is a whole future to be found in that past.

Works Cited