

Introduction

In the past academic year, I had the chance to work with Dr James Morrison and the Phelan US Centre on the continued project “Passing the Torch of Anglo-American Financial Cooperation”. This project expands upon previous work on the political-economic dynamics and trade relations between the UK and the US during the 20th century marked by the collapse of the gold standard. Building on years of research conducted by Dr Morrison, PhD students, and previous research assistants, my role focused on organising and reviewing archival documents, contributing to the development of a digitised database on trans-Atlantic economic relations. My work as an undergraduate research assistant mainly covered UK archival collections on Walter Runciman and the Board of Trade during the 1930s.

Research Role

My work contributed to the development of the database in two main ways. First, I processed and organised primary and secondary sources previously collected by Dr Oksana Levkovich. This task provided me with the opportunity to read through archival reports in addition to book reviews, newspapers and academic articles, introducing me to key themes of the international political economy. Second, I systematically formatted, renamed, and classified photographed archives from Walter Runciman’s Papers to improve their accessibility for future academic research.

Methodology and Data

To ensure reliable file synchronisation, we used Syncthing, a tool aligned with Dr Morrison’s preference for free and open-source software. For the first task, I briefly read through the documents, determined whether each was a primary or secondary source, and then categorised them into the corresponding folders. Although Dr Morrison and I initially created only a few categories, the scope of these documents soon required a more precise classification framework. I progressively added tailored folders and flagged any standout or incomplete documents to facilitate use and citation for future research.

My second and main contribution focused on reviewing and categorising photographed folders from Walter Runciman’s Papers collected at the Robison Library at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Walter Runciman, 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford, was a Liberal politician who served twice as President of the Board of Trade in the UK from 1914 to 1916, then from 1931 to 1937. The archives I studied primarily covered his second appointment during which he worked closely with Prime Ministers Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin. I examined his meeting notes, speech scripts and private correspondence unfolding both professional relationships with key political figures and personal ties with family members. Additionally, the archives spanned related materials including printed articles and government reports on national budgets, tariff policies, and records from economic conferences that reshaped the international financial order. Indeed, analysing Runciman’s notes on the 1932 Ottawa Agreements – a series of bilateral trade policies rooted in the imperial preference system between the UK and Commonwealth Nations – or the League of Nations Monetary and Economic Conferences supplied insights into the inner workings and objectives of policymaking at the time.

Following a systematic methodology, I analysed, organised and renamed these archives to ensure they were easily identifiable and citable for future researchers. As multiple archival documents often appeared on a single photograph, my first step was to edit the pictures to ensure each file contained one individual, legible page. I then identified documents' key markers (such as the type, date, and the people involved) to rename and sort them into corresponding folders. Finally, I included the main ideas discussed and historical events in the file names whenever appropriate and insightful. The materials were ordered chronologically to provide a more clear and logical historical narrative within Walter Runciman's Papers. This task required thorough attention to detail to flag any incomplete files or decipher illegible documents, thus teaching me the need for rigour in archival research.

Personal Experience

Working on this project was an invaluable learning experience; Dr Morrison guided me through the core themes of his research agenda and introduced me to archival work on Anglo-American financial relations during the interwar era. Although the archives I examined reflect a very different historical and political context, many lessons on financial dynamics and macroeconomic theory remain relevant for understanding and interpreting contemporary affairs. Despite having access to a wide range of online information today, this experience has taught me the enduring value of archives, many of which remain scattered and not yet digitised. Archives are crucial for the analysis of historical international political economy, and I am truly grateful to have had the opportunity to contribute to the digitisation of a growing archival database.

Exploring private correspondence and notes further showed me the role of agency, beyond formal institutions and structural forces, in influencing macroeconomic policies. I mainly covered the archives of a single individual, yet the volume of potentially relevant information for understanding decisions made and trajectories chosen by Walter Runciman was striking. His correspondence not only with government officials but also with family members underlines the influence of surroundings, relationships and individual agency in shaping paths taken by macroeconomic policymakers.

The level of precision and consistency required for archival research, collected over years, deepened my interest in Dr Morrison's and his colleagues' work. The methodological approach also improved my eye for detail and my ability to work in a systematic manner – abilities I hope to continue applying in research and other settings. Overall, this experience has confirmed my interest in macroeconomic policymaking and exposed me to a fascinating new field – historical international political economy – which I had not yet explored. I am deeply thankful to the Phelan US Centre for its support and to Dr Morrison for his shared knowledge and continuous guidance throughout this project.