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Selling Fashion: Realizing the Research Potential of the House of Fraser Archive, University of Glasgow Archive Services

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The House of Fraser Archive is a rich resource for the study of the development of fashion retailing in Britain since the mid-nineteenth century. It is, however, underexploited by textile, fashion and retail historians. During the summer of 2009, the University of Glasgow Archive Services will complete an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project which seeks to improve the accessibility of the Archive. Adopting a progressive approach to archival description, the project is developing an innovative online catalogue, providing fuller access to information about the Archive and the resources contained within it.

The House of Fraser Archive

House of Fraser has been a major force in retailing in Britain over the past 160 years. From its very modest beginnings when Arthur and Fraser was established as a retail drapery in rented premises in Glasgow in 1849, House of Fraser has developed into a leading retail brand with stores the length and breadth of Britain and a significant mail-order business which stretched across the reaches of the British empire. Over the course of its history around 200 stores joined or left the House of Fraser with the business acquiring at least nine separate store chains.

During this long history, House of Fraser has seen a massive shift in the business of retail, has found its way through economic boom and bust, and has seen technological advances transform not only the means of buying and selling, but also the manufacture of goods on sale through their stores. Fortunately, the evidence of these changes and the impact they had on the business can be traced through the House of Fraser Archive. [1] (Fig. 1)

The Archive itself is a large collection, comprising over 130 metres of ledgers, product catalogues, photographs and files. It represents a significant proportion of the House of Fraser group, holding records from over 100 companies. The wide number of retail markets for which House of Fraser has catered is reflected, from the bargain basements of Pontings, through Dallas's Glasgow-based mail-order business, to Dickins and Jones' impressive department store in Regent Street. It also highlights the many goods on sale in the House of Fraser stores, from linens, through ladies', men's and children's fashions, to furniture, and the perhaps unexpected markets they operated in, including pharmacy and undertaking. With records held for many stores dating throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Archive provides a wide range of source material for historians.

This paper gives a brief overview of the value of the Archive for a number of research areas. For a full history of the store, Michael Moss and Alison Turton's *A Legend of Retailing* provides a comprehensive study of the development of the group. [2]

The Growth of the Department Store

Arthur and Fraser, the founding business of the group, was itself one of a new breed of retailers when it opened in 1849 and developed in the following decades. Employing a warehouse style, it had its products on display and advertised its prices in its ample windows. This model of department-store selling has only strengthened across the last 160 years, and the records show the importance of not only the display of products within the stores but also of the construction of the buildings themselves.

The records of Arthur and Fraser, Fraser's, Arnott's and Wylie and Lochhead show the physical development of the stores in Glasgow's shopping districts. Initially, they began in small shops, often with very little frontage on the street. The stores then expanded through back courtyards and alleyways, an interconnecting puzzle of departments and separate entrances. As they arose, opportunities were taken to establish a shop frontage along a substantial portion of the street. This generally occurred by expansion into adjacent premises, redevelopment of existing buildings, or the construction of new buildings. The importance of the development of the physical store can be traced through minutes of

meetings of boards of directors, property records, architectural drawings and store photographs.

Most stores have photographic collections retained as part of the Archive, with those for the London stores particularly interesting. The Dickins and Jones' collection includes a series of press shots which show the reconstruction of the store in the 1920s. [3] What is particularly noticeable is the length to which the store went to keep their window display accessible during construction work. Temporary display spaces showing the latest fashions surrounded the site whilst the renovation work was undertaken. Such actions demonstrate the importance placed on these displays by the industry. Initially used to display the wide range of products available and their prices, the Archive provides evidence of the move towards the use of models and the increased design of these displays. The employment of window dressers became increasingly common and as the twentieth century progressed the style and design of window displays became increasingly elaborate.

With efforts expended to ensure a grand store exterior, great care was also taken in the decoration of the interior of department stores. There is a range of records, predominantly photographs and drawings, which shows the importance of internal design and layout. There was a particular emphasis in the higher-end department stores to ensure a high standard of fixtures and fittings, and to ensure that all of a shopper's needs were met. The Barker's of Kensington collection includes an artist's impressions of the store interior. [4] These delicate drawings highlight the elegant shopping experience which they sought to provide for their customers. Such drawings are held throughout the Archive as they were popular inclusions in publications celebrating the long history of stores such as John Barker & Co., John Falconer & Co. and D. H. Evans. The Archive's large photographic collection includes numerous photographs of the stores' exteriors, interiors, departments, restaurants and staff. These photographs highlight the importance of the store interior and provide evidence of the practice of store dressing. Store dressing allowed the season's fashions to be promoted while campaigns such as sales and war weeks were highlighted across a store. The celebration of occasions such as Royal weddings and births were guaranteed to bring about a patriotic display of Britishness; 'Buy British' campaigns ran in House of Fraser stores at the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary in June 1911 and during Queen Elizabeth II's silver jubilee celebrations in 1976. Photographs of the Fraser's store in Glasgow show the elaborate Christmas decorations across a number of years. [5]

Customer Services

As new stores were constructed and older premises renovated, the needs of shoppers were closely attended to. In order to bring in new custom, and to retain the loyalty of existing customers, department stores extended beyond the various fashion and homeware departments, to include restaurants, writing, smoking and restrooms as well as concierge and delivery services. Both in London and across the country, a home-delivery service was a keenly marketed one. Barker's of Kensington's vans, for example, were distinctive and acted as a mobile advert around London.

Initially, these services were offered free of charge, as a means of securing the patronage of the most valued customers and to provide a safe environment where young ladies could visit unchaperoned. Concerns were later raised in a number of boardrooms about the effectiveness of this strategy as it was recognized that customers could be relied upon to accept these services but not to spend their money in store. Whilst complimentary services were largely withdrawn, department stores continued to recognize the value of services which either brought in extra revenue or which persuaded shoppers to come into the store. In 1924, the board of John Walsh, Sheffield, discussed the appointment of an orchestra to play in the store restaurant. Two years later the board agreed the introduction of tea dances. [6]

The Archive also charts the development of collection and sale previews, fashion shows and in-store promotions. In-store promotions ranged from campaigns involving the entire store, 'Buy British' campaigns being particularly popular, to smaller promotions run by individual departments, such as product launches and fashion previews. The Mawer and Collingham

collection, for example, includes a sales register from its annual Summer Show held in Skegness, eastern England. The Dickins and Jones' archive includes invitations to view new fashion collections including a show in the Hotel de Paris in Bray, southern England. [7] In addition to providing evidence about these extra services, the Archive demonstrates the way in which stores maintained their edge and appealed to customers through their staff. The Archive holds staff magazines and staff manuals for a variety of the group's stores. These set out the standards expected of staff and the levels of service which they were to provide. Stores took advantage of the good reputation of their staff, urging customers to make appointments with particular members of staff to ensure the best possible service.

Marketing

The Archive's holdings highlight the use of store dressing to fit in with seasons and campaigns. Whilst all stores employed campaigns for particular seasons, for a number of House of Fraser stores single campaigns were dominant across all advertising. Both Dallas's and Army and Navy adopted this marketing technique. Dallas's of Glasgow was established in 1865 as a retail drapery, operating from the Cowcaddens area of the city. However, by the early twentieth century its business did not centre on meeting the shopping needs of Glaswegians, but on its extensive mail-order business which had significant success in west Africa. Its dominant campaign was built around the British Empire. This is demonstrated clearly through the run of catalogues and price lists included in the Dallas's collection. [8] The Army and Navy also employed a strong British marketing theme focusing on the military, its primary customer (Fig. 2). Established in the 1870s by a group of army and navy officers, the store provided quality goods at competitive prices for its members. Whilst membership expanded beyond the military, the company remained bound to its dominant, and easily recognizable, marketing theme. [9]

Mail Order

The mid- to late nineteenth century saw the growth of mail-order circulars and catalogues as a retail tool for the House of Fraser stores, a trend that was to last throughout the twentieth century. The Archive holds such records for a number of stores, with the most comprehensive holdings in the companies whose main trade lay in mail order, that is the Dallas and Army and Navy stores.

There is a distinct difference between the use of catalogues for stores such as Dallas's which relied on mail order, and stores which used catalogues to entice customers into their stores by highlighting the latest fashions. Both the Dickins and Jones and John Falconer collections have particularly stylish collections of catalogues, with the Dickins and Jones collection ranging from a catalogue from 1921 showing the season's winter sportswear to a 1980s catalogue highlighting the autumn season knitwear. [10] These catalogues are centred on the fashions themselves, with particular designers often being promoted. The details of price are rarely given; this contrasts with the detailed order catalogues and price lists of Dallas and the Army and Navy stores. Price lists, whilst containing few illustrations, give a wealth of information on the availability and pricing of goods and fashions. Dallas's catalogues, which have fuller illustration and branding, provide similar detail on pricing and availability. For example, through the collection of Dallas's catalogues, the pricing of similar blouse styles can be traced over a ten year period during the 1920s and 1930s (Fig. 3). Catalogues and price lists in all their forms provide a valuable resource on changing styles, the way in which fashion retailers reacted to the changing availability of material and other resources, and the demands of shoppers.

Financial and Management Records

Whilst it is the advertising, photographic and architectural records which are the most instantly stimulating, interesting and rewarding, the administrative records held in the Archive are a rich resource for historians. These records, runs of minute books, financial ledgers and journals, and annual reports, provide valuable evidence of the way in which the business of retailing developed.

The minutes held cover every level of management through the company, from individual stores to group level. Decisions taken at the highest level can, therefore, be traced to see their impact on the shop floor. There is clear evidence of the steps taken by companies to deal with financial downturns and restrictions on the availability of resources and to capitalize on financial upswings and buoyant consumer spending. The Archive's accounting records, again, span a wide range, from individual customer accounts through to House of Fraser's group accounts. These can be used to look at individuals' spending patterns and the buying practices of stores, to track trends in the pricing of goods and raw materials and to examine the profitability of the business across the United Kingdom. Taken as a whole, with the management and administrative records enhanced and complemented by the advertising, sales and photographic records, the Archive is a rich resource for the study of retail, textile and fashion history.

Accessing the Archive

Whilst a rich resource for textile, retail and fashion history, the House of Fraser Archive is underused. Whilst the Archive was used extensively for the company history *A Legend of Retailing* published in 1989, it is not a universally recognized resource for textile and fashion history. [11] Recognizing the value of the collection, the University of Glasgow Archive Services are undertaking a project to improve the accessibility of the collection. *Empowering the User: the Development of Flexible Archive Catalogues* is an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project using the House of Fraser Archive to test the development of online, flexible and dynamic finding aids. It aims to improve the accessibility of information about the Archive, the records held within it and the context in which the records were created. By promoting this information, the project aims to attract more users to the collection and to help them get the most out of the Archive for their research purposes. We believe that one of the primary reasons that the Archive is underused is due to the difficulty in locating the relevant resources within it. The Archive is a large collection, extending over 130 metres. The existing hard copy and online catalogues are not user-friendly, with a partially completed relisting project simply confusing the situation for researchers. However, *Empowering the User* is not a standard recataloguing project. It is a novel approach to cataloguing which moves away from traditional catalogues. Whilst the conversion of paper catalogues to online searchable databases has been a priority for archive services for the last decade, this work has simply concentrated on providing online access to existing catalogues. [12] This process has not embraced available technologies to enhance catalogues or explored alternative archival descriptive practices to overcome the limitations of the catalogues which archive services regularly produce.

Empowering the User sets out to address these issues, developing an online, flexible and dynamic archival finding aid which is responsive to the needs of individual users. This paper highlights the ways in which the University of Glasgow Archive Services are building on developments in archival and records theory. It does not offer an in-depth analysis of these developments. For a fuller insight into these developments, professional literature, such as *Archivaria*, the journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists and *Archives and Manuscripts*, the journal of the Society of Australian Archivists, should be consulted. [13]

Demonstrating and Understanding Provenance

Provenance is an essential principal of archival management and description. Understanding and representing the provenance of the archive is key to archival description. Archives are enhanced by an understanding of the context in which they were created, used and maintained. A fashion catalogue on its own provides evidence of fashions, prices and availability at one time and place. Put this fashion catalogue in the context of the company which distributed it, and it provides evidence of shifting availability and prices of fashions and of the company's marketing policies.

Traditionally, provenance has been represented in archival aids by presenting descriptive information in terms of the creating organization's administrative structure. Contextual

information is provided about the organization, with the archives themselves being listed under hierarchical headings representing the different departments or sections of the organization.

Whilst this approach is standard throughout the UK and many other countries, and may have served archivists and historians adequately for many years, it has major drawbacks and deficiencies. In particular, it cannot encompass the developments in archival theory relating to multiple provenances. Recognizing the fluidity of modern organizational structures and the importance of functional context alongside administrative context, archival theory has developed to accept an archive's multiple provenances.

The House of Fraser is a prime example of multiple provenances. A complex organization, its ownership and administrative structures have shifted throughout its long history.

Independent stores were bought up, brought into House of Fraser's divisions, or came in to the House of Fraser group with its purchase of Harrods. The group's structure went through significant organizational changes to ensure it could meet the challenges of the retail market. These shifting administrative structures, all of which are important for the context of the archives themselves, cannot be adequately represented through traditional finding aids. Alongside administrative context is functional context. Whilst the administrative structure which creates, uses and maintains records is likely to change, the business functions and activities which result in the creation and use of records is a fixed one. An organization's functions and activities are equally, if not more, important than its administrative structure. It is, after all, what the organization does. The same records will be created whichever department carries out a particular function. However, if the function changes, the record will also change. To fully appreciate the provenance of an archive it is, therefore, necessary to include a representation of functional provenance in archival finding aids.

Archival and records theory has also progressed from a related, but separate, position, to a recognition of the close, indivisible links between the two. Whilst still largely separate disciplines, archivists and records managers have, more or less, universally accepted the replacement of the linear life cycle records theory by the records continuum. [14] The lifecycle sees an irreversible, time-bound progression from active record through semi-current record to final disposition, either retention as an archive or destruction. The continuum removes the concept of linear, time-bound progression from record to archive (or shredder) and of the value of records and archives from a single point of reference. Rather, it recognizes the importance of records and archives within multiple contexts and timeframes.

Despite these considerable developments in archival and records theory, there has been very little related development in practice. *Empowering the User* is looking to build on the good practice that does exist. In particular, it adopts the Australian series descriptive system. This abandons the organization as the basic descriptive unit in favour of series of records (a grouping of the same type of records, such as fashion catalogues, private ledgers or salary registers). [15] Each of these series can then be linked to the multiple contexts in which the records were created and used. Therefore, the fashion catalogues can be linked to the relevant store, or stores, if the ownership changed during the period for which catalogues are held, and to any particular designer or designers whose products are featured in the catalogue. For financial records, which can be very difficult to interpret for many users, clear links can be made between related series of records, making explicit the links between cash books, journals and ledgers.

Taking this to its logical conclusion, it allows the development of a finding aid across the records management and archival domains. Although not of great importance to the House of Fraser Archive at this time, the approach does not specifically exclude this for future development.

Whilst moving away from traditional descriptive practice, *Empowering the User* does put into practice the three international standards for archival description: General International Standard for Archival Description (ISAD(G)), International Standard Archival Authority Records for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR(CPF)) and International Standard for Describing Functions (ISDF). [16] ISAD(G) has been commonly adopted for

archival finding aids and there has been increasing use of ISAAR(CPF) to assist resource discovery, notably through the National Register of Archives, hosted by The National Archives. ISDF is still an emerging standard, and so *Empowering the User* is one of the first cataloguing projects to encompass all these standards. The structure of the House of Fraser Archive finding aid — a series of separate, but linked, descriptions, allows each of the standards to be implemented fully.

Exploiting Technology

Whilst there has been great progress in the development of online archival finding aids over the last decade, this push has not fully embraced technological advances. The benefits brought by the development of online finding aids, which include the ability to share data and reach much wider audiences than previously possible, are undoubted. However, these finding aids are simply electronic versions of paper lists. They are searchable, with centralized databases such as Access to Archives and the Scottish Archive Network allowing a single search to operate across numerous archival collections held across multiple archive services. [17] However, the finding aids to which they provide access remain a static representation of the archive within a single context. Given the range of technologies which have developed in the same decade, archivists have an opportunity to be imaginative and harness these technologies to deliver finding aids which not only overcome the deficiencies of traditional catalogues, but also improve their usefulness for users and records professionals.

Empowering the User sets out to exploit technological advances, moving away from a single searchable database to allow links across separate descriptive components and interaction with users by exploiting web 2.0 technologies. The exploitation of wiki technology has recently been taken up by The National Archives, through its Your Archives section. [18] Your Archives, as with *Empowering the User*, is an attempt to exploit technological advances to engage with users.

Engaging with Archive Users

The final, and arguably the most important, point of reference for *Empowering the User* is the need to engage with the users of archives. A consequence of archival descriptive practices to date has been that they are developed from the archivist's perspective. An archivist catalogues the records, arranging and describing them in a way in which he, or she, believes that will facilitate use by users. Once completed, there are few resources to update catalogues on any major scale, with these resources being focused on cataloguing uncatalogued collections, or providing access to these archives. Again, this approach has served archivists and users fairly well for many years; however, it is not without its flaws. Many users may find archival catalogues difficult to interpret, with lots of information to sift through before locating the appropriate resources. With a set of unfamiliar archival terms to assimilate, many users require assistance to use archival finding aids, both online and in the searchroom. This approach to cataloguing is based upon the premise that in managing the archive, the archivist is the person with most knowledge about the archive, the organization or individual which brought it together, and the records themselves. This premise is clearly false. Archivists must, and do, seek assistance from the relevant professionals and experts to interpret, understand and catalogue records, particularly technical records such as engineering records, drawings for ships, locomotives and other machinery, and financial records. However, once a finding aid is completed, there is little further interaction to improve the resources available for users.

The House of Fraser Archive is a particularly pertinent collection in relation to its usability. A fabulous resource, it is underused and undervalued. This must, in some part, be due to the finding aid not facilitating easy access to information about the resources contained within it. As stated above, the existing House of Fraser Archive catalogues are far from easy to use. An incomplete relisting project has resulted in two collection catalogues — with some records listed in both, others only in one, and a significant backlog remaining uncatalogued. Contextual information is limited, with the online top-level finding aid providing a brief

description of the companies' and stores' histories. There is little information to guide users through the collection or to give guidance on the information that the records contain. The Archive, if fully accessible, would appeal to a wide range of users, each with distinctive demands. Users encompass business, accounting and fashion historians, through gun enthusiasts and devotees of particular designers, to genealogists whose ancestors worked for or shopped at the stores. A single, static finding aid will either favour the needs of one group of users, or be inadequate in meeting the needs of all of them. By providing a flexible finding aid, users will be able to pick and choose the bits of the catalogue that are of interest to them and of use to their research.

Through the exploitation of technology, *Empowering the User* is offered the opportunity of benefiting from the knowledge of our users. On completing their research, or simply from their existing knowledge, users will be able to share their knowledge by updating, revising and adding to the finding aid. It is inevitable that users will discover that the existing descriptions are not as full as they could be, or that they are incorrect, misleading or unclear. Through the online finding aid, they will be able to submit information to improve or correct the catalogue. They may also wish to submit additional contextual information about an individual or organization connected with the House of Fraser. This could be information about a particular designer whose goods were sold through House of Fraser stores, or about a user's grandmother who worked as a buyer.

As highlighted above, this is an approach which has been adopted by The National Archives. It allows users to connect with archives in a new way, and helps to develop a community of users who can benefit from each other's research and experience.

The New Approach

Fulfilling the demands of these different drivers is a challenging task. However, by drawing on best practice and the relevant international descriptive standards, we are confident of going a considerable way to meeting our aims. The flexible, dynamic House of Fraser Archive finding aid will launch in summer 2009–10. [19] It will be a dramatic shift for users who are used to existing archive catalogues in the United Kingdom.

As highlighted above, *Empowering the User* has abandoned the idea of a single structure for the description of an archival collection. The House of Fraser finding aid will be structured around five separate descriptive components: companies, people, functions, activities and the records themselves. These five separate components and the ability to make unlimited links between them to highlight the multiple provenances of the record, allow the development of a fully flexible, dynamic catalogue.

By focusing on each of these aspects individually, *Empowering the User* aims not only to provide fuller descriptions of each component but also to make explicit the connections between each of the components. Traditionally, functions and activities have been overlooked in archival finding aids, as have individuals within organizations. *Empowering the User* builds upon the work started with the Gateway to the Archives of Scottish Higher Education to allow for the representation of multiple functions, activities, organizations and individuals in archival finding aids. [20]

For the House of Fraser Archive, one of the greatest benefits will be a clear representation of the shifting ownership structure of each of the stores. With over two hundred stores and management structures including Harrods, House of Fraser and House of Fraser divisions, the ownership structure is highly complex. Each company description will provide details of the related companies, whether earlier or later, superior or subordinate, and link to the descriptions of these companies. As an example, Dickins and Jones, based on Regent Street until the early 2000s, began trading as Dickins and Jones in the nineteenth century. In 1901, it was incorporated as Dickins and Jones Ltd, and subsequently taken over by Harrods in 1914. As part of the Harrods group, it shared its Chairman with D. H. Evans. It remained within the Harrods group after the takeover by House of Fraser in 1959 before it subsequently transferred fully to the House of Fraser group. A complex history, the links made possible by the new approach allows users to investigate this history as much or as little as they wish.

The ability to link the same type of record across the Archive is another important advantage for users. For those users who are simply interested in a particular type of record, for example price lists or salary registers, they will quickly be able to locate the holdings of these records across the entire Archive. A search for the term 'catalogue' on the online finding aid will bring results for those held for John Falconer & Co., Army and Navy Stores, Dallas's, Dickins and Jones and the many other stores represented in the Archive. Through the links made at the cataloguing stage between related records — records which have the same, or a similar purpose, but which are not identical — users are also given pointers to these records which may be of value to their research. The search on 'catalogues' may lead to descriptions of the price lists or advertising records which complement individual store's catalogues.

As highlighted above, *Empowering the User* has included descriptions of the House of Fraser's functions and activities in the online finding aid. This gives the user an additional two options for resource discovery. Searches can be carried out and an index browsed to find out all the records relating to a particular function, for example, advertising, financial management or staff management, for the House of Fraser as a whole, or individual stores. This means that the user does not have to have an understanding of the record keeping systems and terminology of the stores to locate the records of the type of activity they are interested in.

However, possibly the most useful resource for fashion and textile historians is the inclusion on the online finding aid of a product index. This index provides details of the products included in many of the catalogues and price lists held within the Archive. The most comprehensive product index covers the Army and Navy Stores Ltd price lists, themselves the most complete collection of price lists in the Archive. Comprising terms drawn from the UK Archival Thesaurus and the Library of Congress Thesaurus for Graphic Materials, the product index allows users to quickly ascertain if the catalogues and price lists in the Archive are of relevance to their research. [21] The product index can be searched and browsed independently through the online finding aid.

All of the search options — records, companies, people, functions and activities — are available through the online finding aid. A simple search is complemented by advanced searching and browsing options to ensure that users get the most benefit from the enhanced descriptions available. User testing has helped the project team to develop a clear web interface which provides guidance on the relevance of the search options available. With a large number of links possible between the records and the House of Fraser store, function, activity and people descriptions, it is essential that users are able to identify the information and records relevant to their research quickly and easily.

Conclusion

Empowering the User is an ambitious project which, if successful, could have a dramatic impact upon the way in which archival finding aids are developed and made available to users. By adopting existing good practice and taking steps to ensure that the developments in archival theory are implemented in archival descriptive practice, the project has developed a cataloguing method which is fit for describing the archives of today's complex organizations and which meets the needs of archival users.

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Fig. 1. Best of British Campaign at House of Fraser's Buchanan Street, Glasgow store, 1980. The House of Fraser Archive, House of Fraser Ltd; (HF84/16/20), *University of Glasgow Archive Services*.



Fig. 2. The Army & Navy Stores Ltd logo. The House of Fraser Archive, Army & Navy Stores Ltd; (HF6), University of Glasgow Archive Services.

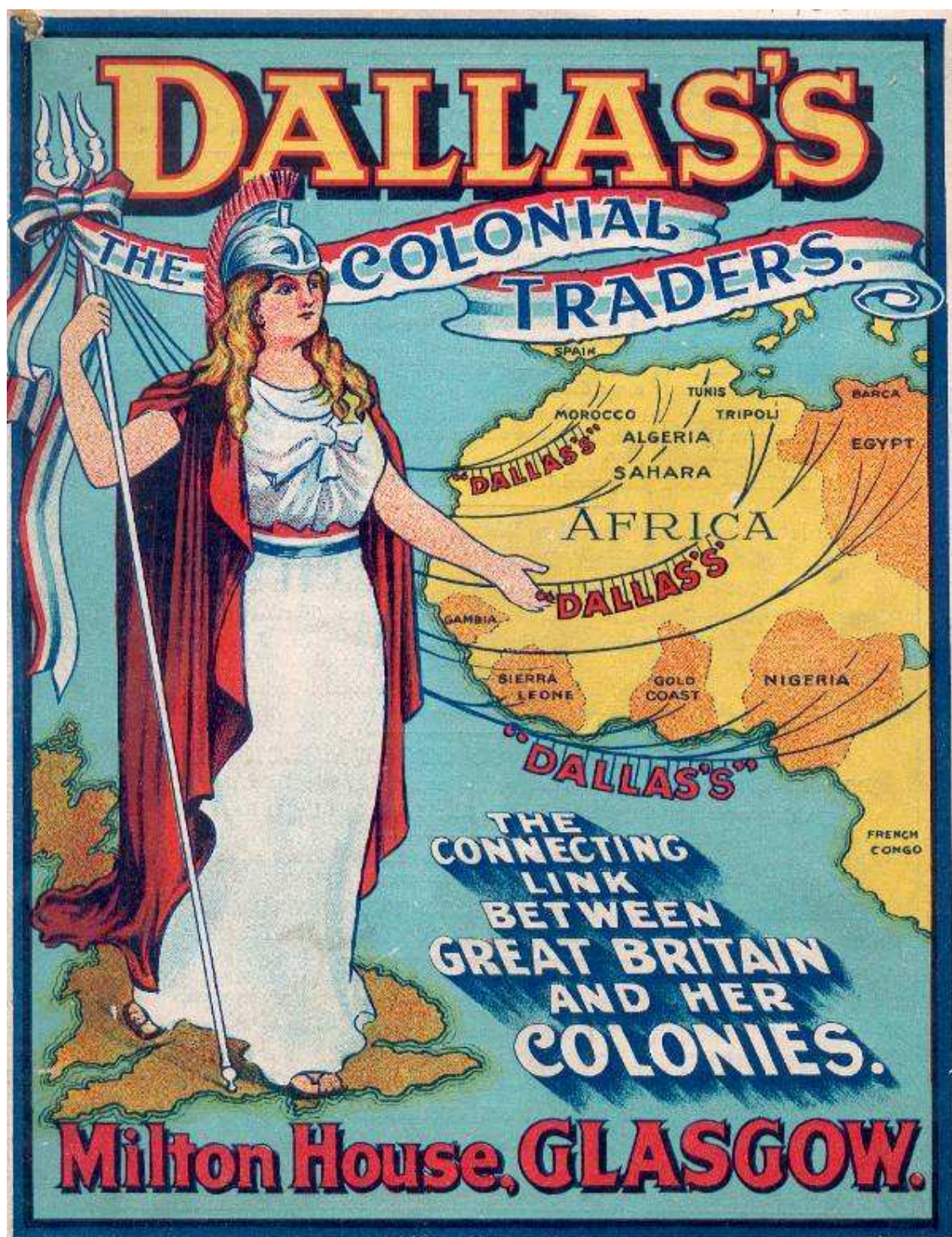


Fig. 3. Dallas's Colonial Price List, c1915. The House of Fraser Archive, Dallas's Ltd; (HF15/7/1/22), University of Glasgow Archive Services.