
The rudiments of bibliomania

Eric Glasgow

The author

Dr Eric Glasgow is a retired University Lecturer, from Southport, Lancashire, UK.

Keywords

Books, History, Libraries, United Kingdom

Abstract

This is a discursive essay about the exuberant cult of books as collectors' items, largely by devoted eccentrics in times when the book was king, as an agency of literacy and civilization. It relates to both national and regional figures, significantly "men only". It is consequently traditional and retrospective. Nevertheless, even in contemporary times of feminism and electronic information technology, the study of bibliomania may be instructive because the ultimate basis of printed books – their aesthetic appeal apart – is not so very different from that diverse continuum of factual and analytical data the basis of today's rapidly evolving IT. A brief account of the perhaps excessive devotion to books as printed artefacts by a few of the more picturesque and off-beat characters along the margins of the English past may prove of some relevance to today's librarians.

Book-collecting, as an addictive pursuit, clearly could not come before the introduction of printing into England by William Caxton (1422-1491), in the year 1477. He began by translating French books into English: a significant response to the European culture of those times. Later, in the shadow of Westminster Abbey, he poured out nearly a hundred books, many of them in folio, and most of them in the English tongue. Among them were Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, and translations of both Cicero and Aesop's *Fables*. He thus possessed, and effectively demonstrated, a huge missionary zeal for the dissemination of good works of literature among his countrymen, "in the English tongue". By so doing he also had the very practical aim of fixing the form of the English language for educated people, and formalizing the varied dialects that had previously existed. This definitely rendered English books, and English literature, at once a discernible and growing category, and so inaugurated the possibilities of the whole pursuit of book-collecting.

But it was scarcely before the eighteenth century in England – that historical era of patrician complacency and huge private residences – that book-collecting came into its own: perhaps because, previously, there had not been a lot to collect. This was emphatically the age of the great T.F. Dibdin (1775-1847), book-collector extraordinary and one of the founders of the Roxburghe Club. Almost inevitably, in the next century, Gladstone at Hawarden gave him much appreciation and attention. Dibdin was certainly a "bibliographical landmark" for his times. He epitomized the bookish attributes of the "English gentleman" of his spacious period, and he was the virtual creator and originator of the very term "bibliomania", which perhaps today we can generally use in approbation rather than in disapproval.

Dibdin, however, was by no means alone in the generation and the sustenance of this creative craze. Richard Heber (1773-1833) – brother of the famous hymn-writer Reginald Heber (1783-1826), Bishop of Calcutta – was another very dedicated English book-collector, who has left his enduring mark in the story of the pursuit. Both Dibdin and Heber belonged to the heyday of English book-collecting. As such, they drew in the young Cambridge scholar, C.H. Hartshorne (1802-1865). Educated at St John's College,

Cambridge, the latter first made a name for himself with his youthful studies of the Book Rarities of the University of Cambridge, carried out mainly in 1825, although not published until 1829.

Under the same inspiration, for bibliographical pursuits, Hartshorne undertook his mission to acquire books for the nascent library of the projected Ionian University at Corfu, in the period 1825–1926. It was in the service of Frederick North, fifth Earl of Guilford (1766–1827), a keen bibliophile who denuded the library of his London home – largely to the consternation of his immediate family – in order to provide the nucleus of the education in books of Greeks in Corfu. The enterprise did not last very long, and after the Earl's death in 1827 much of what had been sent out to Corfu came back to England. However, there can be no doubt about the intensity, and the dedication, of the “bibliomania” at that time of both Hartshorne and Lord Guilford. Both of them, indeed, revelled in the acquisition, at almost any price, of rare and costly books. Dibdin, in particular, fervently advised Hartshorne to cultivate his tastes for “Aldine editions in vellum”. Hartshorne had already studied the books printed by Caxton in the Pepysian Library at Cambridge.

Richard Heber was perhaps even closer to Hartshorne as a book-collector than Dibdin. It may indeed have been he who introduced Hartshorne to Dibdin. Heber, when he was known to Hartshorne, was already a celebrated book-collector, assiduous in his attendance at book-shops and auction rooms, and renowned for his generosity towards fellow enthusiasts. He was also a wealthy landowner, with estates in Hartshorne's native county of Shropshire. When Hartshorne went up to Cambridge, in 1821, he was already corresponding extensively with Heber. During his vacations while he was still at Cambridge, Hartshorne frequented London libraries and book-auctions, although he cannot, at that time, have possessed very much money.

As early as 1823 Hartshorne had demonstrated his bookish interests by completing a survey of the books in his College library. Twice, between 1823 and 1824, he personally escorted the great Dibdin on tours of the Library of St John's College, Cambridge. It was an apt and necessary preliminary for his more expansive duties as a book-hunter,

across Europe, for the Earl of Guilford.

Although eventually (in 1827–1828) Hartshorne became a clergyman of the Church of England, his initial intention – once he had “gone down” from Cambridge in 1825 – was either to settle with Lord Guilford in Corfu or to obtain a post with the British Museum in London. Both of these alternatives were clearly related to his youthful if rather abortive ventures into book-collecting, stimulated by both Dibdin and Heber.

Hartshorne never wrote an extended account of his foreign travels: his intended article on the “Ionian University”, for the *Quarterly Review*, was forestalled by Lord Guilford's death in 1827. He was not a particularly strong Greek nationalist. But his enthusiasm for books and manuscripts, particularly if they were in Greek, was fervent and pervasive. His general “bibliomania” – for such it could well be called – was back in England sustained and encouraged by Hartshorne's extensive associations with literary luminaries: including members of the Roxburghe Club, Lord Spencer, and high officials from the libraries of Oxford, Cambridge and London. He was even welcome at London's prestigious Athenaeum Club. In his mature career, as an Anglican clergyman, Hartshorne essentially relinquished his early fervours of “bibliomania”, although he published about local English antiquities. Indeed, he may well have consigned, by the time of his death at the age of 62 on 11 March 1865, his short, significant period of “bibliomania” (between 1823 and 1826) largely to the limbo of youthful extravagances. His books narrowly escaped a fire at Sotheby's premises on 29 June 1865. Happily, however, the bulk of them was saved, including Hartshorne's own annotated and extra-illustrated copy of the Book of Rarities of the University of Cambridge, which was first published in 1829. What was left of his library, at any rate, was sold at Sotheby's in August 1865. The prices were comparatively low: perhaps as a reflection of some damage by water as a direct result of the fire. It was rather a sad end of all Hartshorne's scholarly labours, and certainly a far cry from the confident beginnings of his “bibliomania” back in the period between 1823 and 1826.

Bibliomania therefore seems a constant and redeemable feature and quality, within the general fabric of English civilization. Although it was most demonstrable in

England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its roots went back very much further, into the literary essence of English life and character. Nor was it confined to London or to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (reputedly the “two eyes” of the Elizabethan state in England). For example, even in remote and provincial Manchester – somewhat benighted in Tudor times – the wealthy merchant, Humphrey Chetham (1580–1653), founded at his death “the oldest surviving public library in the UK”. Its residual building, today near the Cathedral, was purchased in 1654, the year after Chetham’s death, for the sum of £400. “Chetham’s Library” was originally intended to rival those of Oxford and Cambridge. It never quite succeeded in doing that. However, today it contains over 100,000 volumes, being particularly strong in the history and topography of the North-West of England. In 1996 it was invigorated by a generous grant from the proceeds of the National Lottery.

Typical of the Victorian dedication to books and learning, Manchester scholars and bibliophiles decided in 1843 to set up the prestigious Chetham Society, based in the library, for the publication of Lancashire antiquarian books. Although a galaxy of learned scholars was actively involved in the venture, from the point of view of book-collectors we can focus attention upon the personality of James Crossley, its President from 1847 until his death, 36 years later. For several generations he was one of the most familiar figures in the Manchester streets. “He had a kindly quaint face, surrounded by a broad-brimmed silk hat . . . He systematically excavated the bookstalls of Manchester”. He was a well-regarded Manchester resident for 34 years. He spent hours, particularly in his later years, poring over old texts in the Chetham Library, and surprisingly he refused to avail himself of spectacles, using instead a simple magnifying glass. His general practice was to purchase at least one book a day, so he built up a quite amazing private library. “He was probably the most voracious book collector that Manchester has ever known”. When he died in 1883, he left a vast and varied library, and he was grieved in his passing by his huge St Bernard dog. It was certainly a great loss for the Chetham Society, although it has survived, and developed as well in the course of the ensuing twentieth century.

Victorian England, of course, proliferated with ardent book-collectors. Gladstone, at Hawarden, set a good example when he gave 30,000 of his own books as the nucleus of his great foundation of St Deiniol’s Library (1894–1898). Even Disraeli, at his own Buckinghamshire home of Hughenden Manor – now a National Trust property – accumulated an extensive library, strong in artistic and decorative books. These books still seem to represent the tastes of a man who was both politician and novelist. In a letter to a friend, Disraeli wrote: “I have a passion for books and trees. I like to look at them. When I come down to Hughenden, I pass the first week in sauntering about my park and examining all the trees and then I saunter in the library and survey the books”. Such superficial allegiance to books, perhaps, his political rival Gladstone – away at Hawarden in North Wales – would scarcely have approved or applauded. His bookish pursuits were more earnest, such as his *Homeric Studies* published by the Oxford University Press in 1858.

Manchester, too, can return to this picture of bibliomania with the personage of John Rylands (1801–1888) whose wealth, made in the cotton trade, was largely expended by his widow in the creation of the famous John Rylands Library which was opened on 1 January 1900. Its nucleus was the timely purchase in 1892 of more than 40,000 choice volumes of early printed books from the Althorp Library of the second Earl Spencer in Northamptonshire. This was particularly strong in Greek and Latin classics. But it contained very few manuscripts, the interest being chiefly in early printed books. However, it has helped to render Manchester’s John Rylands Library a very conspicuous example – continuing into our own times – of the climax of the Victorian concerns for books and book-collecting.

Alas, perhaps, nowadays in England there seems to be far less room, or propensity, for the large private libraries of the Victorian period. It is a sad loss for our culture. “I fear that private libraries are disappearing and not being replaced. It is partly a result of reduced incomes, partly of the reduced size of houses. In the brave new world of the near future, our one-class society will be housed in small houses, where there is little room for bookshelves. And when the motor car and its petrol are paid for there will be little money

left over for books. Of course, the increase of public libraries and circulating libraries will be some compensation. But it will not fill the gap" (Trevelyan, 1945, p. 27).

Chambers' Journal for 5 February 1881 (pp. 85–87) has an interesting article on "Bibliomania", perhaps of some continuing relevance. At any rate, its remarks embody significantly what Victorians thought about the subject at the climax of their enthusiasm for book-collecting. It suggests, for example, that even public libraries in those times owed a lot of their initial generation to the essentially private activities of the bibliophiles. London's British Museum began on the basis of the collections of Sir Hans Sloane. The perishability of books – finely noticed by Gladstone – could and should be rectified by the new industry of "book renewal", first practised for the Cottonian collections in 1731.

The trade, even in imperfect copies, was then brisk and lucrative. Many collectors acquired two or even three copies of well-favoured books. "Book-collectors are occasionally generous in allowing less favoured brethren the use of their stores". Sir Walter Scott collected ancient Scottish ballads in which he took at Abbotsford, alongside the

Tweed, immense pride and interest. He would go to immense pains for their purchase, no matter how poor their condition or fragile their tangible promise. "The Bibliomaniac takes great delight in acquiring rare books cheaply if he can, but he will pay large sums of money for items that really interest him". Rare books were in 1881 already changing hands for hundreds or even thousands of pounds. What would collectors not pay for early Caxtons, or examples of the Aldine Classics. Whether collected for profit or for pleasure, such treasures of the book-collector constitute still enduring symbols of England's civilisation, which at any rate within the Victorian period remained firmly based upon the "culture of the book". Nor does it seem to be at all necessary for us to give up entirely this very traditional loyalty to printed books, as in the end the definitions of humanism and civilisation, despite all our contemporary pressures from electronic devices, computers, fax machines and the like.

Reference

- Trevelyan, G.M. (1945), *History and the Reader*, National Book League Third Annual Lecture, London.