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## General works

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### A Descriptive Catalogue of the Medieval Manuscripts in the Library of Peterhouse, Cambridge

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When we think of catalogues of manuscripts, we usually imagine mediaeval illuminated and illustrated works. But in this instance, to quote: “Not many of the books contain extensive or important illumination, and this absence has been exacerbated by massive vandalism apparently mainly perpetrated in the late sixteenth century”. As a result, this gives the collection, and its catalogue, a particular interest and value. What we see here is a catalogue of a working library for scholars, with few rare or unique texts but comprising titles for a university curriculum of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: works of Aristotle (in Latin) and of Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus and John Duns Scotus, among others. Commentaries on the texts are also featured.

Founded in 1384, the Peterhouse Library expanded through donations: very few books were actually purchased and only three of the survivors were bought by the College. Although records of the Library, especially in its earlier years, are “opaque”, there is considerable information about previous owners. Two hundred and seventy-seven surviving manuscripts are detailed in the catalogue, together with around 300 fragments in, or removed from, the bindings of early printed books. The detailed information presented in this catalogue allows an intriguing picture of a mediaeval, scholarly working library.

This itself is a work of meticulous and detailed scholarship. The introduction explains all the background that emerges on the history of the library, its contents and its donors. At one stage, this was a chained library and the catalogue notes individual cases where marks of chaining are to be found. Previous work on catalogues of the Library

are noted and discussed, in particular, that of an earlier catalogue by M.R. James (James 1899): “This was one of James’ earliest descriptive catalogues and was of books that he liked least – law and scholastic theology – and so show signs of impatience”.

The entries themselves are detailed and comprehensive and all consistent in contents and layout. Following the heading of each book, with its origin and century, is its structure described in detail: from number and size of leaves, through collation to binding, with notes on appearance where relevant (for example, the use of rulings). Contents are listed in detail, beginning with any blank or introductory folios before stating authors and titles of works included, as well as the folios where they feature. Hands are described, for example, “Written in low-grade gothic rotunda book-hand. Annotated by John Warkworth and others” (No.166). Decorations are noted and, where appropriate, described. A history of each book gives details of inclusion in previous catalogues, names of donors and any other relevant information. A bibliography gives references to entries in previous catalogues or other published sources.

Supplementing the introduction and the catalogue itself are a list of abbreviations and two indexes. The abbreviations list is a very comprehensive, seven-page list of works consulted and quoted. The indexes are to manuscripts and printed books (listed by their institutional locations) and a general index of names and titles. A set of colour plates at the end of the volume contains 113 illustrations: of bindings (1-6), of text extracts (7-87), of decoration and illumination (88-109) and four of surviving features of the fifteenth century library.

Professor Thomson is Professor Emeritus of Medieval History at the University of Tasmania, and his catalogue is the result of annual visits to Peterhouse College between 2012 and 2015. He has also previously published catalogues of the mediaeval manuscripts of Merton College and Corpus Christi College, Oxford. As well as being a work of outstanding, detailed scholarship – that scholarship worn deceptively lightly – this is also the most handsome, large, quarto volume, appropriately and clearly designed and beautifully printed. All in all, this is not only a fascinating, detailed insight into a mediaeval working library and its contents, but also a handsome volume reflecting well on the author, publisher and subject.

**Stuart James**

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## Reference

James, M.R. (1899), *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Peterhouse*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.



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