Here beginneth the Prologue to a Treatise upon the Love of Books, which is called Philobiblon.

To all the faithful in Christ, to whom the tenor of this present writing may descend, Richard de Bury, by divine commiseration Bishop of Durham, wisheth eternal health in the Lord, as also to present a pious memorial of himself before God, while he yet liveth, and likewise after his decease.

The invincible king, psalmist, and greatest of prophets, most devoutly asks, “What can I render to the Lord for all that he hath conferred upon me?” In which most grateful question he recognizeth in himself the willing retributer, the multifarious debtor, and the most soundly discerning counsellor; agreeing with Aristotle, the prince of philosophers, who proves the whole question about things practicable, to be deliberate choice.—Ethics, B. 3 & 6. Truly, if
so admirable a prophet having a fore-knowledge of divine secrets, was willing thus earnestly to premeditate upon the manner in which he might acceptably return gifts by thanks, what more worthily shall we, who are rude thankers and most eager receivers, laden with infinite divine benefactions, be able to resolve upon? Without doubt, in anxious deliberation and increased circumspection, the septiform Spirit being first invoked, so that an illuminating fire may burn in our meditation, we ought most attentively to look forward to the unbeaten way in which the Dispenser of all things would willingly be reciprocally venerated on account of his gifts conferred upon us. Let our neighbour be relieved of his burthen, and the guilt daily contracted by our sins be redeemed by the remedy of alms.

Forewarned, therefore, by admonition of this devotion, by him who alone anticipates and perfects the good will of man (without whom no sufficiency of thinking in any way suggests itself, of whom we doubt not is the reward for whatever good we shall have done), we have diligently discussed within ourselves, and also inquired of others, which amongst the duties of the various kinds of piety might be in the first degree pleasing to the Most High, and best promote the Church militant. And behold a herd of outcast
rather than of elect scholars meets the views of our contemplation, in whom God the artificer, and Nature his handmaid, have planted the roots of the best morals and most celebrated sciences. But the penury of their private affairs so opposes them, being opposed by adverse fortune, that the fruitful seeds of virtue, so productive in the un-exhausted field of youth, unmoistened by their wonted dews, are compelled to wither. Whence it happens, as Boetius says, that bright virtue lies hid in obscurity, and the burning lamp is not put under a bushel, but is utterly extinguished for want of oil. Thus the flowery field in spring is plowed up before harvest; thus wheat gives way to tares, the vine degenerates to woodbine, and the olive grows wild and unproductive. The slender beams which might have grown into strong pillars of the Church entirely decay. Men, endowed with the capacity of a subtle wit, relinquish the schools of learning, violently repelled by the sole envy of a stepmother from the nectarous cup of philosophy, having first tasted of it, and by the very taste become more fervently thirsty. Fitted for the liberal arts, and equally disposed to the contemplation of Scripture, but destitute of the needful aid, they revert, as it were, by a sort of apostasy, to mechanical arts solely for the sake of food, to the impoverishment of the
Church, and the degradation of the whole clerical profession. Thus the mother Church conceiving sons, is compelled to miscarry, if indeed some monstrous misshapen abortion is not torn from her womb; and instead of the few and the smallest with which she is by nature contented, she sends forth egregious bantlings, and finally promotes them as the athlete and champions of the faith. Alas, how quickly the web is cut up, while the hand of the weaver is yet at work! How soon the sun is eclipsed in the clearest sky, and the progressing planet becomes retrograde! How suddenly the meteor, exhibiting the nature and appearance of a real star, falls down; for it is formed from below. What can the pious man more pitifully behold? What can more keenly penetrate the bowels of compassion? What more readily dissolve a heart, though hard as an anvil, into the warmest tears?

Arguing further on the contrary side, let us call to mind from the events of former times, how greatly it profited the whole Christian republic, not indeed to enervate students by the luxuries of Sardanapalus, nor yet by the riches of Croesus, but rather to support the poor in scholastic mediocrity. How many have we seen, how many have we collected from writings, who, not being distinguished by brilliancy of birth, nor boasting of hereditary succession, but supported alone by
the piety of just men, have deserved the Apostolic Chair, and most honourably presided over its faithful subjects, have subjected the necks of the proud and exalted, to the ecclesiastical yoke, and easily procured the liberty of the Church!

Wherefore, taking a thorough survey of human wants, with a view of charitable consideration for this obscure class of men, in whom, however, such great hopes of advantage to the Church are felt, the bent of our compassion has peculiarly predisposed us to offer our pious aid; and not only to provide them with necessary food, but, what is more, with the most useful books for study. For this purpose, most acceptable to the Lord, our unwearied attention hath already been long upon the watch. This ecstatic love hath indeed so powerfully seized upon us, that, discharging all other earthly pursuits from our mind, we have alone ardently desired the acquisition of books. That the motive of our object, therefore, may be manifest as well to posterity as to our contemporaries, and that we may, in so far as it concerns ourselves, for ever close the perverse mouths of talkers, we have drawn up a little treatise, in the lightest style indeed of the moderns (for it is ridiculous in rhetoricians to write pompously when the subject is trifling), which treatise will purge the love we have had for books from
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excess, will advance the purpose of our intense devotion, and will narrate in the clearest manner all the circumstances of our undertaking, dividing them into twenty Chapters. But because it principally treats of the Love of Books, it hath pleased us, after the fashion of the ancient Latins, fondly to name it by a Greek word Philobiblon.

Here endeth the Prologue.
CHAPTER I.

On the Commendation of Wisdom, and of Books in which Wisdom dwelleth.

The desirable treasure of wisdom and knowledge, which all men covet from the impulse of nature, infinitely surpasses all the riches of the world; in comparison with which, precious stones are vile, silver is clay, and purified gold grains of sand; in the splendour of which, the sun and moon grow dim to the sight; in the admirable sweetness of which, honey and manna are bitter to the taste. The value of wisdom decreaseth not with time; it hath an ever-flourishing virtue that cleanseth its possessor from every venom. O celestial gift of divine liberality, descending from the Father of light to raise up the rational soul even to heaven! Thou art the celestial alimony of intellect, of which whosoever eateth shall yet hunger, and whoso drinketh shall yet thirst; a harmony rejoicing the soul of the sorrowful, and never in any way decomposing the hearer. Thou art the moderator and the rule of morals, operating according to which, none will err. By thee kings reign, and lawgivers decree justly. Through thee, the rusticity of nature being cast off, wits and tongues
being polished, and the thorns of vice utterly eradicated, the summit of honour is reached; and they become fathers of their country and companions of princes, who, without thee, might have forged their lances into spades and plowshares, or perhaps have fed swine with the prodigal son. Where then, most potent, most longed-for treasure, art thou concealed? and where shall the thirsty soul find thee? Undoubtedly, indeed, thou hast placed thy desirable tabernacle in books, where the Most High, the Light of light, the Book of Life hath established thee. There then all who ask receive, all who seek find thee, to those who knock thou openest quickly. In books cherubim expand their wings, that the soul of the student may ascend and look around from pole to pole, from the rising to the setting sun, from the north and from the sea. In them the Most High incomprehensible God himself is contained and worshiped. In them the nature of celestial, terrestrial and infernal beings is laid open. In them the laws by which every polity is governed are decreed, the offices of the celestial hierarchy are distinguished, and tyrannies of such demons are described as the ideas of Plato never surpassed, and the chair of Crato never contained.

In books we find the dead as it were living; in books we foresee things to come; in books warlike
affairs are methodized; the rights of peace proceed from books. All things are corrupted and decay with time. Saturn never ceases to devour those whom he generates; insomuch that the glory of the world would be lost in oblivion if God had not provided mortals with a remedy in books. Alexander the ruler of the world; Julius the invader of the world and of the city, the first who in unity of person assumed the empire in arms and arts; the faithful Fabricius, the rigid Cato, would at this day have been without a memorial if the aid of books had failed them. Towers are razed to the earth, cities overthrown, triumphal arches mouldered to dust; nor can the King, or Pope be found, upon whom the privilege of a lasting name can be conferred more easily than by books. A book made, renders succession to the author: for as long as the book exists, the author remaining abaxaros, immortal, cannot perish; as Ptolemy witnesseth in the Prologue of his Almagest, he (he says) is not dead, who gave life to science.

What learned scribe, therefore, who draws out things new and old from an infinite treasury of books, will limit their price by any other thing whatever of another kind? Truth overcoming all things, which ranks above kings, wine and women, to honour which above friends obtains the benefit of sanctity, which is the way that deviates not, and
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the life without end; to which the holy Boetius attributes a threefold existence, in the mind, in the voice, and in writing, appears to abide most usefully and fructify most productively of advantage in books. For the truth of the voice perishes with the sound. Truth latent in the mind, is hidden wisdom and invisible treasure; but the truth which illuminates books desires to manifest itself to every disciplinable sense, to the sight when read, to the hearing when heard: it, moreover, in a manner commends itself to the touch, when submitting to be transcribed, collated, corrected and preserved. Truth confined to the mind, though it may be the possession of a noble soul, while it wants a companion and is not judged of, either by the sight, or the hearing, appears to be inconsistent with pleasure. But the truth of the voice is open to the hearing only, and latent to the sight (which shows us many differences of things fixed upon by a most subtle motion, beginning and ending as it were simultaneously). But the truth written in a book, being not fluctuating, but permanent, shows itself openly to the sight, passing through the spiritual ways of the eyes, as the porches and halls of common sense and imagination; it enters the chamber of intellect, reposes itself upon the couch of memory, and there congenerates the eternal truth of the mind.