INTRODUCTION

DEFINITION OF A BOOK-COLLECTOR

Take care not to understand editions and title-pages too well.
LORD CHESTERFIELD

Bibliophiles, an idiotic class. A. E. HOUSMAN

A. W. POLLARD once[1] defined book-collecting as 'the bringing together of books which in their contents, their form or the history of the individual copy possess some element of permanent interest, and either actually or prospectively are rare, in the sense of being difficult to procure. This qualification of rarity [he continued], which figures much too largely in the popular view of book-collecting, is entirely subordinate to that of interest, for the rarity of a book devoid of interest is a matter of no concern. On the other hand, so long as a book (or anything else) is and appears likely to continue to be easily procurable at any moment, no one has any reason for collecting it. The anticipation that it will always be easily procurable is often unfounded; but so long as the anticipation exists it restrains collecting, with the result that Horn-books are much rarer than First Folio Shakespeares.'

In the course of the same admirable article (at once, *more suo*, learned and humane) Pollard noted that while by the end of the seventeenth century book-collecting was in full swing all over Europe and much of its elementary apparatus already in existence —book-auctions, for instance, were introduced to England from Holland before 1680—it was 'rather as an added grace in the formation of a fine library than as a separate pursuit'. And it is precisely the isolation of the special quality which distinguishes book-collecting from discrimination or good taste exercised in the formation of a library, that I have looked for in vain among the histories and handbooks. Enthusiasts and critics, *illuminati* and

[1] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. 'Book-Collecting'.

philistines, alike habitually speak and write about book-collecting as if its essential nature were perfectly well understood and its practitioners as clearly definable as pharmaceutical chemists or officers of the Royal Navy. This is not so. Yet if we are to consider book-collecting practically as well as historically, we must surely give some thought to what we mean by the term. We must decide which mere accumulators of books we shall exclude altogether, which library-formers qualify and which do not, which specialists we shall relegate to the annex; where, in short, we shall draw the line.

In some, bibliophily is induced by circumstances, for others it is contagious, in others again it is a natural by-product or development from the process of forming a library. No one, I think, would contend that book-collectors are born rather than made. Hereditary bibliophily is of the rarest occurrence in history,[1] and the exceptions are so pitifully few that even Mendel would have labelled them as sports rather than as instances of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. On the other hand, a collector cannot be made, whether by his own or another's effort, out of unsuitable material, any more than silk purses can be made out of sows' ears. There is undoubtedly a greater tendency for book-collecting to take root and flourish in persons of studious or reflective temper than among pugilists or aviators; and certain professions, like surgery and the law, seem especially favourable to it. But even were there not in fact numerous examples of its luxuriant growth among men of action and of affairs (and we need not look beyond the confines of Cambridge to find an outstanding one in the late Lord Keynes), this is rather a question of soil and cultivation than of the seed itself. And if we are trying to define the book-collector, we must look first for his motive source.

Mr Harold Nicolson recently[2] maintained that there is no such thing as the 'collector's instinct', a phrase worn threadbare in extenuation of many aimless as well as many purposeful accumulative activities; and although he was writing as an admittedly

[1] This is perhaps less absolutely true in France than in England or America, and even in England we must not forget the Thorolds and the Earls of Crawford.

[2] *Spectator*, 7 February 1947. Mr Nicolson has since, I am glad to say, suffered a partial conversion.

hostile witness, blind to the charm of original boards and openly contemptuous of philately, he was in this contention surely perfectly correct. Magpies have an acquisitive instinct, and a similarly indiscriminate passion for accumulating junk afflicts one in a hundred of the human race. But that is not what we mean by a collector. The competitive spirit, which is a normal and unexceptionable characteristic of the book-collector *vis-à-vis* other book-collectors, is certainly a very common, if not a universal, human instinct; and I am inclined to think that this factor, by an illegitimate extension of the ingredient to the whole, may account for the prevalence of a phrase which not only has an apologetic sound—as who should say 'he was cross-eyed from birth, poor fellow'—but also promotes an erroneous conception of the nature of the book-collector.

Mr Nicolson makes another point which bears, though less directly, on our quest for a definition. He maintains that bibliophiles suffer from the consciousness of being a minority, even a persecuted minority, and that this causes them to adopt, in respect of their propensity, a generally defensive attitude toward the rest of the world. Again, and regretfully, I think he is right. Moreover, I suspect that to the intrinsic difficulty of defining a particularly elusive sentiment or motive has often been added a disinclination to expose any such definition to public scrutiny, for fear of public ridicule. For many a true bibliophile regards bibliophily as in some sense a mystery,[1] not only too complicated but also too delicate, almost too sacred, to make its exposition to the uninitiated anything but painful. It is in the same spirit that he sometimes hesitates to show his books to strangers, and this by no means entirely (as is often supposed) because he is sure they will drop them or spill whisky over them. It is always instructive to watch a collector's face when he has handed some treasure to a visitor: one who has expressed interest, who may even have come well recommended, but who is not certainly known to be initiate. For a man's handling of a book is as instantly revealing to the experienced eye as his grasp on the reins of a horse.

[1] See, for instance, Richard Curle, *Collecting American First Editions* (1930), p. 212, and John Drinkwater, in his preface to vol. IV of the *Ashley Catalogue*.

This diffidence, this tendency to distrust, in the matter of book-collecting, anyone not himself a collector, and the resultant cliquishness—these are all regrettable. They are also, I submit, irrational and unnecessary. Society is composed of minorities, so that book-collectors have plenty of company in that respect: and though gardeners may tend, like any other technicians, to talk shop very happily when they find themselves in company with others of their kind, I doubt whether they have been accused (as Mr Nicolson accused book-collectors) of emitting a distinctive note or of showing signs of minority-consciousness. Book-collecting can, and occasionally does, degenerate into bibliomania,[1] which, like any other mania, makes for better stories than the doings of sane men. Such quirks may sometimes need explanation: but to regard them as needing excuse is to admit, mistakenly, that they are normal. We have, it is true, been dogged for years by certain general misconceptions, such as that bibliophiles never read their books,[2] but acquire them out of intellectual snobbery or for the pleasure of inspiring a fellow-bibliophile with envy; and by certain particular misconceptions, like the confusion between the terms 'uncut' and 'unopened', which seem to support the accusation of illiteracy. Indeed, the justification for accumulating in the Folger Library about eighty copies of the *First Folio*, or in the Library of the University of Illinois more than fifty first editions of *Paradise Lost*, is not immediately apparent to the layman and may need some exposition even to a collector. Yet here what seems to be senseless greed can be shown to have a scholarly motive. In general, however, if the debt which literature and history owe to bibliography is now generally recognised, as it is, so also is (and might be more generally if all collectors held their heads up) the debt which all three owe to book-collecting.

Many scholars have borne witness to this debt. I shall cite only two examples. 'It is by the zeal of collectors', says A. W. Pollard,[3]

[1] About which Holbrook Jackson has written a book as rich in plums (and as indigestible in large helpings) as a Christmas pudding: *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* (1930, revised edition 1932).

[2] 'When Locker-Lampson complained to Bedford that a book which he had bound for him did not shut properly, Bedford exclaimed, *Why bless me, sir, you've been reading it!*' Jackson, op. cit. (1932 ed.), p. 719.

[3] Loc. cit.

'that books which otherwise would have perished from neglect are discovered, cared for and preserved, and those who achieve these results certainly deserve well of the community.' And Professor F. A. Pottle, in the preface to the work[1] in which he classically demonstrated the dependence of biography upon the bibliographer, has this to say of those on whom bibliographers in their turn depend: 'I have the greatest respect for [dealers and collectors], and I consider that the scholar of today who makes remarks about "mere collectors" is talking nonsense. Our science of bibliography would be sadly hampered, indeed, were it not for the generous and largely disinterested service which private collectors perform by buying and putting freely at our disposal books which our public libraries cannot or will not purchase.' In return, the attitude of the collector towards scholarship could hardly be more delightfully expressed than in the note[2] which Thomas Hollis, a great book-collector and a great patron of learning, wrote in a book he was presenting to Harvard: 'A fine copy of a rare work. It cost a guinea. T.H. is fond of sending Lexicons and Grammars to Harvard College, in honor of those *first-rate* Scholars, possibly half a dozen, the noblest of all men, who, he trusts, are now forming there.' Conscious of beneficence, proud of the quality of his gift, Hollis's 'fondness' was based on a trust in scholarship which events have abundantly justified.

From the days when George Thomason collected and preserved, as they came out, every ephemeral pamphlet and tract of the Civil War period in England to the bequest to Princeton of the Parrish collection of Victorian fiction, the gift of the Andrew Young collection to Cambridge, or the depositing in the British Museum of the late Mr Barry Ono's collection of 'penny dreadfuls', the history of book-collecting is a record of service by book-collectors —a service performed sometimes deliberately, sometimes unconsciously—to the republic of letters. The book-collector is in fact one of the assault troops in literature's and history's battle against the inequity of oblivion. 'The pulping-mill', wrote W. Carew Hazlitt,[3]

[1] *The Literary Career of James Boswell* (Oxford, 1929), p. xvii.
[2] Quoted in the *Harvard Library Bulletin*, vol. I, no. I (1947), p. 53.
[3] *The Book-Collector* (1904), p. 18.

'has been as busy as the Press all these centuries on which we look back. It has neither eyes nor ears, nor has it compassion; it unrelentingly grinds and consumes all that comes in its way; age after age it has reduced to dust what the men of the time refuse in the presence of something newer, and, as they hold, better.' From Archbishop Parker and Robert Cotton to our own time, collectors, whether the professionals in the institutional libraries or the amateurs who are our present concern, have been preservers of books and essential contributors to the progress of scholarship.

Their technique has been well described by a now old-fashioned but still respectable authority, John Hill Burton.[1] 'It is', he says, 'the general ambition of the class to find value where there seems to be none, and this develops a certain skill and subtlety, enabling the operator, in the midst of a heap of rubbish, to put his finger on those things which have in them the latent capacity to become valuable and curious. The adept will at once intuitively separate from its friends the book that either is or will become curious. And there must be something more than mere rarity to give it this value.' Note the words '*or will become* curious'; for it was then and is still one of the collector's most significant functions to anticipate the scholar and the historian, to find some interest where none was recognised before, to rescue books from obscurity, to pioneer a subject or an author by seeking out and assembling the raw material for study, in whatever its printed form. It is a very easy matter nowadays to find a *First Folio* or a first edition of Johnson's *Dictionary* and a man needs neither imagination nor persistence to possess himself of a copy of either: all he needs is a cheque-book. Similarly it was very easy to stand an egg on end after Columbus showed how it was done. But as Mr Sadleir[2] put it, rather more pithily than Burton: 'In nature the bird who gets up earliest catches the most worms, but in book-collecting the prizes fall to birds who know worms when they see them.'

[1] *The Book-Hunter* (1862), p. 209.
[2] Michael Sadleir, 'Decentralisation or Deadlock', in *The Colophon* (New York), no. 3 (1930).

Yet all these factors and qualities are equally applicable to a good institutional librarian with money behind him or to any man who brings 'an added grace to the formation of a fine library'. In search of what Pollard called the 'separate pursuit' of book-collecting, we must go deeper. For while it is true that an original edition in original state can tell the bibliographer, and perhaps through him the historian or critic, something about the book and its author which could not be learned from a rebound copy or a later edition, the fact remains that a poor copy, which he can bend in half or even pull apart if he needs to, will serve his purpose at least as well as, and probably better than, a fine one. But it is the latter and not the former that the collector desires. If he is a collector of fine printing, or of fine bindings, or of illustrated books, his insistence on the highest attainable quality in the objects of his pursuit hardly needs explanation, let alone extenuation. But the first editions of *King Lear* or *The Pilgrim's Progress*, of *The Dunciad* or *Wuthering Heights*, are conspicuously lacking in physical appeal to the uninitiated eye; and it is crucial to our quest for the definition of the book-collector *pur sang* to consider why (*a*) he so passionately wants one of those books in its original edition at all, and (*b*) why he attaches so much importance to its being bibliographically correct in all material points of edition and issue and in as nearly as possible the same physical condition as on the day it first appeared.

As a starting-point for this further narrowing down we may quote Pollard once more. 'To attract a collector,' he says, 'a book must appeal to his eye, his mind, or his imagination.' The appeal to the eye is, as we have already remarked, a motive which the layman can more readily understand, for in this respect the appreciation of books does not differ in kind, though it may in degree, from the appreciation of pictures or silver or porcelain. It is the way in which the collector's mind (or studious interests) and imagination (or heart) are engaged, and the means by which these express themselves, that bring us to grips with our problem. For it does not matter whether your affection is for the moment centred on Bacon's *Essays* or *Sherlock Holmes* or *Das Kapital*: you will express your affection, if you are a book-collector, by acquiring the original edition, however many later editions you

may need or possess for purposes of study. Similarly, if your interest is for the moment centred on the development of chancery italic types in the sixteenth century or on the economics of cheap fiction series in the nineteenth, its logical expression, if you are a collector as distinct from a researcher, is to seek out and possess yourself of every pertinent example you can hear of and lay hands on. As Dr Chapman has well put it:[1] 'It is admitted that literature and history cannot be adequately studied in modern books alone. Even if modern editions were adequate in the information they furnish—and notoriously they are not—they do not satisfy that Sense of the Past without which the study of literature and history is unimaginative and formal. That the student should have some access to originals is necessary for practical purposes, and necessary also for his spiritual health.'

The imagination and the mind cannot always be precisely separated, in book-collecting or elsewhere. But for simplicity's sake we will consider them as potentially distinct components of our equation, as is, more obviously, the eye. There is, however, an important further component to be added, and that is connoisseurship. For whereas the other three may be combined or may obtain in pairs or separately, some degree of connoisseurship or expertise is always present; it is in fact what the mathematicians call, I believe, a constant in the equation.

Some may think the word connoisseurship has a snobbish sound, and I would use a four-letter Saxon equivalent if such existed. All it means is the ability to distinguish good from bad, the significant from the commonplace, in the same kind, with some concomitant satisfaction in the exercise of that ability. An engineer who can tell a sound casting from a flawed one, a soldier who can tell a sniper from a tree-stump, a housewife who can tell under-cut from scrag-end, are all connoisseurs in that they apply some degree of skill, born of precept and observation, to a given problem in their own field. In a precisely similar sense, and with no more affectation whatsoever, does a man distinguish—with a preference for the best and experience as his guide—a vintage port from a non-

[1] R. W. Chapman, 'The Sense of the Past', in *The Book-Collector's Quarterly*, no. 3 (1930), p. 51.

vintage, a Rembrandt from a Bols or a pristine copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in the original boards from a rebound copy without the half-titles.

Whether the heart, the mind or the eye be the predominant factor in any individual collector's make-up; whether connoisseurship, or the application of technique, plays a large or a lesser part in his approach to his objective; there have been few bibliophiles who will not be found to conform to this general formula. For 'books are more than reading matter,' as A. J. A. Symons[1] observed, 'just as clothes are more than coverings. And just as clothes can have, over and above their purpose of covering, the two attributes of style and durability (cut and texture), so books may add either beauty of form, or what we may call interest of edition, to the text they hold.' The analogy between bibliophily and dandyism might well be explored further, for there is a distinct conformity between the plain calf or plain boards beloved of the fastidious collector and Sir Max Beerbohm's famous analysis of Brummell's supreme elegance—'certain congruities of dark cloth and a rigid perfection of linen'.

The book-collector, then, is not just an eccentric who prefers one edition to another for some ritually compulsive reason. He is not a man who says simply 'the old is better' or who thinks that rarity is an objective in itself. It is not even enough to say that he is a man who is not as well satisfied with a photographic reproduction of the original, or a roll of microfilm, or a well-edited verbatim reprint, as with the genuine article. He is rather a man (or of course a woman, though bibliophily, like dandyism, is less common among women) who has a reverence for, and a desire to possess, the original or some other specifically admirable, curious or interesting edition of a book he loves or respects or one which has a special place among his intellectual interests. And the book must be either in its original state or in some contemporary, associative or otherwise appropriate condition. Furthermore, he

[1] 'A Book-Collector's Apology', in *The Book-Collector's Quarterly*, no. 1 (1930), p. 51.

enjoys, with a degree of intensity which will vary according to his temperament, his training and the standards of his fellow-bibliophiles, that exercise of his natural and intellectual faculties which is involved in the application of knowledge, observation, ingenuity, foresight, enterprise and persistence to the pursuit of his quarry, its scrutiny and appraisal when found, its use and perhaps formal description when secured.

The objects of book-collectors' pursuit have always been of an infinite variety. Their own attitude, and that of the public, towards their collections has changed with changing tastes and conventions. The degree and direction of the connoisseurship applied to book-collecting—that is, method and skill as distinct from motive—have developed and will continue to develop. These evolutions of taste and technique during the past century are the subject of the following chapters. But the love of books for their own sake is much more than a mere hundred years old; and whether or not we are any nearer to defining a book-collector, we must recognise that certain aspirations and principles are fundamental to his nature and persist through the changing taste and practice of each succeeding generation.