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978-1-107-43814-9 - Taste and Technique in Book-Collecting: A study of Developments in  
Great Britain and the United States

John Carter

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TASTE & TECHNIQUE IN  
BOOK-COLLECTING

*The Sandars Lectures in Bibliography*  
1947

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# TASTE & TECHNIQUE IN BOOK-COLLECTING

*A study of recent developments in  
Great Britain and the  
United States*

BY

JOHN CARTER

SANDARS READER IN BIBLIOGRAPHY  
AND SOMETIME SCHOLAR OF  
KING'S COLLEGE,  
CAMBRIDGE



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AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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*To My Wife*

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## PREFACE

Τίς τίνοι ταῦτα λέγεις; says Paulus Silentiarius in one of the epigrams in the Palatine Anthology: who are you and to whom are you speaking? A critic has a duty<sup>1</sup> to present his credentials, as well as to define his terms of reference, before presuming on his readers' attention; and I shall do both as briefly as I can.

Except for the duration of the war, I have for the past twenty years earned my living in the rare book business, as European buying agent for an American firm. I was a book-collector for five years before that and have maintained one or two specialities since. I have also published some contributions to bibliographical and bibliophilic literature, as by-products of my work. But the following pages represent the reflexions not of a book-collector or a bibliographer or a man of letters, but of a professional dealer. Some readers may think that there is too much here about sales and the state of the market: but book-collecting means book-buying. Others may consider that I have over-estimated the influence of the bookseller in collecting history: but it is commonly underestimated and it can in some important respects hardly be exaggerated. Moreover, with the partial exception of Seymour de Ricci, who was a bibliographer first and a dealer second, I am the first member of the rare book trade to have been appointed Sandars Reader; and whatever my diffidence as the representative of a business in which I recognise my betters, it is one to which I am proud to belong and should be happy to do some credit.

My second obligation to my readers is to make quite clear what this book does and what it does not attempt to do. It is not a history of book-collecting. That is still to be written. I have quoted here and there from the historians and commentators, and my survey of the past century is inevitably cast in a roughly historical form. But many, and many important, names and collections and happenings

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (1938).

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find no place here because they seemed to me to have less bearing than others superficially less important on those developments of taste and technique which can be seen in retrospect to have influenced book-collecting as we know it today.

Furthermore, this study of the evolution and present state of book-collecting is restricted to Great Britain and the United States. I know that Continental collectors, bibliographers and booksellers have influenced the course of bibliophilic history, especially in the fields of early printing and illustration, of bindings and (more recently) of scientific and technical literature. But I am not competent to assess that influence; and fortunately it is primarily in the fields of their own literature and thought that the most significant recent developments in English and American collecting have lain. Early printed books were being collected in England before Dibdin was born: post-Elizabethan first editions were only just beginning to be collected when he died. I know also that a few English and American collectors have followed the French tradition, which has therefore had some influence in both countries. But its influence has been strictly limited, not only by the small number of its adherents but even more by its own rigid insularity both of taste and technique.

Finally, and perhaps most important, this is not a primer or a text-book or a manual for beginners, nor is it a piece of propaganda for book-collecting. There have been plenty of primers in the last fifty years, so that the novice is well cared for. And if my patron, Samuel Sandars, ever considered that book-collecting needed any propaganda, he surely would not have regarded his Readership as a suitable platform for it. But I believe that the essential nature of book-collecting, the play of cause and effect in its development, the evolution and also the rationale of our present technical approach to it, could all do with more thought than they sometimes receive. This book therefore, which is an attempt to analyse some of these aspects of book-collecting, inevitably takes a good deal for granted. I have not cluttered up my pages or slowed down my argument to explain the meaning of *incunabula* or cancels, of Strawberry Hill or *STC*, and anyone to whom such words need explanation should be warned now that he has the wrong book.

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Yet the fact that I have aimed at a thoughtful and a moderately knowledgeable audience does not mean that I consider myself an expert, for I do not. Nor does it mean that I do not cherish hopes that a somewhat philosophical treatise on book-collecting may be found of some interest to others besides addicts, for I do.

My third obligation, always a pleasant one, is to acknowledge my various debts. Something of what I owe to other writers is indicated by quotations in the text or by references to their works in the notes. But for assistance which is inevitably invisible to the reader I have to thank Mr F. S. Ferguson and Professor William A. Jackson, who scrutinised Chapters I–V; Mr Michael Sadleir, with whom Chapter XI was extensively discussed; and Messrs John Hayward, John Sparrow and Dudley Massey, from whose comments on the first draft the whole book has benefited greatly. I have also profited from the views of Mr Percy Muir, Mr A. N. L. Munby and Mr E. P. Goldschmidt on the final draft; Mr Goldschmidt's being all the more valuable to me for his amiable but profound disapproval of my whole treatment of my subject.

It is rightly considered superfluous to thank the Cambridge University Press for being either affable or efficient; but since its publisher and its printer are both old friends, I shall permit myself the pleasure of doing so.

In conclusion, two technical details require notice. The place of publication of any book referred to may be assumed to be London unless otherwise indicated. In citing collected books as examples of this and that, I am normally speaking of the original edition, and exceptions (e.g. the Jenson *Pliny* or the 1532 *Chaucer*) will be sufficiently obvious.

JOHN CARTER

21 July 1948