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Robert Harding Evans

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White Knights Library

The dispersal of the library amassed by George Spencer-Churchill (1766–1840), Marquess of Blandford and later fifth Duke of Malborough, is most commonly cited today as a preservative against folly. The collection contained some of the most sought-after incunabula of a period defined by the high prices paid for early printed books. It included a fine selection of Caxtons, spectacular botanical and emblem books, and the iconic Valdarfer Boccaccio – the first edition of the *Decameron*, purchased by Blandford in 1812 for the unprecedented sum of £2,260. The Boccaccio was symptomatic of the profligate expenditure of its buyer. By 1819 his spendthrift ways had ruined him, leading to the sale of his opulent estate at Whiteknights, near Reading, and the dispersal of one of the key libraries in the era of bibliomania. Reissued here together are the two parts of the auction catalogue, both annotated by an auction attendee who recorded details of the purchasers and the prices paid. Ed Potten, Head of Rare Books at Cambridge University Library, has provided a new introduction that places the catalogue in its wider context.

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[ISBN 9781108044912]

King, Thomas: *Bibliotheca Farmeriana* (1798) [ISBN 9781108065993]

Oates, J.C.T.: *Catalogue of the Fifteenth-Century Printed Books in the University Library, Cambridge* (2 vols., 1954) [ISBN 9781108008488]

Sayle, C.E.: *Early English Printed Books in the University Library, Cambridge*
(4 vols., 1900–7) [ISBN 9781108007818]

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Introduction

Ed Potten, Head of Rare Books,
Cambridge University Library

The library amassed by George Spencer-Churchill (1766–1840), Marquess of Blandford and later fifth Duke of Marlborough, is one of the behemoths of the bibliomania, but is now primarily remembered as an example of the folly of noble collectors. Blandford's activities at the 1812 sale of the library of John Ker, third Duke of Roxburghe, gained him a notoriety which has lasted centuries. The Roxburghe sale broke all records. For the first time at a British auction, books changed hands for more than £1,000, but the crowning glory of the sale was the epic contest between Blandford and George John, second Earl Spencer (1758–1834), for the iconic Valdarfer Boccaccio, the *editio princeps* of the *Decameron*. Blandford was the victor, paying the unheard-of sum of £2,260 for the then unique *Decameron*. The event was national news, and was immediately eulogised, hyperbolised and mythologised by Thomas Frognall Dibdin:

LORENZO: I can anticipate the *important article* in the favourite class of collection to which you bring us. The DECAMERON of BOCCACCIO!?

LISARDO: 'Tis bravely conjectured, my Lorenzo: yes ... when the hammer fell at *Two Thousand Two Hundred and Sixty Pounds* upon the VALDARFER BOCCACCIO of 1471, the spectators stood aghast! – and the sound of Mr. Evans's prostrate sceptre of dominion reached, and resounded from, the utmost shores of Italy. The echo of that fallen hammer was heard in the libraries of Rome, of Milan, and St. Mark. Boccaccio himself startled from his slumber of some five hundred years.¹

The price paid by Blandford caused outrage in some circles. *The Times* concluded:

We can only say that it is a lamentably erroneous way of indicating the love of learning, to give immense prices for rare or old editions, which do not even possess equal means of infusing knowledge with the modern or common ones. It would be a better testimony of a correct taste, to study useful, than to purchase scarce books.

Francis Douce, meanwhile, branded Blandford 'a mad collector of books who never reads them'.²

Blandford's extravagance in acquiring the Valdarfer Boccaccio was not an isolated event. His name appears frequently in the auction records of the period – often using his agent Triphook to bid to secure a rarity 'not known to Ames'³ – and his library contained some of the most sought-after incunabula of a period defined by the high

1 T.F. Dibdin, *Bibliographical Decameron* (London: 1817) vol. 3, pp.62–5.

2 K. Jensen, *Revolution and the Antiquarian Book* (Cambridge: 2012) p.129.

3 Not in J. Ames, *Typographical Antiquities: Being an Historical Account of Printing in England* (London: 1749). Ames' work was greatly supplemented by William Herbert and reissued in 1785–90.

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prices paid for pre-1501 books. He amassed a fine collection of Caxtons and other early English books, which included copies of the 1476 *Propositio ad Carolum ducem Burgundiae* (today recorded in only two copies), the 1490 *Art and Craft to Know Well to Die*, the 1483 *Pylgremage of the Sowle*, and the 1474 *Play of Chess*. The library also contained some impressive and significant manuscripts: a ninth-century *Evangelia*, two manuscripts of the tenth century, a Wycliffite Revelation and, perhaps its crowning glory, the Bedford Hours, secured by Blandford in 1815 from the library of James Edwards for £687 15s.⁴

The *Bibliotheca Blandfordiensis* was not Blandford's only extravagance; he was equally profligate in other spheres of life. In 1798 he purchased the estate of Whiteknights, Berkshire, from William Byam Martin, and over the ensuing twenty years poured money into redesigning the house, grounds and gardens. The mid-eighteenth-century house was redecorated and populated with paintings by Old Masters, Titian, Guido, Carracci, Tintoretto, Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Holbein, alongside the best and most fashionable British art by such figures as Gainsborough, Reynolds and Romney. The Grecian Room was typical:

admirably painted to represent verde antique columns of the Ionic order, upon a ground of Sienna marble. The chimney-piece, of white marble, is handsomely wrought ... The curtains, Ottomans, chaises longues, and chairs, are covered with a gold and silver Indian chintz. An upright piano forte, and a beautiful cabinet of the finest French China, correspond on each side of the first door, together with various stands, on which are placed noble jars of gilt Dresden China, silver filigree ornaments ... and most beautiful urns of alabaster, with bronze masks.⁵

The picturesque grounds, landscaped by Sir Henry Englefield in the 1780s, were transformed at huge cost to create a flower garden, a botanic garden, a Japanese garden and a 'Chantilly' garden, an imitation of that at Château de Chantilly. Blandford created an arboretum, a rosery, a vineyard and numerous woodland walks, turning the gardens at Whiteknights into 'the most renowned in Southern England'.⁶ Nor was Blandford shy of publicising his extravagance. Between 1812 and 1814 he paid for the production of a privately printed catalogue of his library,⁷ and in 1816 he commissioned the landscape painter Thomas Christopher Hofland (1777–1843) to paint Whiteknights. The paintings were engraved by T. Medland and L. Byrne and published in 1819 under the title *A Descriptive Account of the Mansion and Gardens of White-Knights*, the text provided by Hofland's wife.

The publication of *A Descriptive Account* in 1819 is a monument to folly – a poignant example of Blandford's decadent approach to expenditure and his inability to

⁴ Now British Library Add. MS 18850.

⁵ B. Hofland & T.C. Hofland, *A Descriptive Account of the Mansion and Gardens of White-Knights* (London: [1819]) pp.33–4.

⁶ W. Page & P.H. Ditchfield, *The Victoria History of the County of Berkshire*, vol. 3 (London: 1923) pp.210–11.

⁷ *Catalogus librorum qui in Bibliothecâ Blandfordiensi* ([London: 1812, supplement 1814]).

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acknowledge pending disaster. The lavish folio volume describes an estate moulded to the tastes of 'its noble possessor', yet on the cusp of dissolution. By the time it was published, Blandford's finances were in ruins. T.C. Hofland was never paid for his work: 'his only recompense being the profits from the sale of the twenty-three engravings, a fact which still rankled nearly ten years later, after the marquess had succeeded to the title of Duke of Marlborough'.⁸ By the end of 1819 the house and many of its contents were on the market.

The sale of the *Bibliotheca Blandfordiensis* is as mythologised as the Roxburghe sale of 1812, but for rather different reasons. If the 1812 purchase of the Valdarfer Boccaccio was seized upon as a defining moment in the bibliomania, its sale from Whiteknights in 1819 marked the beginning of the end of this perceived 'golden' era. Although the 1819 auction was 'brilliantly attended',⁹ with Spencer, Richard Heber (1773–1833), and Thomas Grenville (1755–1846) buying heavily, the result is said to have been disappointing. Earl Spencer may have been the underbidder for the Boccaccio in 1812, but he was to have the last laugh, securing it in 1819 for the relative bargain price of £918 15s. Other books acquired by Blandford at the Roxburghe sale failed to make back their purchase price, or barely scraped a profit: lot 1116, a two-volume bind-up of an assortment of Thomas Churchyard's works, several 'not mentioned by Ames or Herbert', was purchased at the Roxburghe sale for £96 and sold in 1819 for £85 1s; lot 1726, *This Mater Treateth of a Merchauntes Wyfe that Afterwarde Went Like a Man and Was Called Frederyke of Jemmen* ([Antwerp: 1518])¹⁰ was purchased for £65 2s, yet sold for only £44 12s 6d. The end result certainly appears disappointing, particularly when compared to the Roxburghe sale: the Whiteknights sale raised £14,383 36s, compared to £23,341 from the sale of the Roxburghe books.

The disappointing result, however, may be not quite as it appears. There is no doubt that Blandford was a financial numbskull and paid heavily over the odds for many of the books he owned, but not everything in the Whiteknights sale sold at a loss. Lot 3752, Blandford's unique copy of John Russell's *Propositio clarissimi oratoris* was purchased by him for £52 10s¹¹ and sold in 1819 for £126, while lot 3799, the highly illuminated manuscript *Recueil des Romans des chevaliers de la Table Ronde* was acquired for £78 15s, then sold for £100. It is worth noting too that comparisons between sales are more complicated than they appear. The Roxburghe sale took place in an atmosphere of fevered excitement, and the final figure raised owes much to the purchase of a handful of items – the Boccaccio and the fifteen Caxtons. The Roxburghe dispersal was also considerably larger than that from Whiteknights – 10,120 items over two sales, compared with only 4,703 from Blandford's library. A rough calculation of the

8 T. Wilcox, 'Hofland, Thomas Christopher (1777–1843)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13458>, accessed 3 April 2013].

9 S. de Ricci, *English Collectors of Books & Manuscripts, 1530–1930, and their Marks of Ownership* (Cambridge: 1930) p.78.

10 ESTC S125703, recorded today in only two copies.

11 Purchased from Triphook – see manuscript note on p.175 of the copy of the Whiteknights auction catalogue reissued in the Cambridge Library Collection.

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average price raised per item is enlightening and indicates that a more detailed analysis is needed: Roxburghe's sale averaged out at approximately £2 per book, Blandford's at £3.

What do we know about the library itself? A detailed study of the 1812–14 library catalogue, alongside the 1819 sale catalogue, has yet to be undertaken, but even a cursory glance is informative. The library certainly did contain much which conforms to our idea of the model bibliophilic library. There are copies of all four Shakespeare folios, with twelve of the quartos, alongside some spectacular early printed treasures. There is no denying too that the collection was extremely strong in early English typography, that staple of the early nineteenth-century bibliophile. There are twenty-six English incunabula, including seventeen Caxtons, and a further 360 sixteenth-century English books, many of which are to this day the sole surviving copies.

Looking beyond these stereotypes, however, aspects of the collection appear which are distinctly atypical, or at least unexpected. Yes, there is the Boccaccio, and there are Caxtons, but this is, surprisingly, not a collection strong in fifteenth-century printing, the commodity which most characterises collecting of the period. In 1814 there were around 100 incunabula in the library, a figure which had risen to only 136 by 1819 – hardly a spectacular array when compared with Spencer's contemporary collection of 2,000, and representing only 2.8 per cent of the items sold in 1819. The chronological sweep of the collection overall is telling. One might expect the bulk of the library to be made up of early books, yet on analysis only 30 per cent of the collection comes from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with some 60 per cent printed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The tally of Aldines is equally telling. From the publication in 1803 of Antoine Augustin Renouard's *Annales de l'imprimerie des Alde*, the collecting of Aldines was a bibliophilic staple. Blandford had a copy of Renouard, but amassed only around forty examples from the press.

With the exception of the English printing, there is little evidence that Blandford collected the monuments of typography – there is no Gutenberg Bible, indeed no printed bibles at all from the incunable period, and relatively few continental incunabula from presses key to the spread and development of printing. Indeed, many of Blandford's continental incunabula appear to have been purchased to fit clear existing subject strengths in the broader collection, rather than as typographic exemplars. When you analyse the books more closely, what appears is not random trophy buying, but rather focussed collecting in a few specific areas.

The collection of emblem books at Whiteknights was justly famous and is as remarkable as one might expect, encompassing not just key antiquarian books, but also contemporary editions and studies. The collection of botanical books and drawings is equally impressive. Blandford had been a keen botanist from the 1790s, corresponding with Joseph Banks, among others, and publishing on the lotus plant. Both the grounds and the library at Whiteknights reflect that this was more than a passing fad. A rapid count identifies more than 200 botanical publications from across Europe, including many, like Blandford's copy of the Schoeffer herbal

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of 1484, which are decidedly bibliomaniacal. Alongside the treasures, however, lies a well-formed and sophisticated library of contemporary flora, books on agriculture and garden design, plant catalogues, the works of Linnaeus and the other pioneers of classification and morphology, and scientific studies. There is evidence too of a strong interest in Hispanic studies, with around 150 Spanish books, ranging from incunabula to later Spanish literature and romances of all periods, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Spanish and Portuguese histories, chronicles and travel books, and contemporary dictionaries and grammars for the Spanish language. There is also evidence of a somewhat more learned approach to bibliography than one might have expected from Douce's characterisation, in a small but rich collection of bibliographical books, marked-up auction catalogues and typographic histories.

What of the man? It would be a grave mistake to make the assumption that owning scholarly botanical or bibliographical books necessarily equates to reading them; and from Douce onwards, Blandford has been the epitome of the idle nobleman, reducing his books to objects of luxury. Is this a fair appraisal? Kristian Jensen has noted that Douce's original attack on Blandford was somewhat unjust, pointing out that Douce's own correspondence contains letters from Blandford which display a much more sophisticated interaction between owner and book,¹² while in 1804 Douce himself co-authored a botanical and antiquarian note for *The Botanist's Repository* with Blandford, so at that stage he clearly had no objection to being linked to the mad collector. There is some evidence that Blandford amassed a second library after the Whiteknights sale, albeit on a rather more modest level, indicating that the love of books did not die on 7 June 1819.¹³ There is a single book in Oxford which came from this sale and which is perhaps indicative: a copy of Caxton's 1489/90 *The Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres*.¹⁴ At present, however, beyond these few hints, we simply do not know whether the appraisal is fair or not; the answer lies in the Blenheim papers.

Beyond the study of the Blandford himself, the marked-up copy of the Whiteknights sale offers interesting insights into the world of collecting and the mechanics of the trade. It is a more detailed document than many of its predecessors, the detail redolent of the tastes of the time. Features designed to catch the eye of the discerning buyer are highlighted in capitals ('LARGE PAPER', 'EXCESSIVELY RARE', 'UNIQUE', 'UNCUT'), much is made of noble or significant provenances ('from the Roxburghe Library', 'from the Merley Library', 'G. Steevens's copy'), binding descriptions are given for many items ('by Derome', 'Roger Payne', 'large paper, elegantly bound in green morocco'), as are suitably tempting bibliographical notes ('this book is printed on the first paper manufactured in England'). There are occasional hints of newly

¹² K. Jensen, *Revolution and the Antiquarian Book* (Cambridge: 2012) p.251, note 97.

¹³ T.A. Birrell has suggested that a sale which took place in Oxford on 28 May 1840 of 'a valuable and extensive collection of books removed from Blenheim' is likely to be Blandford's second library, pointing out that the Sunderland Library at Blenheim at that date was still entailed. See A. Coates, K. Jensen et al., *A Catalogue of Books Printed in the Fifteenth Century Now in the Bodleian Library* (Oxford: 2005) vol. 6, p.2919.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, D-109.

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developing tastes and trends in book collecting. It is interesting that in a period characterised by the desire for tall, clean copies in contemporary gilded crushed morocco bindings, early or original bindings are occasionally cited as a selling point. Lot 578, the 1541 Lutheran Bible, for example, is described as ‘in the original oak binding, covered with purple velvet, with richly gilt clasps and arms’, while lot 2826, a sixteenth-century manuscript *Officium*, is in a ‘very rich old morocco binding, in compartments with clasps, in the finest preservation’.

The analysis of the buyers at the 1819 sale confirms de Ricci’s observation that it was ‘brilliantly attended’. Richard Heber bought particularly heavily, as did Spencer and Thomas Grenville. The activity of agents, particularly Longman, Triphook, Clarke and Payne, is apparent and occasionally offers insights into the complex and interrelated worlds of agents, collectors, friends and employees. Earl Spencer, for example, is represented formally by Longman & Co., his favoured agent, when bidding for the Boccaccio, but by his pet bibliographer Dibdin when bidding for the Russell cited above, and by George Appleyard (d.1855), his secretary and librarian at Althorp and at Spencer House, when bidding for the Edinburgh printing of Boece’s *Hystory and Croniklis of Scotland*.¹⁵

The reissue by Cambridge University Press of a marked-up copy of the Whiteknights auction catalogue offers opportunities to explore in depth one of the key collections of the period, but more important are the opportunities to study the use, trade, movement, distribution and collection of books during a much-maligned and little-studied period in book history – that of the bibliomania.

¹⁵ Lots 765, 3752 and 4012 respectively.

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DRAWINGS.

AND A SELECTION OF RARE, CURIOUS, AND
SPLENDID ARTICLES IN EVERY DEPARTMENT
OF LITERATURE.

PART I.

WHICH WILL BE

SOLD BY AUCTION,

BY MR. EVANS,

AT HIS HOUSE, No. 26, PALL-MALL,

On Monday, June 7, and Eleven following Days, Sunday excepted.

Catalogues, Price Two Shillings, may be had at the Place of Sale,
where the Books may be viewed Four Days prior to the Auction.

1819.

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CONDITIONS OF SALE.

I. THE highest Bidder to be the Buyer; and if any Dispute arises between two or more Bidders, the Lot so disputed, shall be immediately put up again and re-sold.

II. No Person to advance less than 1*s.*; above Five Pounds 2*s.* 6*d.* and so in Proportion.

III. The Purchasers to give in their Names and Places of Abode, and to pay down 5*s.* in the Pound in Part Payment of the Purchase-money; in Default of which the Lot or Lots so purchased to be immediately put up again and re-sold.

IV. The Lots to be taken away, at the Buyer's Expence, within Three Days after the Conclusion of the Sale; and the remainder of the Purchase-money to be absolutely paid on or before Delivery.

V. The Books are presumed to be perfect, unless otherwise expressed; but if, upon collating, AT THE PLACE OF SALE, any should prove defective, the Purchasers will be at Liberty to take or reject them.

VI. Upon failure of complying with the above Conditions the Money deposited in Part of Payment shall be forfeited, and all Lots uncleared within the Time aforesaid, shall be re-sold by public or private Sale, and the Deficiency (if any) attending such Re-sale, shall be made good by the Defaulters at this Sale.

☞ No Books will be delivered during the time of Sale.

Gentlemen who cannot attend the Sale may have their Commissions faithfully executed by their humble Servant,

R. H. EVANS,
26, Pall-Mall.

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| 9th. Day, — Wednesday, — June 16. . | 424 | 12 | 6 |
| 10th. Day, — Thursday, — June 17. . | 1550 | 15 | 6 |
| 11th. Day, — Friday, — June 18. . | 420 | 12 | .. |
| 12th. Day, — Saturday, — June 19. . | 512 | 17 | .. |