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978-1-108-07800-9 - Prices of Books: An Inquiry into the Changes in the Price of Books which Have Occurred in England at Different Periods

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

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PRICES OF BOOKS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE treatment of such a subject as the Prices of Books necessarily obliges us to range over a wide field, for books have been bought and sold far back in the historical period, and to books, both manuscript and printed, we have to refer largely for records of the past. It is, however, only possible in the space at our disposal to take a very general view of the subject; and it is to be hoped that, in recording the main points in the vicissitudes of prices, the information may not be deemed too desultory to be serviceable.

We might go back to the earliest times, even to Job's famous exclamation, but for our present purpose there would not be much advantage in roaming in this early period, as the results to be recorded would partake more of an archæological, than of a practical character. There is very little chance of a copy of the first book of Martial's Epigrams (which, when first composed by the author, cost at Rome about three shillings and

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sixpence of our money) coming to auction, so that we are not likely to be able to record its present value.

A consideration of the subject opens up a large number of interesting subjects, which can only casually be alluded to, such as the position of authors, and their remuneration.

For several centuries monasteries were the chief producers of literature, and it seems probable that it was worth the while of the chiefs of some of these literary manufactories to pay a poet such as Chaucer something for a new Canterbury Tale, which they could copy and distribute over the country. We know by the number of manuscripts, and the different order in these, that several establishments were employed in the production of the manuscripts, and we may guess that there would probably be competition among them, which would naturally result in a settlement of some terms of payment.

In the early times it was only rich men who could afford to collect books. Amongst these, one of the most distinguished was Richard de Bury, Bishop of Durham, Treasurer and Chancellor of Edward III., who collected everything, and spared no cost in the maintenance of a staff of copyists and illuminators in his own household. Not only was he a collector (whose books, however, have been dispersed), but he was the author of an interesting relic of that devotion to an ennobling pursuit, the famous *Philobiblon*. This book had never been satisfactorily produced until the late Mr. Ernest

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Thomas issued in 1888 an admirable edition, founded on a collation of many manuscripts, and a spirited translation.¹ This work occupied Mr. Thomas several years, and before he completed it he saw reason to doubt the high literary position which had been universally accorded to the author; and his opinion was confirmed by an unpublished passage in a manuscript of the *Chronicon sui temporis* of Adam de Murimuth, to which he was referred by Sir Edward Maunde Thompson, where Adam characterised the bishop in very harsh terms. Mr. Thomas published in "The Library" (vol. i. p. 335) an article entitled, "Was Richard de Bury an Impostor?" In this he expressed the opinion that Richard Aungerville—

- (1) Was *not* an excellent bishop, *but* an ambitious self-seeker, who bought his way to preferment.
- (2) Was *not* a scholar and patron of scholars, *but* merely a collector of books, that he might appear as a scholar.
- (3) *Did not* bestow his collections on Durham College, Oxford, as he expressed his intention of doing; *but* that these collections were sold to pay debts incurred by his ostentatious extravagance.
- (4) *Did not* write *Philobiblon*. The authorship was claimed for Robert Holkot, a Dominican, who for some time was a member of the bishop's household.

¹ A still more elaborate edition was published by the Grolier Club in 1889. This was edited by Professor A. F. West, and printed in three volumes small quarto. It was issued in a small edition, and a sight of it is therefore difficult to obtain.

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It is certain that the evidence is such as to force us to lower our estimate of the prelate's merits, but these four charges are certainly not all proved. He may not have been so learned and so unselfish a lover of books as was supposed, but there is no satisfactory reason for depriving him of the credit of being the author of the *Philobiblon*.

Mr. Thomas shows that Richard de Bury was born on 24th January 1287, and not 1281, as stated in the "Dictionary of National Biography." He completed the *Philobiblon*, and on the 14th April of the same year *Dominus Ricardus de Bury migravit ad Dominum*.

A singularly appropriate chapter from the earliest "book about books" may here be quoted:—

"WHAT WE ARE TO THINK OF THE PRICE IN THE
BUYING OF BOOKS.

(Chapter III. of the *Philobiblon* of Richard de Bury.¹)

"From what has been said we draw this corollary, welcome to us, but (as we believe) acceptable to few; namely, that no dearness of price ought to hinder a man from the buying of books, if he has the money that is demanded for them, unless it be to withstand the malice of the seller, or to await a more favourable opportunity of buying. For if it is wisdom only that makes the price of books, which is an infinite treasure to mankind, and if the value of books is unspeakable, as the premises show, how shall the bargain be shown to be dear where an infinite

¹ From Ernest C. Thomas's translation, 1888.

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good is being bought? Wherefore that books are to be gladly bought and unwillingly sold, Solomon, the sun of men, exhorts in the *Proverbs*: *Buy the truth, he says, and sell not wisdom.* But what we are trying to show by rhetoric or logic, let us prove by examples from history. The arch-philosopher Aristotle, whom Averroes regards as the law of Nature, bought a few books of Speusippus straightway after his death for seventy-two thousand sesterces. Plato, before him in time, but after him in learning, bought the book of Philolaus the Pythagorean, from which he is said to have taken the *Timæus*, for ten thousand denaries, as Aulus Gellius relates in the *Noctes Atticæ*. Now Aulus Gellius relates this that the foolish may consider how wise men despise money in comparison with books. And on the other hand, that we may know that folly and pride go together, let us here relate the folly of Tarquin the Proud in despising books, as also related by Aulus Gellius. An old woman, utterly unknown, is said to have come to Tarquin the Proud, the seventh King of Rome, offering to sell nine books in which (as she declared) sacred oracles were contained; but she asked an immense sum for them, insomuch that the king said she was mad. In anger she flung three books into the fire, and still asked the same price for the rest. When the king refused it, again she flung three others into the fire, and still asked the same price for the three that were left. At last, astonished beyond measure, Tarquin was glad to pay for three books the same price for which he might have bought nine. The old woman straightway disappeared, and was never seen before or after. These were the Sibylline books. . . .”

The destruction of libraries, which was common in the Middle Ages, naturally caused an increase in the value of those which remained. How completely

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these libraries passed away may be seen by the instance of that which was once preserved in St. Paul's Cathedral, and is noticed by the late Dr. Sparrow Simpson in his "St. Paul's Cathedral Library" (1893). Walter Shiryngton Clerk founded the library, the catalogue of which (1458) fills eight folio pages in the first edition of Dugdale's "History of St. Paul's." Of all the manuscripts in this catalogue, only three are now known to exist: one is still at St. Paul's, the second is at Aberdeen, and the third at Lambeth.

The British Museum is fortunate in possessing the beautiful library of the Kings and Queens of England since Henry VII., which is full of the most splendid specimens of artistic bindings. What the market value of such literary gems as these may be can scarcely be estimated, and fortunately they are safe from the arising of any occasion which might afford a test of their value. From this library we are able to appreciate the good taste of James I., who, whatever his faults may have been, was certainly a true bibliophile, and to him we owe some of the finest books in the collection.

It may be safely said that few collections of books have been formed under such difficult and trying circumstances as the invaluable Thomason Collection of Civil War Tracts, now happily preserved in the British Museum. Mr. F. Madan has contributed to *Bibliographica* (vol. iii. p. 291) a most valuable article on the labours of the worthy Royalist bookseller, George Thomason. Thomason commenced in November 1640, when the "Long or

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Rebel Parliament" began, his great undertaking of collecting all the pamphlets published in England, and he continued it until May 1661. Many of these were printed surreptitiously, and were obtained with the greatest difficulty; in fact, seventy-three of these were in manuscript, "which no man durst then venture to publish without endangering his ruine." The King and the Cavalier party knew of the existence of the collection, but every endeavour was made to keep the knowledge from the other party. If it were difficult to form the collection, it was still more difficult to preserve it. We are told that, "to prevent the discovery of them, when the army was Northwards, he packed them in several trunks, and, by one or two in a week, sent them to a trusty friend in Surrey, who safely preserved them, and when the army was Westward, and fearing their return that way, they were sent to London again; but the collector durst not keep them, but sent them into Essex, and so according as they lay near danger, still by timely removing them at a great charge, secured them, but continued perfecting the work." Afterwards, for greater security, they were lodged in the Bodleian Library, and a pretended bargain was made, and a receipt for £1000 given to the University of Oxford, so that "if the Usurper had found them out the University should claim them, who had greater power to struggle for them than a private man."

On one occasion Charles I. wished to consult a particular pamphlet, and applied to Thomason for the loan of it. In small quarto vol. 100 is a

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manuscript note describing the particulars of this interesting loan :—

“Memorandum that Col. Will Legg and Mr. Arthur Treavors were employed by his Mātie K. Charles to gett for his present use, a pamphlet which his Mātie had then occasion to make use of, and not meeting with it, they both came to me, having heard that I did employ my selfe to take up all such things, from the beginning of that Parlement, and finding it with me, tould me it was for the King’s owne use, I tould them all I had were at his Māties command and service, and withall tould them if I should part with it and loose it, presuming that when his Mātie had done with it, that little account would be made of it, and so I should loose by that losse a limbe of my collection, which I should be very loth to do, well knowing it would be impossible to supplie it if it should happen to be lost, with which answer they returned to his Mātie at Hampton Court (as I take it) and tould him they had found that peece he so much desired and withall how loath he that had it, was to part with, he much fearing its losse ; whereupon they were both sent to me againe by his Mātie to tell me that upon the worde of a Kinge (to use their own expressions) he would safely returne it, thereupon immediately by them I sent it to his Mātie, who having done with it, and having it with him when he was going towards the Isle of Wight, let it fall in the durt, and then callinge for the two persons before mentioned (who attended him) delivered it to them, with a charge, as they would answer it another day, that they should both speedily and safely return it to him, from whom they had received it, and withall to desire the partie to goe on and continue what had begun, which book together with his Māties signification to me by these worthy and faithfull gentlemen I received both speedily and safely. Which volume hath the marke of honor upon

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it, which no other volume in my collection hath, and very diligently and carefully I continued the same, until the most hapie restoration and coronation of his most gracious mātie Kinge Charles the second whom God long preserve.—
GEORGE THOMASON.”

Here we have surely an interesting instance of the poetry of bibliography.

According to Mr. Madan’s calculation, there are 22,834 pamphlets in about 1983 volumes, and apparently some hundred or so pieces have been lost from the original set. The collection of these pamphlets was made at very considerable expense, and Thomason is said to have refused £4000 for them, “supposing that sum not sufficient to reimburse him.” On his death in 1666 a special trust was appointed under his will to take charge of the collection, and Dr. Thomas Barlow (Bodley’s librarian, 1652 to 1660) was one of the trustees. In 1675 Barlow was appointed Bishop of Lincoln, and in the following year requested the Rev. George Thomason (son of the bookseller) to take over the charge. After many vicissitudes the books were bought for the absurdly small sum of £300 for George III., who presented the collection to the British Museum. It is impossible to guess at the present price of what is practically invaluable.

The famous antiquary Elias Ashmole, whose treasures are now preserved at Oxford in the Ashmolean Museum, records in his Diary some of his purchases, as, on May 1667, “I bought Mr. John Booker’s study of books, and gave £140 for them”; and again, on

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June 12, 1681, "I bought Mr. Lilly's library of books of his widow for £50."¹ We can judge of the character of his library by these purchases of the collections of two of his famous astrological friends.

Even in the seventeenth century men began to be frightened at the increase of books, and Sir Thomas Browne in his *Religio Medici* suggested a system of destruction: "'Tis not a melancholy *utinam* of my own, but the desires of better heads, that there were a general synod—not to unite the incompatible difference of religion, but—for the benefit of learning, to reduce it, as it lay at first, in a few and solid authors; and to condemn to the fire those swarms and millions of rhapsodies, begotten only to distract and abuse the weaker judgments of scholars, and to maintain the trade and mystery of typographers." If there was reason for this complaint two centuries ago, how much more must there be now! but the project is unworkable, and Time takes the matter in his own hand and destroys. Fortunately the destruction chiefly takes place among books not likely to be missed.

Three of the greatest book collectors of the eighteenth century were Bishop Moore, the Earl of Sunderland, and the Earl of Oxford. Bishop Moore's fine library, which consisted of about thirty thousand volumes, was offered in 1714 to Harley, Earl of Oxford, for £8000, but the latter did not accept the offer because the bishop insisted that the earl should pay the money at once, although he was not to receive the books till the

¹ Dibdin's *Bibliomania*, Part V.