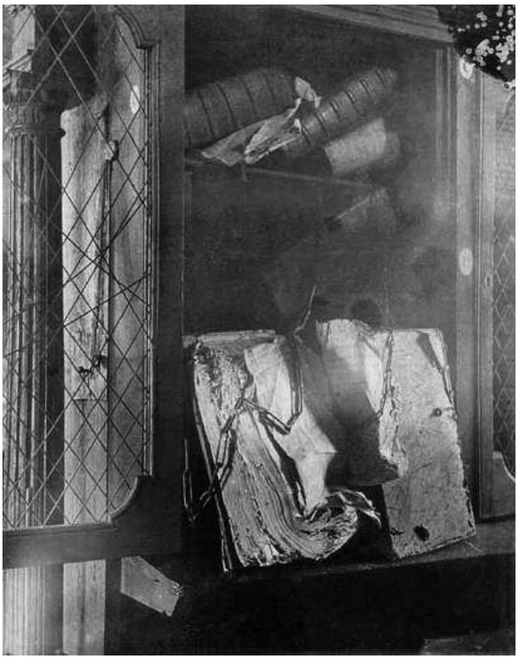
Prologue

Rare printed books, like manuscripts and maps, make news headlines. Sometimes it is thanks to an exceptional price achieved at auction. In November 2013 a copy of the Bay Psalm Book (1640), the first book printed in British North America, was sold at auction in New York for $14.2m (£8.8m). Sometimes it is because of theft. In the nineteenth century, the manuscript collections of several major French libraries were attacked by Gulielmo Libri. In the early twentieth century, Thomas Wise stole from the British Museum on a considerable scale in order to improve imperfect copies of books in his own library. More recently, and to take only a few examples, the national libraries of Britain, Sweden, Denmark and France have all been victims. Cambridge and Oxford libraries have suffered. So have research libraries in America. Much goes unreported because libraries are too embarrassed to admit it.[1] Sometimes more legitimate sales from well-known public or private collections attract notice, especially if prices are high. Sometimes the need to raise money for national or local purposes is paramount. Meanwhile libraries, be they universities, local authorities, learned societies or professional bodies, that were once entrusted with collections of often valuable books, by people who believed that they would be maintained and shared indefinitely, find ready excuses to discard – and therefore reshape – their inheritance.[2]

Not all institutions sell for the improvement of their libraries, as did the General Theological Seminary in New York, when in 1978 it sold its copy of the Gutenberg Bible for $2 million, with the stated intention of providing an endowment for the library.[3] If the sale of the exceptional fifteenth-century printed books from the John Rylands Library in Manchester in 1988 was an extreme, this is by no means the only university library that has found reason to discard high-priced books.[4] The set of Audubon's *Birds of America* sold by Edinburgh University Library in 1992 for $4.07 million helped to rescue the university's accounts.[5] The University of London in 2013 fell prey to temptation in seeking to sell a set of the four Shakespeare folios, but was prevented from doing so by public outcry.[6] In other large-scale and ill-managed sales from well-respected historic collections, such as those from the great nineteenth-century collection at Wigan Public Library and from



1 Forgotten books at Merton College, Oxford, *c.*1900. Photograph collected by J.W.Clark for his *The care of books* (1901), but not used

Bishop Phillpotts's library at Truro Cathedral, rarities can be accorded the same status as common books.[7]

Much of the history of rarity is about ownership; and questions of ownership play a fundamental and necessary part in the way that memory is managed and the way we treat survivals of the past today.

Rare books can become objects no longer to be guarded in the institutions that were once graced with responsibility for their care. They can simply wither by neglect (Fig.1). If they are not discarded in some other way, they can become objects regarded by their owners more for monetary value, part of an investment portfolio. On the other hand, Emmanuelle Toulet, Director of the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, has pointed to a distinction between the inescapable need for stock management in ordinary public libraries, and the responsibilities of *bibliothèques patrimoniales*. Weeding, or *désherbage*, in the latter remains a delicate and little explored question, 'objet de pratiques clandestines plus que de réflexions ouvertes'.[8]

Little of this is new. Library sales and reorganisation, and the disquiet that can accompany them, are not distinctively modern phenomena. In sixteenth-century England, there was concern at the dispersal and destruction of pre-Reformation libraries. Today it is – at the very least – an unfortunate aspect of libraries' own reassessments of themselves that they can breed public distrust. It is still more unfortunate that this distrust can seem justified. At Cardiff in 2007, a local council official described several thousand early books, 'small special collections' that it was proposed to sell, as 'surplus'. After a public outcry, when it proved impossible to obtain accurate information about what was marked for disposal, a large number of books were acquired – with the help of a substantial grant from the Welsh Assembly – by Cardiff University.[9] In the university library these approximately 14,000 books, including 180 incunabula and an exceptional collection of English Restoration drama, can now be seen to be a vastly richer and larger collection than had been misleadingly and inadequately described to the city council and its committees, who were seeking to raise money and save space.[10] At Manchester, the renovation of the central library entailed the sale to a local dealer of what were alleged to be 240,000 or 300,000 unwanted books. Lacking any trustworthy statement, members of the public were understandably anxious at what has been deleted from this much-valued library.[11]

The trade in second-hand and old books is more challenging to track than the trade in new books. It raises questions of survival. What is scarce? What is difficult to find? When and how does a book that is merely old become an object of desire? Aggressive buying by university libraries in Europe, North America and Japan between the 1950s and the 1980s, often provoked as much by competition for status as by encouragement of learning, resulted in wholesale restructuring and a search for stock in a contracting resource. In this collaboration between trade and education, to claim rarity and bulk was to claim educational superiority. In turn, barely half a century later, university, religious, public and other institutional libraries are now discarding stocks of sometimes rare and valuable old books, whether to make space or to raise money. It is not always easy to grasp the former nature of the trade in old books, its size and its variety. The trade has changed again in the last two decades or so, with the passing of a generation of dominant antiquarian booksellers, a consequent realignment of centres of influence, the growth of online selling, and bibliographical destabilisation as institutional libraries determine new policies for collecting and retention and seek to substitute digitised resources.

In all this, how much do books – and particularly rare books – matter? The topic has acquired a new urgency in a world where print itself is being questioned, and to a great extent replaced. It is not surprising to observe a public that is often bewildered and dismayed. They face a revolution that is even now but little understood, partly epitomised in actions by libraries, whether in sale, destruction, neglect or replacement of books by alternative – usually digitised – formats, that can show little nuanced thought for the needs of the present, let alone the future.[12] This all has quite fundamental implications for the future of our libraries: what we are willing to spend money on; how we wish to read – on paper, in the original, in printed facsimile, on microfilm, digitised on a computer screen, at what resolution, on a tablet, in colour or black and white, as derivations from other media. Digital technology has much to offer for new publishing, but the existence of digitised versions of books is only partially satisfactory. They cannot replace the evidential value of artefacts. That is as much true of books as it is, for example, of objects in museums or art galleries, where again digital provision offers new dimensions and opportunities for exploration and comparison, but in ways utterly different from the experience of inspecting, exploring and understanding the original objects. Some aspects of this contrast, a widely held anxiety, have been summarised by Nicholas Thomas in the world of museums:

> The digital image, encountered online, is not meaningfully or effectively equivalent to any actual object … The material thing, in its three-dimensionality, presence, scale, texture and tactility, is different in its nature and effect to any picture of it.[13]

What criteria do we, and should we, use for our decision-making? What evidence concerning current use should we apply when trying to think not just about ourselves, but also about our obligations to future generations?

Trust

We hold the world, including our written and printed inheritance, in trust. Why exactly do we value some kinds of books more than others? How far can we be sure that our criteria are supportable, let alone sustainable? Whence do we derive them? How have criteria developed in the past? Such concepts and activities as surrogates, de-accessioning, redefining, pruning or refocussing are by no means new. The inconsistencies, compromises and hastiness of some past actions should make us the more uneasy as we make decisions that will ever hereafter affect the ways in which human history can be regarded and interpreted.

Libraries manage memory, whether in their retention policies or in the deployment of space, and hence the ways in which readers can work. Whether in London or Oxford, Harvard or New York, city-centre space is increasingly expensive. Out-housing offers an alternative that has attractions of apparent economy in library and estate management, and few attractions for readers whose work is thereby slowed down should they wish to use books rather than what is online. The present contrasts with times when space was lavished on reading rooms, and on extensive adjacent book storage so as to save staff and readers' time. The American architect Charles Warren, criticising the recent plan to remove most of the book stock of New York Public Library in central Manhattan to storage in New Jersey, adapted Le Corbusier: the library is 'a machine for reading books in'.[14] Remove a critical part, and it becomes less efficient. In processes of reorganisation, different kinds of books have to be identified, in an exercise that can never be satisfactory to all parties. Some are of trophy value, to be kept at hand and shown off. Some are frequently used. Some, being less known, are less used for the present, and can be sent away. All may or may not be rare. In much of this, we apply the same criteria that were invented in the eighteenth century by people who sought to define rarity.

Integral to all this are the rising numbers of old books in circulation in proportion to new ones. From roughly the 1770s onwards this increase became acute, and the challenge became vastly greater with the unprecedented quantities of old books coming onto the market in continental Europe as a result of religious and political upheavals. The dispersal of Jesuit libraries in the 1770s following the suppression of the Order, and the French Revolution and its aftermath in Napoleonic Europe, formed a watershed in the supply of old books, as it also did in their management and interpretation.

Private enterprise and values became public, enshrined in policy and in public institutions. The creation of national political, historical and social awareness involved also national self-assessment.[15] At much the same time there was a shift in bibliographical emphases. Where, for example, earlier generations were much concerned with bindings, with large-paper copies and with decoration, at about the beginning of the nineteenth century there came a fundamental change in bibliographical enquiry. Old questions and interests were by no means forgotten, but to them were added fresh emphases: on questions having to do with the printing of books, the reasons for quirks in production, and the orderly setting-out of editions in a comprehensive way that has survived to be still acceptable today.

As we make decisions about books that we have inherited from the past, we are dealing always and by definition with old books. This makes the developments and changes in past attitudes to inherited bibliographical wealth of especial relevance. It is a selective process: not everything that has survived can be kept. This study is of printed books, but many of the issues apply as much to manuscripts. In the words of Jennifer Summit, equally applicable to libraries overseas, 'The libraries of Parker, Cotton, and Bodley reveal that Renaissance collectors created versions of the Middle Ages by ordering and shaping its textual remains.'[16] Processes of selection affect not just our reading, but also our libraries, the places and ordering of memory: the extent to which we are prepared to invest in them, the ways that we organise them, their planning and their architecture, and – not least at a time of rapidly escalating costs of inner-city space, including access and staff costs as well as land and building costs – their location. Libraries today face tensions as never before in what they can, and should expect to, keep in original formats, and what can be supplied as digital surrogates. They face conflicting demands on their financial, staff and environmental resources. They face political and social pressures, by no means always carefully considered or adequately informed.

The originals from which digital versions are prepared may still exist, either in the home library or in another; or they may no longer exist. Libraries can no longer be regarded as simply repositories. An electronic environment, dependent on what is held externally, changes not just the purpose of libraries, but also their status. They become agencies, delivering on behalf of others.[17] They can no longer necessarily be described as trustees of our inherited bibliographical wealth, caring for the books that have survived from the past, making them readily available to readers, and working to ensure that they are passed on to future generations.

This new confusion of libraries' purposes has been described by one commentator as 'a shift from object-gathering to access brokerage'.[18] That is rather a summary statement. Clearly it must apply in different degrees to different kinds of libraries. At its most basic level, it ignores what, exactly, one means by access, and especially if one is interested not simply in the words or images in books, but also in some ostensibly simple questions such as their scale: a large or small book? Everything, from Audubon's elephant folio *Birds of America* to a pocket paperback, can look the same size on screen, whether bloated or miniaturised. How much can one learn on screen about a book's purpose by the materials of which it consists? Of reading and the use of books, once we move from the most obvious annotations to other evidence of where that book has been stored or used, of reading and response? Of the structure of a book, how its codicological form relates to its content? By no means all evidence is contained in marks on the page as they are often defined. Quite apart from questions relating to physical evidence, the statement ignores the changes inherent in such a shift, creating differences, and new limitations, in how knowledge may be gathered, explored, analysed and defined. The foundations for human imagination and memory are changed.

Whatever the provision, books on screen become two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional. In themselves they have no bulk: their bulk is only in the hardware we use to summon them up, where the advertising for this kind of equipment repeatedly alludes to lightness of weight, compactness, slimness and other desirable properties that, in their carefully designed physical uniformity, deliberately reject variety, one of the most basic properties of books: their paper, their bindings, their weight, their size, their tactile properties, the ease or not with which they open and stay flat enough to read: their three-dimensional rather than two-dimensional shape. The sometimes extreme difficulties placed by so many libraries and librarians in the way of scholars who wish to examine original manuscripts and early printed books are designed with the best of intentions only insofar as they relate to the preservation of ancient artefacts. They obstruct and delay the proper understanding of what constitutes a book in all its codicological, structural and material complexity.

We can be in danger of failing to advance knowledge and understanding. Librarians have a duty not only of care to the books and other artefacts with which they are charged, but also to encourage and enable scholarly responsibility to historical sources. They are both guardians of memory and agents for change. If we do not recognise the nature and implications of technological advance, but simply accept its more obvious benefits, we are retreating. Inexorably, we are all moving towards a world that will be dominated by e-publications, by digital presentation. There is debate about the speed with which this will happen, and undoubtedly it is happening at different speeds in different parts of the market and for different publications. It is by no means clear when an equilibrium might eventually be achieved, of the kind to be expected for any new phenomenon. The message is clear. Print sales are contracting. We are in a world that is increasingly turning its back on technologies and social processes (such as marketing, library organisation and private buying) that for over five and a half centuries have in the Western tradition been the standard means of sharing ideas and information, and of organising memory.

We may put it very simply. If, again by analogy with Le Corbusier, who thought of houses as machines for living in,[19] we think of books as machines for reading, then we are reminded of further properties again: the ways in which different sections of books relate to each other – title pages, prefaces, acknowledgements, dedications, the contents that define the primary description of a book, indexes, lists of illustrations, the whole paratextual apparatus[20] developed since the fifteenth century that is designed for something that is at once sequential and at the same time searchable and navigable in particular, three-dimensional, and conventional ways, whether with our eyes across the page-opening or with our fingers through the volume. No scanned version of such an object can reproduce the ways in which the original was designed to be used, as a codex.[21]

Rarity and scarceness are at the head of this agenda. The invention of rare books means the selection, creation and development of particular kinds of cultural memory. It was, and remains, a conscious process, depending on defined tastes, on historical and literary dispositions in a very wide sense, and on a willingness to invest financially, intellectually and even emotionally in some kinds of memory. It means the amendment and adjustment of memory – even radically so in the deliberate alteration of the appearance of old books, for example in their bindings. Yet books can be one of the most reliable of all media for the preservation of memory. In an irony of confusions, large sums of money are now spent to convert this – of proven stability – to digitised forms that will not last as long as the paper they replace. In other words, we are creating new forms of rarity for the future.

Experience with online publication has been accompanied by an increasing and understandably widespread concern for books as physical and material objects.[22] The import of these last words can be traced back at least to the late eighteenth century: to the significance attached by people seeking to understand the making and materials of manuscripts and printed books. But the phrase meant different things to different people. The criteria much discussed in the late eighteenth century and French revolutionary periods were very different from those that developed later, in growing attention paid to such matters as codicology and the more technical details of paper and type.

In the later and increasingly analytical tradition as it developed in the nineteenth century, Henry Bradshaw stands at the head: the person who, more than anyone else in his generation, recognised the importance of understanding early printed books as manufactured objects.[23] As Librarian of Cambridge University he pursued a wide range of interests, including not just medieval manuscripts and early printing, but also the histories of Western liturgy and of Irish printing. He was aquisitive, and especially so in his systematic development of the collections of incunabula in the Library, where he concentrated on books from the Low Countries and the lower Rhine valley, and some of the earliest printing of all at Mainz. While Bradshaw, building on the work of J.W.Holtrop in the Netherlands, grasped the significance of how type designs could be used to identify anonymous printers in the fifteenth century, one of his greatest contributions was to insist on the importance of codicological evidence in understanding how books – manuscript or printed – were assembled and put into circulation, and hence how their texts were presented to readers. While this most reluctant of authors (he never wrote a monograph) is widely remembered by incunabulists for his acute analysis of the presses responsible for the books described in the great sale catalogue of the books of Jean de Meyer in 1869,[24] many of the details of his methods of work with respect to the structure of books have to be sought in his surviving notebooks and annotations on the work of others, now in Cambridge University Library.[25]

We have since become increasingly absorbed in questions of difference: in manufacture, in use, in value and in ownership. The management in the late medieval and early modern printing house of composition, presswork and arrangements for proofreading made variety, and differences between copies, an everyday fact of life. Authorship in print is a process of compromise with manufacture. Further, the study of old books has come to include the history of reading, and with that an emphasis on the relationship of individuals to the particular properties of the objects that face them.

While current attention to materiality and to difference is very far from universal amongst historians of books, it is partly a natural, and important, reaction to the digital revolution that has affected our reading, and our manuscript and printed inheritance, for the last several decades. For all printers' striving in editions for exact replication, and for all that has been alleged of early printing as a means of producing multiple identical copies of the same text, printed books from the hand-press period are not necessarily uniform even among copies from the same series that make up an impression. This fact of textual variation was studied in the early eighteenth century, when Thomas Bennet examined multiple copies of the first printing of the Church of England's Thirty-nine Articles – a text that, having fundamental doctrinal importance, might be expected to be uniform.[26] This widespread quality of difference, especially when set beside variety in use, presents an immediate challenge to the assumptions that underlie the large commercial agglomerations of digitised books – for students of early English books most obviously in EEBO and ECCO, and for French books in Gallica. The norm in these and other datasets is for a single copy; and that is what is liable to be assumed as adequate, whether by scholars who should know better or are simply short of time, or more insidiously and more influentially, by library managers. Increasingly, the individuality of what we still call books is thereby concealed.[27] While many early printed books have now been scanned in multiple copies, thus providing opportunities for comparison on a scale in ways hitherto impracticable, this cannot be done for more than a tiny minority. So far, individual libraries have naturally concentrated on their treasures, thus including the more famous incunabula, especially those with manuscript decoration,[28] and on major later authors, most notably for Shakespeare's first folio of 1623 and early quarto editions.

The Construction of Knowledge

The following pages address two essential aspects that form the background to this revolution. In doing so, I concentrate not on new books, as they were written, typeset, printed, bound and sold for the first time. Instead, I am concerned with the much greater presence of old books – both ordinary second-hand books and those to which has become attached some higher financial, historic, scholarly or aesthetic value – amongst booksellers, readers and other opinion-formers. This is a topic of some importance today. It is relevant to what, in a world increasingly supplied with digitised versions of material objects, we choose to keep and what to discard; to what we choose to read on screen and what we hope to find preserved in libraries; to how we make those choices, whether based on carefully considered knowledge or on carelessness, ignorance or vandalism; to the ways in which we preserve memory. It relates to the extent we should expect to teach about the past, and help others to understand why it is worth spending energy, time, money and other resources on what is apparently so easily, and disarmingly, recreated in media other than paper, leather or cloth.

This is part of a second and much larger enquiry: how are canons of knowledge, of reading, of taste or of values constructed? These several questions are as pertinent today as they have ever been, as we decide what to preserve in alternative media (photographed or digitised), what priorities we give in programmes of digitisation, and how we manage access to the originals of materials that have been copied in some other medium. A bibliophile, bibliographical and bibliothecarial phenomenon, the invention of rare books has repercussions not just on what we choose to preserve, but also on how we do so. The leap from paper to digital demands an understanding of why we are in our present bibliographical condition. Most obviously, our values are derived from what has been received from the past, in a process that is already selective in what has survived. If we are to understand this process, then we must also seek to understand the process of inheritance. Hence the central place of print, as one of the main vehicles for bringing the past to the present. Hence, too, the importance of understanding the survival and valuation – in the widest sense – of old books.

We might tend to concentrate naturally on the past. There are immense dangers in finding too close parallels with our own times. Although the media are different compared with our present digital environments, we have in the last few years seen created an overload of information, with alarming speed and immeasurably faster than in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. We have still to learn how digital and paper worlds may combine and be made to collaborate, when neither offers all the advantages of the other. The study and understanding of the history of rarity is thus of immediate importance to our inheritance, not just because of what is valued in any particular generation, but because concepts of rarity have a direct influence on what has survived in the past, what may survive today, and thus what we mean by human memory. What, bibliographically, do we choose to remember? In what ways do we choose to do so? How are libraries also places of forgetting?[29]

So, we need to consider the present as much as the past. Every generation makes choices as to what it wishes to value. Today, we possess a vastly fuller inventory of what we have inherited, thanks to generations of recording in bibliographies and other lists, in manuscript, in print and online. But that is not the same as saying that we are vastly more aware of what we possess than any previous generation. A report by Research Libraries UK (RLUK) revealed that in 2010, among just 77 academic, specialist and public libraries surveyed, there were an estimated 13 million items unrecorded.[30] Until then, most people would have hesitated to suggest such a figure. Indeed, the question was largely ignored. The more we know, the more difficult – because ever more expensive – it can become to establish realistic and responsible priorities and policies.

We may contrast this with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: not because there was so much less by way of printed matter in existence, but because the question was expressed differently.[31] Since then, following four centuries of bibliographical organisation and selection, and the development of many and diverse methods of indexing and other modes of analysis by subject, period, place, author, genre or other criteria, sheer numbers of books do not hold the same terror today. Instead, the threat of mayhem has been transferred into the digital world, where a process of expansion on a far greater scale than was ever the case for printed books is resulting in a rapidly and unmanageably increasing overload. General search engines are becoming ever less efficient, choked with outdated or poorly verified material and references to sites that no longer exist, leading to delays and frustrations in discovery and in access. In a common but mistaken belief that all information must be equally good, even library catalogues are clogged up with information, references and irrelevant, partial or inadequately articulated answers that are time-wasting for readers. What should be more straightforward thanks to modern technology is actually becoming unnecessarily time-consuming. Universality, promoted as a good in its own right, is in danger of proving a deterrent to knowledge.

It is impractical to recover everything that has gone, but we need constantly to bear in mind what has been said of very different worlds.[32] In her account of the spoliation of French libraries under Nazi occupation, the library historian Martine Poulain has noted a recurring difficulty: while many books can be categorised as having value, and therefore being worthy of attention, the fate of millions more can never be measured. Books are not unique, like works of art. They exist as multiplicities. So, manuscripts, like some very early books, attract attention. Ordinary books do not:

> Le livre appartient le plus souvent au multiple, non à l'unique, comme l'oeuvre d'art. Ne relevant pas du domaine de la rareté, il n'est objet d'admiration, de soins et de soucis particuliers que lorsqu'il se fait manuscrit, autographe, livre ancien, archive singulière. On ne s'étonnera pas en ce sens que la mémoire des spoliations s'attache aux oeuvres d'art ou, dans le domaine de l'écrit, aux documents précieux.[33]

The identification of what is rare is a selective process. The fact of categories of books, or individual titles, being chosen greatly increases their chances of survival. While, at almost every period since the fifteenth century, a great deal has been written about some kinds of old printed books, the vast majority has been neglected. Special kinds of books, more valuable examples, particular authors or genres, or books having noteworthy provenances, for example, have found their admirers, analysts and historians. This applies as much to the practices and policies of our largest repositories as to the least of individual collectors.

I shall be concentrating not only on what is statistically rare, or perceived to be so, at any particular point. I shall also be looking at other features of books. We may think we understand what is old. But what are the implications of this word? What is looked for among what is old simply in terms of years, when some special value is to be attached, and that crucial selection among the surviving masses applied? When were processes of selection developed, and according to what criteria? How were these criteria not just established, but also accepted by the book-buying public?

When did the care of rare books, or old books, become matters of public policy?

If we try and apply tests of rarity, we soon encounter difficulties in deciding what we mean by that term. Absolute numbers of surviving copies, such as a unique copy of a book printed by William Caxton? Or books that are locally rare? The Nuremberg Chronicle, printed in 1493, is generally treated as a rare book. But well over a thousand copies survive – hundreds more than exist of most modern academic books.[34] At what point do we draw even a numerical line, assuming that we can establish any kind of base? Andrew Green, formerly head of the National Library of Wales, has attempted – like many librarians before him – to distinguish between what he called 'common books', and those that were in some way special – usually parts of special collections.[35] That is not necessarily a distinction that is very easy to define more precisely, whatever appeal it may have for library management, for those who have to make decisions about what to keep when there are other copies available in digital form, or how much to spend on caring for books that may receive only occasional use.

This is quite apart from questions of ownership and readership. Increasingly, interest has turned to copy-specific information as evidence of the use and circulation of books whether among individuals, different social groups or different parts of the world. Copies of the same book can differ considerably amongst themselves. Stress on the importance of copy-specific information has become ever more prominent during the last few years, as the study of reading, of book ownership, of trade and circulation, and of book-bindings at all levels from the ornate to the merely adequate has assumed an increasing part in bibliographical and historical investigations – investigations that can, as has been frequently pointed out, be traced partly to McKenzie's plea for a wider interpretation of these subjects in his Panizzi lectures of 1985, with their emphasis on the 'sociology' (as he put it) of texts. In their concentration not just on ownership but also on use, the work of Elly Cockx-Indestege on early editions of Vesalius, Owen Gingerich on Copernicus and Anthony J.West and Eric Rasmussen on the Shakespeare first folio marked a considerable advance on earlier surveys of surviving copies of particular books. In Germany, Jürgen Geiss's work on the circulation and reception of Petrarch has sought similar ends.[36] In this, the apparently ordinary can be as informative as the more obviously valuable. On the one hand such studies provide us with portraits of celebrated books defined by time and space, as well as by ownership. On the other, the study of private libraries, including those belonging to people of comparatively modest means such as that of the Browne family, farmers at Townend in the southern Lake District, reminds us not just of the extent of book ownership on a sometimes surprising scale, but also of how much has been lost through casual assumptions concerning what is important or unimportant.[37]

These concerns emerge periodically as part of a larger historical strategy that is another and perhaps more obvious part of the history of scholarship, invention and literary awareness. What was – or is – worthy of preservation, and why? At different periods there were varying numbers of people whose learned, professional or other interests directed attention to some groups of early books rather than others.

In exploring how ideas of the rarity of printed books developed from the early seventeenth century onwards, I shall focus especially on the physical manifestations of value – not necessarily financial value, but rather a range of what can be broadly gathered up under the umbrella term socio-historical, linked with the bibliographical: a mixture of concerns with the past; how and to what extent the past has been preserved; as it is recorded in, and is represented by, the printed book; and how decisions are made to select from what we have inherited, to impose on some kinds of printed books a scale of values that are the creation in any generation by quite small groups of people. In order to understand this, we must focus on values often best analysed under the heading of descriptive bibliography.

The invention of rare printed books was no sudden discovery. It was a prolonged affair, proceeding at different speeds in different subjects and different literatures; and it was expressed in several different ways. Physical particulars could be as important as scarcity. Much of the following is concerned with individuals. We shall consider how private libraries have been collected and – in particular – sold. In this, we shall explore the development of a common vocabulary to describe not only canons of taste, but also canons of literature. Auctioneers and booksellers were critical to this process, and in their descriptions of books to be sold have left invaluable, indeed crucial, evidence in their printed catalogues. Besides the book trade, we shall consider the development of a bibliographical literature. Here, a search for retrospective comprehensiveness had to be balanced by more selective approaches, a process that by the eighteenth century was producing various guides explicitly to rare books. These guides were of mixed use and value.

How were ideas of rarity formed? How did people learn to view old books? How did new books relate to old ones in the ways that each could be presented to the public and described by readers?