

A LATE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH BINDING IN THE STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

THE STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA possesses a notable binding which has been attributed in the present century to Charles Mearne, one of the most distinguished names among late seventeenth-century English bookbinders. This binding is on a copy of the second edition of Dryden's opera *Albion and Albanus*, printed for the author and sold by William Nott, 1687 (Wing D2225; Macdonald 88 b). The binding is of red morocco, and measures 395 x 255 x 35 mm ; it is elaborately gold-tooled in a modified 'cottage' design, with three loose clusters of foliate flourishes within a central broad double frame, the convex upper and lower borders of which are interrupted by deep central hollows. The spine, also elaborately gold-tooled, is in eight panels with a Maltese cross in the centre of each; in four panels the cross is set in an oval. The edges and dentelles are gilt. The volume was bought by the State Library of Victoria from Bernard Quaritch Ltd in 1946.¹ Apart from a twentieth-century bookplate 'WHC' (designed in imitation of Caxton's monogram; can this be identified?), there are no indications of provenance. The marbled end-papers are nineteenth-century, and their insertion involved removal of whatever earlier marks of ownership there may have been.

The lost original end-papers might also have provided some clue to who first attributed the binding to Charles Mearne. Quaritch's cataloguer confidently described it as Mearne's work, and the attribution was adopted by the cataloguer at the Public Library of Victoria (as it was then called). But there is an obstacle, which does not seem to have been noticed: Mearne died many months before the book was published. The exact date of his death is not known, but it was before 2 September 1686, on which day a warrant was issued for the admission of Robert Scott to the place of King's Stationer and Bookseller, the position which Mearne had occupied.² The second edition of *Albion and Albanus*, which was published by subscription, was advertised by Nott in *The London gazette* 20–23 December 1686 as 'almost Finished' and 9–13 June 1687 as 'quite finished'.³

Few of the tools used on the binding are distinctive enough to aid attribution. Those familiar Restoration motifs the tulip and the poppy are there, but neither appears in a peculiar form. However, one feature – not in itself eye-catching – provide some justification for associating the volume with Mearne's name. The rolled floral border around the outer edge of the broad central frame is clearly recognisable on two other bindings described and illustrated elsewhere. The earlier of these is on a 1681 Oxford *Common Prayer* bound for James II (British Library pressmark 7.h.1), which Howard M. Nixon attributes to Charles Mearne and to which he assigns the date 1685.⁴ In this example the tool is used around the extreme outer edge of the binding and is reversed as compared with our volume, so as to look inwards. Nixon bases his attribution on the bill for the work, submitted by Charles's mother Ann in 1686 after his death, now in the Public Record Office. At least one tool used on our volume was therefore in use in Mearne's bindery in 1685. But we are concerned with the latter half of 1687 or the period immediately thereafter. What had become of his binding tools by then?



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Although Ann Mearne survived Charles, she does not seem to have continued his bookselling business. His stock was sold off in two parts in early 1687, French books on 26 January and English books on 17 and 22 February.⁵ The fate of at least some of Mearne's binding tools is suggested by the second of the two examples on which the same floral border roll has been noted. This is a 1680 Oxford Bible from Major J.R. Abbey's collection, bound for William and Mary *circa* 1688, and described by G.D. Hobson.⁶ Here the border appears in a position corresponding to that which it occupies on our volume. The leafy sprays which fill the spaces between the geometric components of the design also seem to be identical to those on the Melbourne binding; but they are too simple, too common a feature, to do more than corroborate other evidence. On the strength of the Royal Arms painted on the fore-edge – a rare practice in this period – Hobson attributed the Abbey binding to the shop of William Churchill.

Churchill was appointed King's Bookseller, Bookbinder and Stationer on 23 February 1689, in succession to Robert Scott.⁷ Mearne had held this office from May 1675, jointly with his father Samuel until the latter's death in 1683 and as sole occupant thereafter until his own death.⁸ The precise rôle of the Mearnes, father and son, in the shop which produced the bindings associated with their names has been much disputed, and this is not the place to speculate on it further. But one point may be stressed. The Mearnes were long held to have been titular binders only, not practising craftsmen. The notion that neither of them ever personally bound a book, but merely contracted out work to other shops, originated with E.G. Duff, who argued on the basis that 'beyond the official position of royal binder, no [contemporary] allusion to [Samuel] Mearne as a bookbinder exists'.⁹ More recently Howard M. Nixon has found in the Stationers' Company's *Freedom Register* the name of the second of the two masters under whom Samuel served as a new freeman – John (or Jeremy) Arnold, whose occupation is given in the 1641 London Poll Tax Returns as that of bookbinder.¹⁰ Since this discovery, both father and son enjoy better personal claims to be regarded as masters of the craft, or at least as practising binders who employed craftsmen of the first order; for Samuel at least must have learned to bind.

For Churchill, next-but-one holder of the office of King's Bookbinder after Charles Mearne, there is not even such slender evidence as this that he did more than administer a bindery as part of his bookselling business. Along with the tools from Mearne's shop he may have availed himself of Mearne's craftsmen, among whom [] Suckerman, the only one whose name is known for certain, was probably the most skilled. John Bagford, in his manuscript notes on contemporary binders, which are preserved in the British Library, calls Suckerman 'one of the best workmen that ever took tool in hand'.¹¹ But there are defects in the craftsmanship of the Melbourne binding for which it seems unlikely that one whose reputation stood so high could have been responsible. Some of the dots which decorate the spaces between the flourishes are asymmetrically placed, but not so as to suggest that the effect is intentional. On each cover, one of the four roses which look inwards on to the central cluster is at a markedly different angle from the others. Double rules intersect carelessly; some poppies overlap other tooling, while their symmetrically opposite numbers do not, and so on. The general impression is that of an imperfect workman using exquisite tools.

But whoever may have been the craftsman who put tool to leather on this book, it is safe to assert that the workshop from which it emanated was not that of the dead Charles Mearne but that of the extant William Churchill.

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- ¹ It was item 337 in Quaritch's Catalogue 594 (1941).
- ² *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series*, entry for 2 September 1686.
- ³ Hugh Macdonald (*John Dryden: a bibliography*, Oxford, 1939, p. 129) wrongly gives the date of the latter advertisement as 9–13 July 1687.
- ⁴ Howard M. Nixon, 'English bookbindings XXXVIII: a binding from Charles Mearne's shop, 1685', *The Book Collector* 10 (1961), 320.
- ⁵ See *List of catalogues of English book sales 1676 – 1900 now in the British Museum* (London, 1915), p.7.
- ⁶ G.D. Hobson, *English bindings 1490 – 1940 in the library of J.R. Abbey* (London, 1940), pp. 82–3 (item 62).
- ⁷ *CSPD*, entry for that date.
- ⁸ *CSPD*, entry for May 1675.
- ⁹ E.G. Duff. 'The great Mearne myth', *Papers of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society* 11 (1921), 64. (Paper read before the Society 8 February 1917.) Duff, incidentally, mis-states the date of Samuel's death and muddles a number of dates subsequent to it.
- ¹⁰ Howard M. Nixon, *Broxbourne Library: styles and designs of bookbindings* (London, 1956), p. 240.
- ¹¹ Cited by Duff, p.60.

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