

THE HENRY DAVIS GIFT

Mirjam M. Foot. *The Henry Davis Gift. A collection of bookbindings, v.1 : Studies in the history of bookbinding*. London, The British Library, 1978. pp. 352. ISBN 0 7141 0391 8. £60.00.

THE LATE HENRY DAVIS began collecting books, particularly bookbindings, in the 1940s. His purpose — as Mirjam Romme (as she then was) wrote some years ago¹ — was to have ‘an interesting and satisfying occupation for his retirement’ from the cable-making firm of which he was managing director. In the course of building his collection, he developed a close relationship with the British Museum’s bookbinding experts, Howard M. Nixon and his successor Mirjam Foot, a relationship which culminated in 1968 in the signing of a settlement to form a trust holding Mr. Davis’s bindings for the Museum (and from 1973 for the British Library Board), while they should remain in his possession during his lifetime. Bookbindings were not his only bibliographical interest; his fine collection of early printed books, not distinguished for their bindings, was given over to the New University of Ulster at Coleraine (the cable-making firm had Belfast connections) in 1969 under similar terms.² A number of mediaeval manuscripts were left to the Fitzwilliam Museum. But it is for the bindings collection, exceptional in every respect, that Henry Davis will be chiefly remembered. Nicolas Barker, comparing him with the other great recent collectors in the field, has written: ‘He combined Abbey’s eye with Ehrman’s sense of scholarly importance, and added to them a singleminded determination that was all his own. He had the good sense to seek out expert opinion, and the tact and sensibility to maintain a relationship that is not without strain if the expert belongs to an institution that may on occasion be the collector’s competitor.’³ Long before Davis’s death in 1977, the British Library and Mirjam Foot undertook preparation of a two-volume work on the collection (the second volume is now to be split into two), of which v.1 has appeared. It is a worthy response to what Mrs Foot calls in her Introduction ‘the most important gift the Museum has received since the Huth bequest of 1910’, and it will stand on its merits as firmly and as long as the 1880 *Huth Library catalogue*.

But *The Henry Davis Gift*, v.1 is much more than a record of a remarkable bequest. It breaks much new ground, not least in its manner of presentation. From the 1920s until recently very few of the standard scholarly works on bookbinding history offered sustained studies of any binder’s *oeuvre*. Typically they took the form of a catalogue of a disparate collection of bindings, connected (if at all) by ownership, focussing far more exclusively than Mrs Foot does on individual exemplars, one by one, and on their immediate backgrounds. As a result, the available information on a given binder is usually scattered among accounts (illustrated, not normally with more than a page of text) of single bindings in the major monographs, supplemented by journal articles (e.g. *The Book Collector’s* series) and descriptions in auction or booksellers’ catalogues. Obvious examples of this form are G.D. Hobson’s *Thirty bindings ... Selected from the*

First Edition Club's seventh exhibition (1926), *Bindings in Cambridge libraries* (1929) and *English bindings 1490-1940 in the library of J.R. Abbey* (1940); Nixon's *Twelve books in fine bindings from the library of J.W. Hely-Hutchinson* (1953) and *Broxbourne library* (1956); and J.B. Oldham's *Shrewsbury School Library bindings* (1943). Some others — Oldham's *English blind-stamped bindings* (1949), M.J. Craig's *Irish bookbindings 1600-1800* (1954) — have handled particular fields regardless of accidents of ownership, but using much the same method. One or two recent studies, however, have departed from this format and seem to indicate a trend towards a more compact study of defined areas. One thinks of A.R.A. Hobson's *Apollo and Pegasus* (1975), on the Roman binder who worked for Giovanni Battista Grimaldi in the 1540s, and J.H. Loudon's *James Scott and William Scott, bookbinders* (1980), the first full-length study of any British binding shop to have appeared for many years. With Mrs Foot's v.1, the historical study of bookbinding — or, specifically, its manner of presentation — seems to have moved firmly into a new and more systematic phase.

A full descriptive catalogue on the old lines could not do justice to the Davis collection, or show the number of lines of inquiry which it opens up. The 1500 bindings include, we gather, treasures from almost every Western centre of the art, from Russia to Mexico, and spanning eight centuries. The second and third volumes will provide small illustrations of every binding in the collection, with brief descriptions. The first contains twenty-five detailed studies of individual binders, owners or related groups of bindings, each taking as its starting-point one or two or three Davis examples. These have been chosen, the author says in her Introduction, either because they have not previously been the object of detailed study, or else because Mrs Foot is able to provide some new facts about them. They include bindings from Britain, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany and Italy, and range from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth. Mrs Foot confesses to a predilection for the sixteenth, but the essays as a whole present a fair balance.

The first section of the book, dealing with English bindings, is the longest; there are three chapters concerned with the sixteenth century, two with the seventeenth and four with the eighteenth. In chapter 3, the McDurnan Gospels Binder, rather a favourite of Nixon's,⁴ is investigated more fruitfully than before and, though the early years of this shop (to 1588) remain obscure, Mrs Foot manages convincingly to connect John Bateman, Bookbinder to James I, in the next generation with the McDurnan Gospels tools. Using physical evidence and archives she constructs at least an outline history of this long-lived bindery and adds no fewer than 70 examples to the 34 identified by Nixon in 1970. Another binder brought to life for the first time from the Stationers' Registers is Edward Day, identified in chapter 2 with the 'E.D.' who bound for Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, in the late 1570s. Roger Payne (chapter 8) is already probably better-documented than any other English binder — largely thanks to his billing habits — but, apart from the two outdated and unsatisfactory monographs by W.L. Andrews and Cyril Davenport, the available information is widely scattered. Mrs

Foot gives the most succinct account we have had of his output, working systematically through his principal patrons, Cracherode, Sir Richard Colt Hoare, Wodhull and others, and in particular presenting much original documentation on his work for the 2nd Earl Spencer. She has had the advantage of the notes on Payne given by Mr K. Latifi to the British Museum in 1955. These three chapters, especially, are of the first importance.

Other chapters in this section contain equally notable new material on a number of lesser binders. Chapter 5, 'Two bindings by Daniel Boyse, and some remarks on Cambridge bindings of the seventeenth century', which spreads outwards from the two fine Davis examples, adds much to our knowledge of John Halding or Houlden (among other variants) and Henry Moody. Cautiously the appended lists of Cambridge bindings of this period are divided simply into 'Group I' and 'Group II', of seven groups which Mrs Foot distinguishes. This implies a far more complex picture than either G.D. Hobson (in *Bindings in Cambridge libraries*) or, later, Nixon (attributing too freely to Boyse, in Mrs Foot's opinion) drew. The following chapter, on Thomas Dawson and Ed. Moore, offers the suggestion that Moore was Thomas Dawson jnr.'s son-in-law. This hinges on the identification of 'E. More' (remarkably, Ed.'s first name is still not established) with one Edward Morehen, and it is a tribute to Mrs Foot's judgment that we almost believe her. These two chapters suggest that she has enough material to provide us with a full-length study of the rich history of bookbinding in Cambridge.

An inevitable result of a work such as this is that a corpus of bindings previously assigned to one binder will turn out to be more complex in its origins or to be the work of a dynasty. In chapter 9, 'Scott of Edinburgh', Mrs Foot convincingly confirms earlier suggestions that the later Scott binder, William, was successor to James's business. Her work here, however, is largely superseded by Loudon's more recent account of the family, already mentioned.

The first two of the seventeen chapters on continental bindings are closely related, with much new material concerning Thomas Wotton's binders — a field which one might have thought had already been thoroughly dug over. Mrs Foot argues that the Pecking Crow Binder, to whom Ilse Schunke first drew attention in 1953, was the earliest binder patronised by Wotton and, in seven appendices detailing 116 books bound for him, radically revises the map which Nixon drew in *Twelve books*. Of the other chapters, those on bindings from her native Holland deserve special mention: chapter 9, on a Bible bound by Albert Magnus c.1670 (pl. IV. 18 shows it with its startling ten-panel high-rise spine), and 10, 'Some Dutch bindings of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', between them amount to a substantial and highly original survey of the subject. These chapters seem inadequately served by systematic appendices, but it looks as though Mrs Foot has newly identified the work of some eight Dutch binders of the time, though she cannot yet put names to any of them. In the section on Italian bindings — a field where, on the whole, scholars outside Italy have not (except for

A.R.A. Hobson) had very much that is original to say — chapter 24, 'A binding from Venice', introduces for the first time the Venetian Apple Binder. It is a pity that this chapter is provided with a quite inadequate plate (VII. 24), on which the tooling is next to invisible.

The enormous mass of information contained in this volume defies any reviewer to approach it from the error-tracking angle; one can only marvel at Mrs Foot's ability to correlate and organise so much evidence, extending far beyond the bounds of the Davis collection itself. Figures may give some idea: there are nearly 1,700 footnotes (the Payne chapter alone has 124), an average of 14 per text page, and the text itself is dense with information and not to be assimilated quickly. The 34 appendices list all the traceable bindings (in many cases the untraceable ones too) from particular shops or in particular groups, generally with full details including original owner and present location or bibliographical reference: a total of 970 examples, most of which Mrs Foot seems to have authenticated personally while researching at least these twenty-five different fields simultaneously. With such a volume of material it would be surprising indeed if the book were entirely free of small errors. I have not felt tempted to do any systematic checking of, e.g., the footnotes; but it appears that the level of accuracy is likely to be extremely high. Obvious misprints are few and trivial. Only one real error has emerged. As I pointed out in a previous issue of this *Bulletin*⁵ Mrs Foot, in noting secondary references to Payne's binding of Lilly's *Christian astrology*, has failed to notice that these refer to two different copies of the book, both bound by Payne.⁶ This was really only alarming because it happened to be the first point I looked up when I received my review copy. I have not found any other slips since.

But it would be wrong to imply that *The Henry Davis Gift*, v.1 is merely an agglomeration of facts. It will take its place among the few undoubted landmarks of bookbinding scholarship, not because Mrs Foot has collected the evidence of far more bindings than most other scholars, but because of the fine judgment which informs every identification she makes. She has two outstanding talents: an inexhaustible patience with the traffic in binding tools and other inconvenient variables of the book trade, and the ability — like her mentor, Howard Nixon — to present the results of her research with admirable clarity.

The only criticisms a reviewer might make concern the later stages of Mrs Foot's editing and her publisher's rôle. Although one must regretfully own that the price (how much will the other volumes cost?) is probably reasonable for such a complex work, more illustrations (even greatly reduced in size) would have made it easier to follow arguments in some of the chapters and would probably not have added much to production costs. It would have been helpful to have a little more of the descriptive notes (at least size and material) directly under or opposite the plates, instead of at the head of the chapters to which they belong. The quality of the plates (gone are the days of colour plates in books of this nature) is generally as high as one would expect for one's money, though in one

or two cases (II. 10, V. 20) it might have been possible to achieve clearer contrast between, for example, gilt tooling and brown calf. A number of text pages are noticeably less well-inked than others. Typographically the volume is quite acceptable — not much more — but the binding seems a rather tasteless concession to the book's subject: good full cloth would have been preferable. But these are small criticisms of what must be acclaimed a fine monument to a very remarkable collection. Henry Davis would have been delighted with it.

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NOTES

¹ 'Contemporary collectors XLIV. The Henry Davis collection I: The British Museum gift', *Book Collector* 18 (1969), p.23.

² For an account of this part of the collection see H.A. Feisenberger, 'Contemporary collectors XLIV. The Henry Davis collection II: The Ulster gift', *Book Collector* 21 (1972), p.339-55.

³ In his review of the present work, *Book Collector* 29 (1980), p.119.

⁴ See his 'English bookbindings LXIX', *Book Collector* 18 (1969), p.200, and 'Elizabethan gold-tooled bindings' in *Essays in honour of Victor Scholderer* (Mainz, 1970), p.254-62.

⁵ 'An astrological binding by Roger Payne', *BSANZ Bulletin* 5 (1981), p.34, n.7.

⁶ p.112, n.130.

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