

WILLIAM OLDYS AND *THE BRITISH LIBRARIAN**

THE 1737 PERIODICAL, *THE BRITISH LIBRARIAN*¹ offers a unique opportunity to study the books considered useful to antiquaries in the early eighteenth century. The journal was edited by William Oldys (1696-1761) and the books dealt with in its pages were owned either by the editor himself or by his antiquarian colleagues.

Most of the biographical details concerning Oldys were brought together by James Yeowell and published as a *Memoir*² in a volume with Oldys' literary remains. An engraving of Oldys appeared in *The European Magazine and London Review* for November 1796, to accompany a short biographical sketch. It is from a portrait formerly in the possession of Oldys' executor, so we may suppose it to be a credible likeness. It shows a dignified figure, very different from that described by Francis Grose in his notorious 1792 collection of anecdotes, *The Olio*.³ Grose described William Oldys thus:

He was a little mean-looking man, of a vulgar address; and when I knew him, rarely sober in the afternoon, never after supper. His favourite liquor was porter, with a glass of gin between each pot.⁴

William Oldys was born in 1696, the illegitimate son of a lawyer, and died in 1761 as Norroy King of Arms.⁵ He was an antiquary and, for most of his life, a professional man of letters, usually in the employ of Thomas Osborne, one of the leading booksellers and publishers in London from the 1730s to the 1760s; it was Osborne who published *The British Librarian*.

Grose was himself an antiquary and man of letters, as were most of the victims of his pen in *The Olio*. Oldys is there in company with, among others, Joseph Ames, Andrew Ducarrel and Samuel Johnson. In fact, Grose has provided biographical sketches of many of the members of Oldys' circle. His book includes an anecdote of the Society of Antiquaries, of which Oldys was a member. The anecdote concerns their exhumation of Edward I in Westminster Abbey (2 May 1772). This is the incident used by Rowlandson in his caricature, 'Death and the Antiquaries' (from *The English Dance of Death* (1795)). Grose's anecdote concerns a certain Mr G— who was detected in the attempt of secreting from the coffin, 'not a gold crucifix, nor valuable ring, but a joint of the King's middle finger'.⁶ We can see Mr G— in Rowlandson's drawing.

Rowlandson's other caricature of the Society, 'The Reception of a New Member at the Society of Antiquaries' (1782) may perhaps have been suggested by a paper of Dr. Johnson's — *The Rambler* no. 177 (26 November 1751). This is in the form of a letter from a man taken to meet the members of the Society and being invited to join. He described those he met:

The eldest and most venerable of this society was Hirsutus [it has been suggested that this is meant as at least a partial portrait of Oldys]⁷ who, after the first civilities of my reception, found means to introduce the mention of his favourite studies, by a severe censure of those who want the due regard for

* A revised version of a paper read to members of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand at their annual conference, 29-30 September 1989.

their native country. He informed me, that he had early withdrawn his foreign trifles, and that since he began to addict his mind to serious and manly studies, he had very carefully amassed all the English books, that were printed in the black character. This search he had pursued so diligently, that he was able to show the deficiencies of the best catalogues . . . [He had no] ideas but such as his favourite volumes had supplied; when he was serious, he expatiated on the narratives of Johan de Trevisa and when he was merry, regaled us with a quotation from the *Shippe of Foles*.⁸

Doctor Johnson's article, Grose's anecdotes and Rowlandson's caricatures all serve to give us something of the flavour of Oldys' circle.

Oldys was not a virtuoso, a man of private means. He had in 1720 lost money in the South Sea Bubble.⁹ In 1731 he sold his 'collections of manuscripts, historical and political which had been the Earl of Clarendon's; collections of Royal Letters and other papers of State; together with a very large collection of English heads in sculpture [that is, engraved portraits]'¹⁰ for £40 to Edward Harley, second Earl of Oxford.

In the early 1730s Oldys was a contributor of miscellaneous pieces to such periodicals as the *Universal Spectator*. It was at this time (1732) that his poem 'Busy, curious, thirsty fly' appeared in the *Scarborough Miscellany*. This has been anthologised in the *Oxford Book of English Verse* and so is the only piece of Oldys' writing still in print.

His researches took the form of writing notes on scraps of paper and placing them in 'parchment budgets'¹¹ or bags according to subject. Biography was Oldys' main field. His *Life of Sir Walter Raleigh* (1736) was the work which established his reputation. Between 1747 and 1760 he wrote twenty-two of the lives in *Biographia Britannica*¹² and left countless notes used by Kippis in preparing the second edition of that work.

Sir John Hawkins, the first biographer of Samuel Johnson, and himself one of Grose's victims, referred to the different approaches of Johnson and Oldys:

[Johnson] was never a sedulous inquirer after facts or anecdotes, nor very accurate in fixing dates; Oldys was the man of all others the best qualified for such an employment.¹³

There was presumably some such sharing of roles when the two men worked together for Osborne after the bookseller had bought the Earl of Harley's library upon the Earl's death in 1741. They were engaged to produce the sale catalogue of the Library and to edit the *Harleian Miscellany*. Oldys had been Harley's 'literary secretary' in charge of the library from 1738 to 1741.

Apart from 'Busy, curious, thirsty fly', it is only as a footnote to Boswell's *Life of Johnson* that Oldys continues to exist. Boswell commended him as 'a man of eager curiosity and indefatigable diligence who first exerted that spirit of inquiry into the literature of the old English writers, by which the works of our great dramatic poets have of late been so signally illustrated.'¹⁴ This refers to material collected by Oldys for a life of Shakespeare, left unfinished at his death but used in part by later scholars in their editions and biographies.¹⁵

But to return to 1737 when Oldys was editor of the *British Librarian*. Yeowell's *Memoir* includes a fragment of Oldys' diary for 22 June 1737-27 March 1739¹⁶ and his hitherto unpublished account 'Of London Libraries; with Anecdotes of Collectors of Books, Remarks on Booksellers and on the First Publishers of Catalogues.'¹⁷ These, and his miscellaneous 'Adversaria'¹⁸ also published in the *Memoir*, serve to illuminate the period during which he was working on the *British Librarian*. We see him living in his rooms in Gray's Inn, visiting and being visited by his friends Nathaniel Booth, the Treasurer of Gray's Inn, Peter Thompson, a merchant and antiquary, George Vertue, the engraver and antiquary whose notebooks were later used by Walpole for his *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1762-80), and Joseph Ames, whose *Typographical Antiquities* appeared in 1749. Booth, Thompson and Ames were among the collectors who allowed Oldys to use their manuscripts, their Caxtons and other early English books for description in his periodical. The diary gives a great deal of information on the antiquarian and book-collecting circles of that time.

'The Account of London Libraries' includes notes on the collections in various institutions, for example the Tower, Westminster Abbey, Lambeth, the Stationers' Company, Gray's Inn, the Jews' Synagogue, the Friends' Library; and such private libraries as the Harleian, the Cottonian and the libraries of Pepys, Sir Hans Sloane, Lord Somers and many others. This compilation, apart from its intrinsic historical value, even to Oldys when he collected it, seems to have been made to summarise for himself the whereabouts of items likely to be of use in his researches.

The *British Librarian* was a result of Oldys abstracting and annotating books for research. It is a periodical of the learned review type,¹⁹ based ultimately on Continental models such as the *Journal des Scavans* (established in Paris in 1665). The basic material in this type of periodical is the abstract of a book, sometimes with additional biographical, critical or circumstantial comment. The earliest English example of this type was probably the *Weekly Memorials for the Ingenious*, which ran for fifty numbers from January 1682 to January 1683. Dunton in the 1690s issued supplements to his popular *Athenian Mercury* which consisted of translations of the abstracts taken from the continental journals.

There were various periodicals of this type in the 1680s and 1690s. Jean de la Crose, a Huguenot refugee, ran several of them. The books noticed in La Crose's journals were, according to the editor, only such as deserved the perusal of the 'studious and serious reader'.²⁰ Other readers were catered for by Ned Ward in his *London Spy* and by periodicals with such attractive titles as *Miscellanies over Claret*. In the early eighteenth century another Huguenot, Michael de la Roche, began various journals, in English, of the abstract/review type — for example *Memoirs of Literature* (1710) and *New Memoirs of Literature* (1725). Between editing these two titles La Roche went to Amsterdam and began a successful periodical in French, *Bibliothèque angloise ou Histoire littéraire de la Grande Bretagne* (1717-27). In the 1730s La Roche was still exploiting the formula with his *Literary Journal*.

The idea of most of these periodicals was summed up in the title of one of them, *Present State of the Republick of Letters*. They were attempts to give information about new books and accounts of the meetings of learned societies. The emphasis

was often on new *Continental* books. Oldys' journal concentrated on informing the scholarly public of *English* books and manuscripts useful to those involved in antiquarian research. In his Introduction Oldys addressed scholars 'desirous of knowing . . . what has been written in the several Sciences to which they have appropriated their studies.'²¹ Oldys asked, 'How many authors have we who are consuming their time, their Quiet and their Wits in searching after that which is either past finding, or already found?'²²

Oldys was aware of his predecessors in the field of abstract/review journals but criticised their emphasis on *new* books. He noted that it was fifty years since the first journal of this type was published in England, 'yet do all, or the greatest part which have been here made, respect only the Works of a few contemporary writers . . . and trample those Predecessors into Oblivion'.²³ The problem being addressed by Oldys was not that of informing his readers of the latest books but rather how a researcher could discover books relevant to his field and how he could best locate copies of such books — this at a time before the setting up of such libraries as the British Museum (established in 1753).

Oldys tried to cover a broad range of subjects. It may be appropriate here to give some indication of the books dealt with in the six numbers of his journal — 52 books in all, five from the fifteenth century (this figure includes four Caxtons), eleven from the sixteenth century, thirty-two from the seventeenth century and four from the eighteenth century. Each issue included a detailed notice of a manuscript. Most of these were comparatively recent items (including two from the early eighteenth century) which dealt, in the main, with law or heraldry.²⁴ The most important manuscript was a miscellany of the Earl of Derby's papers from Booth's Library. This dated from the Elizabethan period. In general, the topics covered were British History, Chronicles, Antiquities, Genealogy, Heraldry, Literature, Law, Economics, Physick, Education, Theology, Inventions, and, increasingly in the later numbers, perhaps to boost flagging sales, Witchcraft and Wonders.

Location of copies is important, particularly with manuscripts, and Oldys tried to inform his readers where the books could be consulted. In the first number the manuscript he treated was Wyclif's *Poor Caitif*. He used Ames' copy and tells us, 'This Book [is] in the Possession of a Person not more curious in collecting such Antiquities than willing to impart them for the Service of the Publick.'²⁵ That this person is Ames is made clear in the Postscript.²⁶ He also tells us the whereabouts of four other manuscript copies of this work.²⁷

Oldys dealt with all manner of books, from pamphlets to folios; a constant theme in his writings is the importance of ephemeral literature.²⁸ Among the books included are Froissart's *Chronicles*, Hakluyt's *Voyages*, the *Works* of Sir Thomas More, Weever's *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, and, among the pamphlets, *Historia Histrionica*, a thirty-two page contribution to the late seventeenth-century controversy over the morality of the stage, as well as works by such writers as William of Ockham, William Prynne, John Bale, Elias Ashmole, Sir William Dugdale and Thomas Hearne.

How did Oldys describe the books? — for this appears to have been a one-man periodical, with the editor writing all the copy himself (as, in most cases, did his predecessors, the editors of the various *Memoirs for the Ingenious* etc.). He gave an exact bibliographical description: a careful transcription of the title-page — including the publication details (place, printer, date) — and the format and pagination of the book. He then gave a brief statement usually intended to set the item in its period — for example of William of Ockham's *Dialogue betwene a Kryght and a Clerke* he wrote:

This notable little Tract was written to silence the Clergy, and answer their unreasonable Expectations that the Pope might exercise a Jurisdiction over the Temporalities of Princes and the Church be exempted from contributing of its Riches in time of need, either for the Relief of the Poor or the Security of the Nation where they abide.²⁹

Then followed a detailed abstract of the work, often about five pages. The entry for Hakluyt's *Voyages* is the longest, occupying twenty-two pages, possibly because the expanded three-volume edition (1598-1600) that Oldys was considering lacked an index, a failure to which he drew attention. He usually gave biographical details of the author in a footnote. If the work was anonymous or undated Oldys marshalled the evidence on these points and included details of various editions of the work.

He often closed his abstract with a critical summary. His notice of William Prynne's three-volume collection of documents³⁰ ends with an endorsement of the historical value of the books and offers reasons why they have been neglected.³¹ The reasons are, according to Oldys, their cost (supplies of Volumes I and II perished in the Great Fire and 'it is well known the Complete Set has been sold for £30'); the 'publick Punishment the Author once underwent [which] might leave some Distaste to his Name upon the Minds of many'; and what Oldys saw as 'that artful Disregard which has been insinuated of these Collections to abate the Curiosity of the Laity and dissuade their looking into them.' He quotes the Bishop of Carlisle, William Nicolson, who, in the *English Historical Library* (1714), had dismissed any need for a new edition of the first and second volumes of Prynne's work, asserting that 'His Third has enough, in all Conscience, to satisfy any reasonable Reader.'³²

The *British Librarian* ceased after six numbers. In his 'Postscript'³³ Oldys thanked those who had allowed him the use of their books and expressed his obligations 'to some hundreds unknown who have shewn a relish for the Usefulness of this performance by encouraging the Sale of it.'³⁴ He closed the volume with a flourish of optimism, informing his subscribers that 'if thro' other engagements it [the journal] should be suffer'd to lie fallow for a season, 'tis in hopes of increasing its Vigour and making the Returns equivalent to the Toils thereof.'³⁵

Lowndes called *The British Librarian* 'an esteemed work'.³⁶ It would certainly have been a useful publication, particularly in view of its sophisticated index, or 'Master-Key'³⁷ as Oldys described it. This includes entries by author, title key-word and, perhaps most importantly, subject; a reference under 'Printing', for example, sends us to a detailed description of the printing techniques and compositorial practices at the English incunabula period, provided by Oldys in a footnote to his

treatment of Caxton's *Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers*.³⁸ He breaks off his remarks with the statement 'More observations might hence be made on the Rudiments of Printing in England, but to those who are not curious after such Inquiries, possibly the greater number, these may be enough.'³⁹ Oldys, although a man possessed of great curiosity, was journalist enough to know when to stop.

He collected books and manuscripts (the auction catalogue of his library also appears in Yeowell's *Memoir*⁴⁰) but seems to have bought mainly to satisfy his needs as an antiquary. The interest in his *British Librarian* lies partly in its deliberate focusing on a specialist audience. It gives us the opportunity to study a range of books chosen and described by an eighteenth-century English antiquary for the use of his colleagues.

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NOTES

1. *The British Librarian: exhibiting a compendious review or abstract of our most scarce, useful and valuable books in all sciences, as well in manuscript as in print: with many characters, historical and critical, of the authors, their antagonists &c., in a manner never before attempted and useful to all readers. With a complete index to the volume* (London, T. Osborne, 1738).
2. [James Yeowell]. *A Literary Antiquary: memoir of William Oldys, Norroy King-at-Arms* (London, Spottiswoode, 1862).
3. Francis Grose. *The Olio: being a collection of essays, dialogues, letters, biographical sketches, anecdotes, pieces of poetry, parodies, bon mots, epigrams, epitaphs, &c. chiefly original* (London, S. Hooper, 1792).
4. *Ibid.*, p.136.
5. T[hompson] C[oooper]. 'William Oldys' in *Dictionary of National Biography*, XIV, pp.1013-17.
6. Grose, pp.176-7.
7. Lawrence Lipking. 'The Curiosity of William Oldys' in *Philological Quarterly*, 46 (1967): 390.
8. Samuel Johnson. *The Rambler*, edited by W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1969), p.170.
9. *D.N.B.* p.1013.
10. Yeowell, p.xii.
11. Isaac D'Israeli. 'Life and Habits of a Literary Antiquary: Oldys and his manuscripts' in *A Second Series of Curiosities of Literature*, 2nd ed. (London, Murray, 1824), iii, p.462.
12. Bolton Corney. *Curiosities of Literature . . . Illustrated*, 2nd ed. (London, Bentley, 1838), p.177.
13. Sir John Hawkins. *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London, Buckland [et al], 1787), p.533.
14. James Boswell. *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, edited by George Birkbeck Hill, rev. and enl. by L.F. Powell (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1934), i, p.175.
15. D'Israeli (p.485) mentions in particular Steevens and Malone.
16. Yeowell, pp.1-29.
17. *Ibid.*, pp.58-109.
18. *Ibid.*, pp.30-57.
19. Walter Graham. *English Literary Periodicals* (New York, Nelson, 1930). See especially pp.22-64, 196-226. *The British Librarian* is discussed on pp.206-7.
20. Quoted by Graham, p.38.
21. *British Librarian*, p.i.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, p.iii.
24. The following is a list of the manuscripts described, taken from the table of contents for each number of the journal.

- Issue no.1 (pp.21-2) John Wicliffe's *Poor Cairif*.
- Issue no.2 (pp.105-11) John Tleson's *Honour's Genealogy: or the Arms of the Ancient and late Kings of England, with the several Degrees of all our Nobility, their Creation, Succession, Matches, Issues and Arms, in their proper Colours, from the Entrance of William the Conqueror to the latter End of King Charles I.* Oldys notes the date as 1667.
- Issue no.3 (pp.187-8) *A Collection of Royal Grants from the Beginnings of King Henry VIII to the latter End of King William III.* Oldys dates this from 'about the Beginning of the Reign of our late Queen Anne' [c.1702].
- Issue no.4 (p.254) *The Antiquities and Practice of the Courts of Exchequer.* Ms. by the Lord Chief Baron Gilbert. Sir Geoffrey Gilbert (1674-1726) was Chief Baron of the Irish Exchequer 1715-1722.
- Issue no.5 (pp.270-86) Henry Earl of Derby's *Historical and Political Collections, relating to some Years of Queen Elizabeth's Reign; copiously extracted from the Ms. volume in Folio, 1589. To which is added, an Abstract of Queen Jane's letter to Geo. Booth Esq.*
- Issue no.6 (pp.323-31) Sir Thomas Wriothesly's *Collections: Containing the Institution, Arms and Characters of the Knights of the Garter.* Wriothesly, Garter King-of Arms, died in 1534.
25. *British Librarian*, p.22.
 26. *Ibid.*, p.374.
 27. *Ibid.*, p.22. The other copies were located at Lambeth and Cambridge (two copies in the 'publick Library' and one at St.John's College). As Oldys indicates, the attribution to Wyclif is uncertain.
 28. Oldys published a 'History of the Origin of Pamphlets' in *Phoenix Britannicus* (1732). This was reprinted in John Nichols' *Literary Anecdotes* (London, 1812), iv, pp.98-111. In addition to this, as mentioned above, Oldys was co-editor with Samuel Johnson of the *Harleian Miscellany*, which, along with the *Somers Tracts*, is one of the most important collections of early English pamphlets.
 29. *British Librarian*, pp.5-6. Oldys gives the date of composition, taken from a manuscript note on the copy in hand, as 1305. The book itself appears to be STC 12511; STC 2nd ed. dates this as [1533?].
 30. Volumes I and II were published in 1666 and 1665 respectively, under the title *An Exact Chronological Vindication*. Volume III was published in 1668 as *The Third Tome of an Exact Chronological Vindication* and re-issued in 1670, the year after Prynne's death, under the title, *The History of King John*. As Oldys explains (p.20), this was 'in hopes that appearing (under that more general Title,) in the Shape and Disguise of an entire Work, it would go off the more readily.' Oldys' notice of the work appears in issue no.1 of *The British Librarian*, pp.17-21.
 31. *British Librarian*, pp.20-21.
 32. *Ibid.*, p.21. Oldys' copiously annotated copy of William Nicolson's *English, Scotch and Irish Historical Libraries* (London, Strahan, 1736) is in the British Library, shelf mark 128.g.3. Nicolson's comment occurs on p.165 of the *English Historical Library* section of this edition.
 33. *Ibid.*, pp.373-5.
 34. *Ibid.*, p.374.
 35. *Ibid.*, p.375.
 36. William Thomas Lowndes. *The Bibliographer's Manual of English Literature*, rev. and enl. by Henry G. Bohn (London, Bell, 1890), iii, p.1723.
 37. See *British Librarian*, p.374 for Oldys' description of his 'Master-Key'. The index itself occupies pp.376-402.
 38. *Ibid.*, pp.63-4.
 39. *Ibid.*, p.64.
 40. Yeowell, pp.xlv-xlix.

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