

THE TREASURE TROVE, OR, RARE BOOKS REVEALED

A REFLECTION BY STEPHANIE JAEHLING

I am amazed, whenever I pick up and view one of the 60,000 volumes in our Rare Books Collection, that the item I have in my hand has been held in the hands of people from ages past. Each one is like a miniature time machine, having travelled intact through decades or centuries, encasing and perpetuating its own special and individual story. The collection, housed in the Baillieu Library at the University of Melbourne, is a treasure trove. No other term so aptly describes the wealth of knowledge, history and human endeavour that resides therein.

I hold a book and turn the pages oh-so-carefully, not wishing to be the one to damage what has managed to survive for so long. It is incredibly delicate ... one crush from a recycling compactor and it would be, well, history. Each page is just a clumsy slip away from being torn from its hinges. And yet it has made it this far, an incredible journey into the 21st century. Who knows how many different owners each item has had? Who can tell where each one has been, whose library shelves it has sat on? Only in the cases of provenance — the use of bookplates or a neatly printed signature or a dedication to a friend or relative — is it possible to glimpse the identity of a previous owner.

The range of coverings, bindings, sizes and types of books is vast. The tiniest book in the collection, a history of England, is all of three centimetres high (obviously not a very comprehensive history). The largest books reside in the aptly named “elephant folio” collection and measure around 70 centimetres long. Of note among the larger items is the seven-volume collection of Gould’s *Birds of*

Australia: unwieldy to peruse at 56 centimetres long and rather heavy, but worth it for the exquisite illustrations of our native winged fauna.

The oldest book in our collection, the writings of St Augustine, dates from 1466 and forms part of the “incunabula” collection, the term used for books published before 1500. The printing press was reputedly invented by Johann Gutenberg in the 15th century. The word “incunabula” comes from the Latin word for cradle, so literally (and somewhat amusingly, I think) the term has been used to describe the infancy of printing.

The collection of rare books, restricted in scope only by the University’s collection policies and the bequests made to the Baillieu Library, still cover an enormous range of material and topics. These include primary material such as French Revolution pamphlets proclaiming citizens to liberty, equality and fraternity, and gentlemen’s journals articulating the patriarchal musings and happenings of the day. The extensive botanical volumes, a specialty of the collection, feature page after page of exquisitely represented flora. Fastidiously produced facsimiles of medieval manuscripts reveal monastic meditations, and there are tales of voyages and exploration into the New World, topography and geography, natural history ... the list goes on.

There are Greek and Latin classics, such as Ovid and Virgil, in beautiful, gold-stamped bindings, shelf after shelf of significant English writers: Scott, Byron, Thackeray, Burns, Dickens, Johnson. Specialist collections, mostly donated to the Baillieu Library, feature

topics as diverse as Machiavelli, ships and the sea, Cambridge and 19th century French music scores. The Menzies Collection consists mostly of the erstwhile prime minister’s personal book collection, documenting his personal and political interests, but a pile of miscellany donated with that collection harbours unusual odds and ends. Sifting through it can unearth some unexpected finds: a pile of presentation photo albums of his visits overseas, his student lecture notes from 1919, and speeches made on various occasions.

There is so much more and only months of intensive shelf browsing could possibly provide a comprehensive knowledge of those 60,000 volumes.

Tucked away in one drawer of a filing cabinet is a tiny (relatively speaking) manuscript collection of odds and ends. Some are of note, some not so, although one person’s boring old letter is a revelation to someone else. One item which astounded me when I came across it was a letter written in 1822 by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, only Germany’s most famous and revered writer! I was impressed to have before me an original piece of writing by a literary genius. And, I wondered, “how on earth did it end up in Melbourne, Australia”?

Mentioning the term “rare book” more often than not conjures in people’s minds the image of an old, leather-bound volume with brittle pages. Perhaps I was no different. But I have discovered that “rare” does not necessarily mean “old”, and more recently published rare books can be just as beautiful. I am thinking about the so-called private presses that were

established from the end of the 19th century and flourished throughout the 20th century. William Morris created the first “modern” private press in 1891, naming it the Kelmscott Press. Morris, the founder of the contemporary Arts and Crafts movement in England, desired to revive the art of fine book-making. Other private presses have inspiring names such as Doves, Ashdene, Eragny, Fleece, Golden Cockerel... beautiful names, creating beautiful books. These are the creators who insist on fine bindings (often unusual and colourful), the finest quality paper, individual and decorative typefaces, and the best engravers and illustrators available. The books recount unusual stories, histories, poetry, or retell the classics. Sitting side by side on the shelves unobtrusively, their spines often unremarkable, they belie the beauty to be found within. The books are rare because they are published in limited editions, and the Baillieu Library strives to possess complete collections.

Material is acquired by purchase and by bequests and donations. The first major library donation to the University was made in 1903 by George McArthur, a baker from Maldon. Other major bequests bear the names of Grimwade, Pendlebury, Morgan, Ducker and Villiers, named for the people without whose generosity the Rare Book collection would not be what it is today. The most consistent donor, Dr Orde Poynton, who died earlier this year and has lately been revealed by the newspapers as a shy philanthropist, donated a massive 15,000 books from 1959 to 2000, covering a range of his interests, including the history of printing and Sir Walter Scott. His spirit surely floats amongst the bookshelves.

One of the crowning glories of the collection, in my humble opinion, is the Morgan Collection of Children's Books. Frederick Morgan, a librarian and



An item from the Morgan Collection of Children's Books — "Puss in Boots", colour illustration by English illustrator Walter Crane in one of his popular books of traditional stories, *The Marquis of Carabas' Picture Book* (London, George Routledge & Sons, 1874). (Rare Books, Baillieu Library.)

antiquarian collected over 1,000 volumes of children's books over several decades. By a stroke of luck (for the University), Morgan happened to be friends with a Lord Rennell of Rodd, who was a friend of Sir John Medley, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne in 1954, when Morgan decided to part with his collection. Lord Rennell suggested the University to Morgan as a “needy and suitable repository” for the collection and it has resided here ever since, added to by Morgan up to his death, and by the library itself.¹

The Morgan Collection books are diverse in style and topic, interesting each in its own way, but collectively they provide a progressive and fascinating insight into the culture of their respective times, both socially and

morally. Children at any juncture in time are repositories of the future, and the way that their minds are shaped is often a by-product of their literature. Religion, politics, social mores and values, all can be detected in some of the pages of these ostensible children's stories.

Apart from its research value, this collection has a touch of magic about it, because it reveals the world of children and reminds us of our own childhood and the magical experience of discovering the world of books, with their fairytales and stories, myriad characters, and illustrations which transport to other worlds.

The Rare Books Collection is of interest to students, scholars, researchers, but also to the lay person ... In short, anybody can access these treasures. There should be a balance between access and preservation; the books have made it this far and we want them to continue for another few centuries hence. They are the legacy we leave for the pleasure and interest of people in the future. But what is a book for, if not to read, inform and entertain? It would be a shame for a collection such as this to be preserved, but not used. It is a thing of wonder, for everyone.² ♦

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NOTES

- 1 Walter McVitty, *The Morgan Collection of Children's Books: An Appreciation*, (Melbourne: The Hawthorn Press, 1978), p. 1.
- 2 My thanks to Michael Piggott, University Archivist, for his idea of the “time-machine”, and to Merete Smith, Rare Books Curator, for sharing her boundless knowledge.