

# The Poynton Collection

by Merete Smith



## The Poynton Collection is

well known in the Baillieu Library and renowned throughout the country as one of Australia's finest collections of rare books. Dr Poynton, who gave the collection to the Library, is recognised by a plaque in University House as one of the chief benefactors of the University.

The initial donation from Dr Poynton was received by the Baillieu Library in November 1959, and donations have been received on several occasions since then. The early donations from Dr Poynton completely transformed the Baillieu holdings in several fields, particularly in the areas of Greek and Roman classics and modern private presses. As well as the books, a number of valuable prints and original art works have been donated. These now form a large part of the holdings of the Baillieu Print Room, and the books and prints together form a magnificent collection.

John Orde Poynton was born in London and was educated at Marlborough College, Caius College (Cambridge) and Charing Cross Hospital, London. After appointment as a Senior Resident Medical Officer at Charing Cross Hospital, he served as Health Officer, Research Officer and Pathologist in various appointments in Malaya, and also in the British Army until 1946 and was in the Changi prisoner of war camp during the Japanese occupation.

In 1947 Dr Poynton moved to Adelaide to take up a position as lecturer at the University Medical School. In 1950 he became Director of the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science in Adelaide.

Dr Poynton inherited from his father a life-long interest in the study and collection of rare books and prints. The magnificent collection donated by Dr Poynton over the

years was partly inherited from his father, but the books have been mostly collected by Dr Poynton himself. The initial donation consisted of about 850 books and 36 pictures. Among the books were the *Nuremberg Chronicles* from 1493 with its magnificent wood-cuts. A second *Folio of Shakespeare* from 1632 is another of the high spots, as is the complete set of *Delphin Classics* in 60 lavish volumes published in the 16th century. These were originally aids to the education of the French crown prince, the Dauphin (= dolphin, Latinised as Delphin) and the Baillieu set is one of the few complete sets in the world.

A further large donation was made in 1962, shortly before Dr Poynton moved to Melbourne after his retirement from the Institute in Adelaide. After the end of 1963 Dr Poynton took up an honorary position as Consultant Bibliographer which he was to occupy for the next 12 years. During that time further donations of valuable material were made, and Dr Poynton built up and organised the Baillieu Rare Book collection.

Dr Poynton left this position in the Library in 1974, and in 1977 his services to the University were recognised with the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws.

Hand-written notes, often of great interest, are found in many of the books donated by Dr Poynton—about their production, provenance, binding, or indeed about how Dr Poynton came to acquire them. Dr Poynton has also provided card indexes (in his own hand—personal computers did not exist then) to the large number of the extra-illustrated volumes in the Rare Book Room. The extra illustrations (mostly engravings, but also, for instance, water colours) in these volumes are compiled from many sources and are



Above: Thomas Bewick, A general history of quadrupeds. London: Quaritch, 1885. Volume 3: Quadrupeds. Opposite left and following pages: "Clarke's Caesar" C. Julii Caesaris Quae Extant, by Julius Caesar: edited by Samuel Clarke. London: Tonson, 1712.



therefore not found in any other copies of the same books. The indexes are thus particularly valuable and will be made available as computer indexes in time. The Rare Book collections, of which the Poynton material forms an important part, hold much potential for research. Apart from the Greek and Roman classics and the private presses, the Scott collection and the collections of 18th and 19th century British authors (Sterne, Goldsmith, Byron and others) are important in their own right.

Most recently, Dr Poynton has concentrated on collecting and donating first editions of modern authors. These books are neither rare nor particularly expensive to acquire, but since the collections on open access in University and Public libraries will become worn by frequent use, collections of such material in good condition will become very valuable in time. Thus first editions of novels even from a few decades back now fetch very high prices and are expensive for universities to buy. Very few people have the

foresight to collect for the future as well as for the present. Future generations will thank Dr Poynton because the terms of his donation will prevent us from making these particular copies part of the general collection or indeed from discarding them as space-consuming duplicates.

Dr Poynton has built up his collections with great discrimination in such a way that the whole becomes worth much more than the individual parts. Thus a few rare Walter Scott books may be of some interest in themselves, but the Scott collection compiled by Dr Poynton is one of the best in the world because it contains the rare gems together with all of the more easily accessible material. Currently, an edition of Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* is being compiled using this collection, and later on in the year, Professor William Todd, an internationally renowned scholar, will spend some months working on the collection. Part of the collection on Greek and Latin classics has been very important source material for the writing of a recent

book by Professor Clive Probyn about the 18th century English scholar James Harris ("Hermes Harris"). Dr Poynton bought up much of Harris' and his son, the First Duke of Malmesbury's library, many of the books with Harris' annotations. These books are in themselves important editions of the classics, but their association and inscriptions are unique and can be found in no other copies in the world.

Dr Poynton's collections may well be used as a practical illustration of Jonathan Wanthrup's remark in his *Australian Rare Books 1788-1900*, "A collector who cares only for rarity is as absurd as an orchestra that plays only the difficult passages of a symphony; the virtuosity of the performance is pleasing only in its proper place within the complete work." Dr Poynton is a virtuoso book collector and a most generous benefactor to this Library.

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