

The caped collector

Kerriane Stone

Albums of prints are among the highlights of the Baillieu Library Print Collection, so I was aware that the library's nine albums of prints by the Sadeler dynasty of engravers once belonged to the first duchess of Northumberland.¹ But the magnitude of the duchess's persona and her importance as a collector were only made real to me when I took up the Harold Wright and Sarah & William Holmes Scholarship last year, to study prints at the British Museum.

The story of Elizabeth Seymour Percy Northumberland (1716–1776) is astonishing: enjoying an illustrious pedigree, in the sphere of collectors and museums she was a champion of the Enlightenment. It is only in the last few decades that her significance as a diarist, collector and patron have attracted due attention.² In this article I provide a brief overview of my encounter with her in London and indicate why her history and collecting are of such interest.³

In her mezzotint portrait by Richard Houston, after a painting by Joshua Reynolds (see opposite),⁴ Elizabeth wears a family ermine and velvet cape and is holding the coronet that signifies her position as countess of Northumberland.⁵ Her name encapsulates the two great aristocratic families from which she was descended: the Seymours

and the Percys. Jane Seymour, Henry VIII's third wife, who died providing Henry's only male heir, was her ancestral aunt. The Percy name, which traces its lineage back to the Norman Conquest, is known rather for its connection to the notorious Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Thomas Percy was one of the chief conspirators, along with Guy Fawkes, in the attempt to blow up the British parliament. The plot is rumoured to have been hatched at the family estate, Syon House, the location of the ninth earl of Northumberland's armoury.⁶ Thus the first duchess of Northumberland was a woman with both nobility and gunpowder in her blood: characteristics that carried over into her taste and determination as a collector.

Because her brother had died of smallpox during his Grand Tour in 1740, when Elizabeth Seymour Percy's father died in 1750 she inherited the family title (becoming Baroness Percy) and its wealth and estates: the London mansion Northumberland House, Syon House in Brentford (Middlesex), and Alnwick Castle, the family seat in Northumberland. In 1744 she had married Sir Hugh Smithson (c. 1712–1786), a baronet and politician, who through his wife succeeded to the earldom of

Northumberland and in 1751 took her surname, in 1766 being made the first duke of Northumberland for his services to the crown.⁷

Together the duke and duchess of Northumberland enlisted the great 18th-century neoclassical architect Robert Adam, who spent many years transforming their ancestral houses into contemporary feats of high art and taste. Northumberland House accommodated the duchess's 'Musaeum', an expansive collection of pictures, objects and specimens, which she spent her life assembling.⁸ This grand house near Trafalgar Square was demolished in 1874 to make way for Northumberland Avenue, although a glimmer of its former splendour can still be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum, where the sparkling red and green foil-backed glass-panel fireplace surround, designed by Robert Adam, is displayed,⁹ alongside an architectural model of the drawing room.¹⁰ Syon House featured an 18th-century-style print room decorated with 100 prints, complete with printed decorative borders. It was from this house that the albums now in the Baillieu Library were sold in 1951 (the albums were originally stored at Northumberland House), and so it is this residence that is of chief interest here (see p. 34).





Previous page: Richard Houston (engraver), after Joshua Reynolds, *Elizabeth countess of Northumberland, Baroness Percy, Lucy, Poynings, Fitzpaine, Bryan, and Latimer*, c. 1759, mezzotint, 49.8 × 34.6 cm. 2015.0038, purchased 2015, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

Left: The front approach to Syon House. Photograph by Kerriane Stone.

Syon House is built upon the remains of a medieval Bridgettine abbey, which once housed an important library of more than 1,400 books and manuscripts. The abbey fell in Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries; the new Tudor courtyard house was the home of Edward Seymour, protector of Henry's young heir. Even today, scholarship seems to resonate through the floorboards, while overhead Robert Adam's resplendent coffered ceilings and Francesco Zuccarelli's lunettes glow with grandeur. The prints were taken down in the 19th century as part of the third duke's renovations, and the print room now houses family portraits.¹¹ What immediately strikes today's visitor are incongruities among the portraits of British blue-bloods, such as the depiction of Mohawk chief Joseph Brant Thayendanegea (1742–1807). This is explained by the involvement of Elizabeth and Hugh's eldest son, Lord Hugh Percy (1742–1817), in the American War of Independence, where he fought at Boston and New York. He befriended Brant, who became one of many visitors to Syon House.¹² Thus the family's rhizomes and interests had begun to extend into the New World.

Elizabeth's husband had three illegitimate children, including one son: James Lewis Smithson (born

Jacques-Louis Macie, 1764–1829), a mineralogist, who is remembered today as the founder—through his substantial bequest—of the Smithsonian Institution in America. By branding the Smithson name on what is now a world-recognised scientific institution he was attempting to attain the acknowledgement denied him by the family titles and his illegitimacy.¹³ Although James Smithson's portrait does not hang in the former print room at Syon House, his story is told as part of it and his legacy has consequently become intertwined with that of the Percys, whose history was composed of many burls and knots. It is fascinating that the albums in the Baillieu Library have connections to, and tell stories about, some of the Western world's greatest collectors, collections and institutions.

Seven of the nine albums in the Baillieu Library were first identified by their bindings as coming from the library of Robert Harley, first earl of Oxford (1661–1724), and his son, by Antony Griffiths, then keeper of prints at the British Museum.¹⁴ Harley's was one of the greatest libraries of the 18th century, the manuscript collection becoming a foundation stone of the British Library (then part of the British Museum),¹⁵ but the book collection was dispersed on the open market in a series of auctions

between 1741 and 1745. Griffiths also traced the whereabouts of many of the duchess's print albums, which had found their way into the British Museum, various institutions in New York, and of course to Melbourne.¹⁶ The contents of all nine Melbourne volumes were listed and published as part of a Master of Arts thesis by Ruth M. Edquist, a project that took a dedicated 14 years to complete.¹⁷ As part of a re-binding project in the mid-1990s, which at that time was thought to be an efficient means of preserving the prints, the Baillieu Library sent all except two of the Harleian albums to conservator and bookbinder Robin Tait for re-binding. The five Harleian bindings that were removed were stored in the Baillieu (opposite, above).¹⁸

While in London I attended the annual Panizzi Lectures at the British Library, which in 2015 were given by Professor David McKitterick (retired librarian and vice-master of Trinity College, Cambridge). One aspect of the 'invention' of rare books discussed by Professor McKitterick was how printed sale catalogues influenced the perception and construction of book 'rarity'. The second lecture, which focused on the sale of the earl of Oxford's library (the Harleian sales), included reference to volume 5 of the enormous auction catalogue, which

Harleian binding removed in 1994–95 from volume 7 of *Sadeler's works: Aegidius & Justo* (gift of the Society of Collectors 1962, Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne).



contained a listing of the prints. There, at Lot 90, is what appears to be the entry for the Baillieu's seven Harleian albums:

Aegidius, Ralph, John, and Justus Sadeler's Works complete, containing nine hundred and five very curious Prints, bound in 8 vol. in Calves Leather, gilt on the Leaves. To enumerate the Masters whose works the Sadelers have engraved after, would be unnecessary; it being well known, that there is hardly a capital Picture, either of the Italian or Flemish Schools which they have omitted.¹⁹

This auction took place in 1745; it is possible that the duchess's London agent bought the Sadeler volumes. Their subsequent journey—through dealers' hands before arriving at the university in 1962 thanks to the vision of Professor Joseph Burke, who organised their purchase from the famed London print dealership Colnaghi's by the Society of Collectors—is better known. The missing Harleian album, the sixth, which contained the works of Aegidius Sadeler the younger, was the most highly prized and was separated from the group after the Syon House print collection was

auctioned through Sotheby's in 1951; its fate is unknown but most likely it was broken up and the prints sold individually.²⁰

And what of the Baillieu's other two albums, not listed in the Harleian sales catalogue—those containing the prints after Maarten de Vos? The titling of the albums hints at the changing fashions and tastes of print scholars and connoisseurs over the years: the Harleian albums are titled on the spine *Sadeler's works* and subtitled with the engraver's name, whereas the two Northumberland albums are titled on the spines *Sadeler's works* and subtitled with the master's name.²¹ These latter two albums have very different bindings (inexpensive blue paste boards) from the other seven and follow an unusual method of attaching the prints to the page. It was this curious method of fixing the prints into the album by a margin tab that first led Antony Griffiths to investigate further and conclude that this was most likely the duchess's own invention.²² Both the mounting of the prints and their relationship with each other as they are laid out according to themes devised by the duchess tell us much about a woman boldly entering what was then a largely masculine discipline. Viewed together, the Harleian and Northumberland

albums reveal information about 18th-century collecting methods. Enlightenment collections were based on a philosophy of collecting encyclopaedically across disciplines, bringing together scientific and artistic works that enabled specialist research to be disseminated for the benefit of the world. This same philosophy underpinned the foundation in 1753 of the British Museum.²³ Indeed, Elizabeth's husband was appointed to the museum's inaugural board of trustees and the pair were influenced by the objects and Enlightenment methodologies of this landmark institution.²⁴

The first duchess of Northumberland was not only securing rare works of art, such as the seven albums from the Harleian library; she was also adding to the field through her singular approach, which encompassed her assembling practice and her artistic preferences, of which the two paste board Sadeler/Maarten de Vos albums are examples. Like many aristocrats of the 18th century, the duchess went on a Grand Tour to expand her education through the benefits of travel. While fewer women than men went on a tour, most grand tourists, including Elizabeth's husband, concentrated their energies on the



SPECTATORS at a PRINT-SHOP in ST. PAUL'S CHURCH YARD.

Printed for Carington Bowles, at his Map & Print Warehouse, N^o 69 in St. Pauls Church Yard, London. Published as the Act directs 23 June 1774.

Classical world, especially in Italy. Elizabeth, by contrast, favoured the Low Countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and parts of France), acquiring a large proportion of her collections there.²⁵

Few could fail to admire Elizabeth's determination in resigning from her role as lady of the bedchamber to Queen Charlotte and touring (independently of her husband, and with a great entourage) through the Low Countries several times during the 1760s and 1770s, visiting collections and buying works of art.²⁶ She overcame health problems, travelling dangers and inconveniences, many of which she recorded in her diaries (extracts from which were posthumously published as *Diaries of a duchess*).²⁷ Yet her personality, as recounted by her contemporaries, was a combination of ostentation and vulgarity.²⁸ She was not modest about her pedigree or wealth, she meddled in politics, and mixed with the highest and the lowest in society, buying prints from even the most poverty-stricken of street criers.

Around this time, those who, like the duke and duchess, had been on a Grand Tour and acquired a taste for Italian culture were dubbed 'macaronis', as were those who followed the associated wave

of extreme fashions in clothes and hairstyles. The 'macaroni mezzotints' are among 47 prints remaining in an album compiled by the duchess and acquired by the British Museum in 2010. The prints include *Spectators at a print-shop in St. Paul's Church Yard* (1774, see opposite), depicting extravagantly dressed men and women viewing satirical prints of aristocrats (possibly also macaronis) at Carrington Bowles' Print Shop (which published this print, as well as versions of the duchess's portrait). The inference is that aristocratic collectors such as the duchess had, through their over-zealous connoisseurship of all things, also made themselves into caricatures. The Northumberlanders appeared in both satirical prints and lofty, painted portraits; the album in the British Museum demonstrates the duchess's interest in fashion and perhaps also her broad collecting, which encompassed great works of art such as the Dutch and Flemish old masters, and popular contemporary prints that directly mocked her and her class.

One contemporary who commented on the duchess, often in a critical way, was Horace Walpole (1717–1797), son of prime minister Sir Robert Walpole. The first duke of Northumberland began his political

career in opposition to Robert Walpole, so a sarcastic relationship with his son may have been a natural consequence. Nevertheless, the duchess and Horace Walpole had much in common as collectors. Walpole's famous novel *The castle of Otranto* (1764) was inspired by his villa, Strawberry Hill House, located—like Syon House—in Middlesex, and fashioned by Walpole into a fantastical, miniature Gothic castle, its interior a dazzling jewel box, replete with artistic treasures. Unlike their Renaissance collector predecessors, the duchess and Walpole were not merely assembling a cabinet of wonders, but rather creating an entire wonderland incorporating house, grounds and all the elements within. At Syon House, for example, a visitor may explore the remains of the ancient abbey, graceful Adam architecture, house furnishings, conservatory, enchanting Duke's Wood with its North American plantings and, by extension, nearby Kew Gardens, which frames the house at the end of its 'Syon Vista'.

Boasting three such audacious estates of curiosity to his one, the duchess had bested Horace Walpole. The reason why her story and collection fell into obscurity while Walpole's remained well known

Charles Grignion (engraver) after Edward Francis Burney, frontispiece to *A catalogue of the Portland Museum, lately the property of the duchess dowager of Portland, deceased, which will be sold by auction by Mr. Skinner and Co. on Monday the 24th of April, 1786* ... [London], 1786. Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

would seem to lie with the print medium itself. Elizabeth Seymour Percy Northumberland did not publish any books or a handsome catalogue of her collection. By way of contrast, Strawberry Hill House had its own printing press, which Walpole harnessed to produce finely printed books and even a guidebook and catalogue for visitors: *Description of Strawberry Hill* (1784). Further, by publishing his book *Some anecdotes of painting in England* (1762), Walpole became acclaimed as an authority on British art history and biography, while the duchess was then, and generally still is, considered merely an amateur collector. Although Strawberry Hill and Syon were private homes (Syon is still a private home), they were available to the public to enjoy for their enlightenment, as if embarking on a miniaturised version of the Grand Tour.

Elizabeth Seymour Percy's most analogous contemporary collector was Margaret Bentinck (1715–1785), duchess of Portland and granddaughter of Robert Harley. Following Margaret's death, her astonishing Portland Museum collection, which encompassed significant natural history specimens, decorative arts, and zoological and botanic gardens, was auctioned.

A copy of the sale catalogue is held in the Rare Books Collection of the Baillieu Library (see opposite). Walpole inscribed his copy on the frontispiece, a record of his endorsement lacking from Elizabeth Seymour Percy and her collection. This picture was reproduced with the description of the collection by him, and gave birth to yet more rare printed collector items.²⁹

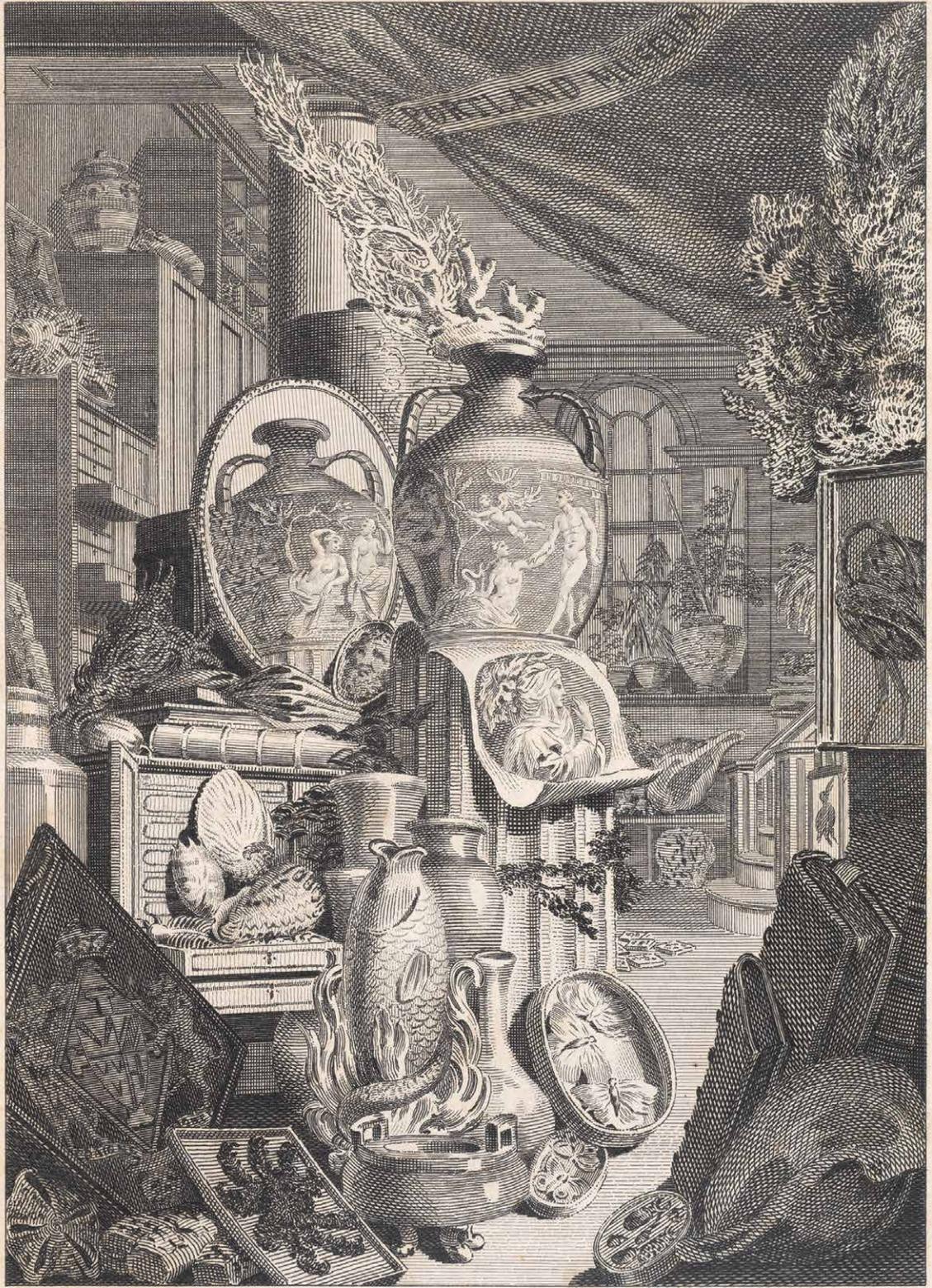
The first duchess of Northumberland made detailed listings of her collections, suggesting that she was aware of the power of a printed catalogue (which the Harleian, Walpole and Portland examples demonstrate) and intended to publish one herself.³⁰ These eight hand-written volumes, the second volume listing the prints, are held at Alnwick Castle. Volume 9 lists the books in Elizabeth's private library, a collection also retained at Alnwick. The print albums now in the Baillieu do not carry any of her printed bookplates,³¹ and they were stored in their own cabinet, suggesting perhaps that the duchess saw prints and books as two separate categories.

Eighteenth-century collections like that of the first duchess of Northumberland are often criticised in current times for their haphazard structure and lack of specialisation.

The duchess of Portland, for example, has been scorned as a 'bowerbird' collector, as if she were a hoarder of baubles.³² However, the albums held by the Baillieu Library reflect a refinement in their appreciation of artists of the Low Countries, and an unusual aspect of the Grand Tour. They are a record of Elizabeth Seymour Percy's status and importance in the 18th century and show that she was both a great and an enlightened collector.

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- 1 Catalogued by the University of Melbourne as *Sadeler's works* [picture], [1576–1628]: vol. 1 John part 1; vol. 2 John part 2; vol. 3 Raphael; vol. 4 Aegidius part 2; vol. 5 Raphael; vol. 7 Aegidius & Justo; vol. 8 Mark & George; vol. 1A Sadeler/de Vos; vol. 2A Sadeler/de Vos. Gift of the Society of Collectors 1962, Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 2 The duchess has been the subject of recent scholarship, in particular by Dr Adriano Aymonino; see his forthcoming book to be published by Yale University Press: *Patronage, collecting and society in Georgian Britain: The grand design of the 1st duke and duchess of Northumberland*.
- 3 In 2016 Louise Box is writing a PhD on the duchess's albums, while Angelo Lo Conte is undertaking a funded research project on the Sadeler prints.



Burney del.

Grignon sculp.

Executed under the direction of J. Bell, Book-seller to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, London April 8th 1786.

- 4 The Baillieu Library's copy of the print carries the collector's stamp of Walter Francis Scott, fifth duke of Buccleuch (1806–1884), a mezzotint collector. I thank Callum Reid for identifying the collector's stamp (Lugt 402). The original Reynolds portrait is on display in Syon House.
- 5 Elizabeth was known by several names and titles during her climb through society, including Lady Smithson, Lady Betty, countess of Northumberland, Baroness Percy and, finally, duchess of Northumberland.
- 6 Colin Shrimpton, F. Woodcock and Richard Pailthorpe, *Syon Park: The London home of the duke of Northumberland*, [England], 2003, pp. 14–15.
- 7 Harriet Blodgett, 'Percy, Elizabeth, duchess of Northumberland and *suo jure* Baroness Percy (1716–1776)', in *Oxford dictionary of national biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004–15.
- 8 See Adriano Aymonino, 'The Musaeum of the first duchess of Northumberland (1716–1776) at Northumberland House in London', in Susan Bracken, Andrea M. Gáldy and Adriana Turpin (eds), *Women patrons and collectors*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012, pp. 101–20.
- 9 Robert Adam (designer), Glass drawing room, 1773–74. W.3:1 to 66–1955, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- 10 Lucy Askew (designer and maker), Model of Northumberland House drawing room, 2001. E.3837–2004, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- 11 Shrimpton, Woodcock and Pailthorpe, *Syon Park*, p. 50.
- 12 Shrimpton, Woodcock and Pailthorpe, *Syon Park*, p. 50.
- 13 H.S. Torrens, 'James Lewis Smithson', in *Oxford dictionary of national biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004–15.
- 14 I thank Antony Griffiths for providing helpful information and for generously reading through this article.
- 15 Sir Hans Sloane's collection, Robert Harley's manuscripts and Sir Robert Bruce Cotton's library are the three foundation collections of the British Museum, which later expanded to form the Natural History Museum and the British Library.
- 16 See Antony Griffiths, 'Elizabeth, duchess of Northumberland, and her albums of prints', in *Dear print fan: A festschrift for Marjorie B. Cohn*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 2001, pp. 139–45.
- 17 See Ruth M. Edquist, *Sadeler catalogue*, University of Melbourne Library, 1990, and Ruth M. Edquist, *The Sadeler family engravings: A critical and historical introduction to the engravings by members of the Sadeler family in the Print Collection of the Baillieu Library*, MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1980.
- 18 Geoffrey Down, 'The University of Melbourne Libraries Print Room annual report', unpublished document, 1994.
- 19 *Catalogus bibliothecæ Harleianæ: or, a catalogue of the remaining part of the library of the late earl of Oxford. Vol. V. ... Which will begin to be sold ... at T. Osborne's ... on the twenty second day of April, 1745, and continue selling till the first of July*, London: for Thomas Osborne, 1743, p. 10.
- 20 Geoffrey Down, 'The Sadeler engravings', *University of Melbourne Library Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, Autumn/Winter 1994, p. 7.
- 21 Of chief interest to collectors and scholars were the creators of the original paintings or other works; recognition and opinions of reproductive engravers wavered over the centuries. An interesting comparison are the 198 print albums, including three Sadeler albums, of Lord Fitzwilliam, founder of the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge University, who when compiling his albums was influenced by the views expressed in the catalogues of Adam Bartsch, which helped lay the foundation for print art history.
- 22 Griffiths, 'Elizabeth, duchess of Northumberland', p. 143.
- 23 See Kim Sloan (ed.), *Enlightenment: Discovering the world in the eighteenth century*, London: British Museum Press, 2003.
- 24 Aymonino, 'The Musaeum of the first duchess of Northumberland', p. 105.
- 25 Anne French, *Art treasures in the North: Northern families on the Grand Tour*, Norwich: Unicorn Press, 2009, pp. 65–71.
- 26 Anne French, *Art treasures in the North*, p. 69.
- 27 See Elizabeth Seymour Percy and James Greig, *The diaries of a duchess. Extracts from the diaries of the first duchess of Northumberland (1716–1776)*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926.
- 28 Horace Walpole, quoted in Blodgett, 'Percy, Elizabeth, duchess of Northumberland'.
- 29 See for example Horace Walpole (with an introduction by W.S. Lewis), *The duchess of Portland's museum*, New York: The Grolier Club, 1936. Rare Books, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 30 Aymonino, 'The Musaeum of the first duchess of Northumberland', p. 109.
- 31 I thank Christopher Hunwick, archivist at Alnwick Castle, for supplying images of two bookplates varying after her title altered to 'duchess', and the present location of her library.
- 32 Beth Fowkes Tobin, 'The duchess's shells: Natural history collecting, gender, and scientific practice', in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Material women, 1750–1950: Consuming desires and collecting practices*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009, p. 249.