

The Roxburghe Club

THE YEAR 1812 is significant because it saw Napoleon in Russia and the upstart and youthful United States declare war on Great Britain. While national armies were deploying on three continents, a select group of amiable bibliophiles was gathering in a London inn. This rather inconspicuous occasion was to have considerable consequence in the world of books, for from it emerged an organization whose list of members reads like *Burke's Peerage* or a bibliophilic *Who's Who*.

Founded in 1812 by the garrulous and indefatigable Thomas Frognall Dibdin (the club's first vice-president), the Roxburghe club takes its name from John Ker, 3rd Duke of Roxburghe, who had gathered together one of the finest libraries of its time, including Boccaccio's *Decameron* printed in 1471 by Valdarfer, some Caxtons and Wynkyn de Wordes, and a first folio Shakespeare. This valuable library was put up for auction in 1812, eight years after the Duke's death, and the sale of the Valdarfer Boccaccio was the immediate occasion for the founding of the club.

The Roxburghe sale proved to be one of the most outstanding bibliophilic events of the early nineteenth century. With it began a new era in book collecting: for the first time in history a four-figure price was reached in an auction for a single printed book; book collecting once again became an avocation for affluent nobility; fine bindings once more became fashionable; and the proceeds of the sale, £23,341, were an ex-

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traordinary total for the time.¹ The fifteen Caxtons which were auctioned brought record prices, and a first folio Shakespeare for which the Duke paid £35 was sold for £100 (it is now in the Huntington Library).²

Although collectors bid record sums for Caxtons and Wynkyn de Wordes, it was the Valdarfer Boccaccio (1471) that commanded the highest price ever paid for a single printed book up to that time. The chief bidders for the Boccaccio were three noblemen—the 2nd Earl Spencer, the 6th Duke of Devonshire, and the Marquis of Blandford (later 5th Duke of Marlborough), who finally purchased it for £2,260.³ When the Marquis made the final bid, Dibdin relates, “the spectators stood aghast!—and the sound of Mr. Evan’s [the auctioneer] prostrate sceptre of dominion reached, and resounded from, the utmost shores of Italy. The echo of that fallen hammer was heard in the libraries of Rome, of Milan, and St. Mark. Boccaccio himself startled [sic] from his slumber of some five hundred years.”⁴ And the British press followed the auction quite closely.

When the Marquis bid the last £10, Lord S. said, “I bow to you.” The engagement was very fierce, and at its termination there was a general “Huzza!” [Nol it was a quiet plaudit of hands (Dibdin’s note).] Presently after, the Marquis offered his hand to Lord S. saying, “We are good friends still!” His Lordship replied,

¹ Seymour de Ricci, *English Collectors of Books and Manuscripts, 1530-1930* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1930), pp. 71ff.

² A. S. W. Rosenbach, *Books and Bidders: the Adventures of a Bibliophile* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1927), p. 89.

³ Thomas Frognall Dibdin, *The Bibliographical Decameron; or, Ten Days Pleasant Discourse Upon Illuminated Manuscripts. . .* (London: Shakespeare Press, 1817), III, pp. 63ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-65.

"Perfectly—indeed, I am obliged to you." "So am I to you," said the Marquis, "therefore the obligation is mutual." He declared that it was his intention to have gone as far as £5,000. Before, he was possessed of a copy of the same edition, but it wanted five leaves; "for which five leaves," as Lord S. observed, "he might be said to have given £2,260."⁵

On the day of the Boccaccio sale, June 17, 1812, the Roxburghe Club was founded and held its first meeting at St. Albans Tavern. Eighteen men dined at the St. Albans that evening when Dibdin suggested that a club be established and meet for dinner on each anniversary of the sale. The eighteen bibliophiles were also men active and prominent in many phases of public life. Earl Spencer, unanimously elected the first president, had been First Lord of the Admiralty, Ambassador to Vienna, President of the Royal Institution, and a Trustee of the British Museum. Sir Samuel Brydges was the founder in 1813 of the Lee Priory Press, noted for its typographical excellence and books with beautiful illustrations; and Richard Heber was the owner of eight houses—four in England, three in Belgium, and one in France—all packed with books.⁶

At the meeting of 1812 it was proposed "for each member, in turn, according to the order of his name in the alphabet, to furnish the Society with a *reprint* of some rare old tract, or composition—chiefly of poetry."⁷ Since only limited editions were intended, some persons objected to the paucity of books to be issued.⁸ Nothing was printed, however, until the club had met for the third time, 1814. By then thirty-five copies of Surrey's translation of the sec-

ond and fourth books of the *Aeneid* had been printed for the members by Sir William Bolland, and the club had expanded to a limit of thirty-one members. Although some of the early Roxburghe Club publications are of little literary or scholarly merit, the manner in which some of them were presented to the members is often amusing. At the anniversary dinner of 1816 George H. Freeling, one of the original members, presented to his compeers a reprint of *La Contenance de la Table*. With a histrionic touch he concealed the small volumes in such a way that when his fellow Roxburghers unrolled their dinner napkins, this French morsel dropped into their laps in lieu of a dinner roll.⁹

As interesting as the early years of the club may be to a gourmet, they were not distinguished by much literary or scholarly activity. Perhaps the greatest achievements of the club were its gastronomical adventures. Patronizing a variety of London inns, such as the St. Albans, the Prince's Restaurant, Willis's Rooms, the Albion Tavern, the Clarendon, and the Crown and Sceptre Inn at Greenwich, the Roxburghe Club gradually earned the reputation of being a society of amiable and imbibing gourmets rather than one of erudite and serious bibliophiles, ". . . and it was sarcastically remarked that the club had spent a full thousand pounds in guzzling before it had produced a single valuable volume."¹⁰ When one considers the number of the toasts drunk at each anniversary dinner, he is not surprised at the notoriety which the club received; at the second meeting and thereafter until around the 1880's the following individual toasts were drunk:

1. The immortal memory of John Duke of Roxburghe;

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66; he quotes from the *Morning Herald and British Press*.

⁶ Clive Bigham, *The Roxburghe Club: Its History and Its Members, 1812-1927* (Printed for the Roxburghe Club, Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 3, 21, 23, *et passim*.

⁷ Dibdin, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁸ See *The Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXXIII (1813), 211-212; replies to this objection appear in the same magazine, LXXXIII (1813), 338-341.

⁹ John Hill Burton, *The Book-hunter*, Ed. by J. Herbert Slater (London: George Routledge and Sons [1908]), p. 174.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

2. of Christopher Valdarfer, Printer of the *Decameron*;
3. of Gutenberg, Fust, and Schoeffer, the inventors of the Art of Printing;
4. of William Caxton, the Father of the British Press;
5. of Dame Julia Berners and the St. Alban's Press;
6. of Wynkyn de Worde and Richard Pynson, the illustrious successors of William Caxton;
7. of the Aldine Family at Venice;
8. of the Giunta Family at Florence;
9. of Walter Chapman, the earliest Scottish Printer (added in 1900);
10. The Society of Bibliophiles at Paris;
11. The Prosperity of the Roxburghe Club;
12. The cause of Bibliomania all over the world.¹¹

Is it any wonder that many of the early anniversary celebrations lasted until three and four o'clock in the morning?

One of the original members and a close friend of Dibdin, a certain Joseph Haslewood, had kept informal notes of the anniversary meetings. After his death in 1833 they were sold with his other possessions, and part of them appeared in the *Athenaeum* in January, 1834. According to Haslewood's account of the 1818 annual gathering, fifteen members (none of them of the nobility) consumed £84 9s. 6d. worth of food and potables. These bibliophilic *bons vivants* celebrated with eleven different wines, paying £11 4s. 0d. for claret, £3 3s. 0d. for Madeira, £2 11s. 0d. for champagne, *ad finitum*, and 5s. 6d. for broken glasses.¹² But their wine menu is no more magnificent than the cuisine. The first course consisted of turtle cutlets, boiled chickens, sauté of haddock, tendrons of lamb, ham, tongue, turbot, filets of whittings, fricandeau of turtles, chartreuse, and John Dory (an edible salt-water fish); the second course was

a mere two haunches of venison; the third course consisted of larded poult, artichoke bottoms, cheese cakes, jelly, quails, salad italienne, peas, cabinet pudding, goose, crème italienne, prawns, tourt, and tart.¹³ But, alas, the poor Dibdin was not in London for this festive event. He was in Paris celebrating with some French bibliophiles, and after the evening was done and all the toasts drunk, he gathered up all the bottle corks to carry with him to London as mementos of his "biblio-vinic" tour.¹⁴

Now it may seem that the first duty of a faithful Roxburgher was to demonstrate his gastronomical capacity; certainly the anniversary dinners were notable accomplishments, but in its first ten years the club had rescued from oblivion some thirty-six books and manuscripts which might otherwise have been lost. By 1820 the club was flourishing and gaining the reputation of exclusiveness: it was once said of the Roxburghe Club that it was more difficult to enter than the Peerage or the Privy Council.¹⁵ On February 22, 1823, Dibdin, still vice-president, wrote the following letter to Sir Walter Scott, whose novels had appeared anonymously:

My Dear Sir,—The Death of Sir M. M. Sykes, Bart., having occasioned a vacancy in our ROXBURGHE CLUB, I am desired to request that you will have the goodness to make that fact known to the AUTHOR OF WAVELEY, who . . . seems disposed to become one of the members thereof; and I am further desired to express the wishes of the said CLUB that the said AUTHOR may succeed the said Baronet.—I am ever most sincerely yours, T. F. Dibdin, v.p.¹⁶

To this missive Scott replied that he

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
¹⁴ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXXIII (1818), 5-6.
¹⁵ Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
¹⁶ Quoted in John G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), VII, p. 96.

¹¹ Biggam, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

¹² *The Athenaeum*, no. 323 (January 4, 1834). 1-6.

would forward the invitation to the "author of Waverley,"¹⁷ and on April 21, Dibdin again wrote Sir Walter announcing his formal election to the Club and requesting him to "Come, and talk of Caxtons and Wynkyns with us, at our next anniversary merry making."¹⁸ Scott accepted the invitation to join the club, but he was never very active in it, attending only one of the annual fetes, that held in May, 1828.¹⁹ He did, however, present to the club a printing of *Proceedings in the Court Martial held upon John, Master of Sinclair* in 1828. Although Scott once said of the Roxburghe Club that his membership was an "honour which I value more than I do that which has been bestowed on me by the credit of having written any of his [Scott's own] novels."²⁰ He was more concerned with a society of which he was the first president—the Bannatyne Club founded in 1823 for the preservation and publication of Scottish documents and literature.

But Scott was not the only eminent figure elected to the august body of Roxburghers at this time. A year before, the Rev. Francis Wrangham was permitted to enter the sacrosanct assemblies of the club. Wrangham had been chaplain to the Archbishop of York, Prebendary of York and of Chester, archdeacon of Cleveland, a scholar and translator of classical poets, and, of course, an avid bibliophile. By the time of his election to the club he had collected a library of some 15,000 books and 10,000 pamphlets.²¹

Even though the club continued to replace deceased members by other men of high repute, many Roxburghers were

remiss in presenting books at their own expense to the club members. In 1827 therefore the club adopted a resolution that as a body it would bear the cost of printing some works. Since the scholarly value of previous publications was not particularly high, the club selected a non-member and scholar to edit an important work. In 1828 appeared the *Romance of Havelock the Dane* edited by Sir Frederick Madden; with this volume the scholarly reputation of the society was established. However, Dibdin and Haslewood objected to a non-member's editing a club publication, and from this time on Dibdin's interest in the Roxburghe club began to wane.

Throughout the early and mid-Victorian period the club underwent a decline even though in 1839 the membership limit was increased to forty. Earl Spencer, the club's first president, died, and in 1843 Dibdin resigned as vice-president, dying soon afterwards in poverty. But new vitality was injected into the group by the election of its first foreign member, Sylvain Van de Weyer, the Belgian envoy.²² However, by 1884 the society had deteriorated to such an extent that a memorandum was circulated among the members to ascertain if the club should continue in existence. At a meeting attended by only nine members it was decided by a vote of seven to two to continue.²³ It was in this year that the first American was admitted to the chambers of the club, James Russell Lowell, then the American envoy to the court of St. James, who records in a letter to his daughter that he attended the anniversary dinner of 1887.²⁴ Also in 1884 two future prime ministers were selected to membership, Robert, the 3rd Marquis of Salisbury

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

¹⁸ Sir Walter Scott, *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott, 1787-1832*, Ed. by H. J. C. Grierson (London: Constable and Company, 1932), VII, pp. 382-3; notice of Scott's election appeared in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, XCIII (1823), 353.

¹⁹ *The Athenaeum*, no. 326 (January 25, 1834), 60-64.

²⁰ Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 383.

²¹ Bigham, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁴ James Russell Lowell, *New Letters of James Russell Lowell*, Ed. by M. A. De Wolfe Howe (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), p. 310.

and Archibald, the 5th Earl of Rosebery.²⁵

The period 1892-1902 showed an increase in the activity of the club: members contributed eighteen books; dues were increased from five to six guineas, there was now a list of men waiting to join, and in this decade the third prime minister entered the club, Arthur James, 1st Earl of Balfour.²⁶ The list of scholars who have edited Roxburghe Club publications was extended and now includes such outstanding figures as F. J. Furnivall, Falconer Madan, Alfred W. Pollard, and recently Helen Darbishire. No longer is the grandfather of all book clubs famous for its annual epicurean fetes; the club is now renowned among bibliophiles for its excellent reproductions of medieval manuscripts such as the *Metz Pontifical* and *Le Pèlerinage* [sic] *de Vie Humaine*.

A roll call no longer reveals an exclusively English membership; nine foreign bookmen have been elected to the rank of a Roxburgher—five Americans (J. R. Lowell, Whitelaw Reid, John Pierpont Morgan and his son John, Jr., and Chester Beatty), two Frenchmen, one Belgian, and one Spaniard, the Duke of Alba.²⁷ Along with these illustrious collectors are the owners of those great libraries which still bear their names: Henry Huth who began the great Huth Collection and his son who completed its catalog; William H. Miller, Samuel Christie-Miller, Wakefield Christie-Miller and Sydney Christie-Miller all of whom have possessed at various times the well-known Britwell Library which was sold in the twenties principally to Henry E. Huntington and A. S. W. Rosenbach. Charles Hornby, founder of the Ashendene Press, and Sir William Osler, as well as the notorious Thomas J. Wise—usually re-

membered for his literary forgeries instead of his fine bibliographical achievements—were also Roxburghers.

In its 145 years of activity the Roxburghe Club has done great service to the world of books. Not only has it published obscure and inaccessible works, but it has generally maintained a typographical excellence in most of its volumes. *A Book of Old Testament Illustrations . . . Sent by Cardinal Bernard Maciljowski to Shah Abbas the Great, King of Persia*, a gift of Mr. Morgan, Sr., to the club members, is an outstanding example of modern typographical art. The influence of the club on collectors has given impetus to the founding of other bibliophilic and scholarly societies. It has inspired the Percy Society (1840), established for the purpose of publishing ballads and other fugitive pieces of literature, the Hakluyt Society (1846), for the publication of rare travel and geographical works, the Bannatyne Club (1823), for the publication of Scottish verse and documents, and the Early English Text Society (1864), still a standard source of scholarly editions of Anglo-Saxon and medieval literature.²⁸

Although Roxburghe publications now number about 200 and the club is still active in publishing, there are few complete collections of its works since all its titles were issued in limited editions of thirty-two to 100 copies. Seldom do they appear on the auction block in America. *American Book Prices Current* lists one Roxburghe publication for the 1942-43 season and none since. In America few libraries possess extensive holdings: Harvard, Library of Congress, Newberry, Boston Athenaeum, and Ohio State are some of the larger libraries owning a sizable number of the publications.

²⁵ Bigham, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁸ Ruth Granniss, "What Bibliography Owes to Private Book Clubs," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, XXIV (1930), 14-33.