

Fifty Years On: *The Book Collector* and 'Printing and the Mind of Man'

*A talk delivered by Nicolas Barker to the University of Otago
Centre for the Book on 29 May 2014*

It began in the spring of 1929 when Ian Fleming, not quite 21, walking down Bond Street, saw a sign in Dulau's window, 'The New D. H. Lawrence'. It was not *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, published the previous year, but *Pansies*. Drawn in, however, he met Percy Muir, and then and there began a friendship that lasted for 35 years. Percy was self-educated, Ian studying at Geneva for the Foreign Office; that day they spent talking about books to read, books as an investment, and collecting as an occupation, discovering as they talked a common dislike of convention and a habit of questioning its assumptions. This lasted after Percy moved to Elkin Mathews and Ian to become, briefly, a stock-broker. His decision to invest a windfall of £250 (a huge sum today) in books was a godsend. Percy was to find 'milestone' books - 'the first book on zip-fasteners, on golf, bicycles, motor-cars, aeroplanes - there was to be no limit to the scope of the idea except that nothing published before the year 1800 would qualify'.

Elkin Mathews had an excellent *On the Origin of Species* 1859 in stock at £10. This was a good beginning, but it took a lot of hard work to identify, let alone find copies of, other books that fitted. They were not dear: Röntgen's 1895-6 papers on X-rays cost £7 10s, Marie Curie's in 1903 isolating radium £4, Freud *Die Traumdeutung* 1899 the same. Both were delighted that so much could be got for so little; the collection went on after the initial £250 was spent, and Fleming became a director of Elkin Mathews. World War II plunged him into naval intelligence, and a lifelong fascination with secret service. War over, Lord Kemsley offered him the job of foreign manager of his newspapers, including the *Sunday Times*, as well as pioneering 'features'. In 1950 he moved to a new flat, the top floor of 24 Carlyle Mansions, Cheyne Walk, where John Hayward shared his flat on the second floor with T. S. Eliot.

Books had rather dropped out of his life during the war, the 'milestones' in their black fitted boxes immured in storage. They now returned from an unexpected direction. Lord Kemsley had been encouraged to start his own venture in the book trade. The Dropmore Press was set up in 1945 at 9 Great James Street, Holborn, and a second string to the enterprise added in 1950. In 1947 Reginald Horrox (1904-1994) had founded the *Book Handbook*, which, against all the adverse conditions of post-war publishing, had so far achieved nine numbers. Its printing was transferred to the Dropmore Press and distribution to the Queen Anne Press, at the same address. Eight more numbers appeared in 1950 and 1951, but in 1952 the journal appeared in new guise as THE BOOK COLLECTOR 'incorporating *Book Handbook*', with a new editorial board, Ian Fleming, John Hayward and Percy Muir. 'An announcement' records this, draws attention to new features, the series on bindings and autographs and 'Bibliographical Notes and Queries'. Next year, the size went up from crown to medium octavo, the imprint changed from Dropmore to Queen Anne Press, and Christopher Dobson took over as editor.

As the first number of THE BOOK COLLECTOR appeared, Ian was at Goldeneye in Jamaica, typing the last words of *Casino Royale*. What was he to do with it? On 12 May, having lunch with his old friend William Plomer, he said 'William, how do you get cigarette smoke out of a woman once you've got it in?' After a moment's bewilderment, Plomer exclaimed 'You've written a book!'. Ignoring protests, he got the typescript out of Ian and showed it to his fellow-reader at Jonathan Cape, Daniel George. They persuaded a reluctant Cape, and terms (less than Ian hoped) were

agreed in September. *Casino Royale* was published on 13 April 1953 at 10s 6d, and well reviewed, notably by John Betjeman and by Raymond Chandler, who became the first subject in the 'Uncollected Authors' series in THE BOOK COLLECTOR that autumn. Home on leave for the Coronation, I was quick to buy a copy of what was already the 'second impression' before publication; the jacket was of the first impression, overprinted with an extract from the *Sunday Times* review by 'Christopher Pym' (Cyril Ray), which ended 'here is the best new thriller-writer since Eric Ambler'.

In 1955 Lord Kemsley withdrew from the press; half-captivated and half-frightened by Ian, he threatened to close THE BOOK COLLECTOR. Ian protested that the journal 'would bring much credit to your name among the scholars and librarians of the world' to no avail; instead he agreed to buy it, paying with a £1 note over lunch. Printing and distribution was transferred to James Shand and the Shenval Press. It was, however, Hayward and Muir who ensured the future of THE BOOK COLLECTOR by writing to a number of prominent book-collectors, who between them provided over £2000. This hedge against whatever the future might bring - 'John Hayward's running away money', Ian called it - encouraged him to continue. To consolidate matters, in September he formed a company, 'The Collector Ltd', with a nominal capital of £100, with 100 £1 shares; Hayward and Muir each took one share and Fleming the remaining ninety-eight.

Despite the pressure of growing literary fame, Ian was not unmindful of THE BOOK COLLECTOR, but mostly he left it to John Hayward, chair-bound with muscular dystrophy, increasingly sharp and dominant in conversation, whose main occupation it became. But when Eliot left him to get married in January 1957, Ian was quick to call with cheering gossip. He read and criticised the journal, but never forgot his obligation 'to keep THE BOOK COLLECTOR under the editorship of John alive and for no other purpose whatsoever'. He enjoyed the first article I wrote and told me so. There was much more to divert him, David Foxon's articles on libertine literature in seventeenth-century England, others smuggled from behind the Iron Curtain like that on the Matenadaran Library at Erivan, on the lives of great collectors, past and present, lists of all the books removed from Chatsworth and Holkham to meet death duties, above all, Hayward's incisive introductory commentaries.

In July 1963 the 'Printing and the Mind of Man' exhibition at Earl's Court introduced the Fleming book-collection to a wider public, and although more books came from Maynard Keynes's collection, left to King's College, Cambridge, Fleming's attracted more attention from the press. Visitors were startled to discover this unexpected attribute of the inventor of 007. It only lasted for a fortnight, but its impact, then and since, has been considerable, and looking back, we can see the revolutionary effect of "PMM", not only in connecting intellectual development with the means by which it was transmitted, but also on the scope of the contemporary book trade over five centuries. If considerable effort was made to identify the movements and developments that seemed to derive from the publication of a particular book, it was obvious that most movements are gradual, the result of not one but several publications. What seemed with hindsight to be important was often neglected or misunderstood at the time, while what was hailed as important by its contemporaries seemed now to be of merely antiquarian interest.

Contemporary importance, however, was real enough to the book trade, and the contrast between contemporary valuation and that of posterity was a paradox that

needed proper consideration by the little group charged with selection. It could not be brushed aside as a quirk of intellectual fashion, nor yet as the background to what now seemed 'significant'. The truth of the matter is that, despite its pretext of absolute intellectual coverage, 'Printing and the Mind of Man' was as much the creature of its time, a reflection of what seemed important then, as any other view of the history of ideas.

That view, and a very distinctive one it was, came from one source, the mind of Stanley Morison. It was to be his last great undertaking, the last that he saw finished and executed. Since his Damascene conversion to typography and its history in 1912, he had come to have a unique authority in the world of print and letter-forms, his ideas and work both informed by a strong sense of history. In 1925 he became within a few months typographical adviser to both the Monotype Company and the Cambridge University Press. Monotype had reached its technical zenith, ideally placed to execute the type-designs based on historic models that Morison conceived. As used by the University Press under his eye, they set a new standard for book design that achieved international fame for both institutions. Morison's editorship of *The Fleuron* and other books established his reputation as a historian as well as designer of type. His trenchantly expressed opinions, prefaced with 'According to me', became proverbial. Nor were they restricted to typography.

In 1907 he had found refuge from spiritual void in the Catholic church. His faith remained strong, but not uncritical. Asked by Tom Burns of Burns & Oates the Catholic publishers how he reconciled his faith with current orthodoxy, he was blunt: 'I wouldn't belong to this bunch of macaroni merchants for another second if it wasn't the way of laying hold on Christ'. His political views were equally clear-cut. A conscientious objector in World War I, he was too independent-minded for the communist party with whom his sympathies lay. The same sense of history that he brought to typography informed both faith and political views. He found a like-minded friend and coadjutor in Eric Gill. Together they created the types based on Gill's designs, Perpetua and Gill Sans. The Catholic faith that they shared did not prevent them from criticising its earthly representatives. The Spanish Civil War found them united in hope for the republican cause, sorrow at its failure and horror of the fascism whose evils they saw all too clearly.

Besides Monotype and Cambridge, Morison had a third attachment, as adviser to *The Times* newspaper, to which he had given a new type and overall design in 1932. His allegiance to this bastion of respectability was a further paradox in his personality. He wrote the history of English newspapers, and became fascinated by the links between their design and editorial policy. He began to write the history of *The Times* itself, a task that continued after World War II, during which his papers and most of his books were destroyed. This was a severe setback to his two long-term projects, the history of the ancient Fell types at the Oxford University Press, and the study of Greco-Roman letterforms over the last 2000 years. But the history of *The Times* was finished in 1955, and despite failing sight he was ready to take on a new challenge.

His friend Jack Matson, chairman of the Monotype Corporation, was in 1963 to be president of the Association of British Manufacturers of Printing Machinery, responsible for IPEX, the annual international exhibition of printing machinery. Morison suggested to him the idea of a historic exhibition to go with it. There would be two parts, one recording the growth and development of printing itself, the other its principal products. From the outset, Morison's interest concentrated on what

came, rather confusingly, to be called the 'historical' (as opposed to 'technical') part. He had spent most of the preceding fifty years thinking about printing and what made it great, and in the process had gathered round him, like Dr Johnson, a group of friends, who admired the vigour of his mind and the force with which he expressed it. He summoned them to the new task.

First was John Carter, whose intelligence and style, if different from his own, he much admired. Carter had for many years been the head of the London branch of Scribner's, and was now at Sotheby's. Equally important was Percy Muir, busy since the war re-establishing the shattered links of the European book trade. Besides these were Howard Nixon, Henry Steinberg, Helmut Feisenberger and myself: Nixon represented the British Museum, Steinberg, editor of *The Statesman's Yearbook*, was author of the influential Penguin *500 Years of Printing*; Feisenberger, another refugee, was now Sotheby's chief cataloguer of printed books; I was very much the junior member of the group, engaged by Morison in 1958 as assistant to help him finish his outstanding work. [I owed this indirectly to Senator William Benton, one of many to admire Morison's forceful intellect. He had asked Morison to become principal adviser on a new edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, to combat a new Russian encyclopaedia intended to infiltrate the countries of the Third World. I was the price that Morison exacted for this, which took him to Chicago, which he enjoyed, if at considerable detriment to his health.]

So we set to work in the spring of 1962. Muir was our chairman. He had far more experience of the task than the rest of us. Years spent discussing with Fleming what should or should not be included in his collection had made the dialectic involved a familiar exercise. He made it enjoyable for the rest of us.

The task as he defined it was formidable:

It meant, first, constructing a canon of eligible material... pinpointing the key books in the entire range of western thought and discovery; no mean job in itself. Secondly, the significance of each entry would have to be indicated within a maximum of 80/100 words.... Thirdly, when the entries had been chosen, copies of the books themselves had to be found in locations where they could be borrowed. Fourthly, a team had to be recruited able and willing to co-operate in all these different phases of the undertaking.

We were limited by the fact that literature, music and the arts were to be omitted unless they contributed to the *mind* of man, only those included that led to 'the propagation of ideas (e.g. *Candide*, *Alice in Wonderland*) or characters (e.g. Hamlet or Faust) which have sensibly affected his *thinking* and actions'. Another limitation was the absence of books, notably oriental, not printed from metal type. Both omissions were criticised at the time, but any expansion would have blurred the outline of Morison's concept without adding any defensible proportion of either element. The first 'cockshy' list was drawn up quickly, as quickly cut to pieces and redrawn, several times. Our presumed expertise (Nixon theology, Muir education and the human sciences, Feisenberger geography and all the other sciences, Steinberg history and politics, mine philosophy and the classics, with Carter contributing a few seminal texts) had begun to merge in the theme of the exhibition as a whole. One might propose and draft an entry, another re-write it. Sixteen successive lists were duplicated and circulated. A re-arrangement of our list by subject instead alphabetically revealed several glaring omissions. The restriction of literature, music and the arts, at first painful, came to seem a blessing as our task came to be more one of exclusion than inclusion.

Then came the hardest task of all, finding copies of the books. Although choice was never determined by availability, we were afraid, wrongly as it proved, that great libraries would not lend their treasures. We tried to get evocative copies whenever possible: Henry VIII's own *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* 1521 came from the Royal Library, Windsor; the first *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Baedeker guide and Brockhaus dictionary were the publishers' file copies. The most copious single lender was King's College, Cambridge, with the wonderful collection of Maynard Keynes to draw on. 51 books came thence, followed by 44 from the Fleming collection. Special climate-controlled cases were built to fit the books, all in chronological order, a rare if not unique instance. When the day for setting up came, the books were packed into an armoured van and driven straight into the lift to the exhibition floor at Earl's Court, whence they were taken to the specially made cases, the process reversed when the exhibition closed. Not a book was damaged, still less lost, at any point. The exhibition lasted for only 10 days, 16-27 July 1963, but the response was dramatic, not only from a large public and the national press, unused to trade fairs, but also apprentices and students from printing schools from all over the country; increasingly, the technical staff otherwise on duty on the stands stole away to look at this rival attraction.

But it was not the end; more was about to follow. An expanded version of the catalogue in folio had been foreseen from the outset, and four years it appeared, both editions a tribute to the design skills of John Dreyfus and Reynolds Stone, who engraved the title-pages. This is not the place to pursue the long subsequent history of PMM, the German and Japanese editions, the proposals to augment the original selection or create sectional versions (rightly rejected, in my view), still less the endless parodies of the title. All these manifestations are, in their different ways, tributes to the vitality of Morison's original concept. One aspect was only partly foreseen by the original team. We guessed, correctly, that 'PMM', like the Grolier 100, would be added to the book trade's pantheon of references. We did not guess how much it would influence both private and institutional collecting, nor the extent to which it would increase the prices of the books, those, at least, that were accessible. No one has, so far as I know, attempted to recreate another set of PMM - impossible, I would say, if I had not seen other feats deemed impossible achieved. For both Carter and Muir it was the summit of their professional lives.

Despite constant pressure, Ian Fleming never wrote for *THE BOOK COLLECTOR*, whose affairs, like his own, were surprised by his sudden death on 12 August 1964. Meanwhile, John Hayward maintained an iron grip on the authors, printers, subscribers and advertisers. Any back-sliding by any of them was rebuked in excoriating words, which made his rarer praise the more appreciated. He died just over a year after Fleming on 17 September 1965, and it was at his memorial service at St Luke's, Chelsea, on 1 October that I became his successor, gently coerced by Muir, Carter, and other friends. So *THE BOOK COLLECTOR* set off again, now without John Hayward's 'running away money', meant to be a shield against emergency, all absorbed by the punitive tax on the Fleming estate.

It is all but fifty years on, and we are in a world of old books not greatly changed, apart from the prices paid for 'iconic' authors' books, like Ian's. 'Iconic' is a word that has recently acquired a new meaning. 'Belonging to an image' has now blurred uneasily into 'Designating a person or thing regarded as representative of a culture or movement', clearly 'work in progress' for the lexicographers. In book trade terms, 'iconic', like 'rare' or 'fine', just means expensive. The *Discours de la Méthode* and *The Wealth of Nations*, both in PMM, are 'iconic'; so are *Pride and Prejudice* and *Wuthering*

Heights, which are not in PMM. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, *Waverley*, Disraeli's *Sybil*, all in, are not 'iconic', *Candide* and *Alice* both are. *The Rights of Man* 1791 is 'iconic' all right, but Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* 1790, as firmly in PMM, is as definitely not 'iconic'. In 1963 we wondered whether posterity would reverse our verdicts, or at least see not one but conflicting views as equally significant. We could not have guessed that 'iconic' would come to take the place of what we thought of as 'significant'.

I am not sure that this is a good thing, but other changes, alarming though they have seemed to some, strike me as less so. The worst is the disappearance of bookshops from high streets. While the universal pressure of increased property values has made it seem inevitable, a determined bookseller (and a sympathetic landlord, like the Salisbury family at Cecil Court in London) shows that it need not be. But relieved of shop hours, booksellers have become more mobile and imaginative. They get about, visit each others' shops (frowned on fifty years ago), discover new reasons for buying and selling and even reading books. The internet and the thousands of books offered for sale on ABE, Vialibri and other sites, put many more books in the reach of booksellers and book-collectors, who do not have to leave their desks to acquire them. This has meant that many books once thought to be rare have become common (no bad thing), but it deprives us all of the pleasure of looking for actual, as opposed to virtual, books on the shelves of libraries as well as bookshops. It also takes away the magic chance of discovering, not the book you were looking for, but a different, unknown, and ultimately more interesting or exciting book, next to it on the shelf. Doubtless 'virtual shelves' will make this possible one day. I refuse to be alarmed about the risk that e-books will banish real books – there is room for both, and no sign that one will banish the other. But one wholly beneficial result of the electronic revolution is that more and more people are beginning to take the secondary aspects of books of books – their physical characteristics, the signs of their movements in time, of owners and binders – as important as their primary role as bearers of texts for reading. The book as an object, as a piece of the furniture of our everyday lives, will survive.

It is these changes of taste that enliven THE BOOK COLLECTOR's pages. What does not change is the common passion for books shared by its readers and contributors.