

THE ALTHORP LIBRARY OF SECOND EARL SPENCER, NOW IN THE JOHN RYLANDS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY OF MANCHESTER: ITS FORMATION AND GROWTH*

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Earl Spencer is rightly associated with Thomas Frognall Dibdin who obtained so many books for him, and compiled the three Spencer library catalogues.¹ But one has to remember that it was Spencer whose taste in antiquarian books decided what was bought, thorough if not over-original though his taste for English black-letter texts and continental incunabula was. Whilst it was Dibdin who, by what he called, in a letter to Spencer of 3 August 1818, 'one of the most difficult, cautiously and delicately-conducted negotiations in the annals of bibliographical diplomacy', obtained the two Stuttgart Virgils from the King of Württemberg, he did not provide the initial stimulus to amass some fifteen incunabular editions of Virgil which Spencer ultimately owned.

George John, second Earl Spencer (1758–1834) had a family library at Althorp, near Northampton, on which to build. Our knowledge of it derives mainly from Dibdin's catalogues, and from the first Earl's binders' and booksellers' bills. Like other libraries of large private houses in the same family ownership for several centuries, it contained some rarities bought as reading copies. Among the twenty of them listed by Dibdin in the *Aedes Althorpianae* were Gamaliel Ratsey, *Ratsey's Ghost* (1605), of which STC lists only one copy, Spencer's now in the John Rylands University Library; Barnaby Googe's *A*

* An earlier version of this paper was read at the Colloquium of the International Association of Bibliophiles which was held in Manchester in September 1988. The author and the John Rylands University Library of Manchester are grateful to the officers of the Association for so readily consenting to its publication in a revised form in this *Bulletin*. Mr A.R.A. Hobson, current President of the Association, has kindly commented upon a first draft.

¹ *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* (4 vols., 1814–15); *Aedes Althorpianae* (2 vols., 1822); *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Books Printed in the Fifteenth Century, lately forming Part of the Library of the Duke di Cassano Serra* (1823). In addition, in this paper, use has been made of the immense series of letters (531 in all) from Dibdin to Spencer, formerly preserved at Althorp Hall and now in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Library. At the time of writing (November 1988) they still await final cataloguing. Among the Spencer muniments in the same depository are Spencer's book-sellers' and binders' bills covering the years 1784–1813 which were used by Frances Harris in 'The Spencers and the Booksellers,' *Factotum*, 25 (February 1988), 21–2. Letters from Spencer to Dibdin written between 1802 and 1807 (174 in number) are housed in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester (Eng. MS 71).

Newe Booke Called the Shippe of Safeguarde (1569), known by three copies, located respectively at the Rylands (the Spencer copy), the Newberry and the Folger Libraries; and T. Reend's *The Pleasant Fable of Hermaphroditus and Salmasius*, known only by two copies housed at the Rylands and the Bodleian Libraries. Dibdin believed the old library to have contained upwards of 7,000 volumes including the 2,000 bought by the first Earl from his former tutor, Dr George of Eton. One volume bore the number 7257. Many of the first Earl's books were disposed of by his son in favour of better copies, but a few such as those mentioned above and the Lascaris *Erotemata* (Milan, 1476), for which the first Earl paid £2.2.0, were retained, perhaps for their extreme rarity. In short, the library inherited by the second Earl was not a great one; it was the latter by the doggedness with which he pursued fine examples of early printed books who brought the library to greatness.

On 13 July 1813 Spencer wrote to Dibdin: 'I despair of getting any more Caxtons except by private Contract.'² In fact his despair was unfounded as other Caxtons he lacked were to appear at auction during his time as a collector, but in his reference to 'private Contract' Spencer was alluding to a method of purchase which obtained for him some of his finest books and was used by the third Mrs Rylands to buy the Spencer collection in 1892 for the library named after her husband.³ Spencer began to collect seriously about 1788 when he was thirty years of age. His initial interest was English black-letter printing, a taste he shared with Richard Farmer, George Steevens and the Duke of Roxburghe among many other collectors of the second half of the eighteenth century. He began buying when good books were still to be had very cheaply but accepted the huge inflation of the 'bibliomania' period, for which he was himself in part responsible, in his willingness to be under-bidder at £2,250 for the Valdarfer printing of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, sold at the Roxburghe sale of 1812 for £2,260 to the Marquis of Blandford. In common with other buyers Spencer believed that the upward trend in prices, most marked in the years 1810 onwards until about 1815, would continue indefinitely. A book which he bought at the Roxburghe sale was Le Fevre's *Le Recueil des histoires de Troyes* (Caxton, Bruges, 1476). Roxburghe had bought it for £5.0.0. from a Payne catalogue of 1794 (no. 799). Despite his

² Rylands Eng. MS 71, fo. 77.

³ She paid £210,000 for the *en bloc* purchase, a huge sum which could only have been spent at auction over many years. The library of the Earl of Ashburnham, one of the greatest to be sold under the hammer in the 1890s (an eight-day sale in June 1897) yielded only £62,911.8.6. The wonderful Huth Library was sold between 1911 and 1920 for £278,498.6.0. and an additional £30,000 was raised by the sale of the Shakespeares to Alexander Smith Cochran who presented them to the Elizabethan Club of Yale University. The fifty books bequeathed by A.H. Huth to the British Museum were worth a further £30,000, so the entire Huth Library was worth approximately £338,498, but it was the first British book sale to exceed in yield the cost of the Spencer books.

having presented George III with 11 folios from it to perfect his copy, it still cost Spencer £116.11.0.⁴ From the Mason sale of 1799 Spencer acquired a copy of *The Book of Hawkynges, Huntynge (and Fysshynge)* (St Albans, 1486) for £75, a phenomenally high price reached by competition with Nicol, the Royal bookseller, bidding on behalf of George III. Seventeen years later Dibdin valued it at £420.⁵

A complement to his enthusiasm for English black-letter texts was provided by his purchase in 1790, after prolonged negotiation, of the library of Count Reviczky, a sometime ambassador of Maria Theresa in Warsaw. This purchase of some 2,000 books proved also to be the bargain of Spencer's collecting career, as well as conferring upon him international status as a collector. Reviczky collected early printed continental texts and Aldines.⁶ His taste for the latter resulted in Spencer assembling the contents of the Aldine Room at Spencer House, St James's which, all 800 volumes, were later housed in a room of their own in the John Rylands Library. The bargain lay in Spencer's contract to pay Reviczky £1,000 down and then £150 a quarter for life. As the latter died conveniently in August 1793 Spencer had the collection for £2,500 which was only £240 more than the Valdarfer *Decameron* was to cost the Marquis of Blandford in 1812. Reviczky had bought considerably at the La Vallière sale held in Paris in 1784, and these books were among the first bought by the second Earl. Spencer added an accession number in ink to each of his purchases, placing it in the upper left-hand corner of the first paste-down. It would be an easy matter, therefore, to determine approximately when a book was bought (the accessions number over 20,000) were it not for the fact that when Spencer obtained a better copy of a book – a not infrequent occurrence – he re-used the old accession number. But, as Seymour de Ricci pointed out, the numbers do enable scholars to identify Spencer duplicates existing in other libraries'.⁷

To order a much enhanced and expanding library Spencer engaged an Italian named Tomaso d'Ocheda, previously librarian to Pierre-Antoine-Bolangaro-Crevenna whose famous library had been auctioned in Amsterdam in 1789. Ocheda's other duties were to prevent the ordering of duplicates, to sort good from inferior copies, and to ensure that reading copies were available at any of Spencer's four residences whenever a member of the family required them. Spencer and his librarian conversed in French. The latter remained in Spencer's service for a further twenty-eight years, until 1818 when he retired to his native land.

⁴ S. de Ricci, *A Census of Caxtons* (Oxford, 1909), 3b no. 4.

⁵ *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*, iv. 373.

⁶ Perhaps to aid the sale of the library, Reviczky published privately a catalogue with the title *Bibliotheca graeca et latina* . . . (Berolini, 1784). Supplements were issued in 1786 and 1788, and a second edition of the whole appeared in 1794. It runs to some 400 pages.

⁷ S. de Ricci, *English Collectors of Books and Manuscripts, 1530–1930* (Cambridge, 1930), 77.

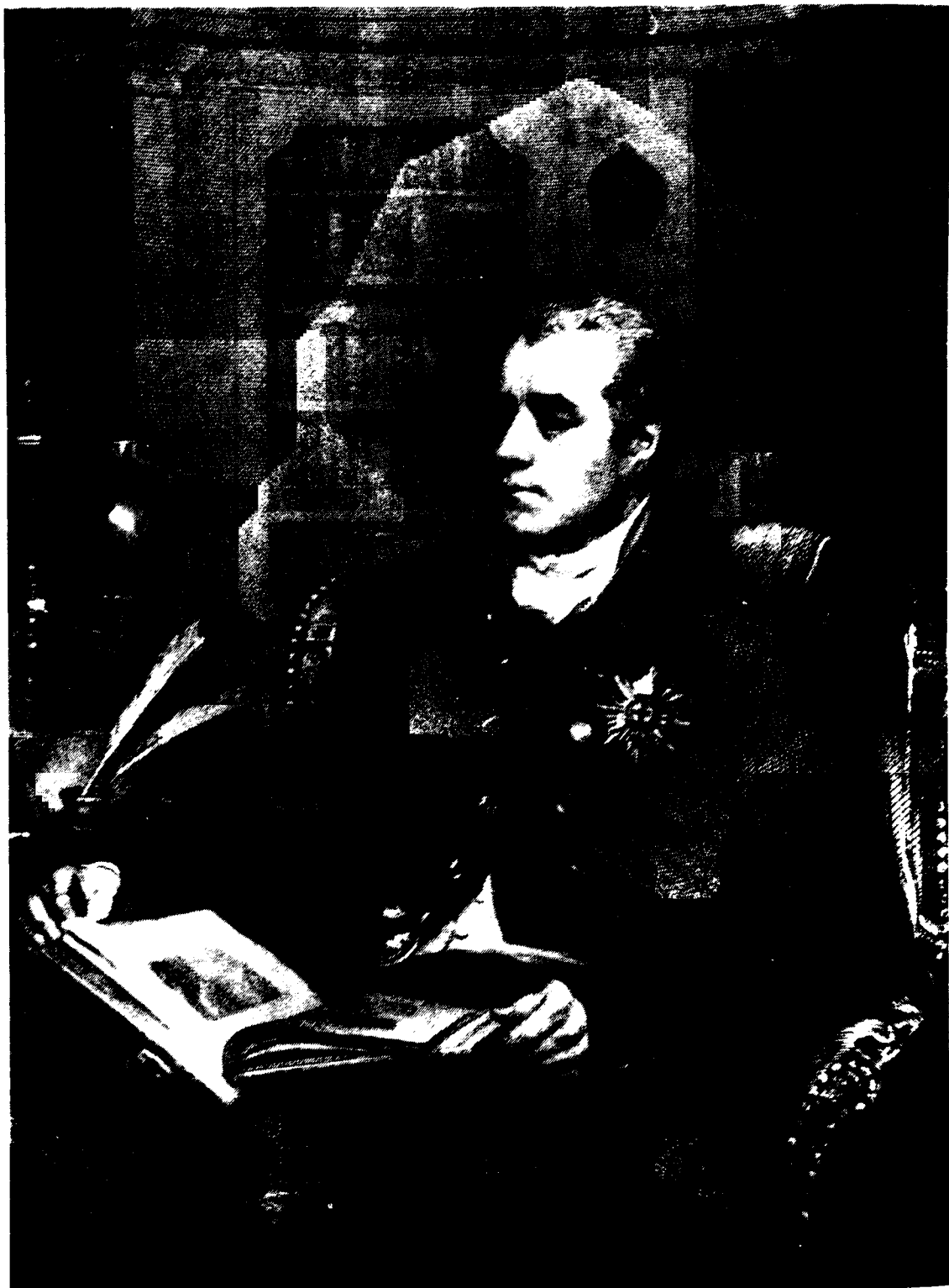


Figure 1

Portrait of George John, second Earl Spencer by Thomas Phillips, engraved by William Finden

The Reviczky acquisition created duplicates which were sold by Leigh & Sotheby in a three-day sale held in March 1790. Like other early Spencer sale catalogues this one is rare. Neither the John Rylands University Library nor even the British Library owns one, hence one must be grateful to Dibdin for providing, from Sir Mark Masterman Sykes' copy of the sale catalogue, a list of some sixty-two duplicates, among them fifteen incunabula.⁸ Which were Reviczky's copies is not clear, but we do know from Dibdin that Spencer criticized the condition of some of the books. According to the latter, Reviczky, known for his rejection of any book bearing marginalia no matter in whose hand, was given to 'washing, cleaning and ruling and [had] . . . the most vehement propensity to gaudy and garish binding.'⁹ Hence there was scope for replacing the Reviczky purchase as the occasion arose. A Sotheby's sale held in December 1798 can be identified as containing Spencer books from the auctioneer's copy in the British Library.¹⁰ Some of them were probably duplicates resulting from the Reviczky purchase. The full title of the catalogue reveals the sale to have been a mixed one, Sotheby's adding to 'the duplicates of a nobleman's library. . . .' (Spencer's) 'a selection of fine articles from a distinguished library.' The sale yielded for its total of 244 lots £571.14.6 of which only £256.8.0. went to Spencer. Some twenty-four lots were bought by Richard Heber. One Reviczky duplicate was disposed of in April 1802 when Sotheby's sold on 3 April the duplicates of an anonymous nobleman's library. The sale totalled 168 lots and realized £396.12.0. Dibdin acknowledged the Reviczky copy to have been a fine one but endorsed its disposal in favour of its replacement obtained by Spencer from Edwards who had it from Horn of Ratisbon who, in turn, had it from a monastic library.¹¹ The book was Pliny's *Natural History*, printed by Johannes de Spira (Venice, 1469); the Reviczky copy made £27.16.0. to Edwards. The last of Spencer's early sales was that of 6 June 1804. It was anonymous, held by Sotheby's who divided the books into 216 lots. The British Library copy of the catalogue, the only one located, bears neither prices nor names of buyers. The books sold were chiefly reading copies of standard literature. On 10 June 1811 Phillips had a sale of pictures and prints which lasted eight days netting a gross amount of £1,443.12.0. These details are taken from the British Library copy of the catalogue which bears a manuscript attribution of the material sold to Spencer's ownership.¹² If this sale was of Spencer property it had

⁸ *The Bibliographical Decameron* (1817), iii. 391–5.

⁹ *ibid.*, iii. 359.

¹⁰ [George John, 2nd Earl Spencer], *A Catalogue of the Duplicates of a Nobleman's Library* (1798).

¹¹ *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*, ii. 256.

¹² *Catalogue of a Superb Cabinet of Drawings, the Entire Collection of a Nobleman, formed with refined Taste and Judgement, about the Middle of the Last Century* (British Library, Department of Prints and Drawings, A6.14.)

evidently been assembled by the first Earl, but the attribution could be mistaken.

Spencer obtained books from the saleroom, chiefly Sotheby's and, after 1812, Evans', but he was not a frequent habitué of the saleroom as were some collectors of the day, notably Richard Heber. The Roxburghe sale was an unusual occurrence in that, apart from the huge sums spent, Spencer attended the sale in person. Normally he used the London booksellers, particularly Longman, to bid for him, whilst outside the trade there was Dibdin whose advice on bidding could be invaluable, as could his presence at a sale. Lot 2692 was the only known copy of the edition of Boccaccio's *Decameron* printed by Valdarfer at Venice in 1471. The occasion was a climactic one in saleroom history when a record price of £2,260 for a printed book was realized. It remained a record until 6 June 1873 when the Earl of Ashburnham paid £3,600 for a Gutenberg Bible on vellum, the former property of Henry Perkins, the brewer. The bidding, which began at £50, rose by bids of £10 to £2,250, and the under-bidder at that figure was Spencer. Dibdin's description of the event is to be found in its mock-heroic fullness in *The Bibliographical Decameron*.¹³ The happening was also witnessed by Leigh Hunt who recalled it in his *Autobiography*¹⁴ in telling, if less dramatic, terms:

I remember . . . [Spencer] well at the sale, and how he sat at the farther end of the auctioneer's table, with an air of intelligent indifference, leaning his head on his hand so as to push up the hat a little from off it. . . . It was curious, and scarcely pleasant to see two Spencers thus bidding against one another, even though the bone of contention was a book.

The other Spencer was, of course, the Marquis of Blandford. Whilst both contestants remained cool throughout the proceedings, Hunt might have added that, whereas Spencer could afford to meet his final bid it was doubtful whether Blandford could pay the £2,260 resulting from his final 'and ten' which he added to Spencer's two and a quarter thousand pounds. As early as 17 November 1817 Dibdin wrote to Spencer:

There is *more than a whisper* abroad, that an execution is carrying on in a certain house where the princeps *Decameron* is supposed to lodge. Will this treasure ever rest at Spencer House? The odds are not quite nine to one against such a circumstance taking place.

Both Spencer and the Duke of Devonshire spent heavily at the Roxburghe sale, the former having made more purchases than any other bidder.¹⁵ As he did not have to find two and a quarter thousand

¹³ iii. 64–5.

¹⁴ *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt* (1859), ch. vi.

¹⁵ T.F. Dibdin, *Reminiscences of a Literary Life* (1836), i. 362.

pounds for the Valdarfer *Decameron* Spencer might easily have bought the library of Dampier, late Bishop of Ely, when it was offered for sale by the latter's widow in the same summer (1812). It was whilst the Roxburghe sale was in progress that Dibdin was in negotiation with Dampier's widow, suggesting to Spencer that the purchase price of £10,000 should be met by an initial payment of £3,000 and the balance, at an agreed rate of interest, over the following year. Dibdin saw the forthcoming *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* as a means of publicizing the sale of books which Spencer might wish to sell as duplicates following the Dampier purchase. Spencer hesitated a fraction too long, despite his being greatly attracted by Dampier's library which he saw as a means of increasing and improving his holdings of continental incunabula. Devonshire acted quickly and decisively, and the library became his. Dibdin described the tense situation with a characteristic sense of heightened drama:

Lord Spencer was a competitor with his nephew, the Duke for this prize. So closely was the race run, that the breath of one antagonist might be said to be felt upon the shoulders of the other. Twenty-four hours' hesitation on the part of the Duke would have carried *Bibliotheca Damperiana* to Spencer House.¹⁶

Another library unfortunately refused by Spencer rather than lost in competition was Dibdin's own remarkable bibliographical library which the latter was obliged to put under the hammer in a three-day sale in June 1817. Although fewer than 1,000 books were involved in the sale (770 lots) which realized only £726.11.6. had Spencer bought them he would have gained thereby a first-rate bibliographical library, the cost of which could have been deferred by the sale of inevitable duplicates.¹⁷

Spencer viewed the onset of the year 1813 with financial misgiving. He wrote to Dibdin on 10 January, warning him that the impending marriage of his daughter, Sarah, to Lord Lyttleton would impose the utmost economy on book-buying. Nevertheless, nothing seems to have deterred him from increasing his holdings of Caxtons or other seriously-sought incunabula, and in the course of the year he bought the Alchorne library for £3,500 and spent heavily at the Merly sale, although he recovered some of his outlay by a sale of duplicates following the Alchorne purchase. Spencer's purchase of this small collection formed by Stanesby Alchorne, Controller of the Mint from 1789 until his death in 1800, was his least happy *en bloc* acquisition. It was a choice collection of early printed books which included the 1460

¹⁶ *ibid.* The Dampier books remained at Chatsworth until the present century. Some were sold in the Christie sale of part of the Duke of Devonshire's Charitable Trust held on 30 September and 1 October 1981.

¹⁷ See A.N.L. Munby, 'Dibdin's Reference Library: The Sale of 26–28 June, 1817', *Studies in the Book Trade in Honour of Graham Pollard* (Oxford, 1975). This article includes a reprint of the catalogue.

Mainz *Catholicon*, the Sweynheim and Pannartz printing of Lactantius (1468), and two editions of Valerius Maximus, one the work of Mentelin dating from about 1470 and the other from the press of Peter Schoeffer (1471). There was also a copy of Fra Eliseo de Treviso's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Aldus, Venice, 1499),¹⁸ and a group of very important Caxtons, among them the *Cordiale* (1479), the *Game and Playe of the Chesse* (1481), the *Cato* (?1484) and Voragine's *The Golden Legende* (1493). The collection had been offered to Spencer in 1806 but, to his subsequent regret, he had refused it. It was bought by the bookseller, Payne, who had re-sold it to Johnes of Hafod whose beautiful estate in Cardiganshire, which included his Hafod Press, incurred an intolerable financial burden which had put him in need of £4,000. He asked £3,600 which was three times Johnes's purchase price. On Spencer's behalf Dibdin offered £3,000, suggesting to Johnes that the amount be paid at three or even six months. He also suggested an alternative, namely that a consortium be formed of Spencer, Devonshire and Sir Mark Masterman Sykes who might divide the purchase between them, but nothing came of this possibility. Dibdin raised the offer to £3,150. After some further haggling Johnes accepted £3,400 paid by Spencer alone, in the form of £1,000 at two and three months, and a final £1,400 to be paid four months later. Dibdin made clear to Johnes that, if imperfections were found in the books, and confirmed by an informed judge such as Evans or Payne, the purchase price would have to be reduced. By way of compensation Johnes deducted £100 for defects he personally acknowledged to have found in his copy of the *St Albans Chronicle*. On arrival the books proved woefully defective in many ways. Both Spencer's memories and those of Dibdin were at fault. Both had visualized the books to be far nearer perfect than they in fact were. Unless some were returned the amount for the whole must have been sharply reduced. The transaction is the more remarkable as from 200 or so books involved Spencer wished for only fifteen, and of those the Caxtons were to be used to perfect, or even only to improve, copies already in his possession. The extent and quality of Spencer's holdings of early printed books were such that he retained only two of the Caxtons one of them a Boethius which he used to improve a copy he already possessed. He also kept the *St Albans Chronicle* of 1484 which Dibdin described as lacking the last leaf. In fact, it lacked three leaves of print and three blanks, the former of which were supplied in facsimile. Spencer also kept what Dibdin described as 'several scarce pieces in quarto, and some fine volumes in folio, from the press of Wynkyn de Worde.'¹⁹ Assisted by Dibdin who compiled the catalogue, Evans auctioned the rest of the Alchorne books on 22 May 1813 at a sale

¹⁸ This was not the Grolier copy sold by the John Rylands University Library in 1988.

¹⁹ *The Bibliographical Decameron*, iii. 84.

which attracted some of the foremost buyers of the day, among them Heber, Sykes, Devonshire and Grenville. Spencer just recouped his outlay. Dibdin estimated that on the £1,900 which the books made Spencer had “brought himself home” within about £25’.²⁰

The sale of Ralph Willett, or the Merly sale, of December 1813 is interesting in several respects. Spencer entrusted his bids to Dibdin who viewed the books carefully, reporting on their condition to his patron who altered some of his bids accordingly. Fourteen lots particularly interested him including two Caxtons: *The Mirror of the World* and the *Orologium*; the first printed Ptolemy with maps printed in Rome by Arnoldus Buckinck in 1478; and two copies of the Horace *Opera* (Grüniger, Strasburg, 1498) which Spencer wanted in order to improve a copy which he already possessed. He instructed Dibdin to go to £15 for the better of the two copies which the latter obtained for £13.13.0. In the case of the Caxton *Orologium Sapientie; or, The Book of Divers Ghostly Matters* (c. 1491, lot 1777) he hoped to negotiate with his nephew, the Duke of Devonshire, so that the latter refrained from bidding. Unluckily, his nephew was unco-operative, and Spencer who had authorized Dibdin to take the bidding to £210 was obliged to pay £195 for it, Devonshire disappointing his hope that as ‘there are so many other Caxtons in this sale that would suit him that it will be but fair he should leave this to me.’²¹ In authorizing Dibdin to go so high for the *Orologium* Spencer manifested the bibliomania at its most virulent. He revealed to Dibdin that he resolved to have the book after reading Herbert’s account of the work which he found in the library at Holkham in December 1813:²²

... I have looked into Herbert’s *Ames* which is in the library here, and on perusing his account of the *Orologium Sapientiae*, I have determined in my own mind that not only £160, but not even £200, or still more, shall *carry it off from me*.²³

In his placing of bids at the Willett sale Spencer showed a blind-spot where block-books were concerned. Lots 2345 and 2346 were editions of the great block-book, *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* of which he told Dibdin in a letter dated 13 July 1813:²⁴

The *Speculum humanae salvationis* has, if I mistake not, occurred once at least, if not oftener, since I have been a Collector, but till of late I was very indifferent to the acquisition of Block-Books; and even now I should be much more tempted by articles more in my genuine line of collection.

²⁰ *ibid.*, iii. 88.

²¹ Rylands Eng. MS 71, fo. 90.

²² *Typographical Antiquities* . . . begun by the late Joseph Ames . . . considerably Augmented, both in the Memoirs and Number of Books, by William Herbert (1790), i. 90–1.

²³ Letter quoted by Dibdin in *Reminiscences*, i. 504.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 503–4. The original is in Rylands Eng. MS 71, fo. 77.



Figure 2
 St Christopher block-print of 1423

Of this sentiment Dibdin added the following comment:

But his Lordship afterwards became possessed of a famously rare block-book in the *Chiromancy of Dr. Hartlieb* – obtained by him at the cost of 100 guineas. . . . He afterwards obtained three block-books, bound in one volume, with the date of 1462 upon the exterior of the binding. . . .

For lot 2345 he authorized Dibdin to go to £60 and for lot 2346 to only £50. In the event Samuel Weller Singer paid £315 for the former lot and Longman £252 for the latter. Ultimately, Spencer obtained others among them the famous St Christopher block-print of 1423 together with the block itself, this last being presented by Thomas Astle, the historian of handwriting.

A subsequent Rylands librarian was able to report that there were fifteen such books in the Library but some were probably acquired after 1892.²⁵ Spencer's early opinion of block-books was shared by the great incunabulist of the last century, Henry Bradshaw, who did not acquire such a book for Cambridge University Library until the Syston Park sale in 1884. On 30 December 1884 he wrote to Quaritch, 'There are many people who no doubt would be glad to see a block-book in the University Library; but for my own part I must confess that there are many books in your stock that I would much sooner buy for the Library. . . .'²⁶

In the early years of the last century the collector could easily turn to advantage the dilemma which still faces the ecclesiastical authorities in our great cathedrals: whether to retain rare but little-used books or sacrifice them to purchase new and much needed ones, or to use the money realized for a different purpose, such as the maintenance of a choir school, as happened at Ripon in 1960. In 1811 Spencer had purchased, through Edwards, the dealer, three great Caxtons from the library at Lincoln Cathedral. Dibdin described all three in *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*. They were *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* (1475), *The History of Jason* (c. 1477) and the first edition of *Raynart the Foxe* (1481).²⁷ Discretion was practised by all, as the books formed part of the Honeywood Bequest of 1681. We do not know Spencer's purchase price, but it was probably less than the £1,000 which Dibdin believed they would have cost at the high noon of the bibliomania. In September 1813 Dibdin visited Lincoln Cathedral with a view to repeating Edwards' *coup* there. He was highly successful, obtaining for £525, payable by a promissory note at eighty-five days, some fourteen early printed books. All were British, and they included three more Caxtons. His purchase price was probably a fair one if less than

²⁵ H. Guppy, *The John Rylands Library, Manchester, 1899–1935* (Manchester, 1935), 36.

²⁶ D. McKitterick, *Cambridge University Library, a History: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1986), 676.

²⁷ *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*, iv. nos. 838, 840, 849.

the books would have realized at auction. But then the Dean and Chapter were prepared to take less than a possible auction price in order to avoid unwanted publicity and even litigation. Their sacrifice was made futile by Dibdin's blunder of publishing a 16-page pamphlet entitled *Here Beginnyth a Littel Tome and to Name the Lincolne Nosegay: Beynge a Breve Table of Certaine Books in the Possession of Maister Thomas Frognall Dibdin Clerk*. The publication probably resulted from Dibdin's need of the £525 which he otherwise lacked and from fear that it would not be forthcoming from Spencer whose attitude initially was cool. He wrote to Dibdin from Ryde, Isle of Wight, on 24 August 1814²⁸ expressing a rather tepid interest in two Caxtons which he thought might be of use to improve copies already in his possession. He also showed interest in an Edinburgh-printed Bible, asking rather oddly if it were printed in the Scottish language. It was actually a reprint of the Geneva Bible of 1560. Also of potential use was a volume of miscellaneous tracts which he hoped to use in an exchange for a Caxton, *The Pilgrimage of the Sowle* (1483), owned by Richard Heber. In the event of Heber's refusal Spencer was prepared to pay him £250 cash, which he probably did as he certainly obtained the book from Heber.²⁹ How many of his Lincoln purchases Spencer retained is difficult to determine. In 1953 Professor William A. Jackson traced thirteen of them to institutional libraries in the United States, whilst a Fabian *Chronicle* of 1516 is certainly at the John Rylands University Library today and, as Jackson suggested, a copy of the Edinburgh Bible there may also have come from the Lincoln loot.³⁰

In August 1816 Spencer, on a northern journey fraught with bad weather, examined the stock of William Ford, the bankrupt Manchester bookseller from some of whose earlier catalogues he had bought items. He was disappointed by what he saw, but moved on to Liverpool to place bids with Winstanley, the auctioneer who was about to auction the splendid library of William Roscoe, the Liverpool author and banker who was obliged to sacrifice his library also owing to bankruptcy. Spencer did not remain in Liverpool for the sale but left bids with Winstanley for ten lots. In eight instances his bids were successful, although the London trade was there in force, among them Longman and Payne and Foss, Heber also placed bids, although it is not clear that he attended personally. Other provincial booksellers whom he patronized included Sams of Darlington, Gutch of Bristol and Todd of York. Surprisingly, there is no record of his having dealt with the de Bures, but another Parisian bookseller, Chardin of Paris,

²⁸ Rylands Eng. MS 71, fo. 119.

²⁹ *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*, iv. no. 879; de Ricci, *A Census of Caxtons*, no. 73.3.

³⁰ In a paper called 'The Lincolne Nosegay Books' originally published by the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association in 1953 and reprinted in *Records of a Bibliographer: Selected Papers of William Alexander Jackson*, ed. W.H. Bond (Cambridge, Mass, 1967), 51-62.

supplied books, some of them through Dibdin, after the latter's visit to Paris in 1819. Another important source of supply was Alexander Horn of Ratisbon who had a Dibdinian facility for obtaining books from religious houses.

Spencer's known determination to acquire copies of every Caxton subjected him to very hard bargaining indeed as when, in April 1813, Dibdin entered into protracted negotiations on Spencer's behalf with Octavius Gilchrist, 'the scholar-grocer of Stamford', for a copy of Caxton's edition of Lydgate's *Lyf of our Ladye*.³¹ Gilchrist was a minor literary figure who had curtailed his time at Oxford in order to assist a relative in a grocery store at Stamford. Dibdin wrote of him to Spencer:

The grocer is Mr Octavius Gilchrist: but Mr Gilchrist is a book-collector, a Bibliomaniac, a Critic and a writer in the Quarterly Review. He is very knowing of old Poetry; and unfortunately this Life is a poetical one-by Lydgate. He considers the book to be the *Planet* of his Library.

How the book was obtained in 1814 has more to do with Dibdin than with Spencer, but it is perhaps sufficient to say that, after starting off with an offer of 50 guineas which Gilchrist, well-versed in current book prices, immediately rejected, Spencer's offer rose to 70 guineas, then to £100 and finally to £262.10.0. payable at two months. On taking the book to the Royal Library to collate it with George III's copy, Spencer found it to lack eleven folios. Surprisingly, he retained it and Dibdin included it in the *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* with the following comment: 'This valuable acquisition in the Caxtonian department of the Library under description was obtained from the curious library of Mr Octavius Gilchrist; for a consideration proportionate to its worth.' It was a very poor copy, Spencer having the missing leaves reproduced in facsimile.³²

It must be emphasized that Spencer was an excellent payer for all his purchases, as he was of his binders. The early bills preserved at the British Library in the Althorp muniments show that the booksellers, like the binders, were leisurely in sending their bills. Between 9 June and 31 December 1788 Spencer spent with Elmsley, the London bookseller, £269.18.7. for eighty-two items of which the most expensive was Saint-Non's *Voyage pittoresque, ou description du royaume de Naples et de Sicile* (4 volumes, 1781–86) at £30. Some of the rest cost not more than a few shillings each. Elmsley's account was settled on 6 February 1789, only some six weeks after the account had been submitted. Another London bookseller, Robson, acknowledged on 30 May 1789 payment of £294.3.0 for books which he had bought for

³¹ *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*, iv. no. 879. de Ricci, *A Census of Caxtons*, no. 71.6.

³² A list of repairs is provided in *English Incunabula in the John Rylands Library* (Manchester, 1930), 59 and by de Ricci, *A Census of Caxtons*, no. 71.6.

Spencer at the Pinelli sale which had taken place on 2 March and the succeeding sixty days. Of course, we do not know how far into the sale Spencer instructed Robson to bid, but his settlement of the latter's bill was of exemplary quickness, probably under two months. Hence the trade, and the private vendor, could expect very speedy treatment, a factor which must have worked in Spencer's favour and have helped Dibdin wherever he negotiated on his patron's behalf.

The condition of Spencer's books has to be faced in any consideration of the building-up of the library. Sophistication as repellent to the modern bibliographer as it is to the modern collector was a condition of many older books in private libraries at the time of the bibliomania. For example, Spencer's copy of the Polish Bible of Radziwil of 1563 was made up from two incomplete copies bought by Spencer for £100, and such cannibalization was common, as was the presentation by one collector of missing leaves required by another to perfect a copy in the latter's possession. Expertly executed facsimiles often indistinguishable from early typography were often resorted to. A particularly talented provider of them was John Whittaker, a great restorer and printer of letters in gold.

We know little of the state of the original bindings of many of Spencer's books. Many were rebound for him, and in this the Caxtons appear to have been especially unlucky. We must bear in mind, of course, the settings in which the books were kept. In the *Aedes Althorpianae*³³ Dibdin described five rooms at Althorp devoted mainly to books. They included the Long Library; a room designated the Raphael Library, because a Holy Family attributed to that artist hung over the fireplace, and containing mainly verse and county histories (Spencer preferred the latter to be on large paper); and the Billiard Library, so called from a billiard table in its centre. This account was written at a time when the finest incunabula were still housed in St James's; they were not moved to Althorp until Spencer's final years. Visiting Spencer House, St James's on 22 December 1826, Henry Crabb Robinson, who was no bibliophile, was impressed by the books and their setting. He wrote in his *Diary*:³⁴

Besides the typographical curiosities the house is well worth seeing – it is the most palatial house in London – the rooms beautifully proportioned and the state ornaments magnificent – painted by Cypriani. The gilded ornaments of the corniches [*sic*] &c all designed by Athenian Stuart.

In an aura of architectural and artistic magnificence which one found in both houses books had to contribute to the overall effect, or at least not to detract from it.

³³ i. 20–236.

³⁴ This passage was not included in full by Edith J. Morley in *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers* (1938). It is taken from the original MS in Dr Williams's Library.



Figure 3
View of the Long Library at Althorp in 1892

Some of the *rariora* Spencer acquired were in extremely poor condition. Let us suppose that he had bought the 'bread and cheese Caxton' which was offered him by Hurst, the bookseller, through Dibdin in 1815. Not merely did it lack an entire signature, but it was badly stained and tainted by a 'bread and cheese smell as if it had been stored in a poor man's cupboard', as Dibdin put it in a letter to Spencer.³⁵ Hurst claimed to have paid £210 for it and was offering it for £300, an offer which Spencer dismissed with contumely, asking Dibdin if he supposed that he (Spencer) meant to spend the forthcoming London season in Bedlam. The book was the second edition of the *Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophers* (1479), and perhaps Dibdin encouraged the purchase because, as he put it, 'it was a long cherished desideratum', and no doubt Charles Lewis could have been relied upon to work a cosmetic miracle with the damp stains and with the smell. The binding would certainly have been abandoned and intensive cleaning resorted to, an expedient which Spencer disliked. It was a rare Caxton³⁶ and one which Spencer was never again to have the opportunity to refuse; hence Dibdin's enthusiasm was not perhaps misplaced.

Similarly, there was the case of the two early printed Oxford books, one of which Dibdin ran to ground in Oxford itself. It was Rufinus' *Expositio Sancti Hieronymi*, bearing the fictitious date of '1468' instead of 1478, but nevertheless the first book to be printed in Oxford.³⁷ It belonged to an Oxford widow named Lewis who insisted on a price of £150. Spencer, delighted with the purchase, claimed that its acquisition had 'helped in the cure of an attack of gout' and added 'in my illness black letter is more efficacious than black doses.'³⁸ Dibdin sent the book to Charles Lewis³⁹ to be bound uniformly with a copy of the Oxford edition of Leonardo Bruni's Latin translation of Aristotle's *Ethics* (1479).⁴⁰ His opinion that 'side by side they will make a most respectable appearance in your Lordship's black-letter Cabinet' can strike a chill in the twentieth-century student of the book. What, if anything, was lost? Were these books in original bindings, or were they merely in the panelled calf of some later time? Was some indication of an interesting provenance irretrievably lost? We shall never know.

However, what we do know is that earlier bindings in good condition were not merely preserved by Spencer but highly esteemed. He did not, as a recent correspondent to the *Times Literary Supplement* claimed, tear 'off the medieval bindings of books he acquired in order

³⁵ Rylands Eng. MS 71, fo. 132.

³⁶ de Ricci, *A Census of Caxtons*, no. 38 records only five copies but STC 6826-9 suggests that the book is bibliographically more complex than de Ricci or Dibdin realized.

³⁷ F. Madan, *The Early Oxford Press* (Oxford, 1895), i. 1.

³⁸ Rylands Eng. MS 71, fo. 125.

³⁹ Whether or not the widow and the binder were related must remain conjectural.

⁴⁰ Madan, *The Early Oxford Press*, i. no. 2 and i. 253.

to replace them with his own.⁴¹ Dibdin remarked of the 1469 Livy printed by Sweynheym and Pannartz, and in the private collection of James Edwards:

It is in its original binding, with richly illuminated borders at the beginning of each of the three Decads; and from the arms at the bottom of the first page of the history, these illuminations appear to have been done for R. Borgia . . . [who] afterwards assumed the purple under the well-known and execrated name of Alexander VI.⁴²

Here was a respect for original condition and provenance which characterized Spencer's approach to the antiquarian book, as well as Edwards'. We find it in the attitude of both Spencer and Dibdin to a rebound copy of the *Greek Anthology* (Laurentius de Alopa, Florence, 1494). Dibdin remarked ' . . . the reader cannot but regret, with the great noble Owner of it, that its original exterior has been exchanged for a modern and less appropriate binding.'⁴³ The first exhibition held at the John Rylands Library in 1899 was in part devoted to distinguished bindings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many of which had been left in their original state by Spencer, among them Bembo's *Gli Asolani* (Aldus, Venice, 1515) in an original Venetian binding.⁴⁴ Other interesting examples of original bindings preserved by Spencer include a Vulgate Bible with Sir Kenelm Digby's monogram on its spine, and a volume of early printed tracts bearing a rebus of an original owner's name: W. Langton ('Lang' and 'tun') incorporated by Lewis into a rebinding. (The 'L' of the surname penetrates a 'tun' or cask).

One must admit that many eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century collectors were indifferent to the condition of their books provided they were virtually complete reading copies. Samuel Johnson is an infamous case in point as is Richard Farmer, who stored his books on the floor of his rooms at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and who wrote his will on a detached free end-paper. When his books were auctioned in 1798 they fetched only some £2,117 for 8,155 lots, an average of approximately 4s. 6d. In Spencer's day complete rebinding was commoner than repairing a damaged binding. For both operations Spencer made extensive use of Charles Lewis (1786–1836), born in London, son of Johann Ludwig, formerly of Hanover. Lewis was apprenticed to Walther, another of the German school of binders working in London at the end of the eighteenth century, and had served his time as an apprentice by 1807.⁴⁵ By 1823 he was foremost

⁴¹ *TLS*, 15 April 1988, 423.

⁴² *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*, ii. 130.

⁴³ *ibid.*, iii. 3.

⁴⁴ The opening of the Library was commemorated by the *Catalogue of the Manuscripts, Books and Bookbindings exhibited at the Opening of the John Rylands Library, Manchester, October 6th, 1899* (Manchester, 1899).

⁴⁵ E. Howe, *List of Bookbinders, 1648–1815* (1950), 58; C. Ramsden, *London Bookbinders, 1780–1840* (1956), 96.

among London binders, employing twenty-one journeymen. Spencer certainly made use of him before 1814 as his work is mentioned in the first volume of the *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*. The seven volumes of Dibdin's catalogues mentioned at least 235 of his rebindings: one refers here to titles, not to the number of volumes which was, of course, much greater. Lewis, too, must have bound or repaired many books printed after 1500 and not included in the *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*. Lewis worked on far more of Spencer's books than did Roger Payne whose binding of the Foulis Press *Aeschylus* (1795) in the library is a bibliopegistic masterpiece. Dibdin certainly encouraged Spencer to patronize him. Rarely in the Spencer catalogues is Lewis mentioned without an added compliment. A Lewis binding is 'chaste and elegant' or a book has been rebound 'in the purest taste of C. Lewis in dark blue morocco.' His skill in restoration is noted by Dibdin in his treatment of the Cassano-Serra copy of Manuel Diaz, *Libro de albeyteria* (Saragossa, 1495): 'Unfortunately, the present copy is, towards the end, in a very wretched condition – from a large and I fear immovable stain – which pervades the last twenty pages . . .' But he was able to add before the *Cassano Catalogue* went to print: 'Since the preceding was written, the book has been returned from the binder (C. Lewis) wonderfully mended and improved; and bound in pale rus-sia.' Another binder Spencer favoured was Hering who did at least eighty-five rebindings. Kalthoeber, Walther, Smith and Mackinlay were also used by Spencer but far more infrequently than Lewis. Great continental binders such as the Bozerians and Padeloup figure rarely, and their work is probably found only on books already bound by them when acquired by Spencer.

Between an original binding in fine state and a complete rebinding there were compromises. In order to preserve the original parchment covers of a Turrecremata *Meditationes* of 1467 Lewis made a book-box, made to look like a book by having a full-calf binding over the wood complete with title. The fore-edge had a lock. One wishes that such a book-box, by no means a disfigurement of its environment, had been used more often instead of rebinding. Slip-cases, in which the upper portion of a case was detached from the lower and an original binding preserved inside, could be used on occasion as in the case of the block-printed French calendar of 1525, housed in the manner of nineteenth-century large-scale county maps.⁴⁶

By the time of his purchase of the Cassano collection in 1820 Spencer had amassed a library by the possession of which, in Dibdin's

⁴⁶ The *Calendaire* is *Aedes*, ii. 303–4, no. 1299. The book-box was first known in this country as a 'solander' named after the Swedish botanist, D.C. Solander (1736–82) and first used to house specimens; R.W. Burchfield, *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* (1986), iv. 260. The slip-case is far older than the first use of the word recorded in the *OED Supplement* which traces the term no further back than A. Edward Newton's *This Book-collecting Game* (1930), ii. 20.

words, he could 'challenge competition even with the finest public library in Europe'.⁴⁷ The twenty-five incunabular editions of Livy were probably unparalleled in any library, private or public, containing among them the rarest known. It would be inappropriate to end this paper on a utilitarian note, but one must ask what satisfaction Spencer gained from his books other than that of possessing books which were thereby denied to other collectors. He had more sense than to use his editions of Livy or the seventy or more incunabular editions of Cicero as reading copies, but he did read Latin and Greek fluently and was able to read and converse in French and Italian. He had a familiarity with some classical texts which was both bibliographical and textual. An example of his latter propensity, reported by Dibdin, is to be seen in his noticing that, in the second book of an *Aeneid* (Mentelin, no date), 'there is a gratuitous and unauthenticated verse, preceding the 130th; which was pointed out to me by Lord Spencer, and which I find in no other ancient impression'.⁴⁸ When he looked at his seventy incunabular editions of Cicero he was not looking merely at a Latin author whom he could read without difficulty in the original but at recognizable typographical styles from the Fust and Schoeffer, *De Officiis* (Mainz, 1465) onwards and between which he was able to make informed comparisons. To the end-papers of many of his books he pencilled bibliographical notes. To an edition of the Chrysolaras, *Erotemata* in Greek, undated, without place of publication or name of printer, he added a note suggesting that it was the work of Laurentius de Alopa, Florence, 1494, or slightly earlier. He was right in each particular, save the date. A more recent authority⁴⁹ ascribes to the work a date of ?1496. Even if his speculations were sometimes inaccurate they reflected a careful and experienced scrutiny as well as familiarity with the bibliographers of his day.

By 1823, when the final volume of his library catalogue appeared, Spencer was sixty-five, and although he went on acquiring books for the rest of his life his bibliomaniacal ardour had cooled. Dibdin's clerical duties at his newly-acquired parishes of Exning, near Newmarket, and St Mary's, Bryanston Square, Marylebone occupied more of his time than had previous clerical appointments, whilst avoiding his London creditors in the later 1820s and 1830s consumed his time and energy. Spencer's representative in the saleroom was George Appleyard, a Northamptonshire man with experience of work in a government office. He served Spencer well in a dual capacity as librarian and secretary, although Dibdin was permitted on occasion to show visitors round Spencer House, as he did the party which included Crabb Robinson in 1826. Spencer died leaving his estates

⁴⁷ *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*, iv. vi.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, ii. 464.

⁴⁹ *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in Italy 1465-1600 now in the British Museum* (1958), 172.

heavily encumbered, although his book collecting must be seen as only a part of his life-style, that of the extravagant Whig aristocrat. The third Earl showed great good sense in not consigning the Althorp Library to the saleroom. Perhaps the depressed state of the market, undergoing a bad attack of what Dibdin called the 'bibliophobia', helped restrain him. The third Earl was content to leave the Library alone and devote himself very successfully to agriculture; he proposed the formation of the Royal Agricultural Society in 1837.⁵⁰ The Library remained at Althorp until 1892 when it passed into the ownership of the John Rylands Library where, in very substantial part, it still remains.

⁵⁰ J.V. Beckett. *The Aristocracy in England, 1660–1914* (Oxford, 1986), 160, 166.