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CLUB BOOKS.

EARLY in the present century, a taste, almost amounting to a mania, grew up for securing copies of rare books. Of the originals, there were so very few, and those mostly confined to public libraries, that the only available resource was reprinting. But to attempt reprinting on a large scale was hopeless, for 'it would not pay.' The only means for reproducing the works in question consisted in an association of individuals, each of whom, by an annual payment, would have a copy of every work printed. By such arrangements a very large accession has been made to history, biography, archaeology, and various other branches of human knowledge. It will be understood that the books so produced did not pass through the ordinary process of publication; nor were the volumes of a popular cast. For the most part, the number of copies was strictly limited, each volume, in a stately quarto size, costing perhaps a guinea. Only wealthy persons with an acute fancy for rare productions, could indulge in the whim of being members of these club-book societies.

It will be further understood, that there was much nicety in selecting the works to be reproduced. The members of the society did not want accuracy, according to modern grammar and spelling. They liked to get an exact reflex of a first, and it might be imperfect edition, containing possibly passages that were afterwards expunged; extreme rarity being what was mainly prized. It was also a great matter to see that the original cut of letter was preserved; and for this purpose, types had to be made specially to represent old characters not to be found in any modern printing-office. The thing, it will be perceived, was very much of a craze; but it was a craze of an innocent and creditable kind; and we should be thankful that there were men who went into it with zest and aptitude. They gave their money. The books they reproduced now exist, though in limited numbers, and the world of letters is so much the richer.

A kind of beginning to the club-book mania was given by the sale by auction of the library of John, third Duke of Roxburghe, in 1814. His Grace had been the most energetic and eminent book-collector in the United Kingdom. His library was large and valuable, and the sale lasted over forty-two days. Wealthy collectors assembled in force, and gave high prices for such works as claimed to be rarities. There were 10,120 lots in all, comprising about 30,000 volumes; and the money paid for them by the bidders at the auction amounted in the aggregate to L.23,398 The Duke of Devonshire gave L.1050 for the *History of Troy*, the first book printed by William Caxton in England, in 1471; the bidders were eager to obtain it simply because it was one of a very few copies of that edition known to be still in existence. There were eleven other Caxtons in the catalogue; and the whole twelve brought L.246 each on an average. But the great struggle was for Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, a copy of the first edition printed at Venice, by Valdarfar. The book was not very choice in any particular except that it was the first edition, and that hardly any other perfect copy of it was known. The Duke of Roxburghe had given L.100 for it some years before. At the sale in 1812, the Marquis of Blandford and Earl Spencer alike set their hearts upon possessing it; emulation grew warm; neither one chose to give way to the other; and the earl did not cease to bid till he had gone up to L.2250; the marquis bid another L.10, and carried off the prize for the stupendous sum of L.2260—the highest price, it is believed, ever paid for a single volume.

Tho principal buyers at the sale did not wish that this famous day, the *Decamerone* day, should pass into oblivion. The Rev. T. F. Dibdin, a celebrated bibliophilist of that age, proposed a dinner. Twenty-four dined together at a tavern in London, including the titled representatives of the Howard, Churchill, Cavendish, Spencer, and Gower families, together with Sir Egerton Brydges, the Rev. Holwell Carr, Mr Heber, and other

owners of famous libraries. It was agreed that they and a few others should form a club or society, to be called the Roxburghe Club, in commemoration of the Roxburghe sale, and that they should dine together annually on the 17th of June, the anniversary of the day on which the *Decamerone* was sold. Many years afterwards, Mr Haslewood, one of the members, wrote an account of those dinners, under the title of the *Roxburghe Revels*— most extravagant revels they certainly were.

If luxurious indulgence had been all, we should not have noticed the Roxburghe Club here. But it was agreed among the members that each should, in turn, print some rare work at his own expense, and give one copy to every member—a copy on vellum to the president. The plan was afterwards altered. The members were to be 40 as a maximum; an annual subscription was paid; the aggregate amount was spent in printing rare and curious old works; 100 copies were printed of each work, two for each member, and 20 to be sold to the public at such prices as the committee might determine. Old histories, chronicles, diaries, household books, topographical sketches, ballads, ecclesiastical and monastic treatises, *&c*, were published from time to time under these regulations—some from old printed, but almost inaccessible copies, some from old manuscripts. Many of the works were greatly valued; and, owing to the small number of copies printed, a complete set of the Roxburghe Club publications would, now command a high price.

From this Roxburghe Club sprung many others, some of which collapsed after a few years; but the majority still remain, distinguished by having brought to light many curious literary treasures which had long been buried in obscurity. The printing-clubs, thus established, are not learned societies or literary institutions in the ordinary sense; they neither give lectures nor read papers, nor do they carry on discussions in a formal manner. They were, as has been stated, simply clubs for printing certain scarce books, each member taking a copy. The members are in some clubs as few as forty or fifty; in one, as many as seven thousand. In most clubs, the books are regarded as privately printed; in others, an approach is made to the plan of publishing by subscription, extra copies being printed for sale to the public after the members have been supplied. In one club, a certain definite number of books are printed annually; in another, the number varies with the bulk and value of the individual works; while in a third, each member prints some books at his own expense, and presents a copy to every member; and these represent three types of the printing-clubs or societies. The members chosen to form the council are generally such as are known to be well versed in the class of subjects to which the publications of the club mostly relate; and the whole of the members reap the advantages of the gratuitous services of such persons. The result is, the publication of works not hitherto available to the average of literary and scientific men—being either in private collections, or in great libraries not accessible without difficulty. The printing of even a few hundred copies will afford the means of knowing where a particular class of works is obtainable. Dr Abraham Hume points out how useful would be a collated tabulation of all the publications of all the clubs. ‘Some one of sufficient leisure and capability may yet, like the setting of a piece of mosaic-work, deduce harmony and beauty from the scattered profusion; and may confirm the fact, so often demonstrated in pure science, that every proposition, however strange, is valuable, if only it can be properly applied. Nor would the task be a contemptible one to reduce to order, in like manner, the knowledge that lies scattered through many formidable volumes of Transactions; to notice what ideas have given way to new lights, the stages and the progress of modern inquiry, the prospects of literature and science in our own times, the obstacles that impede their growth, and the

means available for the removal of those obstacles.'

Such being the general characteristics of the associations to which this article relates, we will proceed to illustrate the subject by a few particulars concerning the chief examples—most of which are still flourishing, the rest having on various grounds brought their operations to a close.

One of the first to follow the example of the Roxburghe was the *Bannatyne Club,* founded mainly by Sir Walter Scott in 1823. Its announced object was to print and circulate among its members works illustrative of the history, antiquities, and literature of Scotland. There were about thirty members at first, afterwards increased to a hundred. The club was named after George Bannatyne, a literary Scot of the sixteenth century. The members, who subscribed five guineas a year each (the same amount as those of the Roxburghe Club), received, in the course of years, considerably more than a hundred distinct publications, many of them curious and valuable in a high degree, relating to all kinds of matters connected with old Scotland. The club closed its operations a few years ago; but its publications, though necessarily in few hands, will have permanent value. Complete sets of the works bring a high price at auctions.

The *Maitland Club,* another which we owe to Scotland, came a few years after the Bannatyne, and was, like it, devoted chiefly to the printing of works relating to Scotland, sometimes fine old manuscripts; in other instances, fine old printed little known and difficult of access. It was named after Sir Richard Maitland, a bibliophilist of the sixteenth century, and had its centre at Glasgow, as the Bannatyne had at Edinburgh. The members, a hundred in number, paid an annual subscription of three guineas. They received copies of all the works, some printed at the expense of the club, others at the expense of wealthy and liberal members. Some of the most interesting of the publications are several volumes of the *Miscellany of the Maitland Club,* a budget of curious odds and ends too small individually to be brought out separately.

The *Oriental Translation Fund,* established about the same time, was virtually a printing-club, founded chiefly by members of the Royal Asiatic Society, for the translation of oriental manuscripts into the languages of Europe, and printing a small number of copies of each. The subscription varied in amount according as large paper or small paper copies were chosen. Those who have the best means of judging, say that the valuable oriental works which this society has printed and published in the course of forty or fifty years, would have had little chance of being brought out in the ordinary course of publishing enterprise.

The *Iona Club,* a short-lived society, was founded for the investigation and illustration of the history, antiquities, and early history of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland; and printed for its members a few works on those subjects. Somewhat similar to this, in the limited range undertaken, was the *Manx Society,* relating to the Isle of Man. More taking was the *Abbotsford Club,* founded for the purpose of printing miscellaneous pieces having the same general character as those of the Bannatyne and the Maitland; it was rather a select body in regard to numbers, and the publications form a handsome quarto series, relating to ancient mysteries and legends, romances and ballads, old Scottish family documents, old monastic manuscripts, presbytery and synod records, *&c.*

The *Surtees Society,* established about the same time as the Abbotsford Club, was an early example of an excellent class. Its self-appointed work was to print and publish inedited manuscripts illustrating the religious, social, intellectual, and moral

condition, in past times, of the ancient kingdom of Northumbria, forming the present northern counties of England and southern counties of Scotland. It was named after Robert Surtees, author of the *County History of Durham.* All the members are (or were) invited by circular letter to vote for or against the printing of any suggested work; if the vote be favourable, enough copies are printed for all the members, and one hundred for sale to the public The series form a collection much prized by literary antiquarians. Closely following the Surtees in date was the *Camden Society,* one of the most celebrated of all; founded to render accessible any valuable but little known materials for the *Civil and Ecclesiastical History of the United Kingdom,* by printing them economically. The society was named after Camden, author of the *Britannia.* The subscription being only a guinea, and the range of subjects important, this society has always had a large number of members, reaching as high as twelve hundred. The numerous works printed, considerably over a hundred, have been edited by such competent men as Thorns, Payne Collier, Wright, Hunter, Halliwell, Henry Ellis, Dyce, Way, Nichols, &c. Some of the publications are printed in sufficient number only for members; others, a surplus number for sale to the public. The *Spalding Club,* following close on the heels of the Camden, resembled in its declared purpose two or three already noticed—namely, the printing of old works and tracts relating to Scotland, chiefly in the Aberdeen district; it was named after Spalding, a noted Aberdeen bibliophilist in the seventeenth century, and rendered good service within the range embraced. The *Parker Society,* the *Percy Society,* and the *Shakspeare Society,* all founded in 1840, undertook the publication of curious old works relating to three different classes of subjects; the first (named after Archbishop Parker), the best, but scarce works of old English divines; the second (named after Bishop Percy), old English ballad poetry; and the third, books and tracts illustrative of Shakspeare and the literature of his times. Dublin may claim the merit of not being behind as regards a valuable class of club books issued in connection with the Irish Archaeological Society; the works, produced with much taste, referring to the antiquities and early history of Ireland.

If we were, in a similar way, to go through the list of printing-clubs established in the thirty-five years which have elapsed since 1840, this article would extend beyond convenient limits. It will suffice to name the principal among them, as illustrative of the varied services rendered. The *Oriental Text Society,* to defray the whole or part of the cost of printing standard works in oriental languages. The *Chetham Society* (named after good Humphry Chetham of Manchester), to print old works and manuscripts relating to the topography, biography, and archaeology of Lancashire and Cheshire. The *Sydenham Society* (named after a learned physician of the seventeenth century), to print rare works, foreign as well as English, relating to medical subjects; many of the works, which no publisher would venture upon, are highly prized in the profession. The *Hay Society,* and the *Cavendish Society,* the one attending to rare treatises and tracts in natural history; the other, in chemistry. The *Wernerian Club,* scientific publications generally. The *Hakluyt Society,* old writings connected with the early navigators and maritime discoverers. The *Arundel Society,* engravings and other productions relating to fine and ornamental art. The *Caxton Society,* to print miscellaneous manuscripts of the middle ages. The *Celtic Society,* and the *Ossianic Society,* documents relating to Ireland in the old days. The *Chaucer Society,* printing old manuscripts of Chaucer's time. The *Harleian Society,* publications from unedited manuscripts relating to heraldry and family history. The *Welsh Manuscript Society,* bardic and historical remains of Wales, with English translations. Musical *Antiquarian Society,* scarce works by early English composers. After all that had been done in Scotland by the Bannatyne, the Maitland,

and other clubs, something was felt to be wanting. It was a club to gather and print the charters and records of the royal burghs. Hence, the Scottish Burgh Records Society, established a few years ago at Edinburgh, and which has already issued several volumes, throwing much light on the old burgh laws, usages, and history.

It will thus be seen that these and similar printing-clubs fill up a place in the literary history of modern times alike creditable to the promoters, and advantageous to the members.