

RALPH THORESBY (1658–1725) OF LEEDS, BOOKS AND LIBRARIES

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This paper reworks a presidential lecture delivered to the Thoresby Society, Leeds, on 22 March 2003. It examines how Ralph Thoresby (1658–1725), bibliophile and antiquary, acquired, borrowed and lent books, and visited and used libraries and archives in connection with his study of the history of Leeds and district. It also examines how he managed his own collection of books and manuscripts. Despite his domicile in Leeds he was not isolated from intellectual activity in London or elsewhere. It notes, finally, the failure of local society to capitalize on his book-collecting, and the eventual dispersal of his collection.

Much work on library history now either focuses on libraries as institutions or illuminates sociological theory: real people reading real books tend to sit obediently in the background. That was not always so; the *Diaries* and *Letters* of Humphrey Wanley, for example, appeared in 1966 and 1989 respectively, and the engaging account of Wanley by C. E. Wright, delivered to the British Academy, is now more than forty years old. Such is the natural ebb and flow of academic fashion, and no individual criticism is implied, but the human dimension of this subject may be recaptured by examining the career of a lesser bibliophile in Wanley's milieu, Ralph Thoresby of Leeds.

Ralph has received honourable mention in some studies of English historiography for his work on local history, but he features less in library studies. Unlike Humphrey Chetham, he founded no lasting institution, and the material achievement of his life, a personal library and museum, was dispersed by a later generation. Nevertheless much evidence is available in print alone to show how as an antiquary and bibliophile he visited and used the libraries of institutions and of friends, and how as a collector he acquired books and historical documents for himself.¹ Although born and bred in Leeds, which his speech doubtless betrayed, and domiciled in the town, distant from both London and the ancient universities, Ralph was not isolated from the wider world of learning and letters: the north of England was not then entirely a dull back-water in contrast to the sophistication of London. Moreover, that dispersal of his books together with a simultaneous decline in the library attached to Leeds Grammar School are a neglected part of the background to the foundation of the Leeds Library by Joseph Priestley and others in 1768.

Writing in the high Victorian tradition of rigorous chronology, Ralph's biographer, D. H. Atkinson, relentlessly pursued his subject through two dull but substantial volumes

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published in 1887. Such an approach is unhelpful to those interested in specific themes. Atkinson indeed offered a plethora of information, some quite recondite, but in view of Ralph's career it is regrettable that he did not focus at least one chapter on Ralph's experiences of books and libraries. Even so, whichever approach one chooses, it would be anachronistic in any study of this period to make too rigid a distinction between printed books and manuscripts, or to erect a scholarly apartheid between libraries and archives. Neither should libraries of Ralph's time be envisaged as arid deserts of leather-bound printed books, unrelieved by any flora or fauna: indeed, botanical specimens, taxidermy, geological specimens, ethnological and medical curiosa and works of art commonly supplemented bookstocks. Dilettanti expected it and Ralph followed modestly.

Ralph was born in Leeds in 1658, shortly before the restoration of Charles II. His father was a moderately successful merchant of nonconformist and Parliamentary sympathies, but he had antiquarian tastes as well as a business, and his own library and numismatic collection, partly acquired from the Fairfax family, was to prove more congenial to Ralph than the counting-house. Ralph had a modest education, and contemporaries later noted his inadequate knowledge of Latin.² He did not proceed either to university or to the Inns of Court, yet his friendships and character drove him onwards and upwards, and eventually he became a Fellow of the Royal Society (not then an exclusively scientific body) and cherished the acquaintance of many scholars. His local circle shows how a mercantile origin did not alienate him from county society, yet he did not become a landed gentleman upon the proceeds of trade but rather, using income from real estate in Leeds and Northumberland inherited from his father, collected manuscripts, printed books and artefacts, and made his name as the author of the first history of Leeds and district, *Ducatus Leodiensis*, published in 1715. Such an outcome was hardly what John Thoresby had envisaged for his son whom he had tried to train in the business by boarding him in London with a family of Leeds merchants and then by sending him to Rotterdam where the Milners of Leeds had a warehouse. Ralph may have retained a smattering of Dutch in later years.³ Neither experience achieved the desired result, and the early decease of John Thoresby, which led to Ralph inheriting his father's books and coins, probably tipped the balance against a life devoted exclusively to trade.

How did provincial collectors actually become aware of what was being published or of what was available on the second-hand market? One recent study of eighteenth-century practice emphasizes book trade publicity and, more vaguely, display techniques in bookshops.⁴ Diaries and letters of Ralph and his contemporaries provide some different evidence. He relied much upon personal contacts. The Revd Joseph Boyse wrote to him from Dublin in 1684, for example, that few books were available there which were not also available in England, and that Dublin prices were higher than those in London. Also writing from Dublin, Thomas Jackson reported in 1699 that no grammars of the Irish language were currently available there.⁵ A few years earlier, Jackson had reported from Edinburgh about a dearth of new publications on Scottish history and had noted that such material was as likely to be published in London, Holland, or even York.⁶ Among Ralph's London correspondents was Revd Richard Stretton who noted the imminent publication of a new edition of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and ten years later, in 1694, reported difficulties in obtaining various books at a fair price. Stretton also sent him catalogues which Ralph duly marked up.⁷ Writing to him from Cambridge, Richard

Idle confessed to having avoided bookshops due to poverty but nevertheless retailed gossip about clerical biographies; Edmund Gibson kept him informed about progress with the production of George Hickes's monumental study of Nordic philology, and also from London, Henry Newman sent news about various books soon to be published.⁸ Some authors were keen to keep Ralph informed about their own work; John Strype, historian of Tudor England, reported the publication of his study of Archbishop Grindal, sending Ralph a copy and reminding him of terms for subscribers; Thomas Hearne, the Oxford antiquary and librarian, announced to Ralph the impending publication of his edition of Leland's *Itinerary* and its likely price.⁹ Of course there was also trade publicity; Dr Arthur Charlett sent him a catalogue of Oxford publications, and Gibson referred to the Stationers' Company *Term Catalogues* in a letter to Ralph.¹⁰

Information also reached Ralph about overseas publications. Again, private contacts were invaluable, but other sources existed. For example, Charles Townley wrote to him in January 1699 about a journal in French printed in Amsterdam, which contained 'an abstract or epitome of such books as are published by the learned in most parts of Europe'.¹¹ Townley lived in Lancashire and this tantalizingly incomplete reference shows how it was possible for northern collectors to become aware of current European scholarship. Despite the imprecise reference, two possibilities might be *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* (Amsterdam, 1684-1718) or *Bibliothèque universelle et historique* (Amsterdam, 1688-1707). Among Ralph's personal overseas contacts was the Revd Joseph Hill, once of Leeds but settled in Rotterdam, who reported in March 1695 having obtained books for him; they were to be shipped through Hull and payment could be made through the network of Leeds merchants trading with the Netherlands. A few years later Hill was still active in this obliging manner, sending an item for the 'school' library in Leeds, to be shipped to Ralph through Hull.¹² Such arrangements were not unique; Ralph's friend, Dr Richardson, physician of North Bierley, Bradford, also imported books from Holland through Hull, using his son in Leiden and various friends as agents.¹³ This northern trade through Hull was largely overlooked by Giles Barber in an essay on eighteenth-century book imports and exports.¹⁴

To acquire books at home was less complicated than getting them from abroad. Ralph patronized auctions and bookshops. Auctions were a feature of the trade in Holland and in London, as Ralph may have been aware from the outset having visited both places early in his career. Indeed, his rather blasé reference to the first book auction in Leeds, in the winter of 1691/92, suggests no surprise. Conducted by Nevill Simmons of Sheffield, it was notable for the collapse of the floor of the premises due to the press of people. Nevertheless Ralph bought a medieval manuscript on that occasion, the *Scala mundi* which appeared as item 13 in the list of his own folio manuscripts appended to his *Ducatus*.¹⁵ He continued to attend auctions throughout his life. Not always too discriminating, he occasionally regretted that he had squandered money, as at Halifax on 12 April 1694. His friend Stretton, however, reminded him that it could be cheaper to buy at auction than to use retail bookshops.¹⁶ Sometimes others attended auctions on his behalf; Jonathan Priestley of Halifax wrote to him in 1696 about a forthcoming auction there, offering to lend him the catalogue and to bid on his behalf. Ralph accepted the offer and sent sixteen shillings on account; Priestley subsequently obtained nineteen titles at a total cost of 15s. 3d. and forwarded them to Leeds by local carrier.¹⁷ Other friends just reported to him on the state of trade at auctions.

Booksellers with permanent premises, in contrast to visiting auctioneers and other itinerant vendors, were not widespread in the provinces until towards the end of Ralph's life, and Leeds apparently had none until about 1700.¹⁸ York, however, had a long-established, settled, book trade, and Ralph visited its shops from time to time. Oxford and Cambridge had permanent bookshops but his visits to both places were fleeting affairs which apparently gave him little opportunity. London offered him more scope because being prolonged his visits gave him time to browse. He particularly patronized booksellers near Gray's Inn, at Smithfield and around Moorfields. He remained anxious about unwise expenditure, for example near Gray's Inn in May 1695 when he 'bought many books, cheap I thought which made me throw away too much money'. On some occasions he was more discriminating, and in January 1709 at Moorfields acquired Tyndale's English New Testament of 1536, which included Old Testament lessons according to the Sarum Use.¹⁹ As late as 1723 he was still buying in London, particularly pamphlets and episcopal sermons which he found cheap. Ralph would also seek books in other towns he passed through and once when returning to Leeds from London was annoyed by not being able to procure a map of Bedfordshire at any bookseller, coffee house or tavern in Bedford.²⁰

Books which had uncertain commercial prospects would normally be published by subscription. Indeed, one friend wrote to him from London in 1686 about how an author might find publication by subscription more profitable than through normal trade channels. Another friend, the wit George Plaxton, incumbent of Barwick-in-Elmet, close to Leeds, discussing prospects for the *Ducatus*, was similarly scornful of the trade when he observed, 'the booksellers are generally very dogs, and care not how they use an author provided they can get by him'.²¹ Ralph and his friends in the north often acted as local agents both to raise subscriptions and to help with subsequent distribution. He co-operated with Archdeacon Nicolson raising subscriptions for Hickes's major work, and also collected subscriptions for publications by John Strype and Elizabeth Elstob.²²

Ralph readily accepted gifts of books: some were germane to his studies, others less so. Having dined with John Chamberlayne in April 1723, his host gave him a copy of John Ecton's account of Queen Anne's Bounty, first published in 1719. Thomas Wilson, bishop of Sodor and Man, sent him a copy of his *Principles and duties of Christianity*, published in 1707. John Warburton gave him a copy of James Torre's *Antiquities of York*, which eventually found its way to the library of the Thoresby Society in Leeds. There were curios too, for example a book 'in the Slavonian language and characters', as Ralph described it, which Nevill Simmons gave him in 1710.²³ However, few gifts could have been more charged with sentiment than a copy of the first Elizabethan *Book of Common Prayer* which Archbishop Sharp of York gave him in 1699, for it was Sharp who had encouraged Ralph to quit nonconformity for the established church.

The historical manuscripts which Ralph acquired raise a serious issue. Although antiquarian studies were being pursued vigorously at this time, some people showed little respect for the integrity of documents. Responsibility among donors varied and doubt persists whether every donor had adequate title to whatever was being given away. The catalogue of his manuscripts which Ralph appended to his *Ducatus*, includes some gifts of doubtful propriety. Thus a rental of the archbishop of York dated around 1603, for example, was given to Ralph by Francis Taylor who had married a grand-daughter of Archbishop Hutton; an account book of the churchwardens of Leeds for 1583 to 1628

was presented by Alderman Hicks, and Joseph Shepherd gave him minutes of the West Riding justices of the peace, meeting in Quarter Sessions between 1629 and 1632. Later generations would have expected such documents to remain in official custody. Perhaps most reprehensible was John Strype whom Ralph had pestered for gifts from his collection of Tudor documents; quite shamelessly Strype wrote to Ralph when sending him some historical autographs in 1707, 'I have mutilated their letters by cutting off their subscriptions [signatures] for you, but the letters I retain because I am loth to break my collection'.²⁴ On the other hand, Sir Hans Sloane clear-sightedly told Ralph in 1702 that he might give him some personal letters, but firmly declined to part with anything connected with his secretaryship of the Royal Society. Ralph had probably also begged gifts of letters from Archbishop Sharp since Sharp replied that he had lost or burned many of his choicest items.²⁵

Once acquired books and papers might have to be transported to Leeds. This could be difficult because books were heavy, and inland transport neither easy nor secure. Ralph was not averse from sending heavy loads to Leeds from London by coast-wise shipping.²⁶ Carriage by road was none too reliable. Archdeacon Nicolson found the service between Leeds and Cumbria indifferent; one package from Leeds was mislaid by the carrier in his warehouse at Penrith, and one in the opposite direction was delayed because the bearer had aborted his journey and returned to Carlisle. At another time Nicolson suggested to Ralph addressing parcels to a physician in Kendal as a form of *poste restante* on his behalf.²⁷ Books might be liable to damage by damp whilst in transit, and return of loans might be deferred until the weather improved.²⁸ What is, perhaps, more remarkable is how expeditious some sea passages could be; Ralph's outward voyage from Hull to Rotterdam took little more than two clear days, whereas in 1680 he took from Saturday 12 June to Wednesday 16 June to ride from Leeds to London.²⁹

How did Ralph manage his books after they had arrived in Leeds, and did he show any awareness of current good practice? Not inconceivably he may have discussed library economy with Humphrey Wanley, Lord Harley's librarian, whom he met on many of his visits to London and acknowledged as a friend, though presumably any advice to Ralph would have been less elaborate than what Wanley offered to the Bodleian, to St Paul's Cathedral and, indeed, to Harley.³⁰ Otherwise two treatises especially were available in English, John Dury, *The reformed library keeper* (1650) and John Evelyn's 1661 translation of Gabriel Naudé, *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque* (Paris, 1627). Soon after Evelyn's translation was published, Samuel Pepys declared it was above his reach, and by 1685 one French critic was dismissing its original as outmoded, but among the books which Jonathan Priestley bought for Ralph at that auction in Halifax was 'Evelyn, *Libraries*', at a cost of 8d.³¹ Whether he subsequently consulted it is unknown.

Certainly Ralph followed some common practices. He would clean his books annually to remove dust, moths and mould, and often refers to this chore in his *Diary*; in March 1702 his wife and daughter helped. Apparently stock-taking might accompany this cleaning, which may be why the two women were helping him in that year, paying particular attention to outstanding loans. How these were recorded is unclear; Naudé had advised a register of loans, presumably some form of account book, but Wanley seems at least sometimes to have used slips of paper, perhaps put in the place of a book which had been lent.³² Even if books are not loaned to acquaintances, at least some form

of catalogue is necessary for stock-taking. Ralph refers to catalogues from time to time but the only substantial evidence which remains are the sectional catalogues which were appended to his *Ducatus*, respectively listing his manuscripts, his Bibles and his early printed books. That of his early printed books is inconsistent and omits details even then usually deemed necessary; it fell below the standard set by the Bodleian with its printed catalogue of 1674. His list of manuscripts was worse, much inferior to that of Saxon manuscripts which Wanley had provided for Hickes's *Thesaurus*, though Ralph did record provenances, perhaps public acknowledgement of his indebtedness to donors rather than disinterested advancement of learning. Indeed, so vague were some entries that Strype wrote to Ralph in 1715 asking for elucidation, and moreover Hearne pointed out that if the catalogue had been in Latin rather than the vernacular it would have commanded more widespread use.³³ In a word, Ralph was a collector, not a cataloguer.

Good practice was more notable in his reception of visitors, for Ralph realized that he should reciprocate courtesies which had been extended to him.³⁴ Even so this involved some sacrifice of his own time to the whims of others which privately he found irksome. Of course, some visitors may have been less deserving than others, and he indeed remarked in August 1710: 'I am exposed, like some common inn-keeper, to guests of all complexions.' One wonders, too, in what state of sobriety those visitors were who descended upon him on 3 September 1724; 'much of this day', he wrote, 'showing the museum, there being much company because of the races at Chapeltown'.³⁵ His visitors did not come exclusively from Yorkshire, or even the British Isles; others came from overseas, including Norway, Sweden, Germany and the Americas.

As well as showing his collections to visitors, Ralph generously lent materials from his library to like-minded friends, mostly to those living in or around Leeds to judge from the evidence in his *Diary* and *Letters*. Richard Thornton, recorder of Leeds, and Jonathan Priestley of Halifax both borrowed items, and Ralph made extensive use of Thornton's collection of manuscripts. Dr Richardson of near Bradford was another local scholar who borrowed items from Ralph's library. So, too, did George Plaxton who, for example, returned to Ralph his copy of Sir Hans Sloane, *Voyage to Madeira and Barbados*, of which Plaxton had a poor opinion.³⁶ Some items he lent further, to Archdeacon Nicolson in Cumbria (he later became bishop of Carlisle), including an unidentified missal, and to Sir George Boynton, an important landowner in the East Riding.³⁷ Whether the manuscripts which he occasionally lent to reliable friends were originals or transcripts is not clear, but he certainly took the risk of lending coins to George Hickes.³⁸

Ralph delighted in the company and libraries of other local collectors, and recorded many visits to them. Nathaniel Johnston of Pontefract was his early mentor in local history, and Ralph considered parts of his library to be unparalleled whilst the quality of books and manuscripts assembled by Archdeacon Nicolson quite embarrassed Ralph. He maintained his father's friendship with the Fairfax family, visiting them in Wharfedale where he admired their library; they were liberal not only as hosts but also in their gifts of manuscripts, including items relating to the Civil War in which the family had played a distinguished role on the Parliamentary side. He often visited Lady Elizabeth Hastings, the eminent local philanthropist and blue-stocking, and at least once her books and conversation detained him until late in the evening. Sir Walter Calverly of Esholt, between Leeds and Bradford, was another; Ralph once wrote of his papers, 'my business lay chiefly amongst old writings of which there is a valuable and very numerous

collection. I run over three drawers full, took extracts of some [...].³⁹ Those family and estate papers were invaluable for local history. However, his occasional exchange of visits with the Irwins of Temple Newsam, Leeds, who were ennobled *nouveaux riches*, was perhaps only diplomatic or social. In contrast was his sincere friendship with Archbishop John Sharp of York which may have stemmed from an original introduction by James Torre, the antiquary. Ralph and the archbishop soon discovered a mutual interest in numismatics, but Ralph also used books and papers at Bishopthorpe, the archbishop's residence outside York, for his own antiquarian research. Of course, knowledge that he was welcome there could ease access to materials elsewhere. The archbishop was renowned for his hospitality, and Ralph occasionally stayed at Bishopthorpe overnight, and even walked there from Leeds. Neither was Sharp too busy or superior to call on Ralph, and after one visit his chaplain thanked Ralph for his kindness, adding that Sharp thought Ralph's collection of coins better than his own.⁴⁰

Ralph developed many friendships beyond the north, sharing mutual interests and unstintingly supplying information about the West Riding. Such circles tend to overlap and coalesce: with Dr Richardson, Ralph had connections with Arthur Charlett and Thomas Hearne in Oxford; through Archdeacon Nicolson he had a circle which included Edmund Gibson and George Hickeys; and it was the scholarly dean of York, Dr Thomas Gale, who successfully nominated Ralph for the Royal Society in 1697. When in London Ralph would visit the Elstobs, Elizabeth, a Saxon scholar, and her brother; she once showed Ralph an ancient manuscript of Saxon homilies whose text she was studying, borrowed from Cambridge University Library. Ralph had corresponded with John Strype about the Cranmer estate in Leeds before eventually meeting him at Leyton, Essex, in 1709. Of that meeting Ralph recorded, 'I was really surprised with the sight of [...] his noble collection of original letters of King Henry VIII and several of his queens, Edward VI [...] Queen Elizabeth [...] Cardinal Wolsey [...] and the most eminent statesmen, divines and historians; which, I perceived, had been the collection of the famous Lord Treasurer Burleigh'.⁴¹ This friendship continued until Ralph's death and was confirmed by Ralph's assertion that he would willingly walk twenty miles to see the collection.⁴² Archdeacon Nicolson may have commended Ralph to Edmund Gibson, librarian at Lambeth and later bishop of Lincoln and of London, as somebody who could revise Camden's account of the West Riding for the English version of *Britannia* which Gibson was preparing: Ralph did so, meeting Gibson at Oxford in 1695.⁴³ Remaining in touch, Gibson showed Ralph the library at Lambeth, read the *Ducatus* in draft and found preferment for Ralph's elder son. Another writer whom Ralph assisted with local information was Edmund Calamy, junior, compiler of the record of ejected ministers.⁴⁴

Through the Royal Society Ralph became acquainted with John Evelyn and Sir Hans Sloane. He expressed unease about Evelyn's trust in allowing him almost unsupervised access to his collection of gold medals, and a rueful Evelyn confided to him how he had lost a collection of historical manuscripts which he lent to the late Duke of Lauderdale who allegedly had never intended to return it. Ralph visited Sloane on several occasions, admiring not only his printed books and manuscripts, but also his natural history specimens from the West Indies.⁴⁵ His collection was probably larger than Ralph's, but they belong to the same cultural tradition.

As an antiquary and aspiring scholar, Ralph visited many libraries and archives. Although he had been to Leiden in 1678 his *Diary* remained silent about its university

library which was normally on any bibliophile's itinerary; perhaps Ralph was not yet focused on such things. Two years later, his interest growing, he made a detour *en route* for London to see Cambridge where, as he tersely recorded, he saw stately buildings and curious libraries. Indeed, his early travels were essentially business trips, but gradually his antiquarian interests predominated. In 1681, business having taken him to Newcastle, Ralph rode on to Edinburgh where he visited the university library. This, perhaps, marked the beginning of a serious interest; he observed the library closely, noting as well as its books, the artefacts, natural history specimens and portraits. Such non-book material was common in larger libraries; its inclusion not only asserted the overall unity of knowledge but also conceded that written records have limitations. Edinburgh may have been the paradigm for his own collection in Leeds. On a later business trip to Newcastle Ralph paused at Durham where he inspected some of Bishop Cosin's manuscripts through the courtesy of Dr Smith, another of the revisers of Camden's *Britannia*.⁴⁶

Subsequently Ralph often visited Oxford or Cambridge on journeys between Leeds and London. In 1684 he met Dr Robert Plot in Oxford, the topographer of Oxfordshire and keeper of the Ashmolean Museum; his hosts even pressed Ralph to give his coin collection to the University, but unsuccessfully. Travelling south in 1695 he diverted through Cambridge where John Milner of Leeds met him; they saw Hebrew Bibles and a Chinese book in St John's, a Turkish herbal in the University Library, and also the new Wren library at Trinity College. On the return journey that year he paused at Oxford and regretted that time did not allow for an adequate inspection of Saxon manuscripts in the Bodleian. Yet another visit to Cambridge in 1714 gave little satisfaction at the University Library, but at Trinity College, 'Dr Colbatch courteously showed me the stately library'; its Master, Dr Richard Bentley, classical scholar and also Royal Librarian, was probably Wakefield's greatest son.⁴⁷

For his antiquarian studies Ralph made much use of resources in London. He often worked in the Harleian Library of which he reported to Dr Richardson his surprise 'to find so prodigious a number of original charters, bulls, MSS as are of late collected and purchased at vast rates by Mr Harley'.⁴⁸ He also used materials in the College of Arms, at the Exchequer Office in Westminster where he transcribed Yorkshire entries from Domesday (and through the kindness of his friend, Peter le Neve, was excused the usual fee), and at the Tower where he was pleased with a recent rearrangement of public records.⁴⁹ At times he may have been too ambitious, once reading in the Harleian 'till almost faint and starved, not being willing to give over to get victuals, being straightened for time and the weather extremely severe'.⁵⁰ Libraries, of course, normally had neither artificial light nor heat. He did not always so neglect himself, or those who helped him, for in 1712, having worked in the Tower yet again, he treated the record keeper at a tavern. More grandly, Dr Moore, bishop of Ely, dined him at his London residence when Ralph viewed the bishop's enormous library there.

Ralph's brief notes on libraries may be compared with those of Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach who toured London, Oxford and Cambridge in 1710. Both men visited many of the same places, but Uffenbach's remarks are fuller, more colourful and more critical. Where Ralph mainly enthused about some individual books or manuscripts, Uffenbach often saw dirt, disorder, inadequate catalogues, and ignorant or incompetent staff. Like Ralph, he was impressed by the public records in the Tower, but unlike him the German

noted that those in the White Tower were on an upper floor above the gunpowder magazine.⁵¹

Did these experiences, pleasurable or potentially hazardous, inspire Ralph to do something for his native town? Many places had been developing town or parish libraries, the result of either corporate initiative or individual philanthropy, but Leeds had not. Ralph was aware of such developments, having visited Chetham's Library, Manchester, in 1682, and twenty years later he inspected both the refurbished Halifax Parish Library and the small parish library at Ribchester; he also knew of the library in Holy Trinity, Hull. Moreover he was associated with the development of the library at Leeds Grammar School (for the learned public rather than pupils). Godfrey Lawson had provided its accommodation in 1692; Ralph gave it some books and through him Mary Milner offered further items.⁵² Ralph's thoughts may have been further stimulated by Nathaniel Johnston who remarked to him in 1693 how deplorable it was that some antiquaries had not deposited their papers in any publicly accessible library.⁵³ Later still, Ralph may have read Thomas Bray's pamphlet on parish libraries (1697) and certainly met him in 1712. As early as December 1683, about eighteen months after that visit to Chetham's, Ralph was examining property deeds 'for a Cottage adjoining to my garden where I have some thoughts [...] to build a public library, and a better conveniency for the collection of rarities which are now disadvantageously crowded up'.⁵⁴ That phrase 'public library', of course, had nothing to do with rate-supported libraries in the nineteenth-century sense, but echoed Oxbridge usage; it would be a library to which respectable and capable people might resort. However, his high motive of emulating Thomas Bodley and Humphrey Chetham was clouded by a suspicion that current arrangements were inconvenient to his household; moreover several fires had occurred in his house, and a separate building might afford greater safety. Work on the project eventually began and in August 1716 he wrote to Thomas Hearne about moving his books; three years later Samuel Buck sketched the exterior of the library building.⁵⁵

The project did not develop further. Municipal support was not forthcoming for the corporation had no official funds for the promotion of libraries or museums. There was little general interest among influential townsmen; in 1707 George Plaxton remarked to Ralph that Leeds was a busy town where 'wine and company, noise and money, are the great things your corporation deals in; now these are enemies of old MSS and records, and will not allow a man time to pore over them'.⁵⁶ Ralph agreed and wrote to Dr Charlett at Oxford some years later, 'ours is a great trading town [...] but the generality of the inhabitants are so immersed in business [...] that they are not solicitous for other matters'.⁵⁷ Furthermore, family considerations militated against a grand public gesture since Ralph's collection represented a substantial part of his estate, and his family had to be provided for in the event of his decease.

Ralph vacillated over his will. In the first one he seems to have envisaged leaving his library in trust, though not clearly expressed as such, for the use of his two sons. A second will charged his executors with selling the books, museum objects and medals, the proceeds to be apportioned between his sons. Then in October 1721 he changed his mind yet again and bequeathed all the collection to his elder son, Ralph, junior. By now Ralph, senior, was in decline. Edward Harley, son of the 1st Earl of Oxford, having visited him in Leeds in 1720, left a sad picture: 'the poor man was now so old, so decayed, infirm and decrepid, and indeed in a manner so superannuated that he was the

only piece of antiquity in the collection that one would have been contented not to have seen.⁵⁸

Meanwhile the fate of his books was exercising various people. White Kennett, bishop of Peterborough and antiquary, called on Ralph to see the collection in August 1723, and this may not have been a mere social visit without ulterior motive. Shortly after Ralph's death on 16 October 1725, Thomas Hearne wrote to Dr Richardson hoping that the collection would fall into good hands and suggesting that it might join that of Sir Hans Sloane. Also it was Hearne, diligently noting current gossip, who understood that both Dr Richardson and Bishop Kennett were interested in the future of the collection for themselves.⁵⁹ Another not entirely innocent visitor had been Dr John Hudson, Bodley's Librarian, who viewed the collection in 1707, which led to some misunderstanding, apparently, as to a possible gift to the Bodleian.⁶⁰ Moreover, immediately after Ralph's death, Richard Witton offered to procure items for Edward Harley.⁶¹ Perhaps aware of these circling biblioraptors, Ralph, junior, promptly took steps to secure his inheritance and advertised in the *Leeds Mercury* on 7 December 1725 for the return of outstanding loans. How successful that appeal was is unknown but certainly many items left Leeds for the South where he was living.

Curiosity about the collection persisted, and in 1758, for example, Horace Walpole was enquiring whether it was still intact.⁶² An answer came a few years later when shortly after Ralph, junior, had died, two auctions were held in London: Thomas Payne sold the books in February 1764 and in the following month, Whiston Bristow auctioned the artefacts. The catalogue of the book sale raises a substantial problem because the auctioneer stated that the lots came from a number of vendors and did not identify what had come from whom. One may infer from a ten per cent sample that of the total of 6651 lots, about 3900 could not have belonged to Ralph, senior, because they had been published after his death, but since other unidentified vendors were also involved, there is no guarantee that all those lots published before 1725 had been his. This problem was acknowledged by Munby and Piggott but they would offer no solution.⁶³ Atkinson, however, identified a few books in various major libraries which had belonged to Ralph and more may be found, and Professor Cawley has traced the descent of the medieval manuscript of the *Corpus Christi* plays which was once in Ralph's possession.⁶⁴ Uncertainty also surrounds the fate of Ralph's museum of artefacts, though D. P. Connell and M. J. Boyd have traced some of them to Burton Constable Hall, East Yorkshire.⁶⁵

Best known for his *Ducatus* to which historians still refer, Ralph has much to offer both to library historians and to others. Of course, his *Diary* and *Letters* sorely need reworking, a point which Professor Turberville made in 1945 without inspiring the response which it deserved, but the general picture is well enough established. Ralph was no provincial immersed only in parish-pump affairs; he moved in national circles of bibliophiles, antiquaries and collectors, a minor player perhaps, but one whose life shows there was culture north of Trent and casts light on books and libraries of his time and on the friendships and travel which went with them. He deserves more attention than just a blue plaque on a baker's shop in Kirkgate, Leeds.

¹ The principal printed sources are: R. Thoresby, *Diary*, ed. J. Hunter (London, 1830), and *Letters*, ed. J. Hunter (London, 1832). Both titles are in two volumes and the second volume of letters contains an index to all four volumes. A further collection of in-letters, edited by W. T. Lancaster, was published by the Thoresby Society (Leeds,

1912). These three sources will be referred to merely as *Diary* or *Letters* or *Lancaster*. Other useful documentation has also been published by the Thoresby Society: G. D. Lumb (ed.), 'MSS written or possessed by Ralph Thoresby', *Publications of the Thoresby Society*, 1st ser., 28 (1928) 431-63; W. Hebditch, 'Thoresby's diary and correspondence: a suggestion', *ibid.*, 41 (1943/5) 98-100, and H. W. Jones, 'A checklist of the correspondence of Ralph Thoresby', *ibid.*, 46 (1963) 36-53.

² T. Hearne, *Remarks and collections*, ed. C. E. Doble and H. E. Salter, Oxford Historical Society, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1889) p. 352.

³ *Diary*, vol. 1, 339.

⁴ E. H. Jacobs, 'Buying into classes: the practice of book selection in eighteenth-century Britain', *Eighteenth Century Studies* 33 (1999) 43-64.

⁵ *Letters*, vol. 1, 53; *Lancaster*, pp. 70-71.

⁶ *Lancaster*, pp. 38-40.

⁷ *Letters*, vol. 1, 61 and 182; *Diary*, vol. 1, 152.

⁸ *Letters*, vol. 1, 44-46, 340-41; vol. 2, 299-301.

⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 255 and 260.

¹⁰ D. H. Atkinson, *Ralph Thoresby*, vol. 2 (London, 1887) 319; *Letters*, vol. 1, 191.

¹¹ *Letters*, vol. 1, 352.

¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 198-99; *Lancaster*, pp. 58-60.

¹³ J. Nichols, *Illustrations of the literary history of the eighteenth century* 1 (London, 1817-58) 262, 264-65, 266, 387 and 793.

¹⁴ G. Barber, 'Book imports and exports in the eighteenth century', in: R. Myers and M. Harris (ed.), *Sale and distribution of books from 1700* (Oxford, 1982) pp. 77-105. A further aspect of North Sea trade appears in Ralph's acquisition of coins and other artefacts from Baltic and northern European sources: R. Thoresby, 'Musaeum Thoresbyanum', in: *Ducatus* (London, 1715) pp. 337-428, and *Diary*, vol. 1, 456.

¹⁵ *Diary*, vol. 1, 230-32; Thoresby, *Ducatus*, p. 516.

¹⁶ *Diary*, vol. 1, 256; *Lancaster*, p. 56. Ralph was attending auctions at least as late as 1720: *Diary*, vol. 2, 298.

¹⁷ *Lancaster*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁸ T. W. Hand, 'Leeds booksellers, printers and libraries', *Book Auction Records* 8 (1910-11) xxxiii-xxxix.

¹⁹ *Diary*, vol. 1, 301; vol. 2, 33, 367-68. On the 1536 New Testament, see: British and Foreign Bible Society, *Historical catalogue [...] English Bible* (London, 1968) pp. 11-15.

²⁰ *Diary*, vol. 2, 164.

²¹ *Letters*, vol. 1, 82-84; *Lancaster*, p. 204.

²² *Lancaster*, pp. 62 and 198; *Letters*, vol. 1, 137 and 331, and vol. 2, 50-51, 74-75, 96, 112, 147-48, 160, 163, 226, and 260.

²³ *Diary*, vol. 2, 366-67; *Lancaster*, pp. 208 and 212.

²⁴ *Letters*, vol. 2, 56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 342-43 (Sharp) and 415 (Sloane).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 73-74.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 263 and 271, and vol. 2, 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 87 and 155.

²⁹ *Diary*, vol. 1, 16-17 and 46-47. His journey to London in January 1709 (new style) was slower still, due to the weather, being snowbound at Stamford for several days.

³⁰ 'Humphrey Wanley and the Bodleian in 1697', *Bodleian Quarterly Record* 1 (1914) 106-12; P. L. Heyworth (ed.), *Letters of Humphrey Wanley* (Oxford, 1989) pp. 258-62; and G. Wakeman, 'Humphrey Wanley on erecting a library', *Private Library* 6 (1965) 80-84.

³¹ S. Pepys, *Diary*, ed. R. Latham and W. Matthews (London, 1970-83) vol. 6, 252; A. Baillet, *Jugemens des savants* 2/1 (Paris, 1685) 273; *Lancaster*, pp. 48-49.

³² H. Wanley, *Diary*, ed. C. E. and R. C. Wright (London, 1966) vol. 2, 213; G. Naudé, *Instructions [...]*, trans. J. Evelyn (London, 1661) p. 92. On Ralph's regular cleaning and maintenance of his library, see: *Diary*, vol. 1, 228, 251, 254, 358-59, and vol. 2, 59 and 274.

³³ *Letters*, vol. 2, 303 and 323-25. Ralph's *Diary* contains some passing references to catalogues, apparently of his own books, but they are uninformative: *ibid.*, vol. 1, 85, 305, and 358-59.

³⁴ *Diary*, vol. 1, 466.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 65 and 412.

³⁶ Thoresby, *Ducatus*, p. 22; *Lancaster*, pp. 21, 37-38, 46-48, 116 & 152.

³⁷ *Lancaster*, pp. 90-92, 112. In his *English historical library* 2nd edn (London, 1714) p. xiv, Nicolson publicly acknowledged his debt to Ralph for lending him various items.

³⁸ *Letters*, vol. 2, 40-41. This kindness was likewise publicly acknowledged: G. Hickes, *Antiquae litt. linguarum [...]*, vol. 3 (Oxford, 1705) 166.

³⁹ *Diary*, vol. 2, 86.

⁴⁰ *Lancaster*, pp. 49-50.

- ⁴¹ *Letters*, vol. 2, 51–53 (about the Cranmer estate); *Diary*, vol. 2, 25–26.
- ⁴² H. Ellis (ed.), *Original letters of eminent literary men*, Camden Society, 23 (London, 1843) 337.
- ⁴³ W. Camden, *Britannia*, ed. E. Gibson (London, 1695), preface (sig. al'). Ralph had received a copy of part of *Britannia*, interleaved with blanks for his corrections, in the autumn of 1693, and Gibson acknowledged receipt of Ralph's revision early in 1694 (*Letters*, vol. 1, 141 and 149).
- ⁴⁴ *Diary*, vol. 1, 353; *Letters*, vol. 1, 417–18.
- ⁴⁵ On his seeing Evelyn's coins and medals, see: G. D. Lumb, 'MSS written or possessed by Ralph Thoresby', Publications of the Thoresby Society, 1st ser. (1928) p. 454 (Ralph's 1701 diary, overlooked by Hunter); *Letters*, vol. 1, 345–46 (Lauderdale incident); *Diary*, vol. 1, 341 (Sloane's library and collection). Apparently Ralph subsequently arranged for Dr Richardson to see Sir Hans's collection (*Letters*, vol. 1, 409).
- ⁴⁶ *Diary*, vol. 1, 97–102 (Edinburgh) and 427 (Durham).
- ⁴⁷ *Diary*, vol. 1, 293–94 and 303; vol. 2, 231–32 and 428–29.
- ⁴⁸ Nichols, *Illustrations*, vol. 1, 803.
- ⁴⁹ *Diary*, vol. 2, 26 (Tower) and 30–31 (Domesday Book). Ralph's friend, Bishop Nicolson, together with the Bishop of Chichester, had visited the records in the Tower on behalf of a government enquiry in 1704 and had found much disorder: cf. 'Bishop Nicolson's diaries', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, new ser., 2 (1902) 213.
- ⁵⁰ *Diary*, vol. 2, 40.
- ⁵¹ Z. C. von Uffenbach, *London in 1710*, trans. W. H. Quarrell and M. Mare (London, 1934) p. 70.
- ⁵² *Diary*, vol. 1, 120 (Chetham's), 361 (Halifax), and 391 (Ribchester); *Letters*, vol. 2, 99 (Hull). On the library at Leeds Grammar School, see: Lancaster, p. 131; *Diary*, pp. 232–33, and Thoresby, *Ducatus*, p. 87.
- ⁵³ *Letters*, vol. 1, 135–36.
- ⁵⁴ *Diary*, vol. 2, 423.
- ⁵⁵ Hearne, *Remarks and collections*, vol. 5, 275; *Diary*, vol. 2, 265. The sketch is preserved in British Library Lansdowne MS 914 and was used as a frontispiece to Lancaster where it was briefly discussed on pp. xv–xvi.
- ⁵⁶ Lancaster, p. 153.
- ⁵⁷ Atkinson, *Ralph Thoresby*, vol. 2, 315.
- ⁵⁸ Copies of all three wills are preserved by the Thoresby Society, Leeds, in MS SD9. Edward Harley's report appears in Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report [...] Portland papers at Welbeck*, vol. 6 (London, 1891–1931) 141.
- ⁵⁹ *Diary*, vol. 2, 388; Nichols, *Illustrations*, vol. 1, 307, and Hearne, *Remarks and collections*, vol. 8, 314, and vol. 9, 56, 104–05.
- ⁶⁰ *Diary*, vol. 1, 470; *Letters*, vol. 2, 277, and Lancaster, p. 168.
- ⁶¹ *Portland papers*, vol. 6, 9–10.
- ⁶² Horace Walpole, *Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (Oxford, 1937–83) vol. 16, 10.
- ⁶³ A. N. L. Munby and S. Piggott (eds.), *Sale catalogues of eminent persons*, vol. 10 (London, 1974) 31–40.
- ⁶⁴ D. H. Atkinson, 'The library of Ralph Thoresby', *The Library* 6 (1889) 185–96; A. C. Cawley, 'Thoresby and later owners of the manuscript of the York Plays', *Leeds Studies in English*, new ser., 11 (1980 for 1979) 74–89.
- ⁶⁵ D. P. Connell and M. J. Boyd, 'Material from the Musæum of Ralph Thoresby', *Journal of Collections* 10 (1998) 31–40.

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