St George and the Dragon, from the manuscript of the Ethiopic life of the saint, presented in 1871.

COLLECTOR'S PIECES

Treasures and oddities of Edinburgh University Library

by CHARLES P. FINLAYSON
(Keeper of Manuscripts)

THE collecting instinct is a very deep-seated one, shared by man with squirrels, bees and other creatures that make provision for the future. The human collector, however, seeks to preserve bits of the past for his own sake, and in such relics scarcity and oddity have always been highly-prized qualities. Even great academic libraries, whose collecting, one might have expected to be governed by sweet reason, have not at times been able to resist picking up curiosities, and those by no means confined to books.

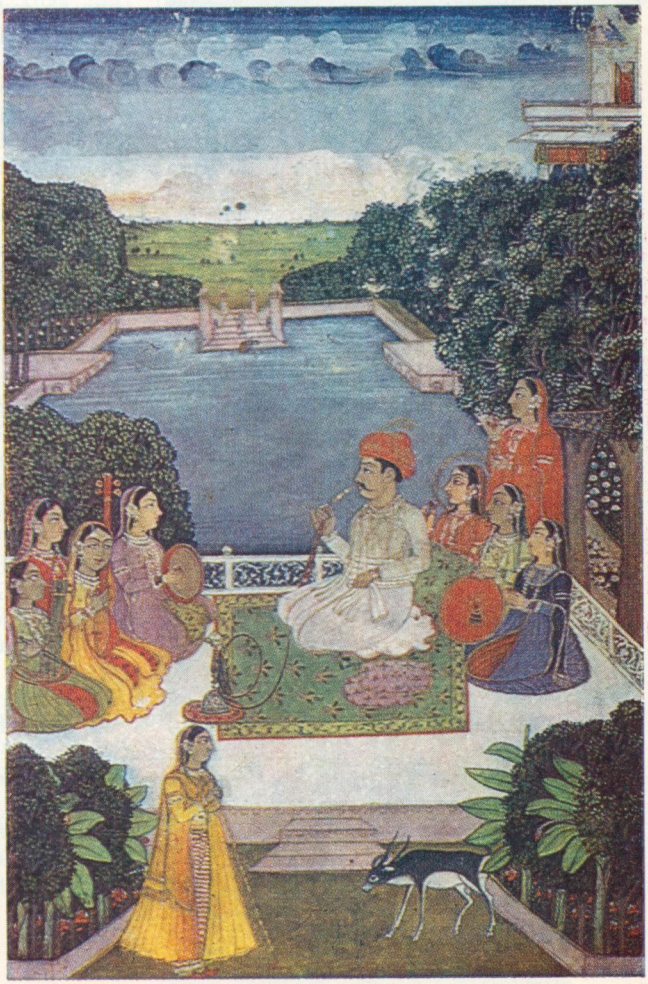
In Edinburgh University, which was founded in 1583, the librarians, especially in the seventeenth century, were very much on the alert for such things. It was important for the image of a library that it should have its show of curios to impress visiting V.I.Ps. of non-bookish interests, and the librarians of the day kept a careful note of these acquisitions, interspersed among the books that

formed the staple increase of the library.

Medical curiosities seemed to hold a particular fascination. Arthur Temple, a local surgeon, in 1671, (to quote from the librarian's book) "did cut a Horne out of a Person's Head Eleven Inches long, and for the Rarity therof haveing caused, putt a silver chaine therto with ane silver plaite bearing the Person's name fra whose head it was cutt He caused His sone (Andrew, a student who graduated that year) Gift the same in to the Library to be conserved as a Token of his love and respect to the College and that such ane extraordinary accident and cure performed by the hand of ane Expert and skilful Chirurgion may be the better remembered."

Another abnormal acquisition, but not of such horrific proportions, was "a corn of a considerable bigness which Mr James Clerk, Graver to the Mint House, did cut from the great toe above the nail." Mr Clerk evidently thought it worth preserving as a memento of his release from the suffering it must have caused him, and on the 3rd March 1692 the librarian records that he "prevailed with the Party to obtain it."

Not all such non-literary items were curiosities pure and simple. A complete male skeleton, presented in 1671, was no doubt useful in the elementary anatomy class that formed part of the philosophy course, for medicine was not as yet taught professionally in the university. It is noteworthy that the librarian describes it as the skeleton



A painting (18th century) showing an Indian potentate being serenaded by a female group, as he smokes his hookah.

The Museum of Natural History, Edinburgh University, in the early nineteenth century showing the live puma resting under one of the show cases.

of a Frenchman. The growing needs of the anatomists had caused an increase in the practice of grave-robbing which was regarded with horror by orthodox Christians, hence it was politic to label such an item as foreign in case of awkward questions.

Another medical curiosity was given in 1682, " a gravel stone taken out of the Bladder of Collonel Francis Ruthven at London in March 1655. He lived six weeks thereafter. This stone for the make and Biggness is very rare and considerable." It was another two hundred years before surgical operations of such seriousness could be performed with reasonable certainty of success, thanks to the discoveries of two Edinburgh professors, Sir James Young Simpson in anaesthetics, and Lord Lister in antisepsis.

The sources of gifts were very varied and some are unusual in themselves. In 1667 a bequest of money from an Edinburgh woman to buy books for the library seems to have startled the all-male community and even received special mention in a contemporary book, *The Present State Of Scotland* (1682) : " There is a gift in this Library of one Mrs Scot to the value of £30, the more esteemed because it is from a worthy matron and lover of learning, a good example to all others of her sex."

In the same year Thomas Falconer, " Skipper in Borrowstonness," gave a Spanish dictionary and grammar. The university, on its own behalf, acquired about this time an extremely rare *portolano* or coastal navigator's chart of Scotland, by James V's pilot, Alexander Lyndsay, evidently prepared for the round voyage from Leith to Dumbarton, via Orkney and the Hebrides, which the king undertook in 1540 to bring the local chiefs to heel. The map is covered with radiating compass bearings to enable the pilot to plot his position in relation to the coastal landmarks which form the only detailed feature of the chart.

Two other items of nautical interest were received as gifts in 1697. In February " the Reverend Doctor Burnet gave in to the collection of curiosities one of the Greenland or Lapland Boats covered with fish skins (called Wicky's Boat)," and in May " Sir William Areskine, Governour of Black-Ness Castle " bequeathed " the bone of the Sword fish, having the appearance of a broad sword with the scabbard on."

Books, of course, were the *raison d'etre* of the collection, and one that perhaps merits special attention because of its possible associations is a little Psalter that came into the library some time before 1636, when the first catalogue was made of the

collection. Being written in the eleventh century, the text is in Latin, but the script is typically Celtic, with large, interlaced initials formed from the body of a cat-like creature though with a Viking-type dragon head.

The most unusual feature of the book is that one of the full-page Celtic frontispieces has been redecorated in the Saxon style, using gold illumination, which the Celtic artists of the time either did not like or could not afford, in order to please some Saxon owner, no doubt a personage of importance. Not inconceivably, this was Queen Margaret herself, for we are told that her husband, Malcolm Canmore, did sometimes arrange for the embellishment with gold, of any book that he saw she was especially fond of. The Psalter belonged, in the sixteenth century, to John Reid, chancellor of Aberdeen, who would have charge of the cathedral school, and is one of the few pieces of Scotland's artistic heritage in the field of book production to have survived the Reformation.

Probably the most extraordinary written item to come into the library in the seventeenth century also has Aberdeen associations. This is the document known as the *Bohemian Protest*, which was bequeathed in 1658 by Principal William Guild, of King's College, Aberdeen. It is a kind of Czech equivalent of the Declaration of Arbroath, and it was provoked by the burning of the Bohemian priest, Jan Hus, in 1415, for heresy.

Hus, who had sought to reform the spirit but not the doctrine of the Church, had won immense popular support in his own country, and when he was summoned to explain his views before the Council of Constance, he was given a safe conduct by the Emperor Sigismund who tamely submitted when it was cancelled by the Council. It was this, together with the Council's allegation that heresy was rife in their country, that roused the Bohemian nobles to make their impressive challenge, virtually to the rest of Christendom. The document itself is impressive, being fringed with the seals of a hundred nobles, and it is unique as the sole survivor of the original eight required to take the names of all the protestors.

A book also associated with the tragic differences in the interpretation of Christianity in the following century is *Christianismi Restitutio* (The Restoration of Christianity) secretly published in 1553 by Michael Servetus, the Spanish Anabaptist who was burned, together with all available copies of the book, in the same year. In this case it was in Protestant Geneva that the sentence was carried out, and Calvin himself was one of the accusers. The book

Wild Turkey, from J. J. Audubon's *Birds of America*, the library's largest book. Engraved by W. H. Lizars of Edinburgh.

Above, illustration from the album of Michael Van Meer, showing Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange, at the helm of his land yacht in 1603. Below, *Book of Hours*, written and illuminated in England in the early 15th century. Bequeathed by the Edinburgh advocate J. Cathcart White in 1943. Illustration of David praying.

exists only in three copies, one of them being the Edinburgh, which was given by James Cunningham of Block, Ayrshire, in 1695, in memory of his pupil, Lord George Douglas, son of the Duke of Queensberry, who was cut off in his youth.

The introductory section of the book has been torn out, the text being supplied in writing of the sixteenth century, and the story goes that the original printed pages were removed from this very volume by Calvin for use as evidence in the trial of Servetus. Another interest in the book is that in it Servetus, who was a doctor, gives an account of the human blood in a manner that shows he had some inkling of the circulation long before William Harvey made his epoch-making discovery in 1628.

All sorts of donors continued to give books, some rare in themselves, others enriched by the donor's own fame. James Sutherland, an Edinburgh merchant, gave in 1680, a truly magnificent French Bible containing 87 miniatures of Biblical scenes illuminated with gold and written in 1314, a fateful year in Scottish history. Sir Robert Boyle, the great scientist, in 1687 gave a Bible printed in Irish type, which he himself had just helped to publish.

Students' notebooks might not be considered rareties, but some are certainly curiosities. One, for instance, in which the Reverend Robert Kirk kept his notes when he was an Edinburgh student in 1660, has its flyleaves covered with cabbalistic doodlings that seem to show his early interest in the supernatural, about which he later wrote in his *Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, a region into which legend has it that he himself was finally spirited away without trace.

Some books may be classed as curiosities because of their size. A tiny Psalm book, printed in 1779, measures only $2\frac{7}{8}$ inches by $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches —it would be a hard job to keep track of the library's stock if this were a popular size! The printer of this little volume, Peter Williamson, may well have wished that he had had just such a book in his earlier adventurous career.

To begin with, he was kidnapped as a child while playing at Aberdeen Harbour, and sold for £15 in Philadelphia to work on the plantations. His master bequeathed him his freedom, only for him to be captured by the Indians. Escaping from them, he enlisted in the British Army, now to be captured by the French, though he soon and finally regained his freedom on the fall of Montreal. His business activities in Edinburgh where he finally settled down as a printer, included the publication of the first *Edinburgh Directory* (1773) and the establishment of a successful penny post there.

At the other extreme are the four great volumes of John James Audubon's *Birds of America* (1827-38), measuring 3 feet 4 inches by 2 feet 2 inches, to which the university was one of the original subscribers. The format was dictated by Audubon's decision to show each bird in its natural size, but some of the larger birds still had to have their necks twisted a bit to fit in, and one can only be grateful that he did not go on to the birds of Africa.

The *Birds of America* may be the largest book in the library, but the longest is certainly the Sanskrit poem known as the *Mahabharata*, written on a silk roll, 220 feet in length, given by Colonel Walker, of Bowland, Stow, in 1821. The poem itself, an epic about early Indian wars, is probably the longest in the

world, running to over 200,000 lines, and this manuscript of it is illuminated throughout its length as well as containing a number of delicate painted miniatures.

Professor Adam Ferguson, regarded by some as the father of modern sociology, and a member of the abortive mission, that tried to conciliate the American colonists in 1778, inspired great respect and affection among his students and friends, and several relics bearing witness to this are preserved in the library. One of these is a dainty little roll-top desk bequeathed to him in 1787 by Commodore George Johnstone, so-called Governor of the colony of West Florida. A silver plate attached to it says, "From George Johnstone to Adam Ferguson, a last farewell."

Another useful gift that he received was a little silver coffee-pot from George Keith, Earl Marischal of Scotland, an ardent Jacobite, who went to live in Germany at the invitation of Frederick the Great. It is inscribed: "The last Earl Marshall of Scotland, having himself in the solitude of his Exile long used this little Coffee Pot, sent it as a token of remembrance of Adam Ferguson at Edinburgh," and this is followed by the then indispensable Latin quotation, in this case praising Ferguson's well-known openness and integrity.

In the early nineteenth century many of the curiosities and specimens were put into a museum which had been specially provided for the purpose in the new university building designed by Robert Adam. The collection rapidly grew, as if to fill its new quarters, and soon included stock museum pieces such as large, stuffed animals. Possibly the strangest acquisition at that time was a live puma, which roamed the museum for several months before its fur was considered to be in the right condition for the attentions of the taxidermist. The poor animal

Illustration based on an Islamic interpretation of Isaiah xxi, 6-9, showing Mohammed on a camel and Jesus on an ass. From a manuscript of Al Biruni's *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, dated 1307.

Jonah and the Whale. Illustration from a manuscript of the *Universal History* by Rashid al Din, written in Persia in 1306. Presented by John B. Baillie of Leys.

can be seen in the illustration, lying beneath one of the exhibition showcases.

Later in the century several very large collections of rare books came in. The greatest was the manuscript collection of the antiquary, David Laing, a friend of Sir Walter Scott, Carlyle, Wordsworth and Southey. One item that has an immediate appeal is an autograph album kept by a Dutchman, Michael Van Meer, who lived in London for a few years after 1613. It contains entries by James VI, his wife, Queen Anne, and Prince Charles, their son, and by many other notabilities including his countryman Martin Droeshout, who made the engraved portrait of Shakespeare for the 1623 edition of his plays. Droeshout's contribution includes a painting of a classical group, Venus, Bacchus and Ceres, done when he was no more than fifteen years old.

Another large collection to come in was that of J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps, the Shakespeare scholar. Among the many early quartos of the plays that it contains is a curiosity that would have gladdened the hearts of librarians of an earlier generation : a piece of the mulberry tree from Shakespeare's garden at Stratford-on-Avon.

In the nineteenth century, of course, the armed might of Britain was not merely a deterrent, and when the Emperor of Abyssinia refused to release some British subjects whom he had imprisoned, a punitive force was sent in 1868 under General Sir Robert Napier, to set them at liberty. Napier was successful, and in destroying the town of Magdala (he later became Lord Napier of Magdala) he rescued several cartloads of Ethiopic manuscripts which the emperor had collected there to be the library of a projected new church.

Most of these found their way eventually into the British Museum and other English libraries, but

Edinburgh, in 1871, received one containing the Life of St George, an important figure in the Ethiopic calendar, though now of lower status in some quarters. However, there are other ways besides the official one of reaching the sanctified state, and even Napier himself attained something like it during his enlightened command of the army in India, where Thursday, which he ordained should be reserved for recreation, became known as St Napier's Day.

In 1867 the library's stock of Oriental manuscripts was increased from a mere handful to a total of 500 volumes by the gift from John B. Baillie of Leys Castle, Inverness, of the private library of his grandfather, Colonel John Baillie of the Honourable East India Company. The latter had time in his off-duty hours to make himself so proficient in Arabic and Persian that he was appointed professor of these languages in the newly-founded College of Fort William, Calcutta, in 1801.

Two of these manuscripts, written early in the fourteenth century, contain a large number of beautiful Persian miniatures, of which there are few other such early examples. An added interest in them is that both are manuscripts of general history, including Biblical times, and some of the illustrations contain familiar figures from the Old and New Testaments seen through the eyes of a Persian artist, a strong corrective to the Westernised representations of them that prevailed until recent times.

Sir John Graham Dalyell, of the Binns (1775-1851), was a great authority on natural history, antiquities and music, and in 1934 Sir James Bruce Dalyell, of the Binns, presented a large number of his notebooks, among which Sir John had carefully preserved some interesting contemporary concert notices. The prize for finding the hardest way of doing a thing must surely go to the Russian Horn Band which visited Edinburgh in 1834. The notice announces: "The first concert on Monday the 28th January at half-past one o'clock afternoon," and continues, "Each horn produces but one note . . . and each performer has to count the time with the greatest accuracy for the purpose of introducing his particular note."

People who keep dogs are said to acquire some of the characteristics of their pets, and keepers of curiosities run similar risks. One seventeenth century librarian, Robert Henderson, who held the job for the record stretch of sixty years, certainly seems to have regarded himself as well out of the ordinary, and it was noted that he always kept away from a certain old bulging wall in the college precincts, which, it was said, would fall on the most learned man in the university. The wall was still standing when James Boswell was a student, considerably after Henderson's departure, but it had been taken down by 1773 when the university was visited by Dr Johnson, whose almost-predictable reaction when told of this was: "They have been afraid it never would fall."

Perhaps the most unlikely librarian of recent times was Alexander Anderson, who held office for the short period from 1905 to 1909. The earlier part of his career had been spent as a surfaceman on the railway. He was a man of great natural genius, largely self-taught, and a poet whose masterpiece, *Cuddle Doon*, will live as long as Scots is spoken, but his "native woodnotes wild" soon fell silent, alas, in the dusty, book-lined corridors of the library.