

An Excerpt from
COTTON'S
LIBRARY

The Many Perils of Preserving History

MATT KUHN'S



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Introduction



IN 1684 SIR JOHN COTTON faced a dilemma. After decades of fruitless searching, he had, at last, found the illuminated Book of Genesis lost from his late grandfather's library more than 50 years before. The prospect of finally returning this jewel to the family's renowned collection must have seemed a minor miracle, well worth all the effort, but for one small problem. The holder demanded £40 for its return.

Significant as £40 was in the 17th century, Sir John could afford it. But should he submit to the indignity of purchasing back what was indisputably his family's own property, and indeed still bore the Cotton arms on its binding? Having acquired the book through some unknown chain of intermediaries, a Lady Stafford now insisted that it had never been the Cottons' book at all but merely loaned to Sir John's father at one point, who then had it rebound. The claim was patently false, and Sir John knew it, but proving such in court would be an expensive gamble. He was prepared to negotiate, instead. He had offered Stafford as much as £30 already. But she refused even this small concession to his

self-respect. He could pay the full ransom, try his luck with a lawsuit, or do without.

Eventually Sir John did recover his book, now recalled as the Cotton Genesis, closing one chapter in a story combining a valuable historic document with aristocracy, generosity, injustice, mischance and more than a touch of absurdity. In that sense the full story of the Cotton Genesis, famed for illuminated miniatures, is itself something of a history in miniature of the whole Cotton library. Like many items in that library the Genesis had passed through a rich history of its own before the library's founder, Sir Robert Cotton, ever set eyes upon it. "One of the earliest Christian books in existence," per Cotton biographer Hope Mirrlees, this Greek manuscript of the Genesis story was already 1,000 years old when visiting bishops presented it to King Henry VIII. Its illustrations may have provided the inspiration for mosaics in St. Mark's Cathedral, in Venice. In England, Henry's daughter and eventual heir Elizabeth rediscovered the book in royal archives, bestowing it on Sir John Fortescue, who had tutored her in Greek. Fortescue, in Mirrlees's words, then "mindful of posterity, added it to the riches of the Cottonian treasure-house."

The best-known portrait of Sir Robert depicts just one book to represent all the wealth of that treasure-house. The choice of the Genesis is some indication of its great importance to him. Despite which, he loaned it out readily, with the same generosity he applied to any and every item in his private library. In 1617, Cotton sent the Genesis back across the Channel to the French scholar Nicolas Claude Fabri de Peiresc, patiently waiting five years for its return without a word of due dates or fines. Cotton was just as liberal with his own country's men of letters, not least Thomas Howard, 14th Earl of Arundel and patron of Cotton's later career. The Cotton Genesis was one of a number of valuable items loaned to Arundel and then lost, in many cases

permanently, in the troubled years between Cotton's death in 1631 and Arundel's in 1646.

Sir Robert's son and grandson made loyal efforts to preserve what remained of the library through the years of England's Civil War and subsequent upheaval, and to restore some of the losses afterward. No doubt they related a particular interest in the lost Genesis to their unofficial librarian, the antiquary William Dugdale; his preserved letters record his efforts to relay that interest to correspondents throughout Europe for nearly 30 years. In 1656 a fellow librarian, who had served the Countess of Arundel, responded to an inquiry from Dugdale that he had not seen the Genesis among the cart loads of antiquities "convaighed away out of England" by the late countess. Another letter indicates that Dugdale nonetheless pestered the man for information about the book at least once more.

Such persistence finally paid off, though locating the Genesis with Lady Stafford was only the beginning of another campaign. After attempting to negotiate on the Cottons' behalf, a Gilbert Crouch wrote to Dugdale that Sir John's offer of £30 remained unacceptable to Stafford. She would have £40, "and will not take one farthinge less... Therefore (if S^r John have soe greate a minde to the booke) in my poore Judgm^t he were better give this other tenn pounds, than runn the chardge and hazard of a suite."

In the end, the aging baronet simply capitulated to Lady Stafford's terms, and bought back his family's manuscript. Even then, the adventures of what the Cottons cataloged as "Otho B VI" were by no means complete. (Most Cotton manuscripts are assigned to one of 14 groups, named for Roman emperors or their contemporaries, for reasons examined later.) Over the following 300 years, the Genesis shared with its sibling volumes remarkably varied fortunes. Sir John's will bequeathed the library to the nation, in hope, perhaps, of preserving the library from

a quarrel among heirs. The collection fell victim to quarreling nonetheless, with its de facto keeper at one point locked out of his own library—not for the first time in the collection’s history. A parsimonious and neglectful British government then nearly accomplished what previous centuries of war and other perils had not, and in 1731 the library was preserved from incineration by a scandalously thin margin. For many individual volumes that margin was too thin, and the Cotton Genesis was reduced to smoldering fragments scarcely 40 years after Sir John had swallowed his pride to recover it.

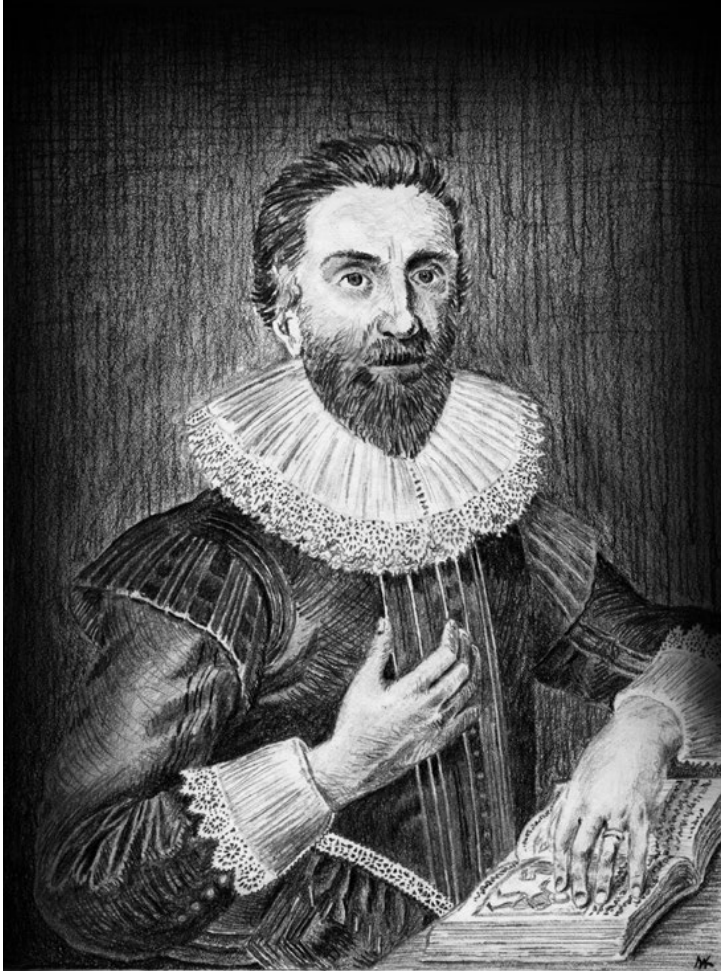
Neglect and fire still did not write finish to the history of the Cotton Genesis or to that of the Cotton library. Eventually arriving, in both cases somewhat the worse for wear, at the British Museum, they became founding pieces of a new national collection. Occasional accidents continued for many years; astonishingly, the Genesis fragments went through an entire second cycle of loss, rediscovery and repurchase. But with time the British Museum repaired both its own mistakes, and many made by those who preceded it. Since the mid-19th century, Cotton’s collection has enjoyed the attention long overdue to a national treasure. Generations of conservators have gradually restored much that was written off as a loss, including even pieces of the Genesis. Curators have abetted and encouraged public appreciation for the library’s contents through exhibitions and publication, including a growing online replica. The permanent Treasures of the British Library exhibit in its St. Pancras home includes a lengthy list of Cotton collection highlights, among them the Lindisfarne Gospels, the unique manuscript of *Beowulf* and one of four surviving copies of Magna Carta.

If the Cotton library is enjoying a second golden age, however, much of its modern brilliance is still a reflection of its first golden age in Sir Robert Cotton’s time. Bringing together great prizes of antiquity, Cotton made them—and himself—central to

the intellectual life of his era. Though he rarely played a leading part, personally, Cotton and his library were closely connected to nearly all who did in early 17th-century England's scholarship, arts and government. Cotton advised the day's foremost politicians, and even the crown; he contributed to and edited the works of a modest revolution in historical scholarship; he gathered up the endangered records of his country's past and present with one hand, and supplied them to nearly every memorable individual and enterprise within reach of early Stuart London with the other.

That very closeness of Cotton and his library, to the most powerful persons of a fractious era, eventually imperiled both. The collection's subsequent, remarkable survival is worth studying for many reasons. The individual documents preserved by (and in some cases in spite of) Sir Robert's successors include many of the foundation stones of British history and Anglophone literature as we know them today. Those documents' survival *as* a largely whole collection provides an invaluable context for better appreciating them. Last, but by no means least, the details of that survival through four centuries of tragic, bizarre and not-infrequently comic hazards constitute the makings of a remarkable tale.

Cotton's Library is my attempt to tell that tale. In doing so, I owe much to a vast and growing bibliography of scholarly works about the library, as well as a surprising number of books for more popular audiences. This latter category is the origin of my own interest. In reading about the history of one or another of the collection's more prominent works, some time ago, I gradually realized that parts of the story were curiously familiar. Indeed I had read of the same events multiple times, over a number of years, as without even realizing it I had acquired four or more



Sir Robert Cotton with the Cotton Genesis
After an engraving by George Vertue

books that owed and acknowledged a significant debt of their own to items preserved by Sir Robert Cotton. The curiosity thus aroused led into one of the most remarkable rabbit holes in the realm of bibliography; one could spend a lifetime exploring its innumerable trails and at least a few people have done so. My own attempt to map its larger structure would not be possible

without their work, duly acknowledged herein.

Nonetheless, until now, no one in its four-century history has prepared a single, complete narrative of the Cotton library. Such a want is almost a theme through the library's story. Generations of researchers have bemoaned the shortcomings of a series of imperfect catalogs, and though Cotton and his library are the subject of a handful of books more than one scholar has expressed astonishment at the continued absence of a comprehensive, scholarly biography. These challenges I, too, shall leave for abler researchers; I make no claim to have assembled a complete encyclopedia of the library (much as I would, very likely, readily devour such a volume at this point). But I believe that the *story* of the library, of its adventures and of the larger patterns among them, is more than ready to be told. The pieces are there, and have only wanted someone to come put them together.

Which situation also has its thematic resonance in the library's history, and offers the perfect place to begin.

A brief further note about the text, first: as nearly all of the sources for Cotton and his library are British in origin, a majority of the quotes herein employ British spelling. It could therefore be preferable to apply the Queen's English throughout, and add "ue" to every instance of the word catalog, e.g., quoted or otherwise. Unfortunately for the purposes of uniformity, all of my own habits and reference materials alike employ American spellings, and quotes from the library's first hundred years or so frequently include archaic and improvisational English (which I have retained per convention), ensuring something of a carnivalesque text no matter what my approach. My apologies to any readers disconcerted by the result; two people separated by a common language, and all.

PART ONE
FOUNDATION

CHAPTER 1

Dissolution and Recovery



IF THE CENTURIES-SPANNING STORY of the Cotton library has any one, genuine beginning, it is the Dissolution of the English monasteries. Thirty-five years before Robert Cotton's birth, King Henry VIII set into motion a transformation of English society with great consequences for the future collector and his collection. In both cases, the results were largely unintended accidents. But then, much the same description might be applied to the entire endeavor.

The Dissolution, from the perspective of more than 450 years' subsequent evaluation and reevaluation, appears curiously to foreshadow Sir John Seeley's remark about Britain's later acquisition of empire in a fit of absentmindedness. A close scrutiny of *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* by Joyce Young suggests that it made substantive contributions to neither religious reformation, nor crown revenues, and for that matter never even "in so many words, dissolved" England's religious houses directly. By itself it merely completed a decline of monastic communities that modern scholars can trace as far back as the 1300s.

At the Dissolution's outset, that decline may only have been dimly evident. Very quickly, though, cautious initial encroach-

ments revealed a tree ready to fall with the slightest push. Material gain was central to Henry's supplying that push even if the results for his exchequer proved impermanent. In addition to their prime land holdings, English monasteries of the late 1530s held considerable treasure as a legacy of past prosperity. Instructions to commissioners inventorying dissolved houses' property emphasized land, plate, and precious ornaments. More mundane commodities were by no means ignored; the eventual haul of lead bells and roof tiles was so great as to inspire rumors, not entirely fanciful, that obtaining monasteries' lead for armaments was Henry's true object. Commission lists also record nearly everything else that might be picked up or pried up, including "corn, cattle, bedding, napery, vessels, kitchen stuff, buttery, pantry and other implements and utensils of household... tables, forms, standards, brewing vessels..." Curiously from a modern perspective, the one, consistent omission is books.

When the Middle Ages' monasteries are recalled today, likely as not it is for their legacy of manuscripts. Beautiful decorative illumination, volumes of Latin text preserving classical learning through the medieval darkness, all carefully produced by robed brothers toiling in the scriptorium; these are the real treasures. For Henry VIII's commissioners, by contrast, all this was little more than scrap. The only documents demanded by their formal instructions—hardly lacking in detail—were property records and deeds. In theory, other papers or parchments might have been encompassed by general injunctions to secure all of a house's "movables." In practice, whole shelves of manuscripts ended up as waste paper, often literally.

The preface to John Bale's *The Laboryouse Journey* records the results that he witnessed, firsthand: "A great nombre of them whych purchased those superstycyous mansyons, reserued of those lybrarye bokes, some to serue theyr iakes, some to scoure theyr candlestyckes, and some to robbe their bootes. Some they

solde to the grosers and sope sellers, & some they sent ouersee to the bokebynders, not in small nombre, but at tymes whole shyppes full..." The "jakes," it's worth emphasizing, was Tudor slang for the toilet.

Bale was one of a small group, including John Leland and Laurence Nowell, who led the way in trying to save England's history. They worked to preserve as much as possible from incidental annihilation, as well as from the intentional purge that followed it. Under Henry's son Edward—whose conception had motivated so much of the Henrician reform program in the first place—what had been driven more by convenience than conviction changed in tenor dramatically. The government of Edward VI pursued Reformation with genuinely religious fervor, and books were no longer overlooked bystanders. The Act against Superstitious Books and Images of 1550 demanded forbidden volumes be surrendered to crown officials, and "openly burnt or otherways defaced and destroyed." Primarily secular collections were no guarantee of safety, either, and England's university libraries suffered enormously during Edward's brief reign.

That more of the English language's heritage was not lost owes as much to the last Tudor king's early death from illness, at age 15, as it does to preservationists' quiet disobedience. Under more accommodating governments, however, England's bibliophiles could act more boldly. Catholic Mary Tudor is often remembered for burning people, but she suspended her half-brother's aggressive policy of burning books, and their half-sister Elizabeth made no effort to revive it. To the contrary, under Queen Elizabeth the salvage of England's libraries became an object of the court, both formally and informally.

Court astrologer John Dee personally assembled an enormous collection of books, eventually numbering perhaps 3,000 volumes. Elizabeth's close advisor William Cecil, and her chosen

Archbishop of Canterbury Matthew Parker, shared with Dee an interest in piecing back together the nation's history as well as a sense of urgency in doing so. Dee and Parker both wrote to Cecil of their concern for the vast number of books and manuscripts still in peril, as a result of the upheavals decades before; Cecil supplied patronage to historians, in addition to collecting, himself. In a 1568 letter that C.E. Wright credits to "the guidance of Cecil and Parker," Elizabeth proclaimed a royal interest in recovering dispersed monastic libraries.

By the 1570s, then, the bewildering variety of Tudor policy had given birth to both a crisis in English historiography, and a subsequent enthusiastic campaign to address it. When the future collector and antiquary Robert Cotton entered the world three years after Queen Elizabeth's proclamation calling for preservation of ancient records, he was indeed, in the words of Justin Pollard, "born at exactly the right time."

Robert Cotton was born, on January 22, 1571, into favorable circumstances in more ways than one. The Cottons were not at the pinnacle of English society—Hope Mirrlees suggests ancestry including a moneylender, a Barbary merchant and even a pirate—but they had done very well out of the land bargains resulting from the Dissolution. Cotton's family also enjoyed a measure of older, inherited wealth through Mary de Wesenham, along with a claim to descent from the Scottish hero Robert the Bruce. The Cottons possessed an estate at Conington, in Huntingdonshire, approximately 70 miles due north of London. Conington was not necessarily the seat of a great lord, less still the nearby Denton home where Cotton was born; descriptions of the surrounding fen country at that time include terms such as "odd," "melancholy," "unhealthy" and, above all, "wet." But even a family seat in the fens offered benefits to the future path of Robert Cotton, beyond just the cash rents of his eventual

inheritance. The country had once been rich with great religious houses, such as Sawtry Abbey. Some of Sawtry's land had since enriched the Cottons, but remnants of the manuscripts loosed from the abbeys made Huntingdonshire a promising home for a collector, as well.

For Robert Cotton, it was in the long run a second home, all the same. From childhood onward, his true home was London. His family's prosperity financed an enviable education including Jesus College, at Cambridge, and later study at Middle Temple, one of London's Inns of Court. Cotton's most important years as a student, however, were those spent at London's Westminster School. There he fell under the sway of William Camden, and of documentary history.

Camden was both heir to the early antiquaries like Bale, Leland and Nowell, and the first major English proponent of a new evidence-based secular history emerging across the Channel. In Camden's day, English history was still as much mythology as documented fact, even among such scholarly treatments as existed. Formal history curricula at the universities were largely concerned with classical antiquity; the prevailing narrative of England's own past was peopled by figures like Brutus the Trojan, King Arthur, and other misty heroes. Even after Camden, generations passed before popular myths gave way entirely to more skeptical inquiry, and in his own later writings Cotton mostly preferred working around the old legends to challenging them head-on.

The larger project of studying as well as salvaging England's historical record nonetheless found an important champion in Camden, and Camden was to find his greatest acolyte in young Robert Cotton. By his late teens, Cotton was well on his way to a lifetime passion for history and its records. Three items in his eventual library bear the date "1588" in Cotton's handwriting, including a 10th-century manuscript and a 15th-century copy of

the *Polychronicon*, a world history by Ranulf Higden. Around the same time, Cotton began assembling notes for a parish-by-parish history of Huntingdonshire, likely inspired by a vogue for county history projects among the previous generation of antiquaries. (His results were similar to theirs; Leland's project aborted after he lost his reason, while Cotton apparently never progressed beyond a list of the local parishes' names.) Given the tall ambitions of his adolescence, it's certainly plausible that Cotton was even partner with his old teacher in forming London's first Society of Antiquaries as early as the 1586 release of Camden's *Britannia*, for which the society may have been a kind of promotional book group that took on a life of its own.

By his late twenties, at all events, Cotton was not only an active participant in the Society of Antiquaries, but also setting out in Camden's company for a season of archeological field work. As an active search for artifacts of the nation's distant past, their 1599 expedition to northernmost England was little short of revolutionary. It was probably the greatest adventure of Cotton's life up to that point, as well. Mirrlees remarks that "I can think of no journey we could take to-day which would be its equivalent in danger and daring. The Border ballads were not only still being sung, but being lived, and if the Queen's writ ran north of the Humber, it certainly did not run smoothly, for it was not until 1603 that peace was brought to the Borders."

For Camden and Cotton the lure of discovery outweighed any local dangers. The land adjoining Hadrian's Wall offered a wealth of monuments and other artifacts compared with the south, where most Roman traces had been either concealed by development, or else quarried for it. The experience may not have been entirely agreeable, as Cotton never again ventured so far from home. But the products of his and Camden's six-month tour were quite enough to contribute to both men's projects for long after, anyway.

The interest of his mentor Camden and other contemporaries in rediscovering Britain's history, in something of a companion effort to the era's voyages of exploration and colonization overseas, certainly motivated Cotton's creation of a great private library. It was not his only motivation. As with nearly any question about the man and his library, the answer is complex. His library's treasures eventually served political, ecclesiastical, social, legal and financial ends at one time or another, from which much may be inferred. Cotton himself, however, has left behind little account of his own thoughts on the matter.

The picture that emerges from the studies of Cotton's life is at once both remarkably full, and oddly incomplete. Incomplete in the sense that, for all of the detailed records about his activity that survive, a fully rounded sense of Cotton as a person seems elusive. He left an extensive paper trail as a librarian, property-holder, academic and courtier. But the gaps include much of his correspondence and other personal papers, as well a collection of printed books that might have constituted a more personal library. Portraits and busts permit looking Cotton in the eyes, in a sense, yet they leave one guessing what was behind them. The effect is somewhat like the enigma that shadows his close contemporary, Shakespeare, and multiple students of Robert Cotton's history have expressed sentiments similar to those of Sidney Lee, that "It is impossible to describe very definitely Cotton's personal character."

What remains is nonetheless full in the sense that Cotton's activities seem so many, and diverse, that one might puzzle at where he possibly found enough time until reminded that he never needed a "real job" in his life. As a young man, he struggled with at least a relative want of cash, borrowing from moneylenders including one of his uncles. The death of Cotton's father in 1592 did not lead to immediate financial ease, either; as eldest son

he was the primary beneficiary, but his father had dealt generously with a second family begun after Robert's mother died. Sorting out administration of the portion he did receive kept Cotton frequently occupied in Huntingdonshire for a number of years. His eventual arrangements, however, appear to have been effective. Though beset by many troubles through his subsequent life, money was rarely among them.

Marriage to Elizabeth Brocas the year after his father died also helped to shore up Cotton's financial position. Mirrlees notes that, "In accordance with the prudent customs of his family Cotton had married an heiress." The subsequent history of their marriage suggests that quite possibly this quality outweighed personal compatibility, too. Judging from his extensive circle of friends, Cotton had a considerable capacity to charm, and per all accounts he employed this *pour chercher la femme* both before marrying and after. He later spent several years and possibly more than a decade living with the widowed Lady Hunsdon, perhaps as her lover but certainly in the context of an overt separation from his wife. Eventually, the Cottons patched things up. Nonetheless a reputation as something of a rake attached to Sir Robert through the end of his life.

If by some measures Robert Cotton was a wealthy playboy, in his defense he was, again, hardly an idle playboy. He devoted the greatest portion of his ample time and energies to a combination of scholarly research and public service. The nexus of both pursuits, for many years, was the Society of Antiquaries of which he had likely been a founding member.

The term "antiquary" has become somewhat anachronistic, ironically enough given that the one common thread to the antiquaries' loose-knit community was interest in the past. Graham Parry, studying these proto-historians in *The Trophies of Time*, writes "How might one define an antiquary? ... the spread of

scholarship they engaged in was so broad and variegated that it defies definition." This was very much true of the core group including Camden and other of Robert Cotton's fellow travelers. Like Cotton, they reacted to the context of their time more than to a single organized program. Someone simply had to take an interest in the nation's documentary past if it was to survive. In addition to ex-monastic manuscripts in danger of becoming lavatory paper, England's government records were nearly as endangered, simply by their expansion beyond rudimentary archives' capacity. Preserving all of this fit very naturally with the antiquaries' one unifying interest, in the origins of things.

It also fit the spirit of the times, up to a point. Relative stability and prosperity under the Tudors had stoked an appetite for taking pride in the nation's accomplishments, at the same time that still-contested separation from Catholic Europe spurred a search for antecedents of a native English Christianity independent from Rome. Traditional stories like Joseph of Arimathea in Glastonbury, or Lucius, the dubious first Christian king in Britain, fell somewhat short of the new standard Camden was trying to introduce to English history. As a group the antiquaries devoted less effort to questioning those old legends than to piling up other, more scholarly rigorous evidence beside them, but the result of their exploration fed later historians somewhat like the alchemists' experiments served the advance of scientific chemistry.

In Cotton's time, antiquarians remained in the early days of even their rudimentary efforts. Their whole project was faintly suspect. Even as the need was readily apparent to the antiquaries and their patrons, what would become a respected interest for gentlemen a century later was at its outset disdained by many as rooting around in a dusty dark age past, while a true renaissance of classical greatness beckoned. Perhaps, though, the antiquaries' support of one another was all the stronger for it.

The Society of Antiquaries that met in London for approximately the last 20 years of Elizabeth's reign seems a distinctly cozy association. Its members were predominantly lawyers, clerks, and heralds from the close world of the London court; many were graduates of the universities, but neither the academic world nor the clergy had a significant presence in the Society. Meetings were largely devoted to topics of interest only to the members—what was the origin of this title, or that legal tradition—explored in relatively casual discussion. Rules required everyone speak, though even the briefest statements were judged adequate and “debates” generally finished without any formal conclusion.

Within this relaxed atmosphere Cotton, who was generally a supporting player in more public forums, achieved considerable prominence for himself. In *Medieval History in the Tudor Age*, May McKisack affirms other authors' impression of Cotton as a respected, well prepared contributor: “...Cotton used an impressive range of documents to illuminate the history of trial by battle. These included the Red Book of the Exchequer, the Parliamentary and Plea Rolls, and the Close and Patent Rolls, as well as in a number of French, Spanish, and papal records.” Cotton's peers took notice. Gradually, inside the Society of Antiquaries' supportive environment, the emergence of Cotton's library as a resource to be reckoned with had begun.

By the closing years of Elizabeth's reign the growing profile of Cotton's collection, combined with the Society's concentration of a general interest in better preserving the nation's records, inspired what may be the Society of Antiquaries' most important if indirect legacy. Together with James Ley and John Doddridge, Cotton petitioned the queen to build upon the foundation of their group a national center for antiquarian research, “The Academye for the Studye of Antiquity and History Founded by Queen Elizabeth.”

Their proposal, probably submitted in 1602, was both ambitious and detailed. The petitioners outlined ideas for both rules and officers, including a president, two librarians and a number of permanent fellows, all to pledge both the Oath of Supremacy to Elizabeth and guardianship of the library. The academy would have combined Cotton's and other antiquaries' collections with the accumulated books and manuscripts of England's sovereigns, to create a great national library. This and the academy's other projects would be responsible to an oversight group including the Lord Chief Justice, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other eminences. Suggestions for siting the academy included "some convenient room in the Savoy, which may well be spared" as well as "the dissolved priory of St John of Jerusalem," the latter particularly appropriate given the petition's multiple origins in the Dissolution.

Cotton and his cosignatories accompanied the proposal with a compelling list of arguments. The queen's own call for better care of the nation's "ancient monuments" would at last be achieved, with historical records both preserved and made reliably accessible for study. The academy would supply a valuable focus for the native historical study "which the Universities, being busy in arts take little care or regard." In demonstration of this value, the petitioners pointed to King Edward I's claim to Scotland and Elizabeth's father's assertion of an independent English church, both of which had employed arguments from historical precedent. Cotton, for that matter, might have brought up his own service to Elizabeth herself; though his career as a courtier was but recently commenced he had already advised the crown in seeking diplomatic precedence over Spain. He and the other antiquaries certainly implied that an academy might advance such work, as well, and might even become an advanced training center for high office with the addition of foreign language and geography departments.

For good measure, the petitioners also made a point of noting rival governments taking up similar plans. In broad outline, their proposal was neither new nor unique, even in their own country. The Tudors had already received such proposals at least as far back as Henry VIII's reign. Leland petitioned Thomas Cromwell, one of Henry's prime agents in carrying out the Dissolution, about a formal program to arrest the wreckage of the nation's libraries. In 1556, John Dee sought Queen Mary's support "for the recovery and preservation of ancient writers and monuments" in a national archive. Elizabeth had heard multiple exhortations to follow up her 1568 letter with more substantive measures. Dee may have raised the matter again during the years when he had the ear of the queen; Archbishop Parker certainly did so. As did Sir Humphrey Gilbert, whose own plan for a "Queen Elizabeth's Academy" even included deposit rights to new-published works.

Cotton and his friends may have considered this history and, with youthful enthusiasm, believed that the moment had arrived. Their older associates may have had comparatively low expectations. This might explain the absence of other names from their petition, not least that of Camden who seemingly might have lent a measure of gravitas to an effort he can hardly have opposed. Nonetheless, the academy just might have come closer to fruition than skeptics imagined. Another member of the antiquaries' Society, Richard Carew, wrote a few years later that "in the late queene's tyme it was lyklye to have received... extraordinarye favour from sundry great personages" and that only Elizabeth's death in 1603 prevented the scheme's realization. The possibility is almost as tantalizing to imagine now as it must have been to the ambitious 30-year-old Cotton: a great national research library and living monument to the Elizabethan "Golden Age," which would today be entering its fifth century. Alas, for both Cotton and counterfactuals, such was not to be. Historians have considered various reasons for the plan's failure; McKisack ques-

tions whether the petition ever reached Elizabeth herself, while an older tradition suggests that some form of grant had even issued, only to be voided by the change in government. Resistance by the universities also comes in for some suspicion, despite the proposal's claim that the academy would not be a competitor.

The history and habits of Elizabeth suggest that the petitioners may simply have been struggling against the Virgin Queen's most dependable instinct: prefer stalling for time to decisive actions whenever possible, especially when the latter would cost money. For most of a half-century Elizabeth routinely made a virtue of delay, and on balance England prospered. By her final years, however, even the famously frugal Elizabeth was struggling to balance her accounts. Funding a glittering new academy would have been a marvelous idea to praise—then defer until later. “Later” ran out for the last of the Tudor dynasty in March of 1603.

By itself, this need not have meant any obvious consequence for the antiquaries' proposed academy, besides a change of name. Given Cotton's initial flourishing under the new reign, James's accession might well have seemed an encouraging development. Nonetheless the petitioners' hopes were disappointed again. Whatever the reason, or reasons, “The Academye for the Studye of Antiquity and History” met the same government reluctance as every such proposal to come before it, and all those that followed for more than a century. In the meantime, if England's antiquaries were to have a center for their work and the preservation of the nation's documentary heritage, it seemed one of them would have to provide it himself.

EX LIBRIS
**THE DIARY OF
EDWARD VI**

Nero C X ff. 10–83

IF ANY ITEM IN THE ENTIRE Cotton library seems calculated to attract both scholarly and popular interest, it must be Nero C X. On one hand, it is an English king's personal record of his life and reign amid pivotal years for the Reformation. On the other, it is *the secret diary of one of the royals*, and a doomed young prince, at that; tabloids in both Britain and theoretically republican America would bid fortunes for its like, today.

This manuscript is something of an odd text, for all that, and in some ways confounds conventional ideas of a diary. In that sense its entries' nature complements and highlights the larger oddities of the reign of Edward VI. The long-sought male heir of Henry VIII, Edward succeeded his father at age nine, then fell ill and died six years later just as he was growing into a more confident and independent role. His diary is thus as much schoolboy's journal as chronicle of a king. Most scholars presume the diary was originally an assignment for one of his tutors. Edward began the manuscript in 1550, but the first section is a summary of his life up to his 1547 accession, plus events of his first two years as king. After completing the account more or less up to the present, however, he may have decided to extend the exercise for his own purposes. Edward continued making diary entries thereafter until late 1552.

Few entries include much in the way of an inner life. In the early section, Edward frequently refers to himself in the third person, and even after he takes up contemporary events the text is as much a summary of court events as it is a personal diary. Despite which, it possesses extraordinary interest for the simple fact of what it records; even at its most clipped and detached it is a king's firsthand account of the events of his own reign. In a 1966 study of the work, Wilbur Kitchener Jordan observed that "in English history, and very possibly in European history, there is no historical source quite of the nature of the Chronicle of Edward VI. It... not infrequently constitutes our only source of information for events of considerable significance."

Perhaps the most fascinating parts of the diary concern arguments with Princess Mary, Edward's much older half-sister, about her steadfast loyalty to Catholicism. Edward's reign pressed England further and more firmly toward Protestantism than any other, and the rejection of this program by a close relation who was also next in line for the throne was inescapably state business. Yet it was also obviously a deeply personal conflict, as is plain even in Edward's stilted prose. In 1551, Edward recorded how

The lady Mary, my sister, came to me to Westminster, where after greetings she was called with my council into a chamber where it was declared how long I had suffered her mass, in hope of her reconciliation, and how now, there being no hope as I saw

by her letters, unless I saw some speedy amendment I could not bear it. She answered that her soul was God's and her faith she would not change, nor hide her opinion with dissembled doings. It was said I did not constrain her faith but willed her only as a subject to obey. And that her example might lead to too much inconvenience.

The presence of Edward's diary in the Cotton library offers its own poignant juxtapositions. Though a Protestant himself, Sir Robert Cotton generally viewed Catholicism as an object for skeptical exchange and analysis; a relic, but a relic to preserve and study. By contrast, Edward sought to erase the Roman church from England entirely. His Act against Superstitious Books and Images of 1550 condemned the illuminated manuscripts and saints' lives that Cotton eagerly archived in his library decades later, and had Edward enjoyed the longevity of his father or his half-sister Elizabeth, the Cotton library might have been very different indeed. In that sense, for the collection that Nero C X now shares with numerous "superstitious books and images," the most important part of Edward's diary is nowhere in the text, at all, but rather in the many entries that were never made.

CHAPTER 2

The Collector



SOME YEARS AFTER JOHN DEE joined his late queen, his legendary library found itself broken up for sale. It was a sad irony given Dee's alarm on behalf of collections scattered by the Dissolution of the Monasteries, and his petition for a national sanctuary for their fragments. But the decline in Dee's fortunes from their Elizabethan peak had left behind a deeply indebted estate. With no national library to extend them shelter, his thousands of volumes were fair game for both creditors and fellow collectors. Sir Robert Cotton, knighted by King James in 1603, hoped for a nobler fate for his own library despite having gotten no further than Dee with petitioning for a national repository. But first, he needed a library worth preserving. In building such a library he felt no hesitation picking over the collections of fellow bibliophiles, ironies or no.

Much of the Cotton library was assembled through such scavenging. Authors frequently quote John Aubrey on how "manuscripts flew about like butterflies" in England, at the turn of the 17th century, and important work remained for those motivated to recapture them. But 60 years had passed since the Dissolution's initial crisis and opportunities. By the time Cotton began col-

lecting he had missed out on the first wave of salvage buying. As a second generation collector, his own great opportunities were often dependent on deaths among the previous generation.

In this, Cotton does indeed seem to have come along at “exactly the right time.” Beginning around the time of Dee’s death at least six more major collectors followed the late mystic in as many years, just as Cotton was enjoying heightened connections and resources thanks to court patronage. In 1609, Cotton managed to secure a few items from Lord Lumley’s collection, although in competing against Prince Henry a number of choice items understandably escaped. The prince’s own early death just three years later presented a second chance, however. That same year saw off William Dethick, followed two years later by Cotton’s great patron the Earl of Northampton, both collectors of note.

Estate sales were by no means Cotton’s only source. The fate of his acquisitions from Northampton points toward another, which may have been the most important of all. Colin G.C. Tite, among the leading scholars of the Cotton library, notes that a prayer book handwritten by Northampton himself is today part of the preserved collection of his nephew Thomas Howard; as Earl of Arundel, he was the major patron of Cotton’s later career. Tite suggests that Cotton, “ever an eye to the main chance,” likely passed it along knowing from experience that generosity had done more for his library than greed. Though the Cotton collection benefitted often from timely death, its development into not only a great but an active, living library, depended most of all on good friends.

Over the years, in collecting for his library, Cotton acquired books by nearly every means fair or foul. A rumor alleged that before his death Dr. Dee had buried manuscripts of his work in a field—and that Cotton subsequently bought part of Dee’s estate

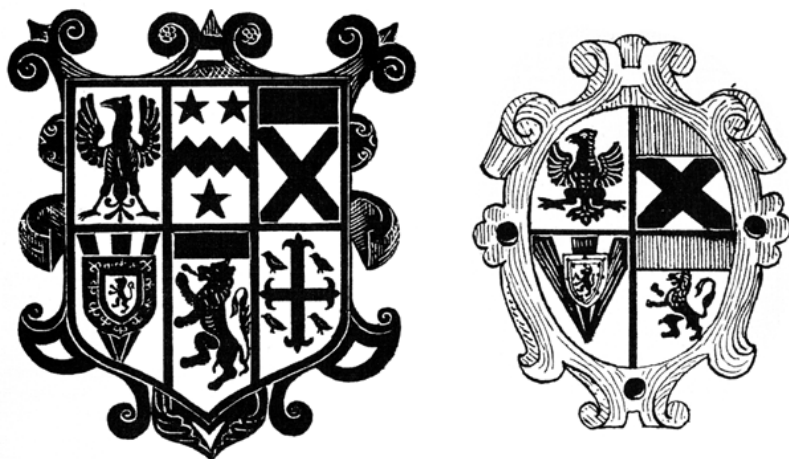
in order to dig for them. Though almost certainly apocryphal, the tale recorded by Aubrey in *Brief Lives* is fully consistent with Cotton's passion for the chase. His library served many purposes, even in his own lifetime, but one of the most important reasons for its existence is undoubtedly its owner's simple joy in assembling it.

The records of Cotton's library transactions, assembled in turn by the patient work of modern scholars, are familiar to anyone who has been or known an eager collector. Cotton had his "want lists." He engaged various "spotters" to extend his quest through his own country, and abroad; Sjoerd Levelt has documented how a number of Dutch manuscripts came to the Cotton library via the commercial consul for the Netherlands, Emanuel van Meteren. Cotton arranged trades with other collectors. He certainly paid out of pocket for manuscripts, if needed, and his rent books confirm that he had the means to buy in bulk in an era when notable manuscripts might still turn up as packing material in a shop from time to time. Cotton also pursued manuscripts that collectors had already recognized and become correspondingly more demanding in selling. Occasionally Sir Robert was outmaneuvered on a key deal, sometimes even by a good friend.

Much more often, though, Cotton was receiving books from friends rather than losing out to them. For *Sir Robert Cotton, 1586–1631*, Kevin Sharpe reviewed surviving records and found surprisingly little evidence of purchased material in the library, concluding that "with the evidence we have, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Cotton, like Matthew Parker, acquired the bulk of his library by gift rather than by purchase." Plenty of anecdotal evidence supports the possibility. His scholarly correspondent de Peiresc sent copies of the latest works off the presses of France. His friend John Weever wrote of discovering manuscripts in a chandler's shop, once, and promptly turning them over to "the onely repairer of ruined antiquitie whom I knew."

The ill-fated Greek Genesis was a gift to Cotton, as were both copies of Magna Carta that his library eventually boasted. Donors had no shortage of reasons to enrich Cotton's library; Weever's confidence in the library as a safe store was shared by many, while Mirrlees has suggested that at least a few items may have represented "peace offerings from guilty borrowers." Whether from guilt or gratitude, Cotton's generous lending and assistance with research certainly inspired many friends to offer gifts. Few of them would have struggled to think of something he would like.

As attested by the opening pages of too many period books to record, friends to Cotton and his library were everywhere among early Stuart literati. Camden dedicated an edition of *Britannia* to Cotton, who supplied much of its source material. The jurist John Selden dedicated multiple works to him, praising Sir Robert's "inestimable library" as well in *The Historie of Tithes*. Francis Bacon's *Historie of the Raigne of King Henry the Seventh* credits Cotton's assistance. Edmund Bolton, a poet as well as a historian,



Two versions of Sir Robert Cotton's coat of arms

The design at left was used most frequently.

From C.J.H. Davenport's English Heraldic Book-stamps (London, 1909).

observed to Cotton that “The world sees that no worthie monument of witt and learning comes forth but with honourable acknowledgement of help from you...” Hope Mirrlees notes more prosaically that “there are very few Jacobean books on history or antiquities which do not contain some expression of gratitude to Cotton or to his library.”

The tremendous value of Sir Robert Cotton's collection to contemporaries, and their resultant gratitude, are perhaps best appreciated within the context of the larger history of England's libraries. Prior to the Dissolution the great collections of books and manuscripts were almost exclusively those of monasteries. Though these had numerous shortcomings as public libraries, they did provide known places to turn, and even engaged in some limited lending. But the visitations of Henry VIII's commissioners brought all of that to a swift end.

The libraries of Oxford and Cambridge survived, as institutions. But even after they began rebuilding from the depredations under Henry's son, they too remained very limited resources. Both universities restricted in-person access to their collections, and borrowing material was an actual physical impossibility within a “chained library.” J.N.L. Myres explains in *The English Library Before 1700* that such a library's books were “chained to the presses of sufficient length to enable them to lie open on the desks but not to be removed to any other part of the room.” Myres adds that the printing press, by dramatically reducing the labor required for book production, effectively made such systems obsolete by the mid-16th century... yet as J.C.T. Oates points out in the same anthology, Cambridge delayed a general unchaining of books until after 1627, while Oxford “kept its chains until late in the eighteenth century...”

Cotton, by contrast, not only lent books but often neglected to make any bother about recovering them. His was a private library, and if a complete stranger knocked on the door Cotton

could have and may well have sent him packing. But on the whole the Cotton library was a champion of accessibility, not least because of its location. Sir Robert and his books moved around a few times before settling in Cotton House, as close as any place has come to being *the* physical location for the Cotton library. But just being in London made the library far more accessible to the capital's scholarly and political community than either of the universities could be, in an age of slow overland travel. Once the library settled in Cotton House, around 1622, it could scarcely have been more centrally located anywhere in the city. In the middle of the Palace of Westminster grounds, amid various official record offices and close by the Houses of Parliament, Cotton was able to establish a national library almost literally by the back door.

Well before the Cotton library moved to Westminster, Cotton himself was becoming nearly an honorary resident. He entered Parliament for the first time in 1601, and at the Earl of Northampton's direction performed some modest service for Elizabeth's government. Under King James, both Northampton and Cotton then began to ascend the ladder of favor and influence even higher, from the new king's first day.

Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, was connected in one way or another to most of the important people, groups and government projects of his era. In the 1590s, he briefly aligned himself with the dynamic Earl of Essex, before prudently moving to Robert Cecil's camp in time to avoid Essex's downfall; he and Cecil then collaborated on the tricky project of planning for a succession that was officially treasonable to discuss. Their gamble paid off when James moved swiftly to occupy the throne of England. While Northampton's relationship with the new king was often strained, he wielded considerable influence at court for the rest of his life. James wryly captured both of these aspects in

dubbing Northampton, Cecil, and Howard's nephew the Earl of Suffolk his "Trinity of Knaves."

For Northampton's own close advisor, relations with the new sovereign were in many ways warmer still. The Scottish James was an awkward outsider suddenly thrust into the very center of England's turbulent court, and Robert Cotton offered a small measure of kinship, figuratively and even literally. Cotton was a descendant of Scotland's revered king Robert the Bruce, and if it was a distant connection, Cotton's new enthusiasm for this shared heritage apparently pleased James who took to calling him "cousin" in addition to including him among the many knighthoods awarded in 1603. (Cotton himself took to signing his name "Robert Cotton Bruceus," thereafter.) Beyond this, James was himself a credible amateur scholar. As the man who eventually gave both patronage and his name to the Anglophone world's most enduring translation of the Bible, and once avowed that "Were I not a king, I would be a university man," he likely recognized a deeper kinship with "cousin" Robert.

Despite shared interests, King James's friendship with Cotton did not extend to the Society of Antiquaries or its projects. The proposed academy and national library remained a dream. If another clue to its rejection were needed, in addition to cost and inertia, one might readily be found in the Society's general decline under James. By 1607, London's first Society of Antiquaries ceased formal meetings, and an attempted revival several years later proved abortive. In both instances royal disapproval played a significant role.

Details of the Society's history are sometimes uncertain, but most sources support the conclusion of Sir Henry Spelman, who wrote some years after its demise that "his Majesty took a little Mislike of our Society." Amateur antiquaries discussing etymology and topography must appear, at this distance, a harmless club of eccentrics, hardly material for a "treasonous cabal." But by the

early 1600s, the Society had in fact strayed some way into contemporary politics. Several members of Parliament had joined, including vocal critics of royal prerogative. More to the point, perhaps, in English politics of their era the distant past was generally inseparable from contemporary arguments.

One of the few things Parliament and crown could reliably agree on even as other differences sharpened was the importance of *precedent*. For James, an organized society of MPs and lawyers scrutinizing questions of precedent likely seemed distinctly unnecessary, particularly once direct questions into law and Parliament joined the relatively nonpolitical agenda of earlier days. The Society's closed proceedings probably did little to help; whatever their reasoning, they certainly courted suspicion in advising members that "Yt is desyred that you bringe none other with you, nor geue anie notive unto anie, but to such as haue the like somouns."

Some evidence points to a last minute attempt to foreswear subjects of political controversy and assuage royal dislike, but it apparently came too late. Though a Society of Antiquaries did return to London eventually, it was not for nearly a century. In the meantime, Cotton may have been disappointed by its disbanding but he had plentiful compensations, not least the king's exemption of Sir Robert's own research into matters of precedent. James and his "knaves" were quite content to support an individual antiquarian or two, as long as he labored under their supervision. Throughout the Stuart dynasty's early years in England, Cotton was kept busy marshaling arguments for one royal project after another. He eagerly produced evidence for James's personal claim to the crown, as well as the sovereign's general claim to preeminence over Parliament. He aided Bacon on James's desired union of England and Scotland (without success), and Northampton on peace negotiations with Spain (with better results, including a minor triumph in defending English

trading activity in the Americas). In all these projects and more besides, Cotton was constantly drawing on documents from not only his personal library, but government archives; significantly, he did not always concern himself with maintaining a distinction between them.

The Cotton library of today most often enjoys attention for the *Beowulf* manuscript, the Lindisfarne Gospels, Magna Carta and other “crown jewels.” For much of Cotton’s lifetime, though, many of these items were either absent from his library or else unrecognized as noteworthy. Both his copies of King John’s great charter were late acquisitions, while *Beowulf*’s ascent to literary fame only began in the 19th century. In the era of its founding the Cotton library’s reputation owed considerably more to documents that seem relatively mundane, at least from the perspective of the uninitiated.

The extensive state papers collection among the Cotton manuscripts nonetheless offers its own claims to interest. For students of English history or heraldry, 200 volumes of records from Henry VIII through James I offer an invaluable resource. Tite declares that the collection as a whole traces “the transactions and preoccupations, major and minor, of English government at the time,” transactions in some instances recorded nowhere else. For more general audiences, though, Sir Robert Cotton’s state papers archive may hold greater interest for how he came by it.

Thomas Wilson, appointed the first keeper of the state paper office by James I, saw Cotton’s private archive as little short of grand larceny. Wilson repeatedly criticized the ongoing drift of government papers into Cotton’s library. More than once, he actively sought to contest it. When Robert Cecil died Wilson sought to secure the late secretary of state’s papers before Cotton could get hold of them. In this, and a similar struggle for the papers of his colleague Arthur Agarde, Wilson met with no more

than partial success; in general, his efforts must be regarded as a signal failure. Yet for what it may be worth, Wilson had a point.

Cotton certainly did help himself to the records of England's government, not only those that might be deemed privately held and therefore fair game, but those on deposit in official archives, as well. Kevin Sharpe notes that Cotton's library was as indispensable to heraldry as the College of Arms, "if only because Sir Robert had much of the material... which should more properly have been deposited there." Few such proprieties ever restrained Cotton. Through the Society of Antiquaries, of course, he knew many of the heralds and record keepers personally. He could bolster acquaintance with formal credentials, after he began regular work as a court researcher under James. In this pursuit, in particular, it seems Cotton developed a habit of taking his work home. Tite sums up the controversy over Cotton's state paper collection memorably, observing that "There is an impression that every time he visited the various archives of government he came away with his pockets crammed with booty."

At the same time, Tite is one of multiple authors who have rallied to Cotton's defense. Cotton's contemporaries recognized and shared much of their reasoning. Even among the official record keepers, Cotton's accumulation of state papers mostly met with acquiescence and even active support because, in most instances, Sir Robert seemed a better custodian of them than the state itself.

A typical tourist's itinerary for London can reveal a good deal about their reasons. Into the 19th century, government scattered its records among makeshift stores anywhere that offered room. Careful visitors to Westminster Abbey will note that its Chapter House was once a state archive. The Tower of London's exhibits note that Tower Records Office only closed in 1858, and that complaints of "the poor state" of records recurred regularly throughout most of its history. Chancery records were divided

between archives at the Tower, the Abbey, the Rolls House in Chancery Lane, and individual court offices. The records of important minsters were, as noted, often treated as personal papers.

By Elizabeth's time people recognized the chaos and began efforts to introduce a system into it. But formal progress remained elusive long afterward. In the meantime, as with a national library Sir Robert Cotton was ready to supply the want of an ordered, central archive for England's state papers, and friends among the clerks and archivists and political class were ready to support him. Sir Thomas Parry, ambassador to France in James's early years, donated papers to Cotton. Very likely other courtiers followed suit, as Cotton proved himself a capable and open-handed librarian. Thomas Wilson could warn against permitting one of Cotton's cronies to replace Arthur Agarde at the office of the exchequer, after Agarde passed away, but as usual his attempts were sabotaged by his own side.

Like Wilson, Agarde was a reformer who devoted himself to ordering and protecting his office's papers; unlike Wilson, Agarde saw no conflict between this and Cotton's private collecting. After Agarde's death, Wilson petitioned the king himself to secure the late archivist's own valuable files, but Agarde had made perfectly clear his desire that many choice items go to none other than his close friend, and fellow Society of Antiquaries alumnus, Sir Robert.

Tite's image of a gentleman plunderer, stuffing manuscripts into his pockets with permission or without, is still difficult to efface. More than one chronicler records how Cotton once borrowed an ancient manuscript of Bede from St. John's College, Oxford, seemingly with every intention of keeping it. Cotton entered the volume into the catalog of his own library, and there part of it remains. Sir Robert surrendered back the volume after desperate pleas for its return and, finally, even promises of "recompense"

by Archbishop Laud, who brokered the loan; even then, Cotton took the liberty of tearing out an entire section to hold back for himself. A similar story involving a large compendium borrowed from the City of London does not aid Cotton's reputation, nor does his employing as librarian one Richard James, who once boasted of having "gott away many of those manuscriptes from ye good olde man [Oxford scholar T. Allen] and conveyed them away to London to Sir Robert Cotton's studie..." Reading of a friend once warning Cotton, in advance of a meeting with Sir Thomas Bodley, that he should hide away any valuable tomes that might be easily concealed owing to Bodley's reputation for helping himself to such items, one must wonder which man should have been more on his guard.

Yet Bodley did not shun Cotton, and very few others did, either. Throughout his life Cotton enjoyed the friendship and frequent praise of exactly the sort of scholars and collectors most likely to have items on one of his want lists. While making some allowance for his charm and political connections, Cotton was never a true royal "favorite," either. Wilson notwithstanding, instances of outright thievery must realistically have been few and forgivable, at least in context of the countless transactions Cotton made over his career as bibliophile. Taking was constantly twinned with giving, including to Bodley; Sir Robert was one of the first donors to Bodley's planned library at Oxford, by his own choice rather than any unwitting loss.

Sir Robert Cotton was, in the end, simply a contradiction that cannot be entirely resolved. He unquestionably pursued books, manuscripts and other "ancient monuments" with passion, and regularly with aggressiveness that at least brushed the bounds of theft. At the same time, he was so generous with his own collection as to confound any idea of a rapacious hoarder. Reviewing Cotton's policies as librarian, one is left with the strange but inescapable impression that getting *back* a book of

one's own from Sir Robert was frequently more difficult than obtaining the loan of even the most valuable of his.

An episode reported by Mirrlees reinforces that impression while offering a perfect vignette of Cotton's habits in all their amusing, infuriating, yet oddly consistent splendor. In 1620, nearly 50 years old, Sir Robert Cotton found himself being scolded by his uncle John for loaning out a manuscript borrowed from their mutual acquaintance Sir George Buc. Cotton had promised Buc to "keep it always in [my] own possession and where it should be ready at all times, if it were called for," a promise Buc had insisted on before parting with it for very good reason. He was correspondingly so anxious for the manuscript's return as to enlist familial guilt for the same reason: he himself had only been borrowing the book from another friend before charming, earnest, endearing old Cotton had somehow talked it away from him.

Continued in the pages of *Cotton's Library*
available now at
www.mattkuhns.com/cottons-library