A CATALOGUE OF SIR ROBERT COTTON'S PRINTED BOOKS?

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The inventory of the goods and chattels of Sir Robert Cotton taken on 20 May 1631, two weeks after his death, records that the upper study at Cotton House, Westminster, was furnished, *inter alia*, with 'i iron prese & ix presses w^th^ printed bookes'. This brief reference draws attention to a subject which has so far received very little consideration – the question of the history, character and present whereabouts of Sir Robert Cotton’s library of printed books. In his monograph on the antiquary, Kevin Sharpe observes that the fate of Cotton's printed books remains a mystery. We know that he owned many from the records of gifts sent by the French scholars and the dedications and expressions of thanks to Cotton by grateful English antiquaries. If he built up a considerable library of printed books, there is no evidence that he took the trouble to catalogue them separately – an omission which suggests a concentration on original material and collections of transcripts.

It is, of course, for his superb collection of manuscripts, charters, rolls and coins that Cotton is primarily known. Much of this was catalogued either during his lifetime or that of his immediate successors and, in the case of the manuscripts, the system of Emperor pressmarks that he devised is still in use. If the printed books were ever organized systematically, the arrangement probably did not long outlive the termination of the family’s direct interest in the library on the death of Sir John Cotton, grandson of Sir Robert, in 1702. Certainly there no longer exists a block of Cottonian printed books in the British Library’s holdings to parallel its collection of the family’s manuscripts. Any printed books that arrived with the manuscripts at Montagu House after the creation of the British Museum in 1753 were destined to be absorbed into the Museum’s general collections of printed books and, like other similar accessions, to lose whatever separate identity they may once have possessed. Locating them today is therefore largely a matter of chance unless some piece of evidence exists to direct the searcher to a specific title. Furthermore, the hunt is complicated by the fact that, as with a number of manuscripts, some Cottonian printed books undoubtedly strayed from the library during the seventeenth century, well before its transfer to public ownership. Any search for the family’s printed books must therefore take in other collections in addition to those of the British Library. Clearly, work on tracing items in the printed book collection of the Cotton family would be substantially advanced by the identification of a catalogue of the
volumes. There are three reasons for thinking that such a listing may have been undertaken. Firstly, Sir Robert Cotton supervised in detail the arrangement and listing of his manuscripts and it might therefore seem surprising if the printed books did not receive some degree of care. Secondly, the survival of catalogues of the printed books (as well as of manuscripts) belonging to other collectors of the period suggests that owners felt that organization and listing were desirable. Thirdly, and most importantly, a list of printed books bearing on a preliminary folio the title ‘Catalogus librorum Robert Cotton’ is to be found in BL, Add. MS. 35213.

Is this list what it claims to be? A generation ago, Sears Jayne in his Library catalogues of the English Renaissance described it without hesitation as a catalogue of Cotton’s printed books. However, while this is possible, the manuscript as a whole and this list in particular present a number of problems which must be confronted before the authenticity of the catalogue can be accepted.

Add. MS. 35213 is a composite manuscript in four broad sections. Briefly, its first four folios are a catalogue of printed books and manuscripts belonging to John Dee (who died in 1608). Folios 5r–32r contain a catalogue of manuscripts owned by Henry Savile of Banke (d. 1617), while ff. 33r–44r consist of a number of separate memoranda. The remainder of the volume is almost wholly taken up by the so-called list of Cottonian printed books on ff. 46r–83v. Of these sections, Sir Robert Cotton’s connection with the second and third can be clearly established. In the margins of the second section, the Savile catalogue, marking a number of manuscripts – some of which later became Cottonian – are to be found the clover leaf sign and the astronomical sign of Venus which appear not only in another Savile catalogue, BL, Harl. MS. 1879, ff. 1r–10r, which undoubtedly went to Cotton, but also in Cotton’s own catalogue of his manuscripts in Harl. MS. 6018. In itself, the evidence from these signs is obviously not conclusive – Cotton was not alone in using such marks in the early seventeenth century – but annotations in his hand are also to be found in the Savile catalogue in Add. MS. 35213. Of these, the most telling appears against an entry of a manuscript which is now BL, Cotton MS. Claudius D. VII: this has been noted in Cotton’s hand as lent to Lord William Howard of Naworth and this same annotation is repeated, again by Cotton, against the entry for the same manuscript in his catalogue in Harl. MS. 6018 which he began in 1621. As this borrowing is also noted in a separate list of loans compiled by Cotton and outstanding in April 1621, the Savile catalogue must have been in use as one of his working records shortly after Savile’s death in 1617, while the loan to Lord William noted in all three places must surely refer to one and the same borrowing.

Several of the memoranda which occupy ff. 33r–44r, the third section of Add. MS. 35213, are also clearly associated with Cotton. Folio 33r, a list of books that Sir Robert had from the arms painter and genealogist, Jacob Chaloner, and f. 34rv, noting exchanges of manuscripts with Patrick Young, Royal Librarian, are in Cotton’s hand. Folios 35r–36v are not, but they are a version of similar entries in the catalogue of Cotton’s manuscripts in Harl. MS. 6018. Folios 37r–43v are further lists by Cotton, mainly of manuscripts, most of which can be identified. Folio 44r is a record of four
Fig. 1. A typical leaf from the list of printed books, showing the slips mounted on the backing sheets and the two versions of the classification headings. Add. MS. 35213, f. 70r
borrowings of manuscripts, at least one of which appears to come from the Cotton library. However, this folio must be a later insertion as it cannot date from before 1634, three years after Cotton’s death.\textsuperscript{13}

Enough has perhaps been said to establish that the context of the list of printed books on ff. 46r–83v of Add. MS. 35213 is Cottonian. Moreover, the fact that the manuscript is no longer a part of the familiar Cotton series need not cause concern: the same is true not only of Harl. MS. 6018 but of two others of the early Cotton catalogues of manuscripts, Add. MSS. 36789 and 36682.\textsuperscript{14} Nevertheless, the list itself requires close scrutiny. It is composed almost entirely of titles written originally on larger sheets which were subsequently cut up. The resulting slips, with one or more titles on each, were then rearranged and mounted on the backing sheets which now form the folios of Add. MS. 35213.\textsuperscript{15} The rearrangement was in accordance with a subject classification whose categories have been written, often in duplicate (one version scribbled, the other more carefully inscribed), at the tops of the pages (fig. 1). There is a very large number of these headings — ‘Religio’, ‘Historia Ecclesiastica’, ‘Politicae’, ‘Ethicae’, ‘Astronomia’, ‘Cronologiae’, ‘Italia’, ‘Germanie scriptores’, ‘Turcay scriptores’, ‘Hungaria’, ‘Tartaria’, ‘Militare’, ‘Antiquitates’, ‘Epistolae’, ‘De Artitectura’ [sic] — to mention fewer than half of them. Within these classifications it appears that an attempt has been made to group volumes of a similar size together but this system frequently breaks down, suggesting that not all the slips were available for mounting at the outset. The hand predominantly responsible for the titles on the slips has yet to be firmly identified:\textsuperscript{16} it is possible that the writer was a friend or servant of Cotton, engaged on listing his printed books. However, for two reasons it seems unlikely that this is what he was doing when he produced all, or at least the bulk, of this list. He has recorded, in some detail, the titles of approximately 575 books, often giving their size and normally the place and date of publication as well. None of the dates of publication he records is later than 1595. In that year Cotton had most of his career as a collector ahead of him: if this is a list of his books it is perhaps surprising that it was not kept up-to-date.\textsuperscript{17} Another objection to accepting the list as Cottonian stems from the identity of the person responsible for establishing the classification system within which the pasted slips were arranged. As has already been mentioned, there are two types of heading to the backing pages: one is in a scribbled hand, the other in a more careful display script. There can be no doubt that the scribbled hand wrote first, to have its work duplicated by the second script.\textsuperscript{18} The scribbled hand is obviously not that of a professional scribe nor of Sir Robert Cotton, nor at present is its identity known. But it is almost certainly the same hand as that which records a loan of books on f. 84v (fig. 2).\textsuperscript{19} This loan appears to be dated 1579 and part of its wording makes it clear that the writer is also the owner of the books lent.\textsuperscript{20} In 1579 Cotton was eight years old and could not have had any connection with this loan. The likelihood is that whoever made the loan also established the classification system laid down by the scribbled headings and, indeed, owned the books listed on the pasted slips, employing an assistant to do this work. If this is correct it fits in with the terminal publication date of 1595 for items recorded on the slips. The owner must belong to the generation
Fig. 2. A loan of books, apparently dated 1579, and almost certainly in the same scribbled hand as writes classification headings to the list of printed books. Add. MS. 35213, f. 84v
immediately senior to Cotton’s and would therefore be reaching old age by around 1600.

However, if Sir Robert Cotton did not commission the list it does not follow that it has no connection with him or that he did not own, or fall heir to, some or all of the books in it. In the same way as he must have taken over the Savile catalogue, as well as some of the manuscripts described in it, he may equally have adopted both the catalogue and some of the volumes of printed books. Part of the evidence which points to this possibility is of a similar nature to that which has been discussed in relation to the Savile catalogue: the list of printed books has been annotated in at least two hands, one of which is undoubtedly that of Sir Robert Cotton (fig. 3). Moreover, as I shall suggest shortly, the context of several of these annotations is Cottonian; but first it may be useful to consider their general purpose and character. Annotations are to be found both on the mounted slips and on the backing pages on which the slips are mounted. Occasionally, they have been partly obscured by a slip or cropped when the slip was cut up, indicating that some slips at least were added or moved after the annotations were made. Sometimes the annotations record an additional title or note a further piece of information but the most interesting are notes of loans, either of new titles which are written, with the name of the borrower, on the backing sheets, or of existing titles, where the slip is annotated (fig. 4). Seven borrowers are recorded: ‘Mr Tomson my lord
tresorers chaplein', 'Mr Camden', 'Mr Cope', 'Mr George Carew', 'Mr Tat', 'John Neell' and 'Mr Beston'. Of these, the last two are at present unidentified but the remaining five were all members of Sir Robert Cotton's circle and borrowers or donors of manuscripts. 'Mr Tomson' is Paul Thomson of Trinity College, Cambridge; he lived until 1617 and was successively chaplain to Lord Burghley and to James I. William Camden (d. 1623) needs no introduction. 'Mr Cope' is Sir Walter Cope who combined a career in government and politics with antiquarian interests, was knighted in 1603 and died in 1614. George Carew is the future earl of Totnes, diplomat, administrator in Ireland and collector of Irish papers and manuscripts, who was raised to the peerage as Baron Carew in 1605. 'Mr Tat' is Francis Tate, secretary of the Elizabethan Society of Antiquaries, who died in 1616. The styles by which Cope and Carew are recorded indicate a terminal date by which, presumably, the records of their borrowings must have been made, and such a chronology agrees with what was said earlier about the date of compilation of the original catalogue of printed books and the possibility that Cotton inherited it around 1600 to use it, at least for the time being, as a working record in much the same way as he used the Savile catalogue.
In addition, three other detailed pieces of evidence may be advanced for Cotton’s ownership of the catalogue of printed books. Firstly, it will be recalled that the backing sheets are headed with broad subject classifications and that these often appear twice, once in a scribbled hand which is then duplicated by a more careful display script (figs. 1, 4). For what it is worth, this habit of duplicating a rough heading by presenting it in a more formal way is to be found in many of the volumes of letters and papers among the Cotton manuscripts where it is undoubtedly a consequence of Cottonian ownership. Secondly, although the two hands of these headings have not been identified, a third hand which occasionally provides a heading is almost certainly Cotton’s. Finally, weight must be given to the title of f. 46r, ‘Catalogus librorum Robert Cotton’, which precedes the list of printed books and which is in an early seventeenth-century hand (fig. 5). This title, rough though it is, is probably intended to relate to the contents of the leaves which follow it.
My suggestion is, then, that Sir Robert Cotton took over a previous owner’s catalogue of printed books in Add. MS. 35213 and that there is a good chance that, as in the case of the Savile catalogue, at least some of the volumes listed in it entered his possession at much the same time. Whether, or to what extent, this catalogue does reflect the contents of his ‘presses w* printed bookes’ and whether it may be possible to establish the identity of its and their original owner is likely only to be determined when the catalogue is edited, a task that would seem well worth undertaking. In conclusion, however, a final point, both negative and positive, should be made. It remains a matter of concern that the catalogue, if it is Cottonian, was not kept up-to-date. We can only guess at the reason but perhaps the task of arranging the manuscripts, especially the volumes of letters and papers, was such a monumental one that little opportunity remained for listing printed books. Nevertheless, although Cotton may not have persisted with the catalogue or continued to use it to note loans, he and later his son did not entirely neglect to keep records of their printed books. Scattered notes and occasionally rather fuller lists of loans of these are to be found interspersed among the records of manuscripts borrowed which are now on ff. 147r–190r of Harl. MS. 6018.\(^2\)

As with other contemporary lists of this type, problems arise both of identification and of distinguishing manuscripts from printed books, but a rough count of titles, where these are identifiable, indicates that approximately half of those which might reasonably be expected to feature in the Additional MS. list do so. One block of loans shows a particularly striking coincidence with the printed book catalogue. In 1635 Sir William Howard, probably the brother-in-law of Sir Thomas Cotton, Sir Robert’s son, borrowed thirteen titles. Of these eight or nine are listed in the catalogue of printed books.\(^3\) While the existence of multiple copies of printed books naturally renders such evidence less compelling than in the case of manuscripts, it is a further indication that the catalogue in Add. MS. 35213 may well be a valuable key to Sir Robert Cotton’s library of printed books.

Professor Robin Alston, Arthur Searle and Professor Andrew Watson kindly read this article in draft. I am grateful for their valuable comments.

1 BL., Cotton ch. i. 16. The inventory makes no mention of manuscripts.


3 For a brief account of the early history of the library see the introduction to my edition of Thomas Smith’s *Catalogue of the manuscripts in the Cottonian library 1606* (Woodbridge, 1984).

4 It is possible that Cotton’s printed books, as a group, never reached the British Museum. It has not, I think, been previously noticed that the act of Parliament (12 & 13 William III, c. 7) which legislated for Sir John Cotton’s gift of the library to the nation makes no mention of printed books, although it defines the scope of the donation fairly precisely: ‘...Manuscripts, Written Books, Papers, Parchments, Records, and other Memorials...together with all Coins, Medals, and other Rarities and Curiosities...’.


6 See Sears Jayne, Library catalogues of the English Renaissance (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1956; reissued Godalming, 1983) and Professor R. C. Alston’s handlist, ‘Library Catalogues, Lists of Manuscripts and Printed Books in The British Library Department of Manuscripts’, which is available in the British Library. I am engaged on a history of Sir Robert Cotton’s manuscript collection.


10 The final folio, 84, is written only on the verso. Its significance will be discussed later.

11 Watson, p. 14. Of the sixteen manuscripts marked by the clover leaf sign, ten (Watson, nos. 10, 12, 70, 102, 176, 183, 211, 218, 226, 233) either certainly or possibly entered the Cotton collection.

12 Add. MS. 35213, f. 1orv; Harl. MS. 6018, ff. 12or, 149r; Watson, pp. 14–15, 21 (no. 20). Cotton was also responsible for the addition ‘a monachus Lanercostensis monasterii in Comitatu Cumberlandiae’ to the same Savile catalogue entry (an authorship which he also records in the April 1621 loans record) and for noting the loan of another manuscript (Watson, p. 22, no. 23) to ‘my lord Carew’. The return of Claudius D. VII from Lord William Howard must be reflected by the duplicate entry for it on f. 135r of Harl. MS. 6018.

13 Sir William Le Neve, knighted in 1634, is mentioned in one of the items. The volume which is likely to be Cottonian (probably Tiberius E.I) is noted ‘titled by Mr James’. Richard James became Cotton’s librarian around 1625 and was responsible for writing many contents tables into manuscripts.

14 See my article, ‘The early catalogues of the Cottonian library’, British Library Journal, vi (1980), pp. 144–57. Add. MS. 35213 was previously owned by the Fairfax family and then by Sir Thomas Phillipps whose number 10701 appears in the title page of printed books, and elsewhere in the volume. The scribbled hand is also responsible for some rough notes on ff. 8or and 8ir. These two folios carry no mounted slips and may have been displaced from the end of the main list, but they share its paper type and watermark.

15 Evidence of rearrangement is provided by a slip number which appears on f. 75r. This has the catchwords ‘Annales pipini’ and must have led on to the entry, now on f. 58v, which begins ‘fol. Annales Pipini.’

16 It is possible that the entries are by Nicholas Charles, Lancaster Herald, who died in 1613. I am grateful to Ann Payne for advice on Charles’s hand. Occasional slips are in another hand: examples are on ff. 51r, 63r. Equally occasionally, slips record manuscripts rather than printed books (ff. 51v, 57r).

17 Unless, of course, as Kevin Sharpe suggests, Cotton’s interests had turned to original material.

18 See, for example, the headings on f. 70r (fig. 1).

19 F. 84v is bound into the manuscript upside down. However, it is of the same paper type as the backing sheets of the booklist proper and shares their watermark. The loan it records is of a dozen items. Several descriptions are inexact but six or seven appear to refer to printed books. For only one of these (‘the statutes’) there is a parallel entry in the main booklist (on f. 71v). This is disappointing but some years may separate the list on f. 84v from the main list. The scribbled hand is also responsible for some rough notes on ff. 8or and 8ir. These two folios carry no mounted slips and may have been displaced from the end of the main list, but they share its paper type and watermark.

20 The entry runs: ‘2 bookes of postells I had of Glenvill’. (The reading of Glenvill is uncertain.) The figure ‘7’ in the date is curiously formed and no other reading seems plausible (fig. 2).

21 For example, notes of loans to Camden on ff. 52r and 70r (see fig. 1, left-hand column) are partly obscured by mounted slips and f. 49r carries a slip whose annotation (also recording a loan) has been cropped.

22 For example, on f. 60v (where three titles have been written on the backing page: see fig. 3), on f. 58v (an addition to a title on a slip), and on f. 70v (a title added to a slip).

23 Tomson: ff. 47v, 49r, 51v; Camden: ff. 50v, 52r,
58v, 7or (fig. 1, left-hand column); Cope: f. 51v; Carew: ff. 52v, 60v; Tat: f. 71v; Neell: f. 73r; Beston: f. 77v.

24 John Venn and J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses. Part I: From the earliest times to 1751*, 4 vols. (Cambridge 1922–7); BL, Lansd. MS. 83, ff. 126r–7v; BL, Eg. MS. 2877, f. 161r. He features, as do the other four, in the memoranda and loans lists at the end of the Cotton catalogue, Harl. MS. 6018. He is also one of the borrowers noted on f. 84v of Add. MS. 35213 (where he is recorded as being lent a copy of the *Bibliotheca Sancta* of Sisto da Siena, a work which is also listed as on loan to him in Harl. MS. 6018, f. 156r). I am grateful to Pamela Selwyn for identifying Thomson and to Pauline Croft for advice about him.


27 *D.N.B.*.

28 For example, it writes ‘Dania’ on f. 56r and ‘Rodium’ on f. 64r.

29 I hope shortly to publish a paper on a loan of printed books made by Cotton to John Selden in 1622.

30 The Howard loan is on f. 181r of Harl. MS. 6018. The entries which can also be found in Add. MS. 35213 are: 1. ‘Descriptio Britannie’ (on f. 57r of the Add. MS., if this loan is of Camden’s *Britannia*); 4. ‘Gregorii Fabritii Chemnisensis’ (f. 75r); 6. ‘Nove Saxonum Historie’ (f. 55r); 7. ‘Mathei Castritii Dar[m]statini’ (f. 50r); 8. ‘Pantheon. folio’ (f. 51v); 9. ‘Danica Historia. folio’ (f. 56r); 10. ‘James [= Johannes] Turpinus. folio’ (ff. 59r, 75r); 11. ‘Davidis Chitreii [= Chytraeus]. folio’ (f. 65r where, however, the volume listed is octavo); 12. ‘Wolphangus Latius. folio’ (ff. 50v, 61r, 70r).