Humfrey Wanley and the Harley Collection

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One of the finest private libraries in Europe was formed by Robert Harley and his son, Edward, 1st and 2nd earls of Oxford. On Edward Harley’s death in 1741, his library contained an estimated ‘7618 manuscripts, 50,000 printed books, 350,000 pamphlets and 41,000 prints’. Arguably, the greatest single acquisition made by the Harleys was their librarian Humfrey Wanley (1672-1726) whose humble origins and lack of academic qualifications did not prevent him from becoming one of the greatest antiquaries of his day. A draper’s apprentice who taught himself Anglo-Saxon, Wanley was one of the founding members of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and an outstanding palaeographer.

Wanley’s first teachers were men who had died centuries before he was born: medieval scribes and notaries who guided his pen. Bent over his desk, the young Wanley would copy the forms of ancient letters until he had mastered their shapes, memorized each abbreviation, and knew every flourish by heart. Among his first models were charters and documents preserved in the archives of his native Coventry, where Humfrey Burton, his maternal grandfather, served as a clerk, but he soon aspired to greater things. In April 1695, armed with a letter of introduction from Samuel Pepys, he visited Sir Robert Cotton’s Library which had passed by descent to his grandson, Sir John Cotton (1621-1702). There he viewed several incomparable manuscripts, including the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Vespasian Psalter and the Cotton Genesis. Before leaving, Wanley insisted on transcribing a text from the ‘Beowulf’ manuscript (Cotton MS. Vitellius A. XV), a painstaking exercise that exasperated the busy keeper, Thomas Smith.

Four years later, on a visit to Cambridge in 1699, Wanley persuaded various college librarians to lend him some of their prized manuscripts and he was able to copy these at his leisure. All but the gentlemen of Bennet College (i.e. Corpus Christi) were willing to accommodate his requests. On 28 September 1699, writing to his friend and landlord, Arthur Charlett (1655-1722), Master of University College, Oxford, he reported that he was ensconced in his room with several priceless volumes and that he had just made a copy of one of the folios in a tenth-century Greek Gospel Book owned by John Covel (1638-1722), Master of Christ’s College, Cambridge (fig. 1). A portrait of Wanley, painted by Thomas Hill in 1711, shows him with his facsimile copy of the Greek text (fig. 2). The copy is inscribed in his ‘Book of Specimens’, a

3 The manuscripts are: Cotton MS. Nero D. IV; Cotton MS. Vespasian A. I; and Cotton MS. Otho B. VI. For the Cotton Library, see Colin G. C. Tite, The Manuscript Library of Sir Robert Cotton (London, 1994) and Stuart Handley, ‘Cotton, Sir Robert Bruce, first baronet (1571–1631)’, in ODNB.
4 Now Harley MS. 5598 (Wanley copied f. 248v). His copy is Longleat MS. 345, f. 12r. For the letter, see Heyworth (ed.), op. cit., pp. 137-8.
Fig. 1. Covel Gospel, Harley MS. 5598, f. 248v.
Humphrey Wanley and the Harley Collection

Fig. 2. Thomas Hill, Portrait of Humfrey Wanley, 1711, Society of Antiquaries of London, LDSAL 309. By kind permission of the Society of Antiquaries.
notebook containing his facsimiles of folios of various manuscripts, now preserved at Longleat House, near Warminster in Wiltshire. At an unknown date, Wanley gave or sold the book to Thomas Thynne, first Viscount Weymouth of Longleat House, where it lay undisturbed until it was discovered by Simon Keynes in 1996.

Replicating medieval texts sharpened Wanley’s powers of observation and gave him a familiarity with medieval documents that few others could rival. And it was his mastery of ancient hands that brought him to the attention of the man who was to be his great patron and friend, Sir Robert Harley. In 1701, seeking to advance Wanley’s career, which had stalled at the Bodleian where he worked as an assistant earning a mere £12 per year, George Hickes, the great Anglo-Saxonist, arranged for him to meet Robert Harley. In his oft-quoted letter of introduction, Hickes assured Harley: ‘[Wanley has] the best skill in ancient hands and MSS of any man not only of this, but, I believe, of any former age.’ Clearly, Hickes respected Wanley’s palaeographic skills, but he also admired his calligraphic ones, for he added, ‘He brings you his book of specimens, which I believe will please you.’

Hickes was right; Harley was impressed. The relationship flourished and in 1708 Harley made Wanley his librarian, a post he occupied until his death on 6 July 1726. Wanley was a prodigious writer and his surviving papers shed light on his role and responsibilities in this post. His work encompassed three main spheres of activity: acquiring printed books and manuscripts, caring for and cataloguing these, and receiving visitors. Wanley’s diary, published in a modern edition by Cyril and Ruth Wright, is an indispensable source of information concerning the provenance of the Harley manuscripts, supplementing the evidence of book-stamps, bookplates, arms, and ownership inscriptions furnished by the books themselves. It was Wanley’s custom to write the date of purchase on one of the initial folios of each manuscript and these inscriptions appear in almost all of the books acquired through his agency.

By the time he came to work for Robert Harley, Wanley had catalogued hundreds of manuscripts. Because he had left Oxford without a degree, his scholarly reputation rested largely on his catalogue of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in English libraries. Published in 1705, Wanley’s Librorum vett. septentrionalium, qui in Angliae bibliothecis extant, nec non multorum vett. codd. septentrionalium alibi extantium Catalogus historico-criticus, which he dedicated to Robert Harley, his ‘Maecenas’, formed the second volume of George Hickes’s Thesaurus of Northern Languages and Literature (the first being Hickes’s own Linguarum vett. septentrionalium thesaurus grammatico-criticus & archaeologicus of 1703).

The dedication to Harley was neither premature nor prophetic. Even before he became Robert Harley’s librarian, Wanley brokered Harley’s first major purchase: the acquisition of over 660 manuscripts that had been collected by the politician and antiquary, Sir Simonds D’Ewes, who left them to his heirs when he died in 1650. ‘Sir’, wrote Wanley to Robert

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8 Ibid.
9 Wright and Wright (eds.), op. cit.
Harley in November of 1703, ‘I will take care that you shall have them cheaper than any person whatsoever.’

The manuscripts included a Carolingian copy of the *Aratea*, which delighted Wanley. ‘There are 2 Copies of this Work in the Cotton-Library’, he reported to Harley, ‘both of ’em antient and beautifull; but in neither respect comparable to this.’

Although Robert Harley had made previous manuscript purchases, the D’Ewes acquisition was momentous. Manuscripts from the D’Ewes collection ‘account for about one-twelfth of the Harley manuscripts … [now held by] the British Library’ and D’Ewes rolls and charters ‘for two-thirds of Harley’s eventual holdings.’

While Wanley was negotiating the D’Ewes sale at Stow Hall, Suffolk, he caught sight of a painting of Sir Robert Cotton (1586–1631) that had been commissioned by Sir Simonds D’Ewes (fig. 3). Now attributed to Cornelius Jansen, the portrait, dated 1626, shows Sir Robert with his hand resting on the famed Cotton Genesis (Cotton Otho B. VI) – one of the manuscripts that Wanley had viewed on his first visit to the Cotton Library in 1695. Coveting the portrait of the renowned bibliophile with his famous manuscript, Wanley arranged to buy the painting for himself, and he took possession of it in January 1706.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that this portrait of Sir Robert, showing him with the Cotton Genesis, inspired Wanley to commission his own portrait with his ‘Book of Specimens’. Posing for the painter, Thomas Hill, with his notebook open at the facsimile of the Covel Gospels, which he had made at Cambridge in 1699, Wanley gazes directly at the viewer. Renaissance painters had first depicted learned men with books and scientific instruments, a style of portraiture which maintained its popularity into the eighteenth century. But Wanley’s decision to have himself depicted in this way may well have stemmed from his desire to emulate Sir Robert Cotton, rather than a general admiration for this type of painting. Although the Cotton and Wanley portraits diverge in style and composition, both were designed to perpetuate the reputations of their scholarly subjects and to advertise their antiquarian interests.

Wanley’s portrait is an exercise in self-fashioning; presumably, since he paid for it himself, he dictated how he would be portrayed. A stone inscribed with runic characters and a parchment roll are among the items displayed alongside him. The roll, made c. 1200, featuring scenes from the life of Guthlac of Crowland, the Anglo-Saxon saint (d. 714), was first examined by Wanley on 23 January 1708 at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries at the Young Devil Tavern, Fleet Street, and he probably purchased it for himself or the Harleys shortly afterwards.

It is telling that Wanley chose to be depicted holding the ‘Book of Specimens’ – his compilation of transcriptions from manuscripts – rather than a medieval
Fig. 3. Cornelius Jansen, Portrait of Sir Robert Cotton, 1626, Collection of the Rt. Hon. Lord Clinton, D. L., Devon.
manuscript itself. His talent, he seems to suggest, does not lie solely in his ability to interpret ancient texts, but in his dexterity as a calligrapher. Unlike most antiquarians, Wanley not only admired the artistry of medieval scribes but was able to replicate it. Wanley presented his likeness to his patron, Edward Harley, to whom at an unknown date he also gave or sold the portrait of Cotton, which stayed in the Harley family until 1742.\(^\text{18}\)

Although their library grew rapidly, the Harleys did not purchase manuscripts indiscriminately and Wanley rejected those he deemed exorbitantly priced. In 1718, for example, when he was offered a monumental two-volume Bible from Germany, he declined the purchase, judging it too expensive. However, as recorded by Wanley in his diary, Harley purchased the manuscripts for the library in 1721 (whether the terms had changed is not stated).\(^\text{19}\) On another occasion, when some Italian manuscripts came to auction, Wanley advised his agent not to buy them unless ‘they should come dog-cheap’ adding, ‘the library is already plentifully furnished with Italian manuscripts.’\(^\text{20}\) This was no exaggeration for a steady stream of them had been pouring into the Harley library through the dealer John Gibson.\(^\text{21}\)

As a statesman, Robert Harley was particularly interested in English history, heraldry, and genealogy, but as his library grew, so did his desire to make his collection comprehensive. As early as 1712, Wanley had written to a gentleman bound for Smyrna, explaining that Robert Harley lacked manuscripts in Greek and Oriental languages and asking for these to be procured.\(^\text{22}\) ‘For the Hebrew, my Lord is & will be pretty well furnished’, he observed, ‘but a Volume of their Law, rolled upon a Stick, & finely written would not be unacceptable.’\(^\text{23}\) Compared with other English collectors of the day, the Harleys built up significant Hebrew holdings: ninety-five manuscripts compared to Sir Hans Sloane’s twelve, and seven in the Royal Collection.\(^\text{24}\)

When visitors called at the Harley library, Wanley would show them, as he once remarked, ‘divers manuscripts both antient & curious’.\(^\text{25}\) Monitoring acquisitions and filling gaps, Wanley helped the Harleys create the most wide-ranging collection in England. ‘In the number and variety of its manuscripts it certainly far outshone its two most notable rivals in London, the Royal and the Cotton Libraries.’\(^\text{26}\)

No items were beyond consideration. Where others saw worthless scraps, Wanley saw valuable evidence of medieval scribes. ‘If a Greek book is torn, or other wise in bad condition, do not reject it. Even Fragments may be welcome, to us, who know how to render them useful’, wrote Wanley in 1718 to Samuel Palmer, a merchant based in Cyprus.\(^\text{27}\)

\(^\text{18}\) For the provenance of the Cotton portrait, see Keynes, op. cit., p. 114, n. 17.
\(^\text{19}\) The Arnstein Bible, Germany, c. 1172, Harley MS. 2799. See Wright and Wright (eds.), op. cit., vol. i, p. xlix.
\(^\text{20}\) Diary 1 April 1724, concerning a sale by a Mr Varenne that was brought to Wanley’s attention by Noel. Ibid., vol. ii, p. 286.
\(^\text{22}\) Heyworth (ed.), op. cit., p. 270.
\(^\text{23}\) Ibid., p. 271.
Although the plan was not implemented, when Wanley was still working at the Bodleian he requested permission to remove from printed books manuscript fragments that had been used as pastedowns, in order to collect a range of samples to be used as the basis for a history of scripts. He was not alone in his enthusiasm for fragments, as his friend John Bagford, shoemaker and book dealer, and fellow founder of the Society of Antiquaries, whose collection was acquired for Harley on Bagford’s death in 1716.

Wanley haggled with booksellers in the taverns and shops of London, and waited for owners to sell or die so he could pounce on their prized volumes. A list, preserved in one of his notebooks, cites items in private hands that he hoped to obtain for his patrons. These range from manuscripts, rolls, and charters owned by his friend and doctor, Sir Hans Sloane, to volumes at the Abbey of Grottaferrata near Rome where, it was said, there were ‘a great number of Greek MSS likely to be bought cheap’ (fig. 4). That anyone possessed of a library should be unready to give or sell his books to Harley […] seemed to Wanley a very unreasonable […] attitude. He had mastered the art of the begging letter while working at the Bodleian, and he put his skills to good use in the Harleys’ service. He composed, for example, a letter to Basil Feilding (1668–1717), the 4th Earl of Denbigh, advising him to give his manuscripts to Robert Harley:

I have been thinking that it would be a Generous & a truly Noble Action, if your Lordship should throw those Old Things, into this Library where they will be always preserved to Your Lordships own Honor & Glory & the Public Use […] If your lordship is not willing to part with anything of that kind, there is no harm done, for My Lord Treasurer [i.e. Robert Harley] nor nobody else […] know’s of this my writying nor […] ever shall.

A draft of Wanley’s letter survives, but nothing came of his request. Convinced that he could persuade the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral to part with their patrimony, Wanley jotted in his Diary, ‘I hope, god willing, to go down [to Durham], because I understand that they have Books, Charters, & other things there which will be more useful to the World in my Lords Library than in that remote corner of the Kingdom.’ Tacitless as they are, these remarks suggest that Wanley saw the Harley collection as a public resource. Wanley’s covetousness and impudence are also apparent in letters that he sent to John Covel whose Greek Gospel Book he had borrowed and copied in part in Cambridge in 1699. Covel had built up a fine library, which Wanley was determined to acquire for Edward Harley. ‘I must Crave leave to putt you in mind of the promise you was pleased to make unto me, with Regard to your Manuscripts. Namely that I should be the Purchaser of them all, at a Reasonable Price,’ wrote Wanley to Covel in September 1712 (fig. 5). Four years later, after protracted negotiations, Edward Harley wrote to Covel, with evident relief, ‘I am very well pleased to find […] that the affair between us is likely to be brought to a good conclusion’ (fig. 6). A copy of a receipt for £300, signed by Covel on 27 February 1716, (fig. 7) proves that Wanley’s persistence paid off: the Greek Gospel Book he

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29 ‘Things proper for the Library in the Hands of Particular Persons’ (Lansdowne MS. 677, ff. 3–4v at f. 3v).
32 The unsigned draft, dated 28 November 1713, is Welbeck Wanleyana, British Library Loan 29/258. Ibid., pp. 282–3. The Earl of Denbigh’s manuscripts were retained by his heirs until the mid-nineteenth century. Wright and Wright (eds.), op. cit., p. xxviii, n. 2.
Humphrey Wanley and the Harley Collection

Fig. 4. Humphry Wanley, notebook, Lansdowne MS 677, f. 3v (detail).
Fig. 5. Humfrey Wanley to John Covel, letter of 30 September 1712, Add. MS. 22911, f. 146.
Fig. 6. Edward Harley to John Covel, letter of 27 February, 1716, Add. MS. 22911, f. 198.
Fig. 7. Copy of a receipt for £300, signed by John Covel on 27 February 1716, Add. MS. 22911, f. 201.
had admired almost twenty years before and had copied so meticulously in his ‘Book of Specimens’ was finally in his grasp.\footnote{Humfrey Wanley to Covel, letter of 30 September 1712: Add. MS. 22911, ff. 145-146; letter of Edward Harley to Covel: Add. MS. 22911, f. 198; copy of receipt: Add. MS. 22911, f. 201.}

In his youth, Wanley had conceived of a plan to visit all the libraries of Europe, but he never left England and he depended on book dealers, diplomats, churchmen, and other envoys to purchase manuscripts on the continent and in the eastern Mediterranean. Poring over printed catalogues, he travelled without leaving his desk and instructed his envoys to purchase specific items.\footnote{A list in one of his surviving notebooks includes the item: ‘Consult Mabillon’s Iter Germanicum & Analecta about MSS. in Germany’ (Lansdowne MS. 677, f. 6).} For Wanley, comparative analysis was vital to the understanding of manuscripts, and catalogues were vital for comparative analysis. They also enabled readers to find specific books, particularly when they were shelved by size rather than by subject, a space-saving practice endorsed by Wanley who recommended ‘that Books of a Bigness be Sett together, without respect of Faculty, Art or Language.’\footnote{Draft of a letter concerning St Paul’s Library, 16 September 1710, Heyworth (ed.), op. cit., p. 261.}

Recognising that a superior catalogue could advertise the Harley library and enhance its reputation, Wanley set out to create one worthy of his lord. Two distinct catalogues of Harley manuscripts, written in Wanley’s neat hand, are preserved in the British Library: his \textit{Catalogus maior}, an incomplete work offering detailed descriptions of hundreds of manuscripts, and his seven-volume \textit{Catalogus brevior}, a summary catalogue which extends from Harley MS. 1 to Harley MS. 2407, and formed the basis of later printed volumes.\footnote{\textit{Catalogus maior}, compiled 1701-1708: Add. MSS. 45699 and 45700. \textit{Catalogus brevior}, compiled 1708-1726: Add. MSS. 45701 to 45707. For Wanley’s catalogue of Harleian charters, see Add. MS. 45711. His notes on heraldic manuscripts are found in Add. MS. 6052. For a partial subject index, see Lansdowne MS. 816. The printed catalogue is \textit{A Catalogue of the Harleian Manuscripts in the British Museum}, 4 vols (London, 1808-12).}

Wanley’s entries reveal his ability to date and localize manuscripts, his prodigious memory, and his talent for scripts and languages. They also give us a glimpse of his spirited and forthright character. He describes, for example, Harley MS. 2293 as ‘a superstitious book in folio, fairly written, with some drawings on velum, by a workman. It contains a rhapsodical and confused discourse to the late King James II for introducing some new religion, if I apprehend the intent of it, from principles of geomancy. The author seems to have been some ignorant foreigner, perhaps some whimsical or maddish Irish-man; whole conceits and style are so hard and barbarous that I cannot spend more time upon them with any patience; and therefore go on to [MS.] 2294.’

Scholars have focused on Wanley’s mastery of medieval scripts, but few have considered his approach to medieval images. Wanley first evinced an interest in medieval miniatures in his formative years. On his eventful Cambridge trip of 1699, he borrowed from Trinity College a monumental Psalter containing illustrations of every Psalm and a full-page image of the Benedictine monk and scribe, Eadwine, showing him seated at a lectern quill and penknife in hand (Cambridge, Trinity College MS. R. 17. 1, f. 283v, fig. 8).\footnote{The Eadwine Psalter, made at Christ Church, Canterbury, c. 1150.} Eadwine’s name is supplied by the inscription, which runs around the perimeter of the image, and describes him as the ‘prince of scribes’. It reads, in part: ‘by its fame your script proclaims you, Eadwine […] alive through the ages, whose genius the beauty of this book demonstrates’.\footnote{The inscription takes the form of a verse dialogue between the scribe and the letter: ‘SCRIPTOR: S\textsuperscript{[C]}RIPTORUM PRINCEPS EGO. NEC OBITURA DEINCEPS LAUS MEA NEC FAMA. QUIS SIM MEA LITTERA CLAMA. LITTERA: TE TUA S\textsuperscript{[C]}RIPTURA QUEM SIGNAT PICTA FIGURA. PREDICAT EADWINUM FAMA PER SECULA VIVUM. INGENIUM CUIUS LIBRI DECUS INDICAT HUIUS. QUEM TIBI SEQUE DATUM MUNUS DEUS ACEPTE GRATUM’. See T. A. Heslop, ‘Eadwine and his Portrait’, in Margaret Gibson, T. A. Heslop, Richard W. Pfaff (eds.), \textit{The Eadwine Psalter: Text, Image, and Monastic Culture in Twelfth-Century Canterbury} (London, 1992), pp. 178-85.} Anxious to record his discovery...
Fig. 8. Eadwine, Cambridge, Trinity College MS. R. 17.1, f. 283v. By kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge.
before returning the manuscript, he made a copy of Eadwine’s portrait in his ‘Book of Specimens’. Few other drawings made by Wanley have been identified, but Simon Keynes has suggested that an image of the Evangelist Luke, based on a miniature in the Lichfield Gospels and later printed by Hickes, is another example of Wanley’s handiwork (Stowe MS. 1061, f. 39). ‘He designs and draws admirably well’, remarked one of his contemporaries, ‘having besides an unaccountable skill in imitating any hand whatsoever.’

The fact that Wanley had the Guthlac Roll depicted in his portrait of 1711 suggests that he maintained an interest in both the Anglo-Saxon saint and medieval modes of representation. Featuring eighteen tinted drawings of Guthlac’s life, the roll has no text, apart from brief captions (fig. 9). Wanley’s ideas regarding the display of manuscripts also reveal his concern with aesthetics. While working at the Bodleian, he recommended that ‘the Strength and Flower of all the Manuscripts in the Library’ be stored together so that they could be easily accessed and shown to visitors, especially those manuscripts ‘adorn’d in the Noblest and Richest Manner, whether they be Missals or Prayer Books, or otherwise relating to the Bible, or Habits of different Nations, or Drawings of Birds, Beasts, Fishes, Tree, Plants, Herbs, etc.’ Similarly, in a memorandum of 1714 addressed to Robert Harley, Wanley set down proposals for furnishing his lord’s library: ‘On the left side may be set a press, wherein only such antient, beautiful, rich, rare, or otherwise valuable books, etc. may be placed as shall be deemed most fit to be shown unto strangers.’ He also proposed that a niche be built for the display of Hebrew scrolls, and that it ‘be adorned with one or more figures representing Moses, Aron, K. David and Q. Esther, etc. as may be found most proper.’

Significantly, Wanley’s conception of an ideal catalogue was one that made mention of pictures as well as texts. At the Bodleian, for example, he suggested that a new catalogue be composed, one that included descriptions of pictures ‘deserving to be made Publick’, and engravings of remarkable examples. Likewise, when he was asked to advise on the Cotton Library in 1703, after it had been sold to the nation, he proposed that a new catalogue be compiled and that ‘some notice […] be taken of the pictures painted in the MSS, especially if they be remarkable for their antiquity, rarity, workmanship, etc.’

Wanley’s catalogues of Harley manuscripts suggest that he judged medieval illustrations on both their historical and aesthetic merits. He noted, for example, that Harley MS. 1671 comprised ‘a large theological treatise […] composed by some Secular Priest of no great learning or capacity […] which he endeavoured to illustrate by a company of Pictures drawn in a most rude and wretched manner.’ It is difficult to disagree with his negative

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40 His facsimiles of the Eadwine Psalter, the most lavishly illustrated English book of the twelfth century, are preserved in his ‘Book of Specimens’ at Longleat. Longleat 345, f. 125: the Pater Noster. The portrait of Eadwine is on an unfoliated folded leaf.

41 Wanley’s drawing was the source of an engraving published by George Hickes in Linguarum vett. septentrionalium thesaurus grammatico-criticus & archaeologicus (1703-05), vol. i, opposite p. viii. Wanley wished to acquire the Lichfield Gospels for the Harleys, but he was unsuccessful (see his diary, 2 March 1715, Wright and Wright (eds.), op. cit., vol. i, p. 1).


43 For Wanley’s proposals for the Bodleian, see Harley MS. 7055, ff. 42-44 and Lansdowne MS. 814, ff. 86-94v.


46 The scheme regarding the Cotton library, dated 29 May 1703, is preserved in Lansdowne 846, ff. 213-15; two drafts appear in Harley MS. 7055, ff. 19-20, 22-23.

assessment of the drawings, but the original artist cannot be faulted entirely since an unskilled person added facial features to the unfinished figures. Although Wanley, who did not note the inept additions, scorned these pictures, he conceded that they were of historical value since they showed the style of clothing worn when the book was made. By contrast, he praised the pictures in Harley MS. 1319, an eyewitness account of the fall of Richard II, composed c. 1401. He observed that both the figures and their garments were well represented, and that they could have served as useful models for the painter, Antonio Verrio, whose murals in St George’s Hall at Windsor Castle of 1680 were filled with absurdities and anachronisms. 48

Like his fellow antiquarians, Wanley was interested in heraldry and he attempted, with varying degrees of success, to identify the arms he encountered in manuscripts. He suggested, for example, that the arms depicted in an early fourteenth-century English Psalter (Harley MS. 2356, f. 9) were those of Hugo Wake (fig. 10). Indeed, the arms of another member of the Wake family, Baldwin Wake (Or, two bars gules, 3 plates in chief gules), which appear on the Dering Roll, the oldest surviving English roll of arms, c. 1270–1280, are almost identical to those depicted in the Psalter, and the book was almost certainly made for a member of this family. Wanley had greater trouble, however, interpreting a miniature in the same manuscript. The image, which shows two friars propping up a church, and a crowned figure reclining in the foreground, illustrates a well-known anecdote concerning Pope Innocent III (fig. 11). He is said to have dreamed that the Church of St John Lateran in Rome was on the verge of collapsing, but was held fast by St Francis. The medieval narrative, endorsing the mendicant orders, sometimes featured Francis, sometimes Saint Dominic, and occasionally both together. 49 Although the anecdote is not obscure – it is the subject of one of the most striking frescos in the Basilica of St Francis at Assisi – Wanley was unfamiliar with it. Looking at the Psalter miniature, he recognized that the figures supporting the church were Dominican friars, but he erroneously concluded that the reclining figure was King Henry III of England, rather than the pope. 50

Wanley’s catalogues of Harley manuscripts were not published in his lifetime, but the effort he expended on them suggests that he intended these volumes to reach a larger audience, and that he shared Robert and Edward Harley’s sense of public duty. Thanks to the generosity of Edward Harley’s widow, and his daughter, the Duchess of Portland, who sold the collection to the nation in 1753, the Harleys’ private library, one of the foundation collections of the British Library, did, indeed, become a public resource. The Duchess of Portland’s letter to Speaker Onslow accepting his suggestion on behalf of her mother and herself, dated 3 April 1753, is preserved in Add. MS. 17521, ff. 38, 38v (fig. 12).

It has been said that Wanley ‘carried the comparative study of manuscripts to lengths unknown before in English scholarship.’ 51 Although his contribution to the interpretation of medieval miniatures has not been recognized to the same extent, his attempts to make sense of the images he encountered in medieval manuscripts, and his conviction that these were, at best, beautiful, and at worst, valuable witnesses to the past, were remarkable for his day.

48 Ibid., vol. ii (1808), no. 1319.
49 For the Dream of Innocent III, see, for example, Michael Robson, St Francis of Assisi: The Legend and the Life (New York, 1999), pp. 87-8.
Fig. 9. Guthlac Roll, Harley Roll Y.6 (detail).
Fig. 10. Arms of a member of the Wake family, Harley MS. 2356, f. 9.
Fig. 11. Dream of Pope Innocent III, Harley MS. 2356, f. 8v.
Fig. 12. The Duchess of Portland's letter to Speaker Onslow on the sale of the Harleian Collection to the British Nation, 3 April 1753, Add. MS. 17521, f. 38v.