



Confessions of a Bibliophile Monk

by Placid Spearrit

An address by the Abbot of New Norcia Abbey given at the Conference Dinner of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand, 10th October 1997.

Confessions in the Roman Catholic Church used to begin with the penitent saying, “Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It is two weeks since my last confession, and in that time I have committed five murders, told three lies, omitted my morning prayers on seventeen occasions, used bad language eleven times, and had two uncharitable thoughts about my husband. For these and all the other sins which I cannot now remember I humbly ask pardon of God and of you father, penance, counsel, and absolution.” You may be relieved to know that I am not going to make one of those confessions tonight.

I will use the word to mean more or less what St Augustine meant when he called his most popular book *Confessions*. There must be a lot of Christians who have picked up that book hoping to learn something about the lurid exploits of his youth, only to be disappointed to learn that by confessions he means praises. *Confitemini Domino quoniam bonus*: Praise the Lord for he is good, is the beginning of Psalm 117, which we sing with enthusiastic Alleluias in the Easter Vigil. At least it’s Psalm 117 for Roman Catholics, Greeks, and ancient Alexandrian Greek-speaking Jews; for Anglicans, Protestants and Hebrew-speaking Jews it is Psalm 118. If you know anybody who’s scouting for a topic for a doctorate in bibliography, you might suggest sorting out the book (or the five books) of the Psalms of David (or whoever else wrote it for them).

What I want to confess, in the sense of praising, is the delight of living and working with books, dipping and browsing in them, studying them, handling them, desiring them, and buying them. I was going to say that I can’t remember ever having sold a book, because for me that would be a kind of sacrilege. But I have to confess (in the other sense) to having done so on one occasion, when not without some reluctance. I sold to the Bodleian Library a late nineteenth-century economic history of Russia, in Russian, in about twenty-five volumes. We didn’t make a lot of money on it for the library of Ampleforth Abbey, and there was the consolation that anybody wanting to consult it would be more likely to try the Bodleian than to apply to an English Roman Catholic monastery library.

There was another item we sold from Ampleforth, a single leaf from a medieval manuscript the rest of which was already in the British Museum collection. I know it’s now politically correct to refer to it as the British Library, but at the time we were still using Old Style terminology. I cannot now remember the name of the manuscript, or all the details of this



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parchment leaf, but I do remember that one side of it was decorated with a Jesse tree, a graphic representation of the descendants of David the son of Jesse with Mary and Jesus as the ultimate fruits perched on the top of the tree.

One of my jobs in my long years of apprenticeship to the monastery librarian was to show visitors the library. This had to be done not because they were interested in books, but because the guestmasters had run out of other things to do with them and their time had to be filled up somehow. Generally I could get away with ignorant guesses as to what I was showing them, but occasionally there would be an expert among them who could relieve me of some part of my profound ignorance.

My enlightenment about this Jesse tree, however, came from a party of air force officers, one of whom drew his mates' attention to the figure of Jesse recumbent at the bottom of the page, and to the part of his anatomy from which the tree was rising. In my naivete I had never noticed just how the medieval scribe had combined earthy realism with pious genealogy and artistic skill. The air force man read it as erotic; I still think the illustrator had a healthier understanding than the air force of the integration of soul and body.

The restoration of that leaf to its home codex raised some interesting questions of monastic morality. Nobody knew how or when it had come into our possession – at least I don't think so. I'm telling this from memory, twenty years or more after the event. The details will exist somewhere at Ampleforth, or maybe in the unsorted cartons of my literary remains that I have brought out to New Norcia at intervals over the last thirteen years. I think I will eventually be awarded a posthumous medal for providing job opportunities for future archivists.

Perhaps the leaf had been stolen by a monk, or stolen by a friend of a monk? At any rate, the school attached to the monastery was agitating for a proper indoor swimming pool at the time, to replace two improper pools that had served it since about 1911. That was an expensive enterprise, and the abbot had shown some alarming willingness to entertain a suggestion from one of the monastic philistines, that we might sell something from the codices room to foot the bill.

We librarians swiftly mobilised a resistance movement among the monks who could read and write; and we managed to persuade the abbot that he didn't want to go down in history as the vandal who disposed of our fine collection of about 200 incunabula, twenty or so medieval manuscripts, 100 later manuscripts, and two or three thousand early imprints, all in aid of a transitory swimming pool.

A little later, however, when we needed some shelving to set up a ground floor reading room, with the idea that given some reader-friendly display space the brethren might be persuaded actually to read some new books, the procurator declared himself totally unable to afford any shelves at all. That was our opportunity to restore the



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medieval leaf to its rightful home, not for a commercial price, but for one thousand pounds, the sum we needed to have some decent oak shelves made to fit our spaces.

Benedictine monks don't take vows of chastity or poverty: we leave that kind of thing to Dominicans, Franciscans and other later inventions. We do take a vow (or more pedantically and accurately we make a promise) of stability; and as with grandparents who stay put in one place for a century or two, we tend to accumulate a lot of stuff and hang onto it in case it might come in handy. Hence the tendency of monasteries to have large libraries and archives. Not well-planned or efficiently-catalogued collections. Monastery libraries rarely have what you want, but they normally have something else twice as interesting.

I don't know whether you are familiar with the work we at New Norcia refer to as Hay & Bean. It is *The early imprints at New Norcia*, a bibliographical study by John Hay and David Bean. John Hay is now the Vice-Chancellor of the only Australian university of which I have the honour to be a graduate; and David Bean is a bibliographer in whose company we all have the honour to be right now. Their catalogue is Number 9 in the *Western Library Studies series*, published by the library of what is now the Curtin University of Technology. They report that they found our early imprints in the two main rooms of the library, but also at seven additional locations in the monastery, including some exposed, hostile environments on verandahs or in store-rooms. Happily, they further report that by the end of their work, most of the works in question had been re-united with the main collection in the library.

I am able to report an eighth additional location that they missed. Some years after their book was published we had flash floods at New Norcia. The museum floor was flooded, the ceiling of the hotel dining-room filled up with water, and a number of other areas in town suffered from inundations. One of them was the west wall of the abbot's study, which began to run streams of muddy water from the ceiling. I hot-footed it up to the room above, which contains a stairwell and not much else. My attempts to plug the join of the wall and the floor there with rags were complicated by a hole in one corner of the floor. Out of the hole I was able to extract a tin can, some rags from a previous generation, and – an early imprint. This was volume 2 of a Spanish translation, published in 1715, of Dom Jean Mabillon's *Treatise on monastic studies, with a list of the principal difficulties to be met in each century in the reading of the originals*.

Hay & Bean record two complete two-volume sets at New Norcia, and another: Hay & Bean 653, imperfect, wanting v. 2. So now we have three complete sets. It would seem that some poor monastic student of the past was frightened off further monastic studies by the thought of all those hundreds of years of difficulties, and solved his problem by hiding the evidence under the floor-boards. Gradually, with the assistance of white-ants and our conservation architect



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we find ourselves looking under all the floors in town. So far a mummified cat is the only other find of any particular note. Perhaps we shall yet come across the monk who was master of studies at the time this volume was laid to rest.

Security is of course a problem for libraries in monasteries where efficiency of collection management is not the order of the day. We do what we can to lock up our treasures, but financial resources are too limited to provide anything like adequate protection. And we have a couple of highly suspect enquirers who try new ways of gaining access every two or three years. I have been commissioned by our library committee to ask for any advice any of you may be able to offer us. The problem that most disturbs us is that there is a good deal of rare and/or valuable material, Australiana for instance, but much else as well, both theological and secular, on our shelves, and we don't have the expertise to know which bits of it are so valuable that they should be transferred to the limited compactus shelf space left over after the early imprints have been stored there. How do we find out, without further increasing our security risks and without incurring costs that we cannot afford? Should we insure the collection? Should we sell duplicate volumes? Perish the thought! Should we be taking in antiquarian booksellers' catalogues, in the hope that they will list and price some of the titles we hold? And finally, if anyone offers to help after this speech, should I insist on taking finger-prints there and then?

Another matter I need to confess, in both senses of the word, is an acquired taste for manuscripts in preference to the printed word. No one who has once tasted the delights of primary sources can ever again be quite satisfied with the re-heated fare that is secondary literature.

Our procurator at New Norcia, Dom Christopher Power, drums into me constantly the principle that every opportunity is a marketing opportunity. In this case, I won't be trying to sell you something, but I will ask as intelligent and good-looking bibliographers just to keep an eye out for some manuscripts I've been chasing for the last thirty years. They are seventeen folio volumes, containing the autograph text of Fr Augustine Baker's writings on prayer and the spiritual life. Baker was a Welsh monk belonging to the English Benedictine Congregation, who wrote most of his works for the nuns of the English convent in Cambrai between 1624 and 1633. Fortunately most of his output is extant in early MS copies. My one ambition this side of the grave is to edit those works. It would make the job much easier if the originals were to come to light. They were confiscated when the convent was suppressed in 1794, after the French Revolution, and placed in the Cambrai Bibliotheque Municipale, but had disappeared from its catalogue by 1821. My guess is that they were stolen by an English monk in the confusion following the battle of Waterloo, but haven't been heard of since. I'd be grateful if you'd all have a look under your floor-boards for me.



I never cease to be astonished at the heights to which Roman Catholic culture can rise, and the depths to which it can sink. Let me finish in the bibliographical depths. A clerical friend told me about one of his seminary professors who, when questioned by his class about some dubious statement replied, “It’s true! I read it in a book.”
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*There are a number of tributes to Placid Spearritt that can be found online. Here is one from the Catholic Religious Australia website:
<http://catholicreligiousaustralia.com/en/477>*