

William Hunter's Book Collection: The Man and his Time

Introduction

William Hunter, an eighteenth-century physician, anatomist, and medical scholar, attended Glasgow University between 1731 and 1736 studying theology (though he did not graduate). Later, Hunter moved to London and led a successful career as Practising Physician to Queen Charlotte, a Professor of Anatomy at the Royal College of Arts, and a member of the Royal College of Physicians. His interests were not purely scientific though; Hunter had a wide interest in antiquities - as can be seen from the range of collections on display in the Hunterian museum and the varied topics being discussed this evening. Hunter dedicated a large portion of his time not spent in medical endeavours as an antiquarian collector; becoming a Fellow of the Society of Antiquities of both London and Scotland from 1768. His book collection, which will be the focus of this talk, was obviously a great passion of Hunter's: a letter from his literary friend Tobias Smollett says of Hunter, 'you say you should be glad to have every curious book on the face of the Earth'.¹ Indeed, as will be discussed, Hunter employed agents to scour the UK and Europe for books of interest, which he compiled in a purpose built library at his home at Great Windmill Street, London. The contents of all Hunter's collections were then left to Glasgow University in his will (Sp. Coll. MS Gen. 1000), 'for the improvement of students and the use of the public' which were received in 1807.

Due to the size and varied content of Hunter's book collection, and the active culture of book collecting in the eighteenth century, there has been much scholarly interest in Hunter's book collection. Catalogues of the manuscripts in the collection have been produced since the 1830s, but it wasn't until 1908 that Young and Aitken published the first full catalogue of the manuscripts held in the collection in print. John Young in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, and more recently Jack Baldwin of the Special Collections department at Glasgow University, have looked widely at Hunter as a book collector and his library as a whole. While other scholars have studied specific aspects of Hunter's library: C. Helen Brock has examined Hunter's own papers and drawings held in the collection, N. R. Ker has looked at Hunter as a collector of medieval manuscripts, and Donal Bateson of the Hunterian Museum has recently published on the numismatic books in Hunter's library.

I will begin with an overview of Hunter's book collection, the range of books it contained, and how he acquired his collections; while thinking about how these contents and methods of acquisition can be seen to both resemble and differ to other eighteenth-century book collections. I will then look specifically at the dictionaries in Hunter's book collection, selected due to my background in linguistics, showing how this small section of books is representative of Hunter's personal and scholarly interests, and how the methods employed to acquire these books are representative of Hunter as a book collector.

What he Collected:

As Jack Baldwin (1983: iii) states: 'what is so interesting about Hunter's library is its immense variety' – and it certainly was varied. As expected – due to Hunter's profession – approximately a third of his library is made up of medical texts. The medical section of Hunter's library has been extensively researched by previous scholars though, and its inclusion is straight-forwardly explained by Hunter's explicit medical interests therefore this sub-set of the collection will not be discussed in much detail within this talk.

The rest of Hunter's library is made up of typical staple features of an eighteenth-century library, and quirks particular to Hunter. For example, Hunter's library includes items on typical eighteenth-century topics such as fine topography, vernacular literature and classical authors. Yet even within the typical interests of the time, Hunter can be seen to have focussed his personal collections on particular areas. For example, it was common to have books documenting the history of print, but Hunter's book collection suggests he had a particular interest in the origins of Greek printing – indeed it seems to have been a principal interest of Hunter's during his later life. And many collectors acquired books on exploration and travel, while Hunter specifically focussed his collection in this area on the Americas and the East Indies. Also while Hunter's library was primarily made up of printed books - there were

¹ Jack Baldwin *William Hunter, 1718-1783: Book Collector Catalogue of an Exhibition Compiled by Jack Baldwin* Glasgow University Library: 14 April-30 September, 1983, p. lii.

over 10,000 in Hunter's collection - his library also notably contained approximately 650 manuscripts (which are primarily medieval and Renaissance in origin, but also includes some 100 plus oriental manuscripts). While the manuscripts only make up approximately one twentieth of Hunter's library, they are a significant aspect of Hunter's collection; firstly because of their quintessential uniqueness as one-off copies of texts, and secondly because barely any of his contemporaries collected manuscripts. While it may seem unusual today due to modern academic and public interest in manuscripts, they were an unfashionable collectors' item in the eighteenth century and held less value than printed editions. Hunter therefore stands apart from other eighteenth-century book collectors in choosing to collect manuscripts when those around him were not.

How he Collected:

What is particularly interesting - not to mention useful - from a researcher's point of view, is that Hunter's library came to Glasgow with some records relating to the library (e.g. booklists, memo books, bills, letters, catalogues). Therefore, to some extent, we have been able to build up a picture of the journey of the books held in Hunter's library and the methods he used to acquire them. I will introduce you briefly to the various ways Hunter collected the books held in his library before discussing them more thoroughly through the examples of the dictionaries found in his collection. As mentioned before, Hunter employed agents to travel to sales/auctions/bookshops to buy items on his behalf - as did the majority of collectors in the eighteenth century. These agents were experts in their fields and were not only employed for the manual labour of travelling and purchasing the books, but were used to give advice on the notable items an antiquarian should hold and to bring to the collectors attention interesting items which would be beneficial to the collection. Therefore often the books in a collection were not entirely there through the collector's personal choice - they were a collection of what the collector's agent thought they should have. This was probably the method through which Hunter acquired much of the staple aspects of an eighteenth-century book collection. Yet some of the acquisitions were specified by Hunter. Oriental books and manuscripts seem to have been a particular area of interest to Hunter and on a catalogue of Chinese and Indian rarebooks (Sp. Coll. MS Hunter H203) Hunter has noted 'At last in Dr Hunter's Lib', suggesting that some books were indeed purchased at Hunter's request.

It was just mentioned that agents often attended sales and auctions on Hunter's behalf, and often these consisted of mass sales of whole collections or groups of books in a single lot. Therefore there are doubtlessly items in Hunter's library which were not intentional purchases by Hunter himself, or even his agents. This reinforces the care that must be taken in this kind of archival research not to make assumptions: just because Hunter owned a book didn't mean that he personally wanted the book or that he read the book. Books were also purchased - in a more specific item by item basis from bookshops or booksellers, for example records show Hunter often purchased from Payne and Osbourne in London, and The Foulis brothers in Glasgow.

Additionally, and more indicative of the books Hunter personally desired was the process of subscribing to a forthcoming publication. This was a common method of acquiring books in the eighteenth century, as can be seen by its use by other prominent contemporary collectors such as Richard Mead who subscribed to a vast amount of books in the early eighteenth century. Interestingly, Hunter can be seen to have subscribed to a Galic-English dictionary in his collection (Sp. Coll. Hunterian Ee.1.3) - though why he specifically wanted this item is unclear. Finally, as knowledge of Hunter as a book collector grew - and as his acclaim spread as his library developed in size and scope - books were regularly gifted to Hunter for inclusion in his library (some 150 books entered Hunter's library this way according to records). None of the dictionaries under analysis can be certified as having been acquired in this way, though interestingly, Hunter did have a 1755-56 copy of Johnson's dictionary in his library (Sp. Coll. Dh.12-13) and records show that another of Johnson's texts was presented to Hunter by Johnson, whom was a friend of Hunter's. It may be therefore that this book was also gifted to Hunter by Johnson, but it is equally plausible that Hunter purchased dictionary himself, and indeed with the specific intention to own this book, as it was one of the most popular books of the eighteenth century.

Case Study: Dictionaries

I will now discuss some of the ideas raised regarding methods of collecting books, the contents of eighteenth-century book collections, and Hunter's book collection in particular, using dictionaries from Hunter's library as case studies to display these actions in practice.

First, let's look at the topics covered by some of the many dictionaries. There is a Latin biblical

dictionary from the fourteenth century within Hunter's book collection (Sp. Coll. MS Hunter 452 (V.6.2)). Hunter had a notably low number of religious texts in his collection in comparison to his contemporaries; suggesting that while religion was a popular interest in the eighteenth century, and key religious texts were a staple part of any 'good' eighteenth-century book collection, perhaps this was not a keen personal interest of Hunter's and he only collected the texts in this area that were necessary to the construction of a 'complete' library. Interestingly though, Hunter has annotated this text, suggesting that actually this text was indeed of personal interest to him and that he read and engaged with it – something which cannot, as mentioned, be said for all the books in Hunter's library. Yet Hunter's note refers only to the language of the dictionary 'Lexicon Latinum', suggesting that perhaps Hunter was interested in this manuscript from a linguistic point of view rather than for its subject matter; an idea which is supported by the large number of other Latin dictionaries held in Hunter's library – five have been counted just within the realms of this study.

A subject area which has already been mentioned as being key to Hunter's book collection is medicine, and there are a large number of medical dictionaries to support Hunter's medical book collection – seven have been identified for this study in both manuscript and print. This collection of dictionaries are more frequently annotated by Hunter than any of the other groups of dictionaries found in Hunter's collection, suggesting these books may have been used practically by Hunter as part of his working library. Also, due to Hunter's undoubtable interest in this subject area, and the large number of medical texts overall in his library, it is quite possible that the medical dictionaries are purposeful acquisitions by Hunter: he specifically desired these texts to be part of his library – perhaps as occupational reference works, to read the work of contemporary scholars, or merely as they were of interest – and if he bought the books intentionally he is more likely to have read them, as can be seen from the annotations to these texts.

An item which stands out as unusual in an overview of the dictionaries Hunter owned is a sixteenth-century geographic dictionary of the Indias (Sp. Coll. Hunterian Df.2.2-3). In a modern society in which dictionaries are primarily linguistic in content, such a dictionary is interesting. While it may be that this text is an example of an unintentional acquisition of Hunter's, there are some interesting correlations that can be made between this dictionary of the Indias and some of Hunter's other known interests. For example, Hunter is known to have held stocks in the East India Company, which may have stimulated his interest in this area, and there are many other books in his library related to this area, for example, as already mentioned, his books on exploration and travel are particularly focussed on the East Indies. Additionally, Hunter also held a Chinese-Latin dictionary in his collection (Sp. Coll. MS Hunter 224 (U.2.15)) which is visually very interesting. This dictionary, like the dictionary of the Indias, could also be hypothesised as being an intentional purchase as Hunter is known to have been interested in the Orient as he held a significant collection of Oriental manuscripts.

But while the medical dictionaries and the dictionary of the Indias could be suggested to have been acquired at the specific request of Hunter because they correspond with his interests, there are other dictionaries in Hunter's collection which seem likely to have entered the collection unintentionally because they were bound with items which, due to Hunter's known interests, seem more likely to be the intended purchase. For example, there is a copy of Bayle's eighteenth-century English dictionary in Hunter's library (Sp. Coll. Hunterian Dy.1.1), but it notably includes articles relating to the Orient by George Sale – a known eighteenth-century Oriental scholar. Due to Hunter's known interest in the Orient and his collection of Oriental works – as was just mentioned – it is possible that this book was acquired for these Oriental articles rather than for the English dictionary it primarily contained. Another - more explicit - example of a dictionary entering Hunter's collection due to the acquisition of a text it is bound with is the 4 leaves of a French-Latin dictionary (once seemingly belonging to a completely separate book) which have been bound within an Aristotle text (Sp. Coll. MS Hunter 292 (U.6.10)). In addition to the fact that the Aristotle text takes up the distinct majority of this volume, the Aristotle text seems more likely to have been the intended purchase as there is some evidence that Hunter collected works of Aristotle – or was advised to – as there are approximately fifty other Aristotle works in Hunter's library. In both these cases therefore it seems likely that the dictionaries entered Hunter's book collection through another – desired – text.

Two more dictionaries which seem unlikely to have been intended acquisitions are interesting in that they differ from the modern day perspective of what a dictionary should contain: they are a bibliographical and geographical dictionary of Horace (Sp. Coll. MS Hunter 573 (S.4.18)), and a Latin dictionary to Horace (Sp. Coll. MS Hunter 631 (S.8.10)). While, as it has been mentioned, classical

authors played a large role in eighteenth-century book collections, Hunter did not collect extensively on this topic, therefore it seems unlikely he specifically desired these items to be part of his collection. Notably, though, the bibliographical and geographical dictionary to Horace is asserted to have entered Hunter's library from James Douglas. Douglas was Hunter's medical tutor during his early years in London, and in turn Hunter lived with Douglas and acted as tutor to his son. Upon his death, Douglas bequeathed all his books, and many of his medical and anatomical specimens, to Hunter. Douglas obviously had a keen interest in Horace – at least seemingly more of an interest in Horace's works than Hunter did: the Latin dictionary is also likely to have entered Hunter's library from Douglas', there is a letter included inside this book addressed to 'Dr Douglas'. The acquisition of these two Horace dictionaries therefore seem to be an example how unknown or unintentionally acquired books regularly entered collections through mass purchases of collections being sold off – or in this case a mass donation of a book collection.

Conclusion

What I think has been most interesting about this research is that even though William Hunter was certainly a man of his time, as has just been displayed, there is also a timeless element to his collection. Despite, his collection being formed around both eighteenth-century and personal interests, and being formed by typical eighteenth-century methods of book collecting, his library is formed by a man passionate about books – just as our book collections are today. He collects books based on his personal interests, just as we do; he collects classic, renowned books, just as we do; he collects books both for education and entertainment, just as we do; and he collects books both that he personally wants and books that are suggested by or gifted by others, just as we do. Therefore while Hunter's book collection is certainly a unique library, and representative of both Hunter the man and of the eighteenth century – I also believe it is representative of book-lovers as a whole. And I think this is no better displayed than by this handwritten note by Hunter at the beginning of his 1779 catalogue of his library in which he states 'My library at present consists of the following number of shelves of books, (besides a heap on the floor not put up)' (Sp. Coll. MR 2) – and I strongly suspect that it is not just be me and Hunter who are in the habit of acquiring piles of books (perhaps beside ones bed?) which we are currently reading or debating reading...