

Chapter 10

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

HOW LORD BROTHERTON LOST OUT ON A BOOK AND FOUNDED A LIBRARY

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THE YEAR 2022 was particularly significant for Special Collections at the University of Leeds. It marked exactly one hundred years since the University Library's greatest benefactor, Lord Brotherton of Wakefield, bought his first rare book and established what was to become the Brotherton Collection. The motivation behind that purchase was the failure to buy a medieval manuscript at auction, but what possessed a man in his late sixties, who had hitherto never shown any interest in rare books and manuscripts, to embark upon a book-buying adventure so late in life?

Edward Allen Brotherton was born in Ardwick, Manchester on April 1, 1856, the eldest of Theophilus, a yarn-agent, and his wife Sarah's nine children (Figure 10.1). When he was twenty-two his mother gave him £200 to start his own business and suggested that he advertise for partners. Very soon Dyson Bros. and Brotherton, manufacturers of ammonium sulphate, had their first premises in Wakefield.¹



Figure 10.1. Photograph of Sir Edward Allen Brotherton by Jas. Bacon and Sons. Courtesy of the University of Leeds.

¹ See also James Donnelly, "Brotherton, Edward Allen, Baron Brotherton," *ODNB*, version September 28, 2006.

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Figure 10.2. Photograph of Dorothy Una Ratcliffe. Courtesy of the University of Leeds.



Brotherton's aim was to make chemical manufacturing processes as efficient and economical as possible. In just three years he had earned enough to buy out the Dysons, and Brotherton & Co. was born. The business went from strength to strength. Brotherton was a generous and philanthropic man who shared his success with his family, his workers, and the general public. To celebrate the coronation of Edward VII in 1902, and again in 1906 to celebrate his own fiftieth birthday, he opened bank accounts with the Yorkshire Penny Bank containing a shilling for every child registered at a public elementary school in Wakefield. He also founded the Brotherton Charity Trust for Wakefield's men and women in need. In September 1928, Brotherton celebrated fifty years of work with another generous act. He visited his nine factories and gave each employee a gold sovereign for every year that they had worked for him. Pensioners and the widows of men who had worked for the company were also rewarded.

Brotherton was also keen supporter of the newly established University of Leeds. The University was founded in 1904, but its origins go back to the nineteenth century with the founding of the Leeds School of Medicine in 1831 and then the Yorkshire College of Science in 1874. Brotherton's significant donations to the new University included the endowment of a Chair in Bacteriology in 1922, but he is perhaps best known, in bibliographic circles at least, for the transformative impact a later gift had on the University Library and its Special Collections.

It was not until Lord Brotherton was approaching his sixty-sixth birthday that his interest in rare books was piqued by the proposed sale of a medieval manuscript. In February 1922, the mid-fifteenth-century manuscript of the Wakefield Mystery Plays, also known as the Towneley Cycle, was offered for sale at Sotheby's in London.² As soon as the sale of the Towneley manuscript was announced, Lord Brotherton's niece, Dorothy Una Ratcliffe or D.U.R. as she was also known, received many communications from north country men and women of letters asking her if she would engage her uncle's help in buying and keeping the manuscript in Yorkshire (Figure 10.2). Dorothy was mar-

2 *Catalogue of The Towneley Mysteries and The York Missal, the property of the late Sir Edward F. Coates ... 8th of February, 1922* (London: Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, 1922). Until the 1970s, scholars dated the manuscript to the fifteenth century or earlier. Scholars now tend to believe that the manuscript was produced in the mid-sixteenth century. See Alexandra F. Johnston, "The Towneley Plays: Huntington Library, MS HM 1," in *Early British Drama in Manuscript*, ed. Tamara Atkin and Laura Estill (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 55–70.

ried to Lord Brotherton's nephew and heir, Charles. Lord Brotherton was a widower and Dorothy, a writer and poet with a deep interest in English literature, assisted him with his public duties, acting as Lady Mayoress when he was Lord Mayor of Leeds. The Town Clerk of Wakefield also wrote to Lord Brotherton directly suggesting a subscription list be opened to secure the manuscript. Lord Brotherton had also been mayor of Wakefield, as well as its Member of Parliament, and matters to do with the city were close to his heart.

Dorothy recounted what happened next in her address to the Council of the University of Leeds some ten years later.³ On February 7, 1922, Lord Brotherton and Dorothy went to London and visited Julius Gilson, Keeper of the Manuscripts at the British Museum. They learned that the Museum, although keen to acquire the Towneley manuscript, could not afford to bid more than £1,400. On February 8, Lord Brotherton, Gilson, and Dorothy consulted with Edmund Dring of Quaritch the booksellers and they decided that Dring should bid up to £1,400 on behalf of the British Museum. If that did not secure the manuscript, Dring would then bid up to £3,250 on behalf of Lord Brotherton. He did not advise paying any more.

At the auction things did not go as planned. The dealer Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach of Philadelphia was in the room, acting on behalf of the Californian millionaire Henry Huntington.⁴ The bidding rose, reaching the agreed limit of £3,250. Dring put up one more bid—another £100—in a final, desperate attempt to secure the manuscript for Lord Brotherton, but Rosenbach was undeterred, and the hammer eventually fell at £3,400. The manuscript is now HM 1 in the Huntington Library in California (see Figure 3.1).

On seeing his niece-in-law's disappointment (which was echoed in the regional press),⁵ Lord Brotherton promised to take Dorothy to Quaritch and ask Dring to help them choose another book. They selected a fine and perfect copy of Andrew Marvell's *Miscellaneous Poems*, a first edition printed in 1681. Marvell was a Yorkshireman and a Member of Parliament for Hull, facts that would not have been lost on Lord Brotherton. This book was to become the first volume in the Brotherton Collection.

Dorothy described how initially she and her uncle "played many a spirited game of Long Auction Bowls," frequenting auction houses and visiting bookshops across the country, but they soon realized they did not have the specialist knowledge or understanding of commercial values to build up a great library.⁶ In 1923 Lord Brotherton engaged the help of John Alexander Symington, the son of a local second-hand bookseller John Simpson Symington. Lord Brotherton had taken a liking to the young man

3 Dorothy Una Ratcliffe, *Statement to the Council of the University of Leeds concerning the Brotherton Library* (Leeds: Brotherton Library, 1933).

4 See Edwin Wolf II and John F. Fleming, *Rosenbach: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960), 155. Thanks to Danielle Magnusson for sharing details of her findings in the Huntington Library archives, including letters and telegrams from Rosenbach to Huntington updating him on the quest for the Towneley manuscript.

5 "Wakefield Mysteries," *The Yorkshire Post*, February 9, 1922, 6; "The Towneley MS," *The Sheffield Daily Independent*, February 10, 1922, 3.

6 Ratcliffe, *Statement*, 3.

when he visited Symington Senior's shop early in his book-collecting career.⁷ On inquiring who was behind a scrapbook compilation entitled *Old Leeds*, he was introduced, serendipitously, to the owner's son. The older man soon appointed the young Symington as his personal librarian, with Dorothy's approval.

The pace at which they bought material was quite staggering. By 1930, the year of Lord Brotherton's death, the collection contained over thirty-five thousand books and pamphlets, four thousand deeds, thirty thousand letters and four hundred other manuscripts, an acquisition rate of approximately thirty items every day for eight years. They looked out for specific items they wanted to buy as well as purchasing whole libraries when they came up at auction.

Brotherton and Symington were keen that the library should contain examples of fine illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages. When the London bookseller Charles Sawyer sent an advance listing of the latest medieval manuscripts he had for sale, Brotherton bought the whole lot in one audacious move. The original Sawyer list survives in the collections at the University Library in Leeds, dismantled, pasted onto new leaves and rebound as one of the Brotherton Collection catalogues. This is no doubt the work of Symington since it bears his notes and annotations. In one swoop Brotherton had added fine examples of medieval manuscripts from France, Germany, the Low Countries, and Italy to his collection.⁸

The level of Brotherton's involvement in the day-to-day work of amassing his library is questionable. In a letter to Symington written in 1932 Dorothy acknowledged Symington's expertise but suggested that she was the collector with the passion for beautiful books and that her uncle's primary role was to supply the funds for acquisitions.⁹

Regardless of who was driving the collecting activity, by the middle of the 1920s Brotherton and Symington had gathered a large and important collection of manuscript and print items. In 1926 Symington wrote a guide to the art and literature held at Roundhay Hall, Brotherton's home in north Leeds, and made clear in the introduction that it included only a few of the most special items in the collection—and that the catalogue itself, even at this stage, ran to over thirty volumes.¹⁰ Symington clearly took his cataloguing work very seriously, creating lengthy typewritten cards that were bound into loose-leaf binders and marked on the spine with the relevant sub-collection.

Symington's catalogue records are often extravagant and hyperbolic, and not always scholarly. For example, in a later publication, he reproduced, without attribution, sections of text from Samuel Leigh Sotheby's catalogue written for the sale of the Kloss

7 John Smurthwaite, *The Life of John Alexander Symington, Bibliographer and Librarian, 1887–1961: A Bookman's Rise and Fall* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1995), 10.

8 The first medieval manuscript acquired by the University Library in 1925 was *Le Manuel des péchés*, an Anglo-Norman didactic verse treatise. It was presented by a group of local benefactors, one of whom was none other than Lord Brotherton.

9 Smurthwaite, *Life of John Alexander Symington*, 11.

10 J. Alexander Symington, *Roundhay Hall: the Library of Col. Sir Edward Allen Brotherton Bart., LL. D.* (Leeds: privately printed, 1926).

library in 1835 and a related monograph published in 1840.¹¹ Symington stated that Brotherton's copy of the works of Ovid printed in Parma in 1477 was "of particular interest as an association book, in that it originally belonged to Philipp Melanchthon, the great reformer, whose profuse and clever sketches appear in the margin."¹² An examination of the evidence in the incunabulum reveals that this was not the case: the drawings and annotations are the work of Oswald von Eck, who doodled in the margins as a student in Ingolstadt in the 1540s.

Brotherton welcomed researchers and other interested people to Roundhay Hall to look at his collection, all the while considering what he might eventually do with his ever-growing library of rare books and manuscripts. He and Symington met with other collectors and librarians, and after conversations with Mr. Wise of the Ashley Library and Dr. Henry Guppy of the John Rylands Library in Manchester, Brotherton decided that his ambition was to create a library that in years to come could rival not only the Rylands, but the Bodleian in Oxford, the Vatican Library, and the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris.

At the same time, different conversations were happening at the University of Leeds which had a significant storage issue with its own collection of books. The library had outgrown its accommodation situated under the Great Hall, and books were scattered in around fifty different locations across the sprawling campus. The University needed new facilities urgently, and an ambitious plan modelled on the reading room of the British Museum had been drawn up. The plan, with its grand circular reading room (slightly larger than the one at the British Museum, in a daring show of Yorkshire bravado) and marble pillars was spectacular, but the question was, where could the university find the £100,000, to realize their ideas?

In 1927 the Vice-Chancellor of the university was Sir James B. Baillie. He knew that Lord Brotherton was a keen supporter of the University and he decided to ask him for the entire amount. Brotherton had been a generous philanthropist throughout his life, and after some persuasion, he agreed to fund the whole operation. On June 24, 1930, there was a ceremony at which Brotherton himself laid the foundation stone. At the ceremony he made a statement in which he outlined his ambitions for the library that was to bear his name:

As one who has spent the greater part of his life in Yorkshire, I am proud of our County; as a citizen of Leeds, I am proud of the city, and I believe in giving our young people the best chance to make its future even better than its past. I like to think that all students will have the opportunity to wander freely through the rooms of a great library. But a great library in a great University is a trust for the Nation at large, and should not be looked upon as exclusively available for its own students. I hope that in the course of time, this library building may

11 J. Alexander Symington, *The Brotherton Collection: A Catalogue of Ancient Manuscripts and Early Printed Books Collected by Edward Allen Baron Brotherton of Wakefield* (Leeds: privately printed, 1931).

12 Symington, *Brotherton Collection*, 87.

be rich enough in books of all kinds to attract scholars from all parts of Great Britain and from countries abroad.¹³

He concluded his statement by confirming that in addition to the money he would give for the building of the library, his desire was that his collection of rare books and manuscripts would also be housed therein and that this would be “held by the university in perpetual trust for the nation.” Furthermore, he would endow the collection, to allow it to be accessed and developed.

The laying of the foundation stone was Lord Brotherton’s last public appearance. In September 1930 he fell ill, and on October 21, 1930, he died. His magnificent library was built and in 1935 the collection was officially handed over to the library. On October 6, 1936, the Brotherton Library was opened, with the wood-panelled Brotherton Room as a designated space for his collection.

During the intensive eight year collecting spree from 1922 until his death in 1930, English literature, and particularly seventeenth-century English drama became a priority for Brotherton, Dorothy, and Symington. It comes as no surprise that they added copies of each of the four seventeenth-century Shakespeare folios to their collection, but that they achieved the “Holy Grail of book collecting” in only four years between 1922 and 1926 is quite extraordinary. Brotherton bought his copy of the First Folio in 1924 from a major American book dealer (and competitor of Rosenbach), Gabriel Wells.

Wells had purchased the First Folio in 1922 (for \$9,500) at an auction in the Anderson Galleries, New York, from a sale titled “The Splendid Library of the late Theodore N. Vail of New York.”¹⁴ Vail had died in 1920. As Head of the American Bell Telephone Company (later AT&T), he had overseen a communications revolution that established the telephone as a necessity of everyday life, instituting phone services between New York and San Francisco by 1915, and America and Europe a year later. Vail’s biographer Albert Paine described his “collector’s love of books” and “tendency to buy generously when he was in the mood—by wholesale, so to speak—it being always easier to buy two pictures than one, and collections of bric-a-brac rather than a single piece.”¹⁵ Vail himself said “I don’t understand my fad for collecting...if I ever get rich enough I am going to have a collection of a curious sort. I am going to have the finest example of each kind of art in the world.”¹⁶ The First Folio was presumably acquired as part of this plan.

The Second, Third, and Fourth folios in the Brotherton Collection all have a northern English provenance. The Brotherton copy of the Second Folio was once in the library of the mill owner and book collector Sir Thomas Brooke at Armitage Bridge, three

13 Lord Brotherton’s speech at the laying of the foundation stone to the Brotherton Library is quoted in *The Brotherton Collection of Books and Manuscripts* (Leeds: Brotherton Library, 1936), 7–8.

14 “Shakespeare Folio is Sold for \$9,500,” *NYT*, May 6, 1922, 11; Victor Gray, *Bookmen: London: 250 Years of Sotheran Bookselling* (London: Sotheran, 2011), 261.

15 Albert Bigelow Paine, *In One Man’s Life: Being Chapters from the Personal and Business Career of Theodore N. Vail* (New York: Harper, 1921), 176.

16 Paine, *In One Man’s Life*, 334.

miles south of Huddersfield. Brooke owned copies of all four Shakespeare folios and bequeathed them to his younger brother Sir John Arthur Brooke who was also a director of Armitage Bridge Mills. His library was auctioned by Sotheby's, London, in May–June 1921, a year before Lord Brotherton started his own collection.¹⁷

Lord Brotherton's copy of the rare Third Folio had two previous Yorkshire owners, the first being Christopher Coleby (d. 1727), Rector of Middleham, Wensleydale. In 1774 his widow Margaret gave it to Jo[h]n Yarker (possibly of Leyburn, North Yorkshire, who died in 1813). The first few pages of its text of *The Tempest* contains detailed marginal notes, markings and underlinings, perhaps for a performance of the play. This copy also has a contemporary binding in calf whereas the other three folios have been rebound in red goatskin with elaborate gold-tooling. Finally, Brotherton's copy of the Fourth Folio bears the Bewick-style bookplate of Dr. John Cresswell of Rothbury House in Heaton near Newcastle. It is hard not to wonder about the motivations and emotions of collectors and the excitement they might have felt on securing such magnificent items for their libraries. The manuscript that began Lord Brotherton's great book-buying adventure, the Wakefield Mystery plays, of such significance to Yorkshire and the place Brotherton had been mayor, ended up in California. It must have given the entrepreneur great satisfaction to have played his part in repatriating one of the most important and influential printed books in English literary history, Shakespeare's First Folio, from New York to Yorkshire.

Unfortunately, Symington does not seem to have kept any sort of detailed accession records, or if he did they are not now part of the collections at Leeds. As a result there is still much work to be done on Lord Brotherton and Symington and their collecting methods. Many of the early print items do, however, contain cuttings from auction catalogues and other evidence of provenance, and one can see that they were purchasing entire libraries as they came up for auction as well as cherry-picking fine examples of medieval manuscripts and annotated incunabula at sales. Brotherton's ambitions for the future of his library show him to be a man of purpose and vision, and his importance as a collector during the early twentieth century should not be overlooked.

The transfer of the collection to the University in the 1930s following Lord Brotherton's death did not go well for Symington. This self-taught bibliophile was not respected by the professional librarians at the University of Leeds and negotiations between Dorothy, her now-estranged husband Charles, and the University were fraught. Lord Brotherton was taken ill suddenly in the autumn of 1930 and had not updated his will to reflect the wishes described in his speech as he laid the foundation stone for the library he hoped would house his collection. Symington did ultimately become Keeper of the Collection at the University Library and continued to curate the vast holdings, but he was dismissed from his post in 1938 following a scandal.

There is certainly evidence of some very opaque dealing between Symington and others. For example a letter written in 1947 from Symington to the head of the Library of

17 *Catalogue of the Valuable and Extensive Library of the Late Sir John Arthur Brooke, Bt....May 25th, 1921* (London: Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, 1921).

Congress Music Division, Harold Spivacke, suggests that Symington may have removed material from the Brotherton Collection and sold it to the Library of Congress for his own personal gain.¹⁸ Rutgers University Library in New Jersey has on its shelves the John Alexander Symington Collection of original manuscripts and correspondence. The collection arrived in three consignments in 1948, seventeen cases in all, purchased directly from Symington in a sale secured by Leslie A. Marchand who, in an article written later that year, described the whole acquisition process with great zeal.¹⁹

Is it simply coincidence that the writers represented therein almost completely duplicate the English literature holdings of the Brotherton Collection in Leeds? Lord Brotherton is unlikely to have understood the importance of keeping collections together and may well have given Symington permission to remove large portions of material to enhance his own personal library, but in the words of Symington's biographer, "the balance of probability is that Symington, realizing that only he had full knowledge of the Collection's contents, simply helped himself."²⁰

Regardless of what may have happened to some of his acquisitions after his death, Brotherton's bequest can be seen as the foundation collection of what we now know as Special Collections at the University of Leeds. There were already some rare books and manuscripts in the University Library, but the sheer size of the Brotherton Collection meant the University now had a very substantial collection of rare and unique material. Brotherton's generosity established the University of Leeds Library as a suitable final home for many other important private collections. Individuals like Blanche Legat Leigh, formerly Lady Mayoress of Leeds, donated her exceptional collection of historic cookery books and manuscripts in 1939, including several rare incunabula.²¹ In the same year Harold Whitaker of Halifax presented his collection of maps, atlases, and road books to the Library, a collection at the time considered the most valuable of its kind in private hands.²²

More recently, significant organizations and institutions have deposited their collections with the University Library for safekeeping. Special Collections at Leeds looks after the Ripon Cathedral Library with its magnificent collection of medieval manuscripts, including a thirteenth-century Bible, and the Ripon Cathedral Dean and Chapter Archive. Books and extensive archival and manuscript material from the Yorkshire Archaeological and Historical Society are lodged with Special Collections, including the

18 This letter, and the sale by Symington of a portion of a substantial collection of material relating to the composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (the rest of which remains in the Brotherton Collection at Leeds), is discussed in Ralf Wehner, "'There is probably no better living authority on Mendelssohn's Autograph:' W. T. Freemantle und seine Mendelssohn-Sammlung," *Mendelssohn-Studien* 16 (2009): 139–86.

19 Leslie A. Marchand, "The Symington Collection," *The Journal of the Rutgers University Library* 12.1 (December 1948): 1–15.

20 Smurthwaite, *Life of John Alexander Symington*, 119.

21 "Two Gifts to Leeds," *The Yorkshire Post*, November 16, 1939, 4.

22 "Gift to Leeds University: Maps on Playing Cards," *The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, December 28, 1939, 3.

Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield. As a result of these and many other donations, acquisitions, and deposits, the wider holdings of Special Collections at Leeds now stand at over 300,000 printed items, hundreds of thousands of manuscripts and pieces of archival material, as well as artworks, coins, and museum objects. Five of the collections at Leeds have been awarded Designated status by the Arts Council England, identifying and celebrating them as being of international significance.

The English Literature collection was accorded Designated status in 2005, and Lord Brotherton's books and manuscripts are at its heart. Had Dring been able to secure the Towneley manuscript for Lord Brotherton on February 7, 1922, he may never have bought another rare book. As the University of Leeds marks the hundredth anniversary of the Brotherton Collection, it seems fitting to acknowledge Dr. Rosenbach, the "Terror of the Auction Room," for his tenacity in the face of competitive bidding on behalf of a distinguished honorary Yorkshireman.²³

23 Wolf and Fleming, *Rosenbach: A Biography*, 190.

