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'There never was such a collector since the world began': a new look at Sir Thomas Phillipps

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When Sir Thomas Phillipps died in 1872, the *Athenaeum* was fulsome in its obituary for him. Not only was he 'the greatest book collector of modern times'; he was also a 'great scholar' – 'one of the most learned men of the age.' All in all, 'there never was such a collector since the world began.'¹ This obituary was all the more remarkable for having being written by his son-in-law, J. O. Halliwell, from whom he had been bitterly estranged for almost thirty years.²

The unparalleled size of his collection is not a matter of hyperbole: it was almost certainly the biggest private manuscript collection ever assembled, and was significantly bigger than most public collections, even today. Estimates of its size vary, from more than forty thousand to 'not far short of sixty thousand' – the latter being the estimate of his grandson, who was in the best position to know. His library also included more than fifty thousand printed books and pamphlets.³

Phillipps had been born in 1792, the illegitimate son of a Manchester textile manufacturer, and inherited the landed estate at Middle Hill in Gloucestershire acquired by his father. He was raised to a baronetcy in 1821, and spent most of

the income from his lands on building his giant collection. The cost was enormous; Phillipps spent something like two-thirds of his income for fifty years on the collection, amounting to somewhere between £200,000 and £250,000 in total, according to an estimate by A. N. L. Munby.⁴

Phillipps was buying manuscripts at a good time. Many private libraries came on the market during the 1820s and 1830s, and many of these had their origins in the libraries of the suppressed Western European religious houses in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Not all of these had been legitimately acquired by their previous owners; among the major sources of the Phillipps collection were two Italian collectors whose own acquisitions appear to have involved stealing from municipal and religious libraries in France and Italy: Luigi Celotti and Guglielmo Libri.⁵ A summary of the major private collectors whose manuscript collections were the main sources for the Phillipps collection is shown in Table 1.

Collector	Number of MSS	Date	Origin
Van Ess	377	1824	Western, Oriental
Chardin	155	1824	French, German
Celotti	156	1825	Italian, French
Meerman	660	1824	French, German, Dutch
Craven Ord	231	1829-1832	English

Guilford	1623	1830 ff.	Italian, French
Heber	428	1836	English, French, Flemish
Ranuzzi	71	1847	Italian
Kingsborough	165	1842	Mexican, Spanish
Porter	296	1852	English, South American
Betham	346	1854, 1860	Ulster
Dering	135	1858-1865	English
Libri	217	1849-1865	Italian, French
Newling	164		
Fitch	151	1855-1859	English
Hunter	91	1862	English
Fischer	237	1869-1870	Mexican

Table 1. Major collections absorbed into the Phillipps Collection

Phillipps seems to have done most of his own collecting and acquisitions. Unlike other major collectors, he did not employ a librarian or a team of specialist agents. His own buying trips to France, Switzerland, Flanders and Germany in 1822-1823 and 1827-1829 were very productive, but were not repeated in later years. Most of his purchases were made in the London auction rooms, either in person or through English book dealers like Thomas Thorpe, Thomas Rodd, Puttick and Simpson, and Payne and Foss. His relationships with these men were often fraught, especially because of his continual financial difficulties and lengthy delays in payment. Thorpe, in particular, was almost bankrupted in 1837 by Phillipps's failure to pay promptly.

One important exception was Obadiah Rich, the American consul in Madrid and later Majorca, who was employed by Phillipps in the 1830s as an agent for Spanish materials, though this relationship eventually soured and ended in a legal case. Once Phillipps's reputation began to spread, however, he was frequently approached by people wanting to sell him objects of various kinds. Captain Robert Mignan of the East India Company was one of these; he sold Phillipps a group of Arabic and Persian manuscripts in 1829, together with a cuneiform cylinder of Nebuchadnezzar II – probably the oldest object in the Phillipps collection, which is now on display in the Bodmer Library at Coligny near Geneva. Mignan claimed to have found the cylinder in the Babylonian ruins near the town of Hillah, but is more likely to have removed it from the house in Baghdad of the Catholic-Armenian Vicar-General of Ispahan, given that it was almost certainly the same cylinder transcribed there by Carl Bellino in 1818.⁶ Like most of these relationships, the connection with Mignan ended with the threat of legal action when Phillipps refused to buy a second consignment of Babylonian materials from him.⁷

The Phillipps collection was notable for its sheer size, and included a substantial number of documents and papers, which ranged in date from medieval through to the nineteenth century. But he also owned beautiful and valuable manuscript codices, many of which are among the treasures of the modern collections where they now reside. A notable example is the so-called Crusader Bible, which no less an expert than Sydney Cockerell called a 'priceless masterpiece' – 'the most splendidly planned and executed of all the wonderful French manuscripts of the

thirteenth century.’⁸ This manuscript, with its remarkable images of Old Testament stories in thirteenth-century clothing, has a rich history. Made in the mid-thirteenth century, probably for Louis IX of France (Saint Louis), it was almost certainly in Naples by the beginning of the fourteenth century, when Latin captions were added to each image. It is next recorded in Krakow in 1604, in the possession of Cardinal Bernard Maciejowski, when he handed it over to a group of papal envoys on a mission from Pope Clement VIII to the Shah of Persia, Abbas I the Great. From 1608 it was in the possession of the Shah in Isfahan, where Persian captions and a Hebrew transliteration were subsequently added.

Lost after the sack of Isfahan by the Afghans in 1722, the manuscript turned up again in the early nineteenth century in Egypt, where it was bought for three schillings by a Greek dealer in antiquities known as Giovanni d’Athanasia. He sold it at Sotheby’s in 1833 to the booksellers Payne and Foss, for 255 guineas, and they in their turn sold it to Phillipps. It is now in the Morgan Library in New York, having been bought from Thomas FitzRoy Fenwick in 1916 by J. P. Morgan’s librarian Belle da Costa Greene for the staggering amount of £10,000.

The Phillipps manuscript collection was extremely broad in scope, both geographically and chronologically. Among the oldest material was Phillipps MS 16402: 19 fragmentary Coptic papyri, bought from the Libri sale at Sotheby’s in 1862. They were part of the archive of St. Pesynthios, Bishop of Koptos/Keft (569–632), and were probably found at a monastic site in Western Thebes in Upper Egypt. They included letters and documents (among them a list of clothes and information about the wages paid to two carpenters), as well as literary and

liturgical texts. The papyri formerly in the Phillipps collection are closely connected to a larger set of similar materials in the Musée du Louvre.

These nineteen fragments were included in the sale of the residue of the collection to the Robinson Brothers in 1946. By the early 1970s, these documents were being offered for sale by the London antiquities dealer (and founder of the Folio Society) Charles Ede. Their subsequent dispersal around the world can only partly be traced. Two are now in the art collection of the Antwerp-based shipping and logistics company Katoen Natie (685/01-02). One is in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley (P. Berk. 01). Another is owned by the Classics Museum of the Australian National University in Canberra (75.01), where its connection with Phillipps was undocumented until fairly recently.⁹

The Phillipps collection was remarkable in its geographical coverage. The holdings of Mexican manuscripts, for example, were substantial and significant. At least 165 of them came from the library of Edward King, Viscount Kingsborough (1795-1837), who produced a series of volumes of facsimiles of early Mesoamerican codices, under the title *Antiquities of Mexico*. Phillipps was acquainted with Kingsborough, having provided an introduction for him to Bodley's Librarian, Bulkeley Bandinel, and lamented his unfortunate death from typhus in a Dublin jail, where he had been imprisoned for debt.¹⁰ More than 25 years later, Phillipps also acquired the original artwork for Kingsborough's facsimiles, produced by Agostino Aglio, an Italian landscape painter (Phillipps MSS 22897-22902).

Another 147 Mexican manuscripts were acquired in the late 1860s from a very different source. Agustín Fischer (1825-1887) was a German Lutheran who emigrated to North America.¹¹ By 1852 he had moved to Mexico and become a Catholic priest. He eventually became an adviser and counselor to the Emperor Maximilian. After Maximilian's execution in June 1867, Fischer returned to Europe. He had collected a large number of Mexican books, manuscripts and artefacts, many of which were sold in London by the booksellers Puttick and Simpson in 1869 and 1870.¹² Fischer returned to Mexico in 1871 and died there in 1887. While some of Phillipps's more than three hundred Mexican manuscripts are now in libraries in the United States, the present whereabouts of many of them are unknown.

The Phillipps collection was also surprisingly rich in Persian, Turkish and Arabic manuscripts and miniatures.¹³ Among these were several albums of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Mughal paintings, two of which had formerly been owned by Warren Hastings (Governor-General of Bengal, 1774-1784) and another by Sir Elijah Impey (Chief Justice of Bengal 1774 to 1783). Unfortunately, the paintings in these albums were sold individually by Sotheby's at two auctions in 1968 and 1974, and are now scattered around the world. A significant number of Phillipps's Persian manuscripts also came from an East India Company source, Captain Robert Mignan, who sold Phillipps 36 manuscripts in 1829. Other Persian and Indian manuscripts came from English collectors, such as John Haddon Hindley and the 4th Marquess of Hastings. There

were also some Turkish manuscripts, from the collection of Auguste Chardin, and Arabic manuscripts from Egypt, Syria and North Africa.

One of the most interesting items was a Persian manuscript recording astronomical observations from the observatory at Maragheh (Iran), dated 1288/1289 (Phillipps MS 16354). Bought at the Libri sale in 1859, it is also notable for having 'the earliest decorated Persian binding on a dated manuscript.'¹⁴ It was sold at Sotheby's in 1968 to the Anglo-Iranian dealer and collector Mehdi Mahboubian. One of Phillipps's Arabic manuscripts has travelled further than almost any of the items in his collection. A Coptic Egyptian copy of the Kitāb al-Tawrāh (Torah), written in 1713, it was acquired by Phillipps in 1868 from the booksellers Puttick and Simpson (Phillipps MS 19375). It is now in the Dunedin Public Library, New Zealand, which bought it in 1982 from the London bookseller Alan G. Thomas.¹⁵

Such a huge collection proved difficult to manage and document, unsurprisingly. The manuscripts were housed in more than 2,000 specially-designed wooden boxes, three of which survive today in the collection of the Grolier Club in New York. The boxes were of a standard length (four feet), but their height and width varied from four inches to two feet. They were intended to enable rapid removal of books and manuscripts in the event of a fire, and were piled up throughout the rooms at Middle Hill 'to a convenient height.' Even after the collection was moved to the larger surroundings of Thirlestaine House in Cheltenham in 1863 – a major event which took eight months and at least 105 wagon-loads – Phillipps's wife complained of being 'booked out' of the house.¹⁶

The arrangement of the collection was described in a letter from Samuel Gael, one of Phillipps's trustees, to Edward Bond of the British Museum, who carried out a valuation for probate after Phillipps's death.¹⁷ The manuscripts were numbered consecutively in approximate order of acquisition, and marked with Phillipps's ownership stamp, a lion rampant. Each box was also given a number, and a finding-list (the 'MSS Reference Book') was used to match manuscript numbers to box numbers. There was another book listing each box by number and showing which room it was in (the 'Box Reference Book'). To find a manuscript involved the following steps:

- Using the printed catalogue to find the number of the manuscript;
- Looking up this number in the 'MSS Reference Book' to find its box number;
- Looking up the box number in the 'Box Reference Book' to find its room and 'site in the Room.'

No wonder many of the manuscripts got out of sequence or could not be found during the probate process! Gael notes: 'Many of the MSS were not found in their Places in the Catalogue.' There were also 'MSS lying in Heaps on the floors unsorted & uncatalogued', as well as 'several large Portfolios of Deeds uncatalogued.'

Nevertheless, Phillipps spent much time and energy on preparing and printing a catalogue of his manuscripts, beginning from 1837 and ending in 1871 – the year before his death. The complicated printing history of this *Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum in Bibliotheca D. Thomae Phillipps, Bart.* has been explored by A.

N. L. Munby, who oversaw an invaluable facsimile edition in 1968.¹⁸ The *Catalogus* is difficult to use; the descriptions are often short and unreliable, a single number may cover a whole group of volumes or documents, and some numbers were reassigned and manuscripts renumbered. Phillipps provided indexes to several sections of the catalogue, and also supplied indications of provenance, but these too can be unreliable and hard to navigate.

The *Catalogus* ceases with manuscript number 23,837. Documentation for higher numbers is almost non-existent, though three copies of handwritten inventories made for probate after Phillipps's death have survived. Two of these go up to 26,179 and the third to 26,365. The latter copy was used by Thomas FitzRoy Fenwick to record which manuscripts had been sold, and was extensively revised and amended by him over the course of five decades. It is not entirely clear which numbers were assigned by Phillipps himself, and which were assigned after his death. But a note inside the cover of the shorter probate inventory suggests that all numbers higher than 23,837 were assigned after Phillipps's death: 'Catalogue of MSS. in Thirlstaine [sic] Library that had never been catalogued by Sir Thos. Phillipps or had lost their Catalogue numbers.'¹⁹ Some of these were assigned during the probate process, and others subsequently to that.

The collection was clearly meant to be used, and Phillipps was surprisingly hospitable to scholars, despite his prickly reputation. Various visitors left enthusiastic accounts of their visits to Middle Hill and of the welcome they received, although several did comment on the somewhat chaotic arrangements

there. The American historian Jared Sparks, who visited Middle Hill in 1840, was very complimentary:²⁰

I have rarely passed so agreeable and profitable a week. Sir Thomas Phillipps is renowned for his hospitality, and on this occasion it was bestowed in the most liberal and generous manner.

Even scholars like the future Cardinal Pitra (in 1849) were welcomed, despite Phillipps's very vocal hostility to the Catholic Church. In all, Phillipps corresponded quite extensively with more than fifty scholars in the 1840s and 1850s.

Phillipps made his own contributions to scholarship – although these were mostly those of the amateur wealthy antiquarian, fairly typical of the earlier nineteenth century. He published at least 557 different items between 1818/1819 and 1871, including more than 300 editions and transcriptions of documents relating to local history, genealogy, and folklore, and indexes to historical sources.²¹ In many cases, his three daughters provided the basic labour of transcription. He ran his own printing press and employed his own printers, though the relationship was often a difficult one.

Phillipps was also actively involved in the world of learned societies. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1820, and served as a proposer for William Henry Fox Talbot in 1831 and Frederic Madden in 1832. He was also a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and of the Royal Society for Literature, and was appointed as a Trustee of the British Museum in 1861. He was particularly interested in the work of the Record Commission and the management of the

public records, and gave lengthy evidence to the 1836 Buller committee of inquiry into these subjects.

Phillipps came up with a number of different proposals for the disposal of his collection, which he clearly saw as valuable for posterity and the nation.²² As early as 1827-1828, he approached the University of Oxford to buy his library for £30,000 – though the University rejected his conditions, which included allowing him to manage the library and remove any of the books or manuscripts. He then offered the collection to the British Museum in 1828, and again in 1831; the asking price on the latter occasion was £60,000. By 1850 he was being courted by the Royal Institution in Swansea, but this came to nothing. Negotiations with Oxford began again in 1852 and continued until 1861. This time Phillipps asked for the Ashmolean building, and then the Radcliffe Camera, and eventually proposed that he be appointed Bodley's Librarian. His last unsuccessful move was an attempt to persuade Benjamin Disraeli, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, to sponsor an Act of Parliament which would have established his library as a permanent public institution.

In the end, his complicated will left the collection in trust to his youngest daughter Katharine Fenwick and her husband, to be retained and made available for access at Thirlestaine House. This arrangement quickly proved to be financially and logistically unviable, and the Fenwicks successfully applied to the courts under the new Settled Land Act of 1882 for permission to dispose of the collection. This law enabled heirlooms settled in trust to be sold by the heirs: 'Where personal chattels are settled on trust so as to devolve with land until a

tenant in tail by purchase is born or attains the age of twenty-one years, or so as otherwise to vest in some person becoming entitled to an estate of freehold of inheritance in the land, a tenant for life of the land may sell the chattels or any of them.'²³

Most of the subsequent disposal of the manuscripts was managed by their son, Thomas FitzRoy Fenwick. He was very shrewd and careful in selling off manuscripts gradually, through a long series of auctions at Sotheby's, accompanied by occasional direct sales to specific countries or collectors. There were sixteen Sotheby's sales between 1886 and 1913, with a total of 18,876 lots realizing £71,277. Six further sales between 1919 and 1938 realized £25,786 from a total of 3,321 lots.²⁴

After Fenwick's death in 1938, the remainder of the collection was stored in the basement of Thirlestaine House for the duration of the War, following which his family sold it to the London book-dealers Lionel and Philip Robinson. The Robinson brothers offered some of the manuscripts in sales catalogues published between 1948 and 1954, together with consigning others for sale by Sotheby's and Hodgson's at twelve auctions between 1946 and 1958.²⁵ By 1957, the remaining manuscripts, documents and books were owned by the Robinson Trust, which the Robinson brothers formed after winding up their book-selling business in December 1956. A new series of twenty Sotheby's auctions was held on behalf of the Trust between 1966 and 1981. The remaining material, estimated to contain at least 2,000 manuscripts and over 130,000 letters and documents, was sold to the American dealer H. P. Kraus in 1977.²⁶ Kraus

advertised the first installment of a 'final selection' from the Phillipps collection in a catalogue of 1979.²⁷

Phillipps manuscripts are still being advertised for sale today on sites like AbeBooks as well as through auctions held by large and small dealers alike. A significant proportion of the collection is in private hands, and much of it is now difficult or impossible to trace. But it is clear that the Phillipps manuscripts have been dispersed all over the world – enriching collections in North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand as well as across Western Europe. Cultural institutions of all types have benefited: libraries, museums, galleries, archives, and local record offices.

Tracing this dispersal is a Herculean task. Several methods for collating the relevant information have been tried, notably by A. N. L. Munby, the author of the definitive study of Phillipps as a collector. In 1955, working in collaboration with L. J. Gorton, Munby began a card index which is now held in the Manuscripts Reading Room of the British Library.²⁸ By the time of Munby's preface to the 1968 facsimile edition of the *Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum*, this card index contained more than 10,000 locations. It was still being updated by British Library staff in the 1990s, but has never been digitized and is not always reliable or accurate.

Munby also used interleaved pages in a copy of the *Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum* to note references to sales and auction catalogues and to library holdings of individual manuscripts. His original annotated catalogue, bound in

three volumes, is now in a private collection in the United States. A microfilm copy was made in 1975 for the Cambridge University Library; the Bodleian Library has a photocopy made from this microfilm. The Bodleian copy continued to be updated by Library staff until at least the 1990s. None of these copies has been digitized, and all of them now differ from the British Library's card index in the information they provide. The Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes (IRHT) in Paris has its own typescript index of Phillipps locations, compiled by Edith Brayer in 1951.²⁹

Phillipps was not just a collector of manuscripts, however, and not everything listed in his printed catalogue and given a number was a manuscript or a document. He owned somewhere between 1,600 and 1,800 Old Master drawings, for a start. Many of them had originally been part of the vast collection assembled by the painter Sir Thomas Lawrence, which was later owned by the Woodburn brothers. Phillipps bought over 1,000 of these drawings at Christie's in 1860.

In the mid-1930s, A. E. Popham compiled a catalogue of about 1,250 drawings still owned by the Fenwick family.³⁰ These drawings were clearly of very mixed quality and value, and Popham left un-catalogued about 400 of them, which he described as those too badly damaged to be recognizable, obviously inferior copies of famous artists, and 'a vast number of unnamed and unnameable scraps.' But the drawings have found their way into various major institutional collections, both in Britain and in the United States, after they were sold off in the 1930s and 1940s. Many ended up in the British Museum, and others are in the

Courtauld Gallery. The latter group were purchased from the Fenwick family after the war by Count Antoine Seilern, and bequeathed to the Courtauld after his death in 1978. Seilern was definitely a connoisseur of Old Master drawings, and his collection was one of the best of the post-war era. Some of the Old Master drawings, including those now owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, were listed and numbered in Phillipps's manuscript catalogue, suggesting that he had a broad approach to defining a 'manuscript'; drawings were, after all, drawn by hand.

Phillipps also collected oil paintings and water-colours. The most detailed list, compiled in 1869, contains 370 works in all.³¹ One of the advantages of his move to Thirlestaine House was that he gained enough space to display his art collection. Middle Hill was too small, as the surviving lists of paintings make clear, and a number of them had to be stored in the house-keeper's room. In fact, Phillipps bought about 100 paintings from the estate of the previous owner of Thirlestaine, Lord Northwick, in 1860 – a purchase which Frederic Madden described in his journal as 'the act of an idiot.'³² One explanation is that Phillipps was following the same approach as he had with manuscripts: trying to keep together earlier collections in the face of their dispersal.

One of the rooms at Thirlestaine House was devoted to the paintings of George Catlin (1796-1872). Catlin was an American artist turned entrepreneur; he specialized in paintings of Native Americans, and spent many years in Britain and France touring his 'Indian Gallery' – which consisted not only of paintings but also of several Native Americans in person.³³ Phillipps was Catlin's patron

during the 1840s and 1850s, and actually lent him money more than once – a very untypical act for Phillipps. There was a long-standing correspondence between them, which survives on opposite sides of the Atlantic – in the Bodleian Library and in Tulsa, Oklahoma, at the Gilcrease Museum of Western Art.

Phillipps had two sets of Catlin's paintings, both of which are now in the Gilcrease Museum and both of which were acquired in repayment of Phillipps's loans to Catlin. The first consisted of watercolour portraits of Native Americans, seventy in total, which were given individual Phillipps numbers in the *Catalogus*. The other set of paintings consisted of copies made by Catlin for Phillipps of many of the paintings in his Indian Gallery, showing Indian ceremonies and landscapes of the Mid-West. There are fifty-seven of these oil paintings, which also have individual Phillipps numbers in the printed catalogue.

Catlin was a significant early artist of the American West, whose Indian Gallery is now in the Smithsonian Museum. His relationship with Phillipps reveals an unexpected side to Phillipps as a collector. His tastes and interests evidently ran well beyond the antiquarian and the purely European. Perhaps the opportunity to exercise patronage was also a significant motivation? This is reinforced by another of the rooms at Thirlestaine House, known as the Glover Gallery and dedicated to the works of the landscape painter John Glover (1767-1849).

Phillipps was also something of a patron to Glover and owned nearly fifty of his paintings. Their earliest connection seems to date from 1824, when Phillipps commissioned Glover to paint three views of Middle Hill. There is a series of

letters between the two men in the Phillipps papers in the Bodleian Library, and Phillipps later reprinted copies of several of Glover's exhibition catalogues.

Glover is a relatively minor figure in the history of English landscape painting in the earlier nineteenth century. But he is much more significant – and much better known – in Australia. He migrated to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in 1831 at the age of 64, and his subsequent Australian paintings were the first serious attempts to paint the Australian landscape in a European style. The Art Gallery of New South Wales describes him as 'one of Australia's most celebrated colonial landscape painters'; he is 'significant for being the first painter of the Australian landscape sensitive to its visual and spatial qualities and its latent expressive potential.'³⁴

When Glover sent a consignment of his first Tasmanian paintings back to London for an exhibition in 1835, Phillipps bought at least three of them.³⁵ One, showing Glover's garden in northern Tasmania near Launceston, was acquired in 1951 by the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide.³⁶ Another Glover painting, which is also in the Art Gallery of South Australia, is very significant as the first European painting of an Aboriginal corroboree, painted in 1832 – although all the remaining Aboriginal Tasmanians had been moved to Flinders Island by 1833, so it is unclear whether Glover was painting from direct observation. In the handwritten catalogue of pictures at Thirlestaine House in 1869, it is described as being located at the Swan River, though there is no record of Glover ever travelling to the Western side of Australia.

As well as listing some of his paintings and drawings among his manuscripts, Phillipps included several photograph albums in the *Catalogus*. He describes these as 'manuscripts by the hand of nature', an interesting expression of what quickly became the standard contemporary view of the role of photography.³⁷ The surviving albums are now in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. Most of them are photographs commissioned by Phillipps, rather than photographic prints acquired by him, and consist of views of trees and other objects on the Middle Hill estate.

Two of the albums are particularly interesting since they contain photographs of manuscripts and objects in the Phillipps Collection, taken in the early 1850s by Mrs Amelia Guppy. She seems to have been an amateur photographer, and the surviving negatives and prints are full of trials and errors. But these are some of the earliest attempts to use photographs to document museum objects and manuscripts. One of the manuscripts she photographed was the thirteenth-century Welsh Book of Aneirin, one of the Four Ancient Books of Wales (Phillipps MS 16614) – now Cardiff MS 2.81, on deposit in the National Library of Wales since 2011 and available on-line in full digital colour since 2013.

Photography was not the only innovative technique used by Phillipps in documenting his collections. He was also an early adopter of anastatic printing, which was developed in the 1840s as a form of transfer lithography. It could be used to reproduce drawings and handwriting easily and quickly, avoiding the need for expensive and time-consuming engraving and typesetting. Phillipps made considerable use of it in his Middle Hill publications, particularly for

publishing his transcriptions of parish registers and other types of historical documents.³⁸ He also unsuccessfully urged the Rolls Office and the Record Office to use it for transcribing government records.³⁹ No doubt the much lower cost appealed to him, as much as the way in which delays and difficulties in printing could be reduced.

Phillipps was relatively reticent about the aims and motives which inspired him to amass such a huge collection. His only written statement was in the unpublished draft of a preface to his printed catalogue (written c. 1828), which is worth quoting at length:⁴⁰

In amassing my Collection of MSS. I commenced with purchasing everything that lay within my reach, to which I was instigated by reading various accounts of the destruction of valuable MSS. As in the beginning of any undertaking few persons are sufficiently masters of their subject as to judge unerringly what may be done & what not done so with regard to myself; I had not the ability to select, nor the resolution to let anything escape because it was of trifling value. My principal search has been for Historical & particularly unpublished MSS., whether good or bad, and more particularly those on vellum. My chief desire for preserving Vellum MSS. arose from witnessing the unceasing destruction of them by Goldbeaters; My search for charters or deeds by their destruction in the shops of Glue-makers & Taylors.

As I advanced, the ardour of pursuit increased until at last

I became a perfect Vello-maniac (if I may coin a word) and I gave any price that was asked. Nor do I regret it, for my object was not only to secure good Manuscripts for myself but also to raise the public estimation of them, so that their value might be more generally known, & consequently more MSS. preserved. For nothing tends to the preservation of anything so much as making it bear a high price.

The examples I always kept in view were Sir Robert Cotton & Sir. Robt. Harley. They had the advantage of me in living a century or two before, & although their collections were so immense, that some thought there was nothing to be gleaned after them, yet I foresaw that there must be vast treasures upon the Continent in consequence of the dispersion of Monastic libraries by the French Revolution. In this I was not deceived... And although I have amassed above three thousand volumes in the course of six years, yet any other person equally devoted, & with the same fortune would collect as many more in the same space of time. I do not intend to cease collecting, although I shall for the future diminish my ardour, because I have raised MSS. to their proper value.

He goes on to claim that the bookseller Thomas Thorpe (one of his main suppliers) hardly ever dealt in manuscripts until Phillipps paid him high prices and urged him 'to buy up all he could.' He also discusses the 'melancholy fate' of Sir Robert Cotton's library – the carelessness, apathy and ignorance of the barbarians who destroyed it, and the 'ungrateful return made by the Government to Sir Robert.'

In the unpublished Preface, Phillipps invokes Cotton (1571-1631) and Robert Harley (1661-1724) as his models. There is some obvious truth in this; both Cotton and Harley collected significant numbers of medieval manuscripts and documents. Their interest was clearly historical and antiquarian, rather than the connoisseurship of beautiful objects. Cotton owned more than 950 manuscripts, as well as many rolls, charters, and books.⁴¹ Harley seems to have owned about 6,000 volumes, 14,000 medieval and later charters, and 500 rolls.⁴² To judge from this comparison, Phillipps may have seen himself as something of a latter-day antiquarian, collecting and preserving historical materials for the British nation. Both Cotton's and Harley's manuscript collections had been incorporated into the British Museum, an institution to which Phillipps also had a strong connection and to which he tried to transfer his own collection.

A more interesting comparison, however, is with Harley's son Edward (1689-1741). He extended the family collection dramatically in both size and scope, adding large numbers of pamphlets, prints, pictures, antiquities, bronzes, coins, medals, and medallions. C. H. Wright observes that Edward Harley exhibits the way in which tastes were changing in the early eighteenth century: a new interest in material from the Continent, including Greek and Oriental manuscripts.⁴³ Like Phillipps, Harley spent beyond his means, and was criticized by contemporaries for his indiscriminate approach to collecting. 'There is ... much rubbish,' Horace Walpole noted acidly in relation to the Harley sales of 1742.⁴⁴

In many ways, though, the most appropriate comparison is with that prodigious collector of the eighteenth century, Sir Hans Sloane. Though his vast collections were primarily of materials relevant to natural history, they included a significant number of manuscripts.⁴⁵ Sloane's motives for collecting remained largely unarticulated, but his primary goal seems to have been to accumulate as many unique and rare materials as possible, with their preservation and documentation as priorities. Like Phillipps, he incorporated wholesale the collections of various other people into his own. He was widely criticized for his indiscriminate collecting, and his motives were questioned; he was accused of using his collections for financial gain and social acceptance. He was regarded, not as a connoisseur, but as more of an antiquarian – at a time when connoisseurship was fashionable. He opened up his collections to scholars, but they remained little used. Having only daughters, like Phillipps, he was collecting for posterity and wanted to leave his collections to the nation. Unlike Phillipps, he did manage to ensure that they were acquired as one of the foundational collections of the new British Museum.

In the scale and scope of his manuscript collecting, however, Phillipps went a long way beyond his predecessors. His description of himself as a 'Vello-maniac' in the unpublished Preface is an interesting one, and probably should be read as an ironic nod to Thomas Frognall Dibden's *Bibliomania, or Book Madness*, first published in 1809.⁴⁶ Werner Muensterberger, in his book on collecting, takes it more literally – as a manifestation of Phillipps's 'severe inner problems,' which led him into an obsession with objects which served as 'magical remedies against existential doubt' and as a compensation for the insecurities resulting from his

illegitimate birth and lack of maternal care.⁴⁷ But the scale and breadth of Phillipps's collecting cannot simply be explained away solely in psychoanalytic terms as a response to his personal circumstances and as a manifestation of his undoubtedly difficult personality. There were more factors at work than that.

Muensterberger's account of Phillipps relies heavily on the work of A. N. L. Munby. In this context, it is perhaps unfortunate that Munby quotes liberally from the journal of Phillipps's contemporary Sir Frederic Madden (1801-1873), Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum. In private, Madden took a dim view of Phillipps, describing him (amongst other things) as 'a selfish madman' and 'an arrant fool.'⁴⁸ But perhaps these comments say more about Madden; after all, he was privately vitriolic about a whole range of other people, not just Phillipps. His feuds with his colleagues at the British Museum – and especially with its director Antonio Panizzi – were numerous, long-standing, and 'Homeric' in scope (in Munby's view).⁴⁹ Madden was 'a curmudgeon's curmudgeon if ever there was one, with seldom a good word for anyone,' according to Richard Beadle.⁵⁰ In reality, his connection with Phillipps was long-standing and relatively amicable, at least until the 1860s. Phillipps was godson to Madden's son George Phillipps Madden, and later offered a job to Madden's other son Frederic, as well as proposing Madden for the Fellowship of the Royal Society.

A more balanced appraisal must begin from the way in which Phillipps talks about his desire to preserve and rescue as many manuscripts as possible for posterity. There is no reason to doubt his sincerity in saying this. Wishing to be valued for his contribution as an antiquarian on a large scale was clearly one of

Phillipps's motives, also demonstrated by his commitment to publishing scholarly materials and by his membership of antiquarian associations. In the unpublished Preface, he also mentions his willingness to drive up prices to achieve his goals, but this had its limits. While he was willing to out-bid other buyers – especially the British Museum – in the auction rooms, there were times when he simply refused to pay what he felt were unreasonably high prices.

Although Madden and others disparaged him as no connoisseur, and a collector of 'rubbish and fragments,' his collection was not simply about quantity. He owned his fair share of beautiful and valuable manuscripts, which are now among the treasures of institutions like the Morgan Library and many of which were eagerly sought by subsequent generations of connoisseur collectors from Sydney Cockerell to Alfred Chester Beatty.⁵¹ Others of his manuscripts are of great value for their significance as witnesses to the history of countries across Western Europe, as well as in North and Central America. A. N. L. Munby tried to select his 'top thirty' manuscripts from the Phillipps collection, but admitted this was an almost impossible task.⁵²

While Phillipps did not come from a long line of landed or titled gentry, he lived like a gentleman, relying on his income from his estates and focusing his life on historical, antiquarian and literary activities. Although his father had made his fortune in trade, Phillipps was hardly one of the 'nouveaux riches' described so vividly by J. Mordaunt Crook.⁵³ He certainly shared many of the opinions of conservative landowners, especially in his strident anti-Catholicism, and his opposition to Free Trade and the repeal of the Corn Laws. He may well have

considered that collecting would help to demonstrate that he was a gentleman, and allay any doubts about his somewhat unorthodox origins. In a superficial sense he was part of the established tradition of the country house library and the connoisseurship of the landed gentry.⁵⁴ But the scale of his collecting, and the purpose he claimed for it, went well beyond this tradition. They place him within a different world, that of the wealthy antiquarian and amateur, at a time when that world was changing with the emergence of professional and institutional experts like Sir Frederic Madden and Henry Bradshaw.⁵⁵

When we add in Phillipps's other activities – especially his patronage of artists like Catlin and Glover, and his interest in early photography and anastatic printing, especially for copying and documenting manuscripts and objects – the result is a collector who, in some ways, harks back to the vast scope and ambition of eighteenth-century collectors like Sloane, but in other ways is very much a man of his time. The combination of these two perspectives helps to explain the scale and importance of his collecting. But perhaps, like Christopher Wren, his achievement is best assessed by looking around – at the public manuscript collections of the world. His manuscripts form significant and valuable components of many major national and university libraries, as well as in regional record offices and in the specialist libraries founded by the great manuscript collectors of the twentieth century like Morgan, Huntington and Folger. Without the dispersal of his vast collection, the manuscript market of the last 130 years would have been much smaller and less active. Because his library was scattered across the globe, and he left no institutional legacy of his own, he

is largely unknown to the general public. But he was undoubtedly the most important and extraordinary manuscript collector of the nineteenth century.

¹ 'Art and Literary Gossip: Sir Thomas Phillipps, Bart.', *Manchester Weekly Times – Supplement* 17 February 1872, p. 56

² A. N. L. Munby, *The Family Affairs of Sir Thomas Phillipps* (Phillipps Studies, no. 2) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 100

³ A. N. L. Munby, *The Formation of the Phillipps Library from 1841 to 1872* (Phillipps Studies, no. 4) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 166

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 167

⁵ Anne-Marie Eze, *Abbé Luigi Celotti (1759-1843): Connoisseur, Dealer, and Collector of Illuminated Miniatures* (London: Courtauld Institute of Art, 2010) [doctoral thesis]; P. Alessandra Maccioni Ruju and Marco Mostert, *The Life and Times of Guglielmo Libri (1802-1869), scientist, patriot, scholar, journalist and thief: A nineteenth-century story* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1995)

⁶ Robert Mignan, *Travels in Chaldaea* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1829), pp. 228-229; H. F. Talbot, 'Translation of an inscription of Nebuchadnezzar', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature*, series 2 vol. 7 (1862), 341-375

⁷ A. N. L. Munby, *The Formation of the Phillipps Library up to the Year 1840* (Phillipps Studies, no. 3) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 56

⁸ Sydney C. Cockerell, 'The book and its history', in: *A Book of Old Testament Illustrations of the Middle of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press for the Roxburghe Club, 1972), pp. 57, 72 – see also Stella Panayotova's chapter in this volume

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- ⁹ Kelly, B., 'A Late-Antique Contract in the Collection of the Australian National University Classics Museum,' *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 161 (2007), 207-214
- ¹⁰ Munby, *The Formation of the Phillipps Library from 1841 to 1872*, p. 12
- ¹¹ Álvaro Canales Santos, *Agustín Fischer, el rasputín de II Imperio Mexicano* (Saltillo, Coah.: Club del Libro Coahuilense : El Dos, 2005)
- ¹² Munby, *The Formation of the Phillipps Library from 1841 to 1872*, p. 138
- ¹³ J. Michael Rogers, 'Great Britain xi. Persian Art Collections in Britain', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/great-britain-xi> (last updated 23 Feb. 2012)
- ¹⁴ Sotheby & Co., *Catalogue of Persian, Turkish and Arabic Manuscripts, Indian and Persian Miniatures* (Bibliotheca Phillipica, New series: Medieval manuscripts, 4th part), (London: Sotheby & Co., 1968), p. 63
- ¹⁵ Dunedin Public Libraries, Reed MS 11
- ¹⁶ Munby, *The Family Affairs of Sir Thomas Phillipps*, p. 91
- ¹⁷ Samuel Gael, Letter to Edward Bond, 17 April 1872 (Grolier Club, *Phillipps Collection*)
- ¹⁸ Sir Thomas Phillipps, *The Phillipps Manuscripts: Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum in Bibliotheca D. Thomae Phillipps, Bart.* (London: Holland Press, 1968)
- ¹⁹ Grolier Club, *Phillipps Collection*, MS Cat. 14
- ²⁰ Munby, *The Formation of the Phillipps Library from 1841 to 1872*, p. 32
- ²¹ Martin Antonetti and Eric Holzenberg, 'The Horblit Phillipps Collection at the Grolier Club,' *The Gazette of the Grolier Club* 48 (1997), 51-72
- ²² A. N. L. Munby, *The Dispersal of the Phillipps Library* (Phillipps Studies no. 5) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 2-12
- ²³ *Settled Land Act 1872*, 45 & 46 Vict. Ch. 38, section 37 (1)
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1882/38/pdfs/ukpga_18820038_en.pdf
- ²⁴ Five of these sales were of printed books, the rest of manuscripts and autograph letters. Munby, *The Dispersal of the Phillipps Library*, pp. 55, 86
- ²⁵ Munby, *The Dispersal of the Phillipps Library*, pp. 106-107
- ²⁶ H. P. Kraus, *A Rare Book Saga: the Autobiography of H.P. Kraus* (New York: Putnam, 1978), p. 226
- ²⁷ H. P. Kraus, *Bibliotheca Phillipica: Manuscripts on vellum and paper from the 9th to the 18th centuries, from the celebrated collection formed by Sir Thomas Phillipps: the Final Selection* (Catalogue no 153) (New York: H. P. Kraus, 1979)
- ²⁸ Munby, *The Formation of the Phillipps Library from 1841 to 1872*, p. xii
- ²⁹ Edith Brayer, *Dispersion des manuscrits de la Collection Phillipps jadis conservée à Cheltenham: tables de concordance* (Paris: IRHT, 1951)
- ³⁰ A. E. Popham, *Catalogue of Drawings in the Collection formed by Sir Thomas Phillipps, Bart., F.R.S., now in the possession of his Grandson, T. Fitzroy Phillipps Fenwick of Thirlestaine House, Cheltenham* (London, 1935)
- ³¹ *Catalogue of Phillipps Gallery 1869* (Bodleian Library, MS Phillipps-Robinson c.696)
- ³² Munby, *The Formation of the Phillipps Library*, p. 225
- ³³ Troccoli, Joan Carpenter, 'George Catlin and Sir Thomas Phillipps: A Nineteenth-Century Friendship,' *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship* 10 (1995), 9-20
- ³⁴ Art Gallery of New South Wales, 'John Glover: Artist Profile'
<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/glover-john/>
- ³⁵ *A Catalogue of Pictures Descriptive of Van Diemen's Land ... by John Glover* (1835) (Bodleian Library, MS Phillipps-Robinson d.323)
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- ³⁹ Munby, *The Formation of the Phillipps Library*, p. 110
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- ⁴¹ Kevin Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton, 1586-1631: History and Politics in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 75
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- ⁴³ Cyril Ernest Wright, *Fontes Harleiani* (London: British Museum, 1972)
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- ⁵⁴ Mark Purcell, *The Country House Library* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1979)
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