

Thomas J. Wise: Inventing Collectors, Inventing Books

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Bibliography appeals to me in the strongest possible manner; and I would never stand in the way to hinder its progress for the sake of satisfying my selfish ends.

Thomas J. Wise to John H. Wrenn.¹

Book-collecting means book-buying.

John Carter.²

The buying and selling of books has been a notable passion since long before the invention of the printing press. In those early days, the high cost of an individual book prevented all but the wealthiest from amassing extensive private libraries. The intervening centuries have witnessed many changes in the economics of publishing and in the forms of literature, and with those changes bibliophily has changed as well.

The 1870s saw the beginning of a new style of bibliophily, where book collectors were interested in modern authors, rather than restricting themselves to those of antiquity. One of the overwhelming desires of the new form of bibliophily was for originality: original condition, original binding, and, above all, first editions.³ There was also a increase of interest in minor works as well as the major, and rarity became as, if not more, important than literary merit. The market for first editions of even obscure works was such that prices were inflated well beyond the recommendations of many noted book dealers.⁴

One of the most successful book collectors of this era was Thomas J. Wise. His Ashley Library, now residing in the British Museum, has been described as “the finest

¹ Quoted in Ratchford, p. 28.

² Carter, 1970, p. ix.

³ Collins, p. 280.

⁴ For example William Roberts, quoted in Carter and Pollard, pp. 104-106.

private library in existence.”⁵ Wise also took an active role in helping other collectors assemble impressive libraries, including John Wrenn, whose library now forms part of the collection of the University of Texas.

Wise, who from humble beginnings made a minor fortune in the essential oils business, became a noted bibliophile and bibliographer, and sponsored many private printings of the works of well-known nineteenth-century authors. From a young age, he favoured the modern authors, and soon came to use his influence to increase their popularity among other collectors.⁶ He was considered a pioneer of and a spokesman for a new style of bibliography,⁷ and published more than forty bibliographic works.⁸

Wise was also the perpetrator of one of the greatest literary frauds ever executed. Though the number is now impossible to determine precisely, he was responsible for over one hundred forgeries and pirated works. Most of these were in the form of the “creative forgery,” or fake first edition.

The modus operandi Wise followed was to select an obscure short work by a sought-after author and create a falsely-dated pamphlet edition (frequently identified as “for private circulation only”) predating the known first edition. These pamphlets would sometimes be referred to as “pre-first editions.” They would then be described as extremely rare, and could be sold for exorbitant prices. The false imprint created what appeared to be an invaluable collector’s item, which would bring an impressive profit to its printer. While a few have suggested that the pamphlets were printed as a joke, it seems

⁵ Ratchford, p. 46.

⁶ Partington, p. 17.

⁷ Ratchford, p. 114.

⁸ Todd, p. 121.

more likely that they were “deliberately manufactured for the rare book market,” designed by an expert to be as profitable as possible.⁹

Wise was not the inventor of the creative forgery: that distinction belongs to his friend, Harry Buxton Forman, who in 1881 printed a previously unpublished work of a relatively unknown poet under a false imprint and false date. This was an act of “bibliographic forgery, creating a book after the event to fill a persuasive niche,”¹⁰ though the niche was not one which appealed strongly to collectors.

Forman, a prominent figure in the British Postal Service, also rose to eminence in the literary field as a scholar of Shelley and an “important pioneer” of editorial methods.¹¹ He also saw the potential profit in printing offprints and intentionally rare volumes specifically to appeal to collectors.¹² It was Forman’s editions of Shelley that introduced Wise to the literary world – appropriate, as it was Forman who introduced Wise to many of the less respectable methods that would bring him such success.

While Forman came up with the idea of the creative forgery, it was Wise who made it profitable. Imbued with considerable business sense and salesmanship, he was able to distribute the forgeries to unsuspecting and grateful customers, such as John Wrenn. In fact, Wise seems to have taken the lead in this project early on, with Forman as a reluctant and somewhat trapped partner.¹³

Producing the pamphlets was no great challenge, as Wise and Forman were both experienced in printing legitimate reprints of older material. Selling the forgeries safely

⁹ Carter and Pollard, p. 74.

¹⁰ Collins, p. 43.

¹¹ Collins, p. 47.

¹² Collins, p. 48.

¹³ Collins, p. 82, 150.

was a more serious concern. If too many copies hit the market at once, a pamphlet would lose all pretence to “rare” standing, and its price would drop. Also, if all the newly discovered rarities could be traced to Wise, his role in their creation would become obvious.

Many of the pamphlets were sold in anonymous auctions. More than once, Wise bid against himself, in order to establish a high price. He also sold pamphlets through intermediaries, or passed them on to clients such as Wrenn while claiming to act as an intermediary himself.¹⁴ When selling the forged pamphlets, Wise was careful to mix his own creations in lots with authentic works, to allay suspicions.¹⁵

Later, Wise unburdened himself of the task of selling the pamphlets. He sold his remainders in bulk to Herbert Gorfin, a bookseller and long-time acquaintance, between 1909 and 1912. Later, Gorfin would deny having any idea of the dubious origin of the pamphlets.

Establishing a false provenance for each pamphlet required a series of inventions. Many of the pamphlets were endowed with fictional stories of their printing or their discovery – none so elaborate as for Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Reading Sonnets.”¹⁶ Copies of the pamphlets were deposited in the private libraries of friends and associates of Wise and Forman, often as gifts. Wise arranged for forged pamphlets to be either donated or sold, frequently through intermediaries, to the British Museum, to add to their

¹⁴ For instance, Wise several times claimed to sell books or proofs he had obtained from a Dr. Underwood, who appears to have been completely fictitious. See Ratchford, p. 74.

¹⁵ For an example of this, see Wise’s letters to J. E. Cornish, in Carter, Pollard, and Todd, p. 22.

¹⁶ A contradiction in the accounts of the publication of this volume is one of the stronger pieces of negative evidence for the forgeries. See Carter and Pollard, Chapter 2, pp. 8-37.

apparent legitimacy. He even, on several occasions, attempted to induce authors to acknowledge the fictitious editions.¹⁷

However, the most powerful tools used by Wise and by Forman to invent provenance and legitimacy for their creations were their reputations as bibliographers and scholars. After seeing a pamphlet described as *the* first edition in an official bibliography, who would question its authenticity? Collins notes “in most later cases Wise (or Forman) wrote the bibliographies themselves to make sure their publications got proper billing,”¹⁸ and by including the spurious volume in a complete bibliography the forgers could ensure that collectors would desire it and seek it out. Forman even wrote critically on the text of the forged Tennyson pamphlet “The Last Tournament.”¹⁹

Wise produced his last forgery in 1906.²⁰ In his later years, he denounced the practice of forgery and pirating authors’ works.²¹ It is likely that this public stance helped to deflect attention from his own illicit publishing.

Wise profited from the forgeries doubly: not only did he collect the funds from their sale, but his discovery and description of such exciting materials improved his reputation as a bibliographer and book-collecting authority.²² He then used his reputation to develop a book-collecting milieu which would eagerly embrace each new pamphlet he created.

¹⁷ Collins, pp. 85-86.

¹⁸ Collins, p. 89.

¹⁹ Ratchford, pp. 107-109.

²⁰ Todd, p. 120.

²¹ Partington, p. 5.

²² Carter, 1959, p. 7.

It was not long before the authenticity of a few of the pamphlets came under suspicion. Although Wise and Forman had gone to pains to establish provenance for many of the pamphlets, it was still the case that none could be verified independently before 1890.²³ Also, many of the supposedly rare volumes had been turning up surprisingly frequently, often in sets together.

It was this set of suspicious circumstances that inspired two booksellers, John Carter and Graham Pollard, to begin the investigations that culminated in their 380-page exposé An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth Century Pamphlets. The authors refrained from explicitly identifying Wise as the forger, but still held him to blame for helping to perpetuate a blind naïveté in book-collecting:

“But far more serious in its import and far-reaching in its extent is the damage done to the integrity of bibliography as a whole. Mr. Wise, by his credulity, by his vanity in his own possessions, by his dogmatism, by abuse of his eminence in the bibliographical world, has dealt a blow to the prestige of an honourable science, the repercussions of which will be long and widely felt.”²⁴

The book made headlines, as the public learned of the massive literary fraud for the first time.

Carter and Pollard’s suspicions had arisen out of the same negative evidence others had noticed, particularly the lack of provenance and the large numbers of supposedly rare pamphlets turning up. They pursued these problems, and used rigorous methods to provide positive proof that many of the pamphlets had been produced years later than they had been dated.

²³ Carter and Pollard, p. 92.

²⁴ Carter and Pollard, p. 141.

The first form of evidence came from an examination of the paper that the pamphlets were printed on. Paper produced from rags was used exclusively in England until 1861, when esparto (a type of grass) was introduced as a new raw material. The acid process for producing paper from wood pulp was not introduced until 1874.²⁵ Thus, the constituents of a leaf of paper can be used to provide a definite anterior date for its printing: a pamphlet printed on wood pulp paper cannot have been produced before the 1870s.

On examining the suspected forgeries with a microscope, Carter and Pollard found evidence that twenty-two pamphlets had been printed on anachronistic paper.²⁶ This was absolute, positive evidence of forgery, where before there had been only suspicion.

The second set of evidence gathered against the forgeries was an analysis of the typefaces used in their printing. It is possible to date the first use of a particular typeface, thus again providing a solid date before which a particular piece of text could not have been printed. This method of dating proved particularly effective, as it became clear that sixteen of the forgeries had been printed with the same, unique typeface.

This typeface Carter and Pollard were able to identify as “Clay’s Long Primer No. 3.” Its most distinctive feature was an unusual question mark, cast from an italic fount rather than roman. The typeface also used kernless *fs* and *js*, which were not in use at all before 1880. Most significantly, this particular face had been used only by the printers Richard Clay and Sons, and only between 1876 and 1893.²⁷

²⁵ Carter and Pollard, pp. 43-47.

²⁶ Carter and Pollard, p. 55.

²⁷ Carter and Pollard, p. 64.

Thus, the pamphlets printed in this distinctive and recognisable type could be clearly dated within a short period, and all sixteen had been printed with false dates. (Furthermore, the printer Clay and Sons, and even the Long Primer No. 3, had been frequently used by Wise in his legitimate printings, adding to the evidence that he was responsible for the forgeries.²⁸)

A comparison of the typefaces used for the other forgeries showed that many of the pamphlets (with supposed dates ranging over thirty years) shared common typefaces, all of which had been used by Clay and Sons during this short period of time.²⁹

This is not the only evidence presented by Carter and Pollard in their exposé. They also provide accounts of imprints of fictitious printers and authors' own denials of supposed first editions. While most of this evidence is inconclusive on its own, its sheer quantity is remarkable. Further evidence, including the identification of more pamphlets as forgeries, has been uncovered by later research.

Still, only one indisputable piece of evidence connects this string of forgeries to Wise and Forman. Known as the Pforzheimer document, after its discoverer, it consists of a letter from Forman to Wise, expressing anger at Forman's being trapped in a position of dishonesty.³⁰ This is more than evidence enough of both men's complicity, but the letter was not released to the public until 1944, long after Wise's death. However, the evidence presented in Carter and Pollard's volume was strong enough to convince the public of Wise's guilt.³¹

²⁸ Carter and Pollard, p. 64.

²⁹ Carter and Pollard, pp. 66-70.

³⁰ The letter is reproduced in Collins, pp. 119-121.

³¹ Carter, 1959, p. 4.

Clear, positive proof had been presented which demonstrated that more than fifty pamphlets, prized by collectors, had been printed with false dates. This devastated any claim to first edition status, rendering them, if not entirely worthless, then nearly so. It also demolished Thomas J. Wise's reputation as a bibliographer, and shocked the world of book collecting.

The effect that Wise had on bibliography and bibliophily must be treated in two periods: before the publication of the Enquiry and the discovery of the forgeries, and after.

The new style of bibliophily that became popular in the late nineteenth century was in part due to Wise's influence. Ratchford describes Wise as "the chief proponent and defender" of the new school, with the Ashley Library as "the very centre of the cult."³² Through his column in The Bookman (beginning in 1893) Wise was able to promulgate his own style of bibliography, and "describe and authenticate many forgeries."³³ He promoted interest in modern authors, and defended the high prices being paid for rare pamphlets. Wise produced forgeries which were exactly suited to the type of collecting he espoused, and he was able to use funds obtained through this fraud to build his own library and reputation.

Though "The Ashley Library" was Wise's name for his private collection, it also refers to the catalogue of his own private printings. Although Wise claimed that the catalogue was produced for bibliographic purposes rather than commercial, his own

³² Ratchford, p. 41.

³³ Collins, p. 102.

printings were an important source of income.³⁴ These were largely limited edition reprints of the works of modern authors, desirable to the same collectors who paid outrageous sums for his forgeries.

Wise also took advantage of the increase in numbers of American book collectors, of whom John Wrenn was but one.³⁵ America was, at this time, a new market for rare or antiquated English books. American bibliophiles could not find desired volumes except by travelling overseas themselves, or by trusting catalogues or agents. Wise was considered reliable in both respects. (Ratchford finds that, aside from the forgeries, Wise displayed “surprisingly little” dishonesty in the assembly of the Wrenn library.³⁶)

At his peak, Wise used his influence to steer bibliography and bibliophily in a new direction, according to his tastes, but also according to which he could best profit from his dishonesty. He used his considerable influence to build legitimacy for the pamphlets he created himself, and used those spurious works to build his own influence. For years, no one would think of questioning his scholarship or love of the books he lived by.

Carter and Pollard’s methods were new to the field of bibliography at the time of the publication of the Enquiry, though none of their investigations required any major technological leap. The description of paper content, or the precise identification of typeface, could have been made part of common bibliographic practice much earlier. Likewise the examination of auction records to determine provenance, which was found

³⁴ Ratchford, p. 8.

³⁵ Ratchford, p. 40.

³⁶ Ratchford, p. 111.

to be surprisingly effective: “It is not until this test has been put to constant use that one can realise how effective it is, and that the overwhelming majority of collected nineteenth-century books are authenticated in this way.”³⁷

Yet, before 1934, there had been no clear reason to go to such effort to prove the authenticity of a book. Certainly forgeries existed, but they tended to be copies of extant editions, and thus could be easily detected by visual comparison. The creative forgery, and the devious false scholarship supporting it, was a new phenomenon, requiring a new rigour of proof. Some years later, Carter acknowledged: “It is true he [Wise] knew nothing about chemical wood or esparto grass or kernless *fs* or hybrid founds; and it was on these invisible rocks that his corsair fleet eventually foundered. But then, neither did anyone else.”³⁸

Wise, not without the help of co-conspirators, used his expertise in the field of bibliography to create nearly perfect forgeries. He then used his influence to create a situation receptive to those forgeries, which very few others could have done. He used his scholarly works to establish false provenance for many of the pamphlets, covering for his own criminal actions. His unique access to these “rare” materials increased his reputation in the bibliographic community. And he used the profits from the sales of the pamphlets, usually through a third party, to finance his extraordinary private library of (mostly) legitimate materials.

³⁷ Carter and Pollard, p. 83.

³⁸ Carter, 1959, pp. 18-19.

By the early 1900s, at least one forgery of a forgery had been created.³⁹ And now, the volumes enjoy a certain fame not as first editions, but as Thomas J. Wise forgeries. Carter described the “Reading Sonnets” as “a book which is in fact worthless except as a curiosity,”⁴⁰ but the forgeries themselves are now quite collectible.⁴¹ These “certain nineteenth-century pamphlets” may have had no place in the great literary collections of the world when they were first printed, but they now form an important part of bibliographical history.

³⁹ Collins, p. 161.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Ratchford, p. 90.

⁴¹ “Forging a Collection”

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