

## John Claude Trewinard Oates 1912–1990

FOR ALMOST FOUR DECADES students of 15th-century printed books have used the word ‘Oates’ to denote one of their most regularly cited references, *A Catalogue of the Fifteenth-Century Printed Books in the University Library Cambridge*, published in 1954. Its consistent use cannot be explained by the importance of this collection alone. ‘Oates’ is, along with other such conveniently short names like ‘Hain’, or more recently ‘Goff’ and ‘Sack’ (not to speak of acronyms like ‘GW’, ‘BMC’ and ‘IGI’) an infallible bibliographical guide to the material described, much improving on earlier and far less systematic methods of description at this level. With its transparent layout and analysis of the items it set an example that was readily followed in many other catalogues. To the world at large the Cambridge catalogue of incunabula is John Oates’s best-known work, but its particular value can be better appreciated if it is seen in the context of the other interests that were so clearly defined as central in its author’s life and work.

John Claude Trewinard Oates was born in Gloucester on 24 June 1912. He was educated at the Crypt School in Gloucester and won in 1931 a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he read classics. He graduated BA with first-class honours in 1935, and after a short interval which included some months spent in Germany intended as a preparation for a planned future in classical archaeology he was appointed as assistant under-librarian at the University Library, Cambridge. His obvious gift for scholarship had led his mentor at Trinity, A. S. F. Gow, to recommend him to the Librarian, A. F. Scholfield. The balance between scholarship and the organizational needs of the library were a first priority in Scholfield’s librarianship, and striking this balance proved to be the main theme in John Oates’s long career in the University Library. His career was interrupted

© The British Academy 1993.



J. C. T. OATES

by war-time service but after his return he was promoted to the post of Under-Librarian in 1949. He became Deputy Librarian in 1975 and, just when he was on the point of retirement, was called upon to fulfil the function of Acting Librarian, following the sudden death of Eric Ceadel in 1979. A year later, after 45 years of service, he was at last free to complete the second of the major works of scholarship which he had undertaken, *Cambridge University Library: A History, from the Beginning to the Copyright Act of Queen Anne*, which was published in 1986. The catalogue of incunabula of 1954 betrays the embryonic presence of the later book in the author's mind, in its extensive introduction containing a concise history of the collection, and even more in the annotation of each single item to explain its acquisition and whenever possible its earlier history. For this part of the collections Oates could claim to have achieved what more than thirty years later he would state as one of his aims for the history of the library as a whole 'a history which would tell [the reader] when, why, where, and in what manner every important manuscript or printed book had entered our collections and what scholarly use had been made of it since'.

In this respect, linking early ownership and the history of individual copies with the systematic bibliographical description of a collection, the catalogue is truly innovatory, and is an early sign of the direction the study of early printing was to take in decades to come: the history of the book-trade, of collecting and of libraries, and more recently, of reading and the spread of the printed book. One of the foundation stones for pursuing these new kinds of interest was laid by John Oates himself, but it also fell to him to complete an edifice for which the foundations had been laid by others. It cannot have been an easy inheritance. Some three generations before him the incunabula of the University Library had been the breeding ground for fundamental innovation in the study of this kind of material. Henry Bradshaw, University Librarian from 1867 to 1886, had outlined the principles of classification and description of incunabula in two short publications, developed and supported by contact and correspondence with other scholars. He took the collection at Cambridge (which he enriched considerably by acquisitions and gifts) as his point of departure and used it as his experimental material, thus almost incidentally beginning with a systematic catalogue of the collection. After Bradshaw's premature death in 1886 the torch was taken over by Robert Proctor and the classification of all 15th-century printing was accomplished on the collections of the British Museum and the Bodleian Library. A wealth of notes and unfinished materials remained in Cambridge, however, and Bradshaw's pupil and later successor F. Jenkinson (Librarian 1889–1923) displayed keen interest in incunabula, added many to the collection

and produced several specialized studies. But the catalogue remained unfinished. This task proved ideally suited to John Oates, a young man, not yet distracted by the many obligations of office, unwilling to be lured by the many scholarly temptations offered by a large and wide-ranging collection.

Once the incunabula catalogue was completed, John Oates was free to follow his manifest inclination to accomplish the detailed and comprehensive study of the history of the University Library. That this took him over thirty years, in which time he brought the history not beyond the year 1710, is no sign of idleness. It goes without saying that his work was meticulous and of great integrity, but as it progressed his responsibilities in the Library grew, and he allowed his rapidly increasing experience to enrich his perception of the function of the collection and the institution.

A whole generation of scholars could follow his progress with the *History of the University Library* by a sequence of smaller publications which served as preliminary studies, several almost ready to be absorbed into the larger work.<sup>1</sup> In 1952 (the same year as his first Sandars lectures which appeared in print as the introduction to his catalogue of incunabula) he published with H. L. Pink the text of three 16th-century catalogues of the University Library. Several studies (in 1952, 1972 and 1974) were devoted to the development of legal deposit. A preliminary and abbreviated survey of the history of the Library 1400–1600 presented as a lecture to the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago was published in *The Library Quarterly* in 1962. In 1974 a detailed analysis of the ineradicable misinformation published about the *Nachlass* of the Dutch orientalist Thomas Erpenius (which is in the University Library) was the subject of a lecture for the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand. The Sandars lectures for 1966, a study of Abraham Whelock 1593–1653, orientalist, Anglo-Saxonist, and University Librarian, became a chapter in the *History of the Library*.

Among Oates's short studies of English printing his excellent introduction to a facsimile edition of Caxton's *Vocabulary in French and English* (1964) deserves particular mention. He published a handful of articles about Sterne and his imitators among which *Shandyism and Sentiment, 1760–1800*, a commemorative lecture presented in 1968, stands out as a lucid and entertaining overview.

Meanwhile his disposition to share his knowledge of the collections

<sup>1</sup> A checklist of the published works compiled by D. E. Rhodes was added to a posthumous publication of a selection of his essays: J. C. T. Oates, *Studies in English Printing and Libraries*, London, 1991.

as well as of bibliographical discipline in its most recent developments exerted an inestimable influence on the large number of scholars who for part of their researches came to rely on the University Library. John Oates was generous in making his experience available to others, applauded and happily supported any new use made of the collections. A spectacular example is his understanding of the significance of the early records of the Cambridge University Press, which indirectly led to D. F. McKenzie's seminal analysis of these documents and their implications for our understanding of book production in the hand-press period. Such an instance gave him immense satisfaction and it is by no means isolated. I count myself among the very many scholars who have cause for lasting gratitude for a guiding hand and generous support on long and regular visits to Cambridge. The duties to the public of a rare-book librarian, as John Oates had now become, are not confined to visitors, and a substantial amount of time has to be given to correspondence. John Oates was in frequent epistolary contact with scholars on both sides of the Atlantic and in Europe. In such contacts he showed an excellent grasp of all current developments in historical bibliography which in his published work surfaces only occasionally. Although his correspondence was always carried out promptly, with great courtesy and understanding of the inquirer's needs and without wasting words, it offered occasionally scope for his remarkable talent for writing outrageously witty prose, a gift he used sparingly, as appropriate to a highly spiced ingredient. On very rare occasions, as in some book reviews, he allowed it to take over, to unforgettable effect but without real malice,<sup>2</sup> probably because he was fully aware that this could be devastating ammunition if used indiscriminately. The influence of Laurence Sterne to whom (with his imitators of the eighteenth century) he was devoted, is obvious, and, although he never descended into pastiche, a delightful hint of Sternianism pervades all Oates's prose. Let one example suffice, taken from the preface of his *History*, which also sums up his attitude to the allocation of priorities:

. . . For a time my researches formed part of my official duties, and I made fair, if slow, progress, writing each chapter as the research upon it was completed. There are, I suspect, other and better ways of writing a book like this one. The tenor of my way began to change some fifteen years ago when subtle pressures began to be exerted upon me for the purpose of turning me into an administrator. These proved difficult to resist, the conversion being finally effected in the middle of a sentence now to be found on p. 367. It was almost a decade before I was able,

<sup>2</sup> The most delightful example must be the review of a revised edition of John Carter, *ABC for book collectors* which appeared in *The Library*, September 1962, pp. 272–3, 'by Z as dictated to J.C.T. Oates'.

after my retirement, to return to it and to carry on my work to its present ending . . .

Juxtapose this to the end of a letter to William A. Jackson, written in October 1956, which answers, with usual brisk efficiency a questionnaire for STC and an expression of envy:

. . . A life so tranquil indeed! When your letter arrived I was buried up to the neck in 13500 Christmas cards newly arrived from the press and was making arrangements for ULC to go into trade . . .

John Oates became an authoritative voice both in Cambridge and in an international network of scholars in a wide-ranging variety of bibliographical disciplines. Apart from the affection and gratitude of many he received recognition of his gifts and achievements. He was Editor of *The Library* from 1953 to 1960, during which years the journal flourished. His strict standards of editing are preserved in the folk memory as nuggets of editorial advice: that foot-notes should wherever possible be incorporated into the text; that the time for research is *before* a paper is sent to press . . . He served as President of the Bibliographical Society in 1970–2, and was President of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society from 1977 to 1981. In 1964 he was one of the Founding Fellows of Darwin College, and he was Reader in Historical Bibliography in the University of Cambridge from 1972. In 1976 he was elected Fellow of the British Academy.

The life and work of John Oates exemplifies that of the scholar-librarian. In its traditions of librarianship this country has been blessed with more than one of his kind in every generation, and has thus been able to maintain (tenuously) a tradition that is constantly under threat from professional demands partly of its own making. In the case of John Oates there was never any question of giving the profession second place by withdrawing into esoteric scholarship: the demands of the library and assisting readers in using the collection to best advantage were his first priorities. In later years his function as Reader in Historical Bibliography gave a new dimension to the concept of this task, but even from this external responsibility the library benefited directly, as testified by his didactic disposition of reference material in the Munby Room. His successful efforts to raise funds for the Munby Fellowship were yet another expression of his intense support of scholarship centred on the University Library. Thus the influence of a scholar dedicated to important collections can be seen to pervade concentric circles: a close circle of friends in Cambridge to whom he was 'Titus', and with whom he maintained an enduring exchange of scholarly interests and encouragement. Immediately beyond this there was a circle of younger colleagues and pupils, who greatly profited from his teaching and the model he set, but, although friends, maintained some

respectful distance.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat more remote but perceptibly influenced over many years were the circles of the Bibliographical Society and colleagues in other British collections. And finally there was a very large circle of scholars, encompassing universities and libraries over half the world, who felt admiration and affection for him in about equal measure, and who acknowledged his guidance and advice in their many publications. That amid such rich diversity it remained possible for him to complete two major publications was not only due to his patience, tenacity, and sense of purpose, but above all to his systematic and sharp definition of what he wished to accomplish in these works. The world of bibliography and librarianship will remain deeply grateful to him.

LOTTE HELLINGA

*Fellow of the British Academy*

<sup>3</sup> Affectionate memorials were written by D.F. McKenzie in *Transaction of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, ix, 1990, pp. 401–8, and by D. J. McKitterick in *The Cambridge Review*, December 1990, pp. 188–90.