

***A British Book Collector: Rare Books and Manuscripts in the R.E. Hart Collection, Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery*, edited by CYNTHIA JOHNSTON. London: University of London Press, Institute of English Studies, 2021. xiii + 234 pp. £30.00. ISBN: 978-0-9927257-9-2**

At the end of her introduction to this collection of conference proceedings, Cynthia Johnston states her ambition “to find new life [for the R.E. Hart collection] in his own community in Blackburn. It is our intention with this volume to enrich that life, and to deepen the connections between the Hart Collection and the local community as well as an international audience” (p. 5).

To direct a collection of this kind at two very different audiences, presumably academic and non-academic – neither target group is clearly defined – is ambitious indeed.

“Something for my native town” was the title of a conference held at Blackburn College in 2017 on the collection donated to the Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery by the local industrialist R.E. Hart in 1946. It was the third conference on the subject and these proceedings are the second volume to arise from them. The partnership between the Institute of English Studies, University of London, and Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery has also resulted in three exhibitions, held in London and Blackburn, with accompanying catalogues. Much has therefore been done already by Johnston and her colleagues to breathe new life into Hart’s collection.

Robert Edward Hart (1878-1946) was a native of Blackburn, whose family specialised in rope making. Hart never married and unlike his father and grandfather was not involved in local politics. He was however known for his philanthropy, inspired by deep religious conviction and not an uncommon sentiment among northern industrialists. He was also a very private man.

Hart donated parts of his collection to Pembroke College, Cambridge University Library, the Fitzwilliam Museum, and Blackburn Free Library, Museum and Art Gallery. At Blackburn are 21 medieval manuscripts, over 50 incunabula, and over 1,000 books printed before 1801, as well as a substantial numismatic collection and a number of Islamic manuscripts; figures for the latter two are not given in Johnston’s introduction. The volume in hand concentrates on the Blackburn portion of Hart’s collection.

Following from Johnston’s brief introduction, David McKitterick takes up the challenge of untangling the motivations behind Hart’s collecting and distribution of his collections. Not much is known about Hart’s private life or his decision-making, and McKitterick provides a useful contextual account of possible influences on Hart’s decisions. His discussion of other contemporary collectors and collections is taken up again by Johnston towards the end of the volume.

From McKitterick’s explorative essay, the focus shifts, perhaps rather abruptly, to three densely written analyses of the Blackburn Psalter, Missal and Hours respectively by Nigel Morgan, Francesca Manzari and Scott McKendrick. Along with Eric White’s discussion of three early printed fragments, these essays are very much geared towards an audience of fellow-specialists. Cleo Cantone gives us an insight into Hart’s Islamic manuscripts and the idea of virtual pilgrimage, before Cynthia Johnston gives an overview of other book collections in the North West. Rebecca Darley closes the proceedings with a brief meditation

on the value of heritage in concepts nationhood and regional identity, with a nod to Hart's numismatic collection.

Because the volume is part of a series of outputs, there are gaps that are possibly filled by previous publications. The emphasis on star items risks obscuring more mundane but nevertheless interesting manuscripts and printed books and I felt not much clearer about the scope of Hart's collection or whether there is much coherence to it; there appears to be no publicly accessible catalogue. It would also have been interesting to get more insight into the project as a whole: what is its overall aim and how does this publication fit into it? How does the "local community", one of the volume's intended audiences, benefit from the project?

As part of bringing the collection to life for local communities, I would also have been interested in how the Museum's curatorial and learning staff are managing this, or learn more about how people in Blackburn engage with the Hart Collection. Perhaps these silences are yet to be addressed in a future publication.

The index appears hastily compiled and uneven in coverage. For example, medieval manuscripts, ornamental repertoire and pen work are given detailed analytical entries, but Darley's essay is hardly referenced. The Staffordshire Hoard, used by Darley as an example to support her argument, is not mentioned.

Johnston has gathered an impressive line-up of experts in the field of medieval manuscripts and book history, and the volume is lavishly illustrated with high-quality colour images. The price is very reasonable. But, does she fulfil her stated aim of connecting the collections to both a local and a global audience? I am not sure, but there is certainly something here for anyone with a professional interest in heritage collections, medieval manuscripts or early printed books. As a means of enticing researchers from further afield to explore the Hart Collection, the volume does an excellent job, but how enlightening it is for the people of Blackburn, I am not entirely sure.

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