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BOOK OWNERS ONLINE: A DATABASE TO SUPPORT PROVENANCE RESEARCH

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Abstract: Launched in August 2020, the Book Owners Online was built as a collaborative project between the Bibliographical Society and the University College London, designed to be scalable and flexible with the aspiration to expand both chronologically and geographically. Initially containing data for around 1400 English seventeenth-century book owners, the number of entries has grown to more than 1800, covering Scottish as well as English owners, and moving into the 18th century. The Book Owners Online platform is meant to be a place to start, not one to end, providing overview information to further sources of reference. It does not aspire to list all the books a person owned; the entries conform to a standard structure, with several fields which will be filled depending on the nature of the evidence. They include a name with at least a date of birth or death, a narrative field on "Books" aiming to summarise what we know about their library, and at least one source of further information. Like all online databases of this nature, providing a source of reference and information to support other works, it is conceived as being always a work in progress.

Keywords: Provenance. Data. Book Owners. Information. Collections.

BOOK OWNERS ONLINE: UMA BASE DE DADOS PARA SUBSIDIAR A PESQUISA DA PROVENIÊNCIA

Resumo: Lançado em agosto de 2020, o Projeto Book Owners Online foi construído como um trabalho colaborativo entre a Bibliographical Society e a University College London, desenvolvido para ser escalonável e flexível, com intenção de se expandir tanto cronologicamente quanto geograficamente. Contando inicialmente com dados de cerca de 1.400 proprietários ingleses do século XVII, a base de dados já abrange informações de mais 1.800 proprietários escoceses e ingleses, avançando para o século XVIII. O Book Owners Online pretende ser um lugar para começar, não para terminar, fornecendo uma visão geral das informações para outras fontes de referências adicionais. O projeto não almeja listar todos os livros que uma pessoa possuiu, as entradas obedecem a uma estrutura padrão, com uma série de campos que serão preenchidos dependendo da natureza da evidência. Todos os registros incluem um nome com pelo menos uma data de nascimento ou óbito, um campo "Livros" com o objetivo de resumir o que sabemos a respeito de sua biblioteca, e pelo menos uma fonte adicional de informação. Como qualquer base de dados online dessa natureza, que constituem uma fonte de referência e informação para apoiar outros trabalhos, é concebida como sendo sempre um trabalho em andamento.

Palavras-chave: Proveniência. Dados. Proprietários. Informação. Coleções.

1 INTRODUCTION

Provenance research of all kinds relies on an extensive supporting structure of reference works, of secondary publications and other documentary sources to help us answer the key questions that are often central to this kind of work. The inscriptions, bookplates and other kinds of evidence which owners leave in their books lead us to their names, after which we face a series of obvious questions: who is this person? Did they own other books, and if so, how many, and of what kind? What happened to their books, where can we find other examples? What kind of book owner are we encountering here – a major collector, or someone who is not otherwise known to have had books? We need not only to identify the provenance evidence, but also to contextualise it within the book historical landscape of its time.

In the English-speaking world, we have a number of directories and listings of people who have owned or collected books, some of them compiled many years ago, to which people have regularly turned for answers to these questions. Some of them relate to particular kinds of provenance evidence – catalogues of bookplates, or of surviving sale catalogues, and lists of probate inventories which include books. We also have works which provide a narrative or dictionary-style overview of owners over a period of time, though these tend to be very selective in coverage, focusing only on major and well-known collectors. Seymour de Ricci's *English Collectors of Books and Manuscripts* is an example which is still consulted, despite being nearly a century old, though there are some more recent works also.[1]

2 THE GROWTH OF ONLINE DATA

Our access to information of all kinds has been transformed by the advent of the Internet, including that relating to the provenance of historic books. Library catalogues are mounted and searchable online, and because cataloguers of historic material now regularly include provenance data in their records, there is a huge quantity of information about the previous ownership of books discoverable from those records. We have also seen the

[1] Seymour de Ricci, *English Collectors of Books and Manuscripts (1530-1930) and their Marks of Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930); a more recent example is William Baker and Kenneth Womack (eds), *Pre-nineteenth-centuryBritish Book Collectors and Bibliographers* (Detroit: Gale, 1999).

development of various online projects aimed at supporting provenance research, often starting from the holdings of a particular library or libraries, and presenting the ownership evidence found in those books. The *Provenance Online Project* is an obvious example, which mounts broadly classified images of inscriptions, bookplates and other markings from books in North American libraries on Flickr.[2] Many individual libraries have devised ways of showcasing copy-specific features of their holdings, often as part of their special collections webpages; there is a great quantity of data in these, as there is in *POP*, but it is not always indexed in a way that makes it simple to quarry.

A much more sophisticated approach has been taken by *Material Evidence in Incunabula*, which accumulates data from fifteenth-century books in many libraries, with the express aim of enabling sophisticated interrogation of their individual historic evidence. An initiative of the Consortium of European Research Libraries, *MEI* set out to gather detailed records from an extensive network of libraries, with a research goal in mind: "to provide a physical representation of the circulation of books throughout the centuries".[3] It recognizes that copy-specific evidence of all kinds (including bindings, as well as ownership traces) provides clues to unlock understanding of the ways in which books were traded and used across Europe. The database was a cornerstone of the associated academic research project, *15c Booktrade*, whose many outputs included the proceedings of a major international conference where these threads were drawn together.[4] That project is now beyond its funded phase, but the *MEI* database continues to grow, with a satellite database on *Owners of incunabula*.[5]

What we have not had, through these or the many other provenance-related projects, is an up to date reference work which covers multiple kinds of evidence, and all kinds of owners, structured with owners (rather than books from particular libraries) as the organising principle. *Book Owners Online* has been created to try to fill that gap. Its philosophy is built around creating a list of private library owners from defined time periods and places and compiling a directory of key information, with those questions in the first paragraph above in mind.

[2] https://www.flickr.com/people/58558794@N07/ (accessed 2 April 2021).
[3] https://data.cerl.org/mei/_search (accessed 2 April 2021).
[4] https://15cbooktrade.ox.ac.uk/ (accessed 2 April 2021); Cristina Dondi (ed), *Printing R-evolution and Society 1450-1500: Fifty Years that Changed Europe* (Venice: Edizioni Ca'Foscari, 2020).
[5] https://data.cerl.org/owners/_search (accessed 2 April 2021).

3 THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF THE PROJECT

BOO was launched in August 2020 as a freely available website built as a collaborative project between the Bibliographical Society and the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters at University College London (UCL), with some additional startup funding provided by the Lyell Electors at the Bodleian Library.[6] Initially containing data for around 1400 English seventeenth-century book owners, it was designed to be scalable and flexible, with the aspiration to expand both chronologically and geographically. Since its launch, that expansion has been taking place, and at the time of writing the number of entries has grown to more than 1800, covering Scottish as well as English owners, and moving into the eighteenth century. By the time that this is published, we hope that it will have grown further.

The idea of the database began life as a brief list of seventeenth-century English owners, compiled by working through a range of sources, including directories of bookplates, sale catalogues, inventories and armorial stamps. The list was augmented from the evidence of surviving books, in libraries, which indicated the existence of a personal library. A range of secondary sources was also brought in, where libraries were described in published historical and other literature. Sometimes, the evidence is pictorial rather than documentary—we know little about the books of John Boys, Dean of Canterbury (1571-1625), but the contemporary image of him in his study shows him sitting in front of shelves of books.[7] That list was posted as a work-in-progress document on the Bibliographical Society website—partly because it might be useful to others, and partly to solicit input—while research was undertaken to expand the brief list entries into fuller directory-style accounts.

The rationale and methodology of the project was described in a paper to the Bibliographical Society in 2012, and at various other workshop and conference presentations.[8] In 2016 the Society formally decided to adopt the directory as an electronic publication, and a search took place to find the right partner to provide development support and a stable base for its hosting. An agreement was signed with UCL in 2019 to define the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters as that partner, and the content of the draft directory was

[6] https://bookowners.online/Main_Page (accessed 2 April 2021).
[7] https://bookowners.online/John_Boys (accessed 2 April 2021).
[8] David Pearson, 'The English Private Library in the Seventeenth Century', *The Library* 7th ser 13 (2012), 379-399.

turned from a series of Word files into an online database during the academic year 2019–20, with the help of a part-time research assistant whose salary costs were met by the Society, and the Lyell Electors.

Semantic Mediawiki was chosen as the platform for the database, because it is freely available, open-source software whose format is familiar to anyone who has interacted with *Wikipedia*, and which allows for sophisticated search options by encoding semantic data within its structure. It can mount images as well as text (an important consideration for *BOO*), and can be tailored to present a professional and user-friendly public interface. The resulting database is flexible and scalable, with endless opportunity for expansion both as regards content, and editorial input. While it is devised primarily for online use, each page can be formatted for printing or saved as a PDF, so the whole thing could be printed out by any user, if required.

The development phase ran for just under twelve months, between September 2019 and August 2020, while data was entered (mostly by myself, and the research assistant). A professional web designer was engaged to create the front end, with technical support from the CELL office. An advisory group of academics and librarians with expertise in this subject field, and an active interest in the project, was assembled at an early stage. This has met several times, and continues to do so, to discuss questions that arise over priorities and methodologies; it has been very useful as a mechanism for steering the project, and introducing a broader range of views into decision making.

4 QUESTIONS OF DEFINITION

Developing *BOO* raised a series of questions around content and format, which will continue to be part of its intellectual landscape. How can a potentially limitless project be divided up into manageable segments? What constitutes a private library (or, to put it another way, when is someone's demonstrable extent of book ownership enough to merit the creation of an entry?). What are the elements of information that a *BOO* entry should include? The first of these questions was dealt with, pragmatically, by limiting the first phase to English-based owners of the seventeenth century, defined as people who died between 1610 and 1715. The dates are rather arbitrary, and it will rightly be pointed out that the library of someone who died in 1610 is more likely to be a sixteenth-century assemblage than a seventeenth-

century one, but lines have to be drawn somewhere. Databases like this need clearly understandable criteria for inclusion - the simpler the better, so that users know what to expect.

What do we mean by "all owners"? This is a harder question to answer, and deciding the boundaries will always be a matter of judgment as well as defined rules. *BOO* is not meant to comprise a universal provenance index to every name found written in the world's books; that would be a separate, and huge, project. A book with a name written in it, known from one occurrence, may be the sole survivor of what was once a large library, which has otherwise disappeared through the circumstances of history. In the absence of other documentary evidence, we will never know. It can be argued that a directory of historic book owners should begin by listing all clergymen and members of universities, inns of court and professional bodies, as they are all likely to have owned some books, and possibly many; however, those directories already exist, and there seems little value in creating speculative entries in *BOO* with no evidence to back them. Size is not, of itself, a defining factor; a hundred books owned by someone at the end of the sixteenth century is more noteworthy than the same quantity owned a century later. Fifty books owned by a cleric, or academic, in England in the middle of the seventeenth century is unremarkable, while the same number owned by a provincial schoolmaster or a farmer is certainly something worth recording.

Taking all these things into consideration led to the establishment of a workable set of guidelines, based on what is knowable, or evidenced, rather than that which is not. Entries in the database are created for owners who meet one or more of the following criteria:

- the use of a bookplate or armorial binding stamp (likely to reflect a library of some size, though this is not invariably demonstrable)
- the survival of all or part of a library, through preservation in an institutional or private library today (or, documentary evidence of a gift or bequest in the past, of books now lost)
- evidence of a person's books having been sold, via a surviving or lost catalogue, or an advertisement, naming them
- the documentation of a library in probate documents, in wills and/or inventories
- other secondary evidence—diaries, letters, images, book bills—which testify to the existence of a library, now lost or dispersed.

5 THE DATABASE STRUCTURE

The format of the entries is guided by the purposes of the database, and is set out in detail on one of the information pages linked to the home page.[9] *BOO* is meant to be a place to start, not one to end, providing overview information and signposts to further sources of reference. It does not aspire to list all the books a person owned, though it will cite edited lists if they exist. Entries conform to a standard structure, with a number of fields which will be more or less full, depending on the nature of the evidence. They all include a name with at least a date of birth or death, a narrative field on "Books" aiming to summarise what we know about their library, and at least one source of further information (in print or online). They always include "Categories", which form the basis of browsable subject classifications (e.g., Aristocracy, Physicians, Libraries sold at auction) and usually an opening section of Biographical Information. This is generally derived from other standard sources and is deliberately minimal: details of family origin, education, and career, enough to give a sense of who they were without repeating too much data readily available elsewhere. If someone in included in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, or the *History of Parliament*, there is no need to replicate information which is readily available there. The "Books" field sits much more at the heart of a *BOO* entry than the biographical one.

One aim of *BOO* is to help to identify inscriptions or other evidences in books, and a field on "Characteristic Markings" is therefore included to facilitate this. Incorporating images, as well as verbal descriptions, is obviously important here and we are very grateful to the libraries and other custodians who have agreed to permit their inclusion, taken from their books. The project has no budget for this, but the evolution of digital photography (and of library mindsets in loosening traditional restrictions) makes things simple, and possible, which would have been much harder ten years ago. It is regrettable that some of the larger research libraries continue to refuse such permission, effectively discouraging a kind of scholarship which they might be expected to support. Populating this field depends on locating examples which can be photographed, and it is hoped that the many gaps which currently exist can gradually be filled as examples are reported.

[9] https://bookowners.online/User_Guide (accessed 2 April 2021).

There is no standard formula for the content of the "Books" field, as it depends very much on the nature of the library and the surviving evidence. Similar sets of wording will be found in all the entries for libraries which were sold at auction, or where a bookplate was used, but it is important that this field provides an opportunity to provide broader impressions of individual libraries within their contemporary context. The extent to which this can be done depends on the level of research which it has been possible to undertake, case by case. Was the library typical in size and contents, taking the owner's background into account? Do we have any insights into the owner's engagement with, or interest in, the books, looking at the ways they were bound, or the ways they were disposed of? There is a lot of generally untapped evidence to be found in wills, in which people with large libraries are sometimes found to mention them not at all, while those with more modest ones devote considerable care to the disposition of their books. Common patterns emerge, when many wills are examined – in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was often the case that English language and devotional books were left to wives and daughters, while sons and nephews received professional ones, and those in Latin or other learned languages.

There is a great deal of documentation on the textual contents of libraries in the many sale catalogues which survive for those which were sold by auction or retail sale, usually after the owner's death, from the late seventeenth century onwards.[10] The policy of *BOO* is not to analyse these in great depth, title by title, but to summarize them by stating the total size (number of lots) and breakdown by language or subject, as given in the catalogue. Anyone who has worked with these catalogues knows the caveats which must be borne in mind when using them—books left out, books salted in from other sources, many multi-owner sales in which individual provenance cannot be separated out—but it is hoped that the establishment of a body of data with this level of statistical analysis will help to create a framework within which any particular sale can be better contextualized.

Entries vary considerably in their length and contents, depending on the evidence available. Some are very brief, when, for example, all we know is that a sale took place, with no surviving catalogue, for someone whose biographical details have not proved traceable.[11]

[10] For an overview of the history and tracing of sale catalogues for English book owners, see David Pearson, *Provenance Research in Book History* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2019), ch.6, pp.162-218.
[11] E.g. https://bookowners.online/Oately, https://bookowners.online/Rice (both accessed 2 April 2021).

Others are much fuller, for well-documented owners whose books survive today.[12] The screenshot of William Lucy's entry (**fig.1**) is an example of a more mid-length entry, illustrating what the database provides: summary biographical information, an image of his bookplate, a few sentences setting out what we currently know about his library, and a range of sources which can be followed up for more leads. This is not, by any means, an exhaustive account of this particular library but it will allow anyone encountering a book with this plate in it to know what they are looking at. It gives enough information to construct a catalogue record, while also enabling anyone interested in pursuing further research to establish what is already known, and where to go next.

[12]E.g. https://bookowners.online/Sir_Robert_Cotton, https://bookowners.online/Robert_Harley_1661-1724 (both accessed 2 April 2021).

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Figure 01 – William Lucy's entry

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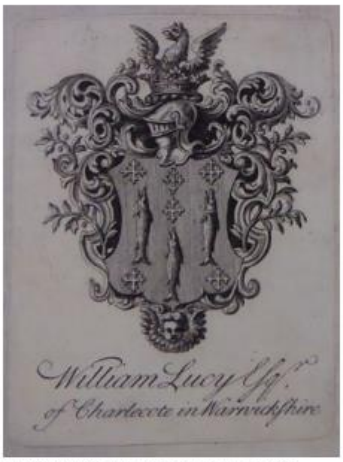
William LUCY 1676/7-1723

Biographical Note

Son of Fulke Lucy of Caldicote, Warwickshire. BA Magdalen Hall, Oxford 1696, MA 1699, BD and DD 1723. Vicar of Kilton, Somerset 1703, canon of Wells 1709, rector of Tolland, Somerset 1714, of Hampton Lucy, Warwickshire 1721. In 1721 he inherited the estate of Charlecote Park, Warwickshire from his relation George Lucy.



Lucy's bookplate (British Museum Franks Collection 18885)

Books

Lucy used an engraved armorial bookplate (Franks 18885), probably made around the time that he inherited Charlecote Park. He is known to have reorganised the library there and added the plate to books which were already on the shelves; the extent of the family library at the time of his death is not known. His will has no specific mention of books; much of his estate was left to his wife for her lifetime use before it passed to his nephew.

Sources

Will of William Lucy, The National Archives PROB 11/596/170 (http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/D585433).

Foster, J., *Alumni Oxonienses*, Oxford, 1891.

Gambier Howe, E. R. J. *Franks bequest: catalogue of British and American book plates bequeathed to the ... British Museum.* London, 1903.

Purcell, M., *The country house library*, New Haven and London, 2017, 120.

The Lucy family of Charlecote Park (https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/charlecote-park/features/the-lucy-family-of-charlecote-park).

Retrieved from 'https://bookowners.online/index.php?title=William_Lucy&oldid=18471'

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Source: https://bookowners.online/index.php?title=William_Lucy&oldid=18471

Libraries which were built up over long periods of time by successive family members provided a challenge for the database format, which has been only partly solved. A commonly encountered pattern, when looking at British private libraries owned by members of the gentry and aristocracy, is one where a library is begun the head of the family at some point in time, and augmented by his heirs over several generations, who both inherited and added to what was effectively a family library. Such libraries often played an important role in their localities, as a source of books at a time when public libraries did not exist, as well as being available for their wider household members. It was originally envisaged that such libraries

would be entered in *BOO* with an umbrella entry under the family name, containing references to the family members, to stress its multi-generational nature. In practice, the architecture of the database as a spine of individual names made this impractical, so cases like this have been dealt with by creating entries for all the relevant family members, with prose in each one to explain the way in which the library grew over time.[13]

6 THE BROADER INTERPRETATIVE CONTEXT

While the database should have an immediate usefulness to help identify particular instances of provenance evidence found in books – an inscription, or a bookplate – it also has a purpose in setting a broader context to understand patterns of historic book ownership. There is value in knowing which books a particular individual owned, and in knowing how the contents of their shelves compared with those of their neighbours and contemporaries. We have a set of ideas and values in our heads around the significant books of the past – we know what the great milestones were in the advancement of thinking and knowledge in earlier centuries, what the important books are. Typically, they are literary or scientific texts, or ones whose contents can be seen in retrospect as having political, economic, cultural or medical impact. They are the kinds of books which today command high prices in salerooms, and find themselves displayed in exhibitions.

If we look systematically at the contents of historic private libraries, we typically find different sets of values in play. Books which were commonly owned by many people will often be ones which are much less read or sought after today, and vice versa. When I undertook a systematic analysis of five late seventeenth-century English private libraries, based on sale catalogues, I found that the literary text most commonly encountered was not Shakespeare, or Milton, but John Barclay, whose allegorical romance *Argenis* was widely read at the time, but is hardly read at all today.[14] Of the 61 books published between 1580 and 1680 which *Printing and the Mind of Man* (1967) considered books of prime importance, for the ideas they brought to the world, only four were found to have been regularly owned.[15] Early modern period bookshelves were often filled with theological and devotional texts

[13] See, for example, the entries in *BOO* for members of the Sidney family, or the Finch family.
[14] David Pearson, Patterns of book ownership in late seventeenth-century England, *The Library* 7th ser 11 (2010), 139-167, p.147.
[15] Ibid., p.158.

whose contemporary importance can be hard to appreciate in the more secular mindset of the twenty-first century.

This kind of methodological approach matters if we wish to develop a true understanding of historic book use; we need to look not only at individual books owned, but at libraries as a whole. If we know what is typical, by way of size and contents, for the library of a clergyman, or a gentry lady, or a surgeon, at different points in time, we can better assess individual cases within that context. We should also compare and contrast ways in which people marked their books, or had them bound; were they owned solely as functional objects, to be read and quarried for information, or were they a showcase to display wealth, taste and fashion? Many historic book owners spent more on their bindings than they needed to, if all they needed was a working text, and we should always stop to think about the motives behind that. They may just have liked nice books, and been able to afford them, or they may have wanted their books to make a statement about their social status. Often, a mixture of these factors is likely to have been behind the choices that individuals made.

BOO aims to help us to answer these kinds of questions, as well as simpler ones around identifying a bookplate or inscription, by summarising the nature and contents of libraries where we know them. Of course, we have to be careful in interpreting the evidence, and remember that a snapshot of a library at any particular point in time is no more than that. Libraries are rarely static things, and books were bought and sold all the time; a book owned in 1680 may have been disposed of, or lent out and never returned, by 1690. Books which might be expected to be found on someone's shelves may not have been there because the owner had access to them elsewhere, or because the opportunity to purchase them never came along at the right time. If we concentrate too much on one library, as an isolated case study, these qualifying factors around the usefulness of the data are more significant than they are if we look instead at patterns and trends, across a broader spread of libraries.

"The contents of a private library have been described as a projection of the owner's mind".[16] This is a commonly-encountered sentiment which if not entirely false, needs to be unpicked with care. It all too easily slips into an assumption that the books people owned were ones that reflected the ideas they were particularly interested in or agreed with, that they sought to own only texts which fitted that mental landscape. In reality people came to own,

[16] J. Challoner, A new manuscript compilation of Katherine Philips, *The Library*, 7th ser 17 (2016), 287-316, 299.

lose, or fail to acquire books for all kinds of reasons, and they certainly did not only own books that they agreed with or admired. When looking at the libraries of English bishops in the early seventeenth century, I was struck by the regular appearance of works by Roman Catholic authors whose doctrine they spent much of their time refuting; in a world in which print was such an important medium for disputing and defending ideas, it was essential to know the enemy in order to refute him.[17] Quite apart from that, there was a widespread respect for serious scholarship, and a recognition that valuable exegesis was produced by Catholic as well as Protestant authors. "Rather than offering us a sharply defined picture of its last owner's personal intellectual orientation, [a library] reveals instead his larger intellectual inheritance and the range of texts he might have used to think with, or against" is a much better way of recrafting that idea at the beginning of this paragraph.[18]

BOO was deliberately entitled *Book Owners*, rather than *Book Collectors*, although people who have had personal libraries are often, as a whole, described as collectors, and that word will regularly be encountered in both academic and more popular publications in this area. Book collecting is a familiar modern concept, summarized by John Carter as "reverence for, and a desire to possess, the original or some other specifically admirable, curious or interesting edition of a book... [which] must be either in its original state or in some contemporary, associative or otherwise appropriate condition".[19] Some of this wording can be applied in an early modern context, when people did seek out editions that were valued, and did care about condition, but not in ways that chime with the concepts of connoisseurship that underpin Carter's definition, and which remain commonly associated with the idea of book collecting today. The ownership of books through the early modern period was widespread, and hugely important in laying the foundations of the libraries we rely on today, but one of the points that *BOO* would seek to make is that we should not think about, or judge, the private libraries of the past simplistically in twenty-first century terms. All collectors are owners, but not all owners of the past have been collectors in a modern sense, and there is merit in taking more care with the terminology.

[17] D. Pearson, The libraries of English bishops 1600-1640, *The Library* 6th ser 14 (1992), 221-57, 229.
[18] P. Benedict and P-O. Léchot, The library of Elie Bouhéreau, in M. McCarthy and A. Simmons (eds), *Marsh's Library: a mirror on the world*, Dublin, 2009, 165-84, 183.
[19] John Carter, *Taste and Technique in Book Collecting* (London: Private Libraries Association, 1970), 9.

7 ONWARD DEVELOPMENT

The database was formally launched in August 2020, through a series of online announcements. Social media platforms helped to spread the word, and the immediate feedback was encouraging. The only negative comment made around that time came from someone in Germany, reponding to a posting on the CERL blog, who objected that the focus on English owners (as opposed to European ones more broadly) was unhelpfully narrow. This is a very reasonable point; we would like the database to be more inclusive, both geographically and chronologically, and its current limits are dictated only by what it has been practicable to achieve with limited resources.

Like all online databases of this nature, providing a source of reference and information to support other work, it is conceived as being always a work in progress. Unlike a printed book, which is brought to a stage of sufficient completion to be fixed as a text, and published, its electronic nature means that it can be endlessly augmented and edited, while being publicly accessible. That does of course mean that the text seen by users can change from day to day, which could lead to confusion or inaccuracy in citations, but the advantages created by this fluidity greatly outweigh those drawbacks. Since the formal launch, the database has continued to be developed through the addition of new entries, images, and corrections. At the time of writing, it has 1820 entries, so has grown by over 30%; new ones are being added all the time, so that total should have grown further by the time this account is published. As stated on the website itself, "it will never be perfect; it will never be complete ... [but] databases like this are dynamic, easily edited, and intended to be continuously revised".[20] The focus on English owners, only, has been abandoned and we are now creating entries for British people more widely, taking in owners who were based in Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

It was always anticipated that community interaction, and some element of crowdsourcing, would be part of the future of *BOO*. *Wikipedia* is created by a worldwide network of volunteers, and one of the reasons for choosing Semantic Mediawiki as the software platform was the knowledge that it would facilitate this. There are several reasons for opening up the editing more widely; most obviously, perhaps, the fact that the project

[20] https://www.bookowners.online/About (accessed 4 April 2021).

relies on fixed-term grants, rather than any kind of permanent funding, to support its work, and it currently has no paid editorial staff. Equally important is the recognition that a great deal of knowledge about particular owners and their libraries resides with curators, researchers and others who have worked on particular collections, and the database will be greatly enriched if they can be persuaded to create or improve entries that relate to their expertise. Beyond that, there is value in encouraging this kind of wider involvement as a way of raising the profile of *BOO*, and in developing a sense of community involvement, and investment.

Crowdsourcing, "using the Internet to attract and divide work between particpants to achieve a cumulative result", is a well-established technique for all kinds of digital age projects.[21] Within the fields of book history and provenance research, *Annotated Books Online*, and the *Reading Experience Database* demonstrate both the opportunities and the challenges inherent in this methodology. *ABO*, an international collaborative project based at Utrecht, invites anyone to contribute images of interestingly annotated books to the database.[22] The website provides the functionality to browse through the digitized books, page by page, to see not only the original material but also, ideally, edited transcripts of the marginalia. The interface is sophisicated, but the scanning and editing of whole books calls for a lot of time and resources, beyond what would-be contributors may be able to commit. This is reflected in the fact that there are only a little over a hundred books currently uploaded, many without transcripts of the annotations. Simon Eliot pioneered the idea of establishing a crowdsourced database to capture owners' interactions with their books when he created the *Reading Experience Database* in 1996. This joint project of the British Library and the Open University set out to record all kinds of reading experiences, 1450–1914, evidenced by annotations or secondary sources (e.g., accounts in diaries).[23] It attracted significant funding and by 2020 had ca.30,000 separate records in a sophisticated metadata structure, but outdated interfaces and broken webpage links also testified to the problems which all such resources face if they are not actively maintained.

BOO is not as demanding as *ABO* in its editorial conventions, but the Semantic Mediawiki platform involves a lot of markup language, invisible from the public interface, to

[21] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowdsourcing#Definitions (accessed 4 April 2021).
[22] https://www.annotatedbooksonline.com/ (accessed 4 April 2021).
[23] http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/index.php (accessed 4 April 2021); Simon Eliot, 'The Reading Experience Database: problems and possibilities', *Publishing History* 39 (1996), 89-97.

support its functionality. An editorial manual has been created to guide new contributors, which has so far proved successful among those who have taken up the invitation to become contributors. At the time of writing we have eleven volunteer editors, who have been responsible for most of the 400 or so entries added to the database since its launch. Many were recruited following an online symposium on the database in February 2021, held by the Bibliographical Society; new ones are always welcome. Editorial rights have to be approved and set up by the central administrative team (unlike *Wikipedia*, people cannot create their own accounts), but the process is simple. The contribution of volunteers is acknowledged publicly via the list on the *BOO* Editorial Team page.

A Facebook group for *BOO* was set up in March 2021.[24] Its aim is partly to act as another awareness-raising vehicle for the project, and also to create a space in which queries, discussions, and any other communications relating to *BOO* and its aims can be shared (something which was flagged up as desirable at the online symposium). Some functionality for this is provided by the Semantic Mediawiki platform, but only for people who are signed into it, and it is important to be able to encourage interaction without that formality. The group attracted over 200 members within a week of being set up, and continues to grow; these are encouraging signs and we hope that it will evolve into a forum with international reach which will foster the aims of the project and interest in the subject more broadly.

8 THE FUTURE

Community engagement is key to the success of *BOO*. It will succeed if people discover it, find it useful, want it to grow, and share their knowledge or questions in order to help it improve. Recognition that it is incomplete, in comparison with what completeness might look like, is not in itself a problem as long as what we have created so far generates a wish to see the database develop further.

Chronological expansion seems to be an obvious priority in taking it forward; a database of book owners, 1610-1715, is useful, but one which covered the period 1500-1800 would be more useful to more people. Or, ideally, 1500-1900, taking in the nineteenth century also. The further forward in time the limit moves, the more ambitious it becomes, because the number of owners grows significantly, but the greater the benefits. The volunteer editors now

[24] https://www.facebook.com/groups/424763118619629 (accessed 4 April 2021).

working on the database are expanding its coverage into the eighteenth century, and exploration is under way for more grant funding to cover another tranche of salaried editorial work.

Another theme which emerged from discussion at the Bibliographical Society's online symposium was that of collaboration and relationships with other projects in this field.[25] To what extent should these be working in parallel, and how far should they seek to join up, or avoid duplication of effort? There are numerous other online resources geared to provenance work and private libraries, some of which have already been mentioned. Others include *Private Libraries in Renaissance England*, an ongoing project which began as a series of printed volumes in 1992, but which has also been developed in an online version mounted on the website of the Folger Library.[26] The interface of *PLRE* online is unsophisticated, but enables the database to be interrogated by author, title or owner, and includes an index of owners' names. Inventories, along with sale catalogues and other extant lists, provide the base of another ambitious online project, *Legacy Libraries*, which is largely but not wholly focused on American private libraries of all centuries, and uses the *LibraryThing* platform to turn the lists into fuller catalogues.[27] Most of the book owners of the early modern period who are known to us today are men, rather than women, but we increasingly recognise that this gender imbalance is only a consquence of the documentary evidence and legal frameworks of the past, and not of contemporary reality. Women, as well as men, read and owned books during these centuries. *Early Modern Female Book Ownership* is only one of numerous projects currently under way to try to put the record straight.[28]

The editors of all these projects know one another, are in communication, and recognise that they all have useful contributions to make to the broader research landscape. *BOO*'s philosophy is to cross-refer to other resources like this where relevant, to avoid duplicating effort unnecessarily, and to try to establish its own distinctive place. If or when a

[25] The Zoom session of the presentations at the symposium was recorded and is available here: https://www.sas.ac.uk/videos-and-podcasts/culture-language-and-literature/bibliographical-society-book-owners-online (accessed 6 April 2021).
[26] R. J. Fehrenbach et al (eds), *Private Libraries in Renaissance England* (New York and elsewhere, 1992-); https://plre.folger.edu/ (accessed 6 April 2021).
[27] http://www.librarything.com/legacylibraries (accessed 6 April 2021).
[28] https://earlymodernfemalebookownership.wordpress.com/ (accessed 6 April 2021); see also M-L Coolahan and M. Empey, 'Women's book ownership and the reception of early modern women's texts', in Leah Knight et al (eds), *Women's bookscapes in early modern Britain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 231-52.

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time comes to work more closely with any other project, it will be open to that discussion. It has no aspirations, at present, to expand internationally but the German critic was right in pointing out that resources like this are needed with a global, rather than national, perspective, not least because trade in books has been an international one for many centuries - books which began life in Spanish, or South American, ownership will be found in British libraries, and vice versa. It would be perfectly possible to add owners based in other parts of the world to *BOO*, but any such initiatives would be better based in those countries than in Britain; its software platform and interface provides a model to show how it could be done.

As a contribution to the burgeoning landscape of digital humanities, *BOO* is a case study around how these projects can be devised and achieved, and of the challenges which most of them face around resourcing and sustainability. It was first turned from a series of text files (themselves the fruit of many years of individual research) into an online database through the raising of modest funding to cover development costs, and an initial phase of data input. Going forward, the use of a team of volunteers will raise issues of maintaining quality control, as well as recruitment (people with the knowledge and interest to be potential contributors do not necessarily have the time to devote to such work). Sponsors of the database will need to continue to support any essential maintenance and hosting costs. These issues are common to many projects of this kind, including the other databases mentioned earlier.

Sustainability – for *BOO*, and for many of the other digital resources mentioned here - is perhaps the biggest challenge, which will depend ultimately on the success of takeup. It is well known that many digital humanities projects during the last couple of decades have produced web-based outputs which have disappeared, or become unusable, through a lack of maintenance or updating; the environment is a fast-changing and fragile one. The fact that *BOO* is published under the aegis of a long-established learned society, in partnership with a leading university, should help to ensure longevity; guaranteed hosting and access for a number of years was one of the conditions written into the formal agreement between the Bibliographical Society and UCL.

9 CONCLUSIONS

One of the questions raised at a symposium on early private libraries, which included a presentation on *BOO*, was: why have you created it? To which the most immediate and honest answer is, because it needs to exist, to fill the gap in the reference insfrastructure which was identified at the beginning of this article. By way of a research output from the project so far, an academic monograph giving an overview of book ownership and private libraries during the seventeenth century, based around the information in *BOO*, was published in 2021.[29] This is, however, only one kind of product to which the data can be applied; it is hoped that anyone working on a particular individual or their books will find it useful in advancing their research. Curators of historic collections should be helped in identifying and contextualizing their own books, while dealers, auctioneers and collectors (who have become much more attuned to the value of provenance in making books interesting) can also benefit from its contents. It is hoped that the database will find a place in the list of standard sources to which all kinds of book historians turn on a regular basis for factual information, and to catalyse teaching and research.

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