

CHAPTER XIX

DEE'S LIBRARY

The commerce of books accosteth and secondeth all my course, and everywhere assisteth me. It comforts me in age, and solaces me in solitarinesse. It easeth me of the burden of a wearysome sloth, and at all times rids me of tedious companies. It abateth the edge of fretting sorrow and...is the best munition I have found in this human peregrination.

— Montaigne, *Essays* (Florio)

The account of the library at Mortlake as it was when Dee left it in 1583, forms one of the most valuable parts of the *Compendious Rehearsall*. Comparing it with the catalogue which he made before leaving with Laski, we can see at a glance of what intrinsic value was this collection of precious books which so often haunted its owner in his dreams. Two original copies of the Catalogue of manuscripts remain, one of which is dated September 6, 1583, a fortnight before he sailed from England, and there is a third, made by Ashmole from one of these.

The library contained, however, not only books and manuscripts, to the number of four thousand, bound and unbound, but scientific instruments collected from several parts of Europe. The books alone Dee valued at 2,000 pounds in the current value of the day, for many of them were unique autographia of famous and rare authors. As a further proof of this estimate, he cited to the two Commissioners a great volume in Greek, two others in French, and a third in High Dutch, which together cost him, and his friends for him, 533 pounds, as the endorsements upon them will show.

The instruments included a valuable quadrant, used and he says made, by his friend, Richard Chancellor, the navigator to Russia and the White Seas. It measured five feet in semi-diameter, and Dee relates that Chancellor and he together made observations of the sun's height at meridian with it, before this exploring seaman sailed on his last voyage (in which he and his crew perished) in 1556. Many years after, the quadrant was repaired and re-engraved by Mr. Bromfield, the Lieutenant of Ordnance who had given it to Dee, at a cost of 20 pounds. On Dee's return to Mortlake, he found it barbarously hacked to pieces with hammers.

There was also a ten foot radius Astronomicus, (some early form of telescope), its staff and cross divided with equal markings, like Chancellor's quadrant. It swung in a frame, and could be easily directed to any point in the heavens, or used for mensuration on the earth.

A couple of globes of Gerard Mercator's best make were among the most valuable contents of the library, especially as upon the celestial globe Dee had marked his own observations of comets, their place and path in the heavens. There were other objects which Mercator had constructed specially for Dee, viz., three theorics, two with horizon and meridian lines in copper. A number of compasses of many kinds were among the objects, for Dee had invented, as we have seen, what he calls a "Paradoxall Cumpass." There was also a great piece of load-stone, or "magnes-stone," of extraordinary virtue. It had been sold for five shillings, but "being divided up and parted with piece-meal it made more than 20 pounds."

“There was also an excellent watch-clock, made by one Dibley, a notable workman, long since dead, by which clock the tyme might sensibly be measured in the seconds of an houre, that is, not to faile the 360th. part of an houre. The use of this clock was very great, more than vulgar.”

Then in the three laboratories, the chambers and garrets, were stores of “chemical stuff,” which he had been twenty years getting together. Also a great cart-load of special vessels for chemical use, some earthen, some of glass, metal and mixed stuff, which he had brought from Lorraine when Mr. Powell and he had gone over in 1571. Of these, only a few broken bits remained. He describes other things left in his other or “open” library, and in particular a “great bladder with about four pounds weight of a very sweetish thing, like a brownish gum in it, artificially prepared by thirty tymes purifying it; whosoever came by it hath more than I could well afford him for one hundred crownes, as may be proved by witnesses yet living.”

As regards the manuscript treasures of the library, he mentions specially a great case or frame of boxes, full of rare evidences of lands in Ireland which had been in the hands of some of the ancient Irish Princes. Agreements for submission and tributes, with seals appended, and many other valuable records of the descent of these manors to such families as the Mortimers, the de Burghs, the Clares, etc. How he came by these, save in the way of a collector, does not appear. His interest in Welsh ancestry would account for his amassing Welsh records, of which he says there were many deeds of gift from Welsh princes and nobles, of land devoted by them to the foundation and enriching of religious houses. Norman deeds also dating back to the Conquest. These were all methodically stored away in separate boxes, each marked on the front — “the fore part of the boxes” — with chalk, explaining its contents. When he returned from his six years wandering abroad, and looked in the poor boxes, he found the name outside was all that was left. The deeds had been “imbezzled away, every one of them, which is a loss of great value in sundry respects, as antiquaries can testify for their part, and noble heralds can tell for their skill, and as her Majesties officers, for her interest and titles Royall, may think in their consideration.”

Near this great chest of boxes stood another box, very much less in size, measuring only two feet by one and a half, which was filled with nothing but seals of coats of arms; many of these were named, and had already proved invaluable to students of heraldry and genealogy, as well as to the Queen’s Heralds who had carefully examined them, also a number of other antiquaries as Camden, Stow and others. The Clerks of the Records in the Tower had sat whole days in the library at Mortlake, “gathering rarities to their liking out of them.” Dee was no blind collector, hoarding things because they were of value to himself. He was a true altruist, gaining his knowledge to share with others.

“Unto the Tower I had vowed these my hardly gotten muniments (gotten as in manner out of a dunghill, in the corner of a church, wherein very many were utterly spoiled by rotting, through the raine continually, for many yeares before, falling on them through the decayed roof of that church, lying desolate and waste at this houre).

“But truly well deserve they the imprisonment of the Tower, that will now still keepe them, if any publike warning by her Majestie or her right honorable Councill were given for restitution of them to the Office in the Tower.”

Dee’s own works were of course in the library although not included in his catalogue. He drew up a list of them for his Apology to the Archbishop in 1595, by which it appears that before he left England eight had been published. The unprinted books and treatises, some, he owns, not perfectly finished, numbered forty-six. To these others were added before he died; two that may be especially named were upon the Three Oracular Sentences of the Ancients: *Nosce te ipsum*, *Homo Homini Deus*, and *Homo Homini Lupus*, (1592); and a “Treatise upon the Queen’s Sovereignty over the Seas,” a fitting subject indeed for an author who had personally known most of the great navigators, and who had already written so intelligently upon the navy and the coast fisheries of “Albion.” The book was undertaken at the request of “an honorable friend in Court.” It had, of course, a long Latin title — *Thalattocratia Brytannica*, etc. It was finished at Manchester and dated September 20, 1597. Another work projected, and perhaps partly finished, was to be called *De Horizonte Aeternitatis*, to consist of three treatises in answer to *Andreas Libavius*, who had published a book written in misapprehension of something in *Dee’s Monas*.

We spare the reader the long list of titles of *Dee’s* own books, poured out in an almost continuous stream since *The Art of Logicke*, in English, printed 1547, during his college days. The only idle years as regards literary output, from then up to his departure for life abroad in 1583, seem to have been 1563, 1564, and 1566-9.

The most important of his printed contributions to knowledge are mentioned in these pages. One more may be alluded to here — his edition, in 1582, of *Robert Recorde’s* arithmetical work, *The Ground of Artes*, etc. *Dee* had probably known this accomplished physician, antiquary and mathematician at Cambridge, where *Recorde* was a tutor before 1545. *Recorde* was afterwards Comptroller of the Mint at Bristol, and Surveyor of Mines and Money to King Henry VIII., but he died a youngish and impoverished man, in the King’s Bench Prison, Southwark, in 1558. He introduced algebra into this country; was something of an astrologer and a good mathematician. His choice of titles for his books was ingenious. In *The Whetstone of Witte* (1557), the signs for plus, minus and equality were first used in this country. In his *Castle of Knowledge*, a beautiful and dignified hymn of his own composition appears. *The Ground of Artes*, his first work (1540), went through eleven editions before *Dee* augmented it and added some of his apologetic doggerel rhymes.

That which my friend hath well begun
For very love to common weale
Need not all whole to be new done
But new increase I do reveale.

Something herein I once redrest,
And now again for thy behoofe
Of seale, I doe, and at request,
Both mend and add, fit for all prooffe.

Of numbers use, the endlesse might
No wit nor language can expresse,
Apply and try, both day and night,
And then this truth thou wilt confesse.
I. Dee.

From original and autograph works we may now turn to the miscellaneous contents of Dee's library — a truly vast and precious collection for one private gentleman of precarious fortune to won in the sixteenth century. Printed books were by no means easy to obtain, and manuscript copies entailed a great expenditure of skill, industry, time and cost. The text was often ignorantly or corruptly rendered by an imperfect scribe or copyist, and the scholar and collector could not rest satisfied without several versions of one work.

The cataloguer of the 200 most important manuscripts — Dee himself — enters with exactitude the size and substance of each volume. The bulk of course were in quarto, although a few folios and octavos are mentioned. Most of them were written upon parchment, but a certain number were on paper. Bindings were not noticed, chiefly because as yet few were bound. Two of Roger Bacon's tracts, however, on the multiplication of species, and on perspective, the owner describes as together "in paste-bords with strings." These identical tracts, in Dee's own hand, and now being edited by Mr. Robert Steele, from the originals in the Mazarine Library, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. From Dee they passed to Sir Richard Eden, afterwards to the Kenelm Digby Library. Treatises on kindred subjects often followed straight upon each other on the same parchment, and sometimes as many as twenty composed a single manuscript, included under a list of titles numbered as one. In some cases the treatise is described as a fragment. Once he writes "the second tract is cut out and to be answered for."

The owner's tastes and pursuits point, of course, to a large representation among his books, of works in philosophy, alchemy, astrology and medicine, with a substantial proportion dealing with metallurgy, geometry, optics, physics, Ptolomaic and Copernican astronomy, and every branch of science already known in a crude form to Dee's famous predecessors. There are also historical chronicles; works of devotion and ethics; with a fair sprinkling of authors upon poetry, music, and the gentler arts.

Taking first the classics: Dee names the Meno, Phaedo and Timaeus of Plato; writings of Aristotle, Socrates and Hippocrates, of Cicero, Cato and Archimedes. A copy of Pliny's *Mundi Historia*, Lib. ii., Frankfort, 1543, now in the British Museum, bears Dee's signature, Louvain, January, 1550, and many of his notes. Of Euclid he had many copies, and Augustine was his guide and confessor. A vast number of Arabic and Persian writers were comprehended in the list. He was particularly rich in manuscripts of the early and mediaeval writers upon alchemy and the philosopher's stone: Hermes Trismegistus, Geber, Albertus Magnus, John Sacrobosco, Raymond Lully, Philip Alstade, and Arnold de Villa Nova. Other sciences are represented by Guido Bonatus, Anselmus de Boot (Boetius), Alhazen, John of Saxony, Jacob Alkind, and Petrus Peregrinus and a score of learned writers. Dee's own perfect and clean copy of the rare printed Epistle of Peregrinus, upon the Magnet (Augsburg, 1558), is now in the British Museum. It bears his name, "Joannes Dee, 1564," in faded ink, with many and copious notes written by its owner

mostly in his large copy-book hand, with a few in the scribbling writing which he used for speed, and some marginal sketches.

Several of the manuscripts named in Dee's list are to be found among the Cotton MSS. at the Museum; in Trinity College, Dublin; and at Oxford and Cambridge.

Of English authors, who are very numerous in the list, the most eagerly sought after, judging by the number of works included by one author, were Roger Bacon and Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln. Bacon's writings were owned by Dee in fragments. Some had been already collected and printed in Nuremburg and Paris. The only other writer as often repeated in the catalogue is Boethius, whose *Consolation of Philosophy* had tempted King Alfred into literary translation some seven hundred years before. Dee notes that he gave a manuscript of it in Greek to the Library of Cracow, on July 27, 1584. Some of the ethical and philosophical works of St. Isidore, the canonised Bishop of Seville, were duplicated. Thomas Aquinas; Duns Scotus; Richard of Wallingford, Abbot of St. Albans; Robert of Holcot, the Bible Commentator; Robert of Gloucester; William of Woodford, the Franciscan opponent of Wycliffe; Richard Rolle (de Hampole), the hermit and ethical writer, are among his other English authors. A finely illuminated history of the last years of King Richard II., by a French gentleman who was in his suite, once the property of Dee, is now in the Lambeth Library. His manuscript *Life of Edward the Confessor*, by Ethelred, Abbot of Rievaulx, is another treasure that has survived the wreck of time. It is now among the Harleian MSS. at the British Museum, with his name and the date 1575 inscribed.

Of the three or four thousand printed volumes even Dee's industry has left no catalogue. Many of them he mentions in his diaries, as Holinshed's and Stow's *Chronicles*; the Arabic book that was lost; the collection of writings upon demonology and witchcraft, which were to be so useful to his Lancashire neighbours in after life. The books of the alchemist of Louvain, Cornelius Agrippa, he once speaks of as lying open in the window of his study, and therefore in constant use in the "actions," whether theurgic or alchemistic.

He refers no doubt to Agrippa's *de Occulta Philosophia* (Cologne? 1533), a work enormously read in all countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and translated into many languages. Another book by the alchemist of Queen Margaret of the Netherlands had an even greater popularity in England, France, Germany and Italy. This was *On the Nobility and Excellence of the Female Sex* (*de nobilitate et procellentia foeminei sexus*) which in the translation by Henry Care in 1670 becomes magnified into *Female Pre-eminence*; or, the *Dignity and Excellency of that Sex above the Male*. It is dedicated to Queen Catharine of Braganza.

These are a very few of the authors and writings contained in the manuscript catalogue. Such as they are, however, they give us a faint glimpse into that realm of learning and romance wherein Dee, shut into his library at Mortlake, roamed a free citizen of the world and dwelled where he would.