

Zeitschrift:	Stultifera navis : Mitteilungsblatt der Schweizerischen Bibliophilen-Gesellschaft = bulletin de la Société Suisse des Bibliophiles
Herausgeber:	Schweizerische Bibliophilen-Gesellschaft
Band:	5 (1948)
Heft:	1-2
Artikel:	Pleasures and problems of book collecting
Autor:	Sadleir, Michael
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-387598

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 30.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

ans de recherches? Peut-on trouver mieux comme perfection technique à prix égal?

Le bibliophile est reconnu sensuel; le livre lui procure le plaisir de la lecture, la joie des illustrations, le toucher agréable du papier et de la re-

liure, le contentement d'entasser tant de richesses. En voilà assez pour damner son homme! Le livre de chevet apporte le contre-poison; il sauvegarde l'échelle des valeurs; il protège de la bibliomanie!

Michael Sadleir / Pleasures and Problems of Book Collecting¹

There are two essential qualifications for becoming a book-collector—and one of them is not a taste for speculation. They are the acquisitive spirit and a love for a book as a physical object. If you have not the collecting impulse, if there are moods in which you resent "possessions" because they hamper mobility or expose you to risks of loss or damage which, without them, would hardly exist, then leave the game alone. Similarly, unless the sight and feel of a really fine copy of almost any significant book gives you the sort of thrill which can only be described as "sensuous", you would be wise—however fond you may be of reading—to remain a book-buyer and not aspire to become a book-collector.

For the two are by no means synonymous. The "buyer" buys at random, but the "collector"—and not necessarily at any greater expense—buys according to a plan.

According to what plan? That is for each starting collector to decide for himself; and, if I may judge from my own experience, his first plan will in time give way to a second, which will develop a third, to which will be added a fourth and so on, until he finds himself in the delicious position of entering a second-hand bookshop alert for specimens of half a dozen distinct categories, and therefore not losing hope until he has examined every likely shelf.

The spirit of anticipation in which any genuine collector confronts a hitherto unvisited shop devoted to his speciality is one of the few ecstasies to which human nature can aspire. Of china or coins or ivories or engravings or half a dozen other collectabilities, I know nothing; but with the feelings of collectors of these objects when on the prowl, I am perfectly familiar—and they add up to sheer enchantment, an enchantment in which, when you have turned book-collector, you will share to the full.

"How do I start?" is the usual and natural first question of the willing neophyte. And the second is "Can I afford it?" You start by considering very carefully whither your individual

taste inclines. What *period* do you most fancy? What *class* of book or which specific author in that period attracts you most? Alternatively you may prefer collecting book-production or book-embellishment to literary content. You may wish to collect typography or illustration or binding. Once again what period? Once again what classes of typography, illustration or binding?

Having answered these questions to your own satisfaction, you then review the answers in the light of the second main query: "Can I afford it?" I assume you are no millionaire but a person of modest yet sufficient means, willing (maybe by self-denial in other directions) to spend a margin of money on your hobby; and this being so, you may find at the outset of your search that your first selections of period and class are impracticable on grounds of expense. You must then revise them down until they are within your reach.

Mr. P. H. Muir, in a recently published little book² (which I urge you to read, for it is designed precisely to assist such as you), gives one piece of all-important advice. This is to work *with* the booksellers, not against them. I will not attempt to repeat what Mr. Muir has already well said. But I would like to forestall a further question which, confronted by this recommendation, the newcomer to collecting may well ask. "How," he may say, "can I work with booksellers when they do not know who I am or what I want?"

The answer must vary with circumstances. If you have a friend already a collector, tell him of your chosen terrain (or selection of terrains) and ask his advice. If you have no such friend, but live in London and can spend time haunting the bookshop areas—Charing Cross Road and its purlieus, the streets near the British Museum, the top-drawer shopping district of the West End from Pall Mall to Marylebone High Street, from Curzon Street to Piccadilly Circus—take your courage in both hands and chart the field for yourself. Also attend in person a few auction sales in New Bond Street and in Chancery Lane—not to buy (I will return to this caution in a moment) but to watch who buys what and to begin to acquire a general sense of values, and of the vast

¹ Der Verfasser, Vorsitzender der Bibliographical Society, stellt uns auf Anregung unseres verehrten Mitgliedes Dr. A. S. diesen hübschen Beitrag aus den «British Book News» freundlichst zur Verfügung.

² Book Collecting as a Hobby. Gramol Publications. 3s. 6d. net. (Recently added to the National Book League Library.)

difference in value between a book in fine condition and the same book soiled or loose.

If you are far from London, but have access to an established bookshop in a provincial town, make friends with it, and perhaps borrow a few numbers of the weekly paper called *The Clique*, in which the trade announce their desiderata and, so doing, reveal their specialities. Finally, wherever you live—even if it be abroad—I recommend three moves. Subscribe a few shillings per annum for the Book Auction Catalogues of the two chief London Sale Rooms, Sotheby's, 34-5 New Bond Street, and Hodson's, 155 Chancery Lane. Secondly, subscribe to the *Times Literary Supplement*, the back page of which weekly is at present the only book-collectors' forum. Thirdly, send sixpence or a shilling to a dozen catalogue-issuing booksellers, who will put you on their mailing list and send you catalogues from time to time.

We may now assume that you are in a position, either in person or by correspondence, to interest certain booksellers in your collecting ambitions. If you are on the spot you will visit bookshops, ask permission to browse, and try to convince the bookseller that, though a beginner, you are serious. You will find that the proportion of honourable, helpful and knowledgeable individuals in the antiquarian book trade is high. There are churls, of course, as in every walk of life; but in the main you will encounter persons who ask nothing better than to collaborate in your collecting ambitions.

From the obvious desire of the reputable bookseller to help you on your way (on grounds of self-interest, if for no other reason) there follows the undeniable fact that, except in a few special circumstances, you will be unwise to operate in person at auction sales. In your very early days, when you have as yet only a vague "plan" of collecting, you may well benefit from an occasional bundle, bought personally and cheaply at the end of a tiring session. Such bundles teach lessons; and being miscellaneous or composed of books in no special demand, their purchase by a private unknown collector will hardly be noticed by the trade. But once you have chosen your line and enlisted the help of one or more booksellers, you will only confuse the issue and put up prices against yourself if you insist on bidding at what are, after all, the trade's best opportunities of finding and offering to you the books you want. Booksellers at auction are admittedly in competition with one another; but they are in much bitterer competition with private collectors who are glad to benefit from bookshop facilities yet, when a likely sale comes along, bid personally in order to save commission. It stands to reason that such collectors, trying to evade the burden and heat of a trader's day, will if possible be run up; and once the trade start to run an amateur up, it is ten to one that this unpractised individual loses his head.

Let us now pass from the general to the particular, and demonstrate by concrete example

how you will fare when pursuing some approved collecting plan. Let us suppose this plan comprises one typographical ambition, one single-author ambition, and one group-subject ambition. I suggest, purely as examples, that you aspire to a collection of books printed by William Bulmer, of first editions of Tennyson, and of certain books about London.

These three hypothetical collecting ambitions (please understand that I am not urging them for their own sake, but analysing them for the sake of the typical experiences implicit in their adoption) are singularly illustrative of several of the problems which, *mutatis mutandis*, confront a book-collector.

Bulmer was a printer in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—a craftsman with style and dignity, but not so far regarded as in the front rank of collected printers. Therefore his productions, apart from a few famous colour-plate books such as Boydell's *Thames*, should not be expensive. There is a survey of his work (*Bulmer and Bensley*, by H. V. Marrot; Fleuron, 1929) which you will find helpful; but there is not, to my knowledge, a check-list of the books he printed, so that you must rely on your own assiduity and intelligence to track them down. It is no good asking a general bookseller for Bulmers. He won't have grouped them, for the demand does not justify the trouble. You must know what titles you want, and find your way to the section of the shop where—*on their subjects' accounts and not for the sake of their imprint*—the books are most likely to be. Further you must decide for yourself in what *state* you want the books. They appeared at the transition period from ephemeral unlettered wrappers or boards to semi-ephemeral boards with spine labels. Therefore specimens tend to be re-bound, and the early ones are very rarely anything else. If you opt for "bound" Bulmers, you must get a sense of *contemporary* binding styles as opposed to those of later date, and so far as possible insist that your purchases shall have been bound at the time they first appeared.

First editions of Tennyson are a different proposition. They include a few items of very great rarity and high value, and a large number frequently met with at reasonable prices. In other words, you will begin to score at one (which is an encouragement) and can safely leave the high spots to turn up in their own time. But when buying the common Tennysons, be firm about condition. They should be in what is called "mint state", and you will find that in this state they are not so common as at first blush they seemed.

Londoniana are yet a third proposition. The subject is immense, and demands rigorous subdivision alike into period and/or theme. Manifestly, the earlier the period the scarcer the material and, in the main, the more expensive. I say "period and/or theme" because these subdivisions need not be combined. You may, for example, select one particular parish or borough

or even street, and include documents from every period in your campaign. Or you may decide on street maps (comprehensive or local) and go as far back as your means permit. Or you may specialise in records of railway development in the metropolis, which choice more or less dictates its own period—as will also a fancy for the Great Exhibition of 1851, of the Diamond Jubilee of 1897, or the Blitz of 1940–41. The possibilities of Londoniana are illimitable; and there are not many collecting themes which involve you (if you so desire) not only in books, but also in prints, pamphlets, maps, guide-books, periodicals, panoramas, song-music, theatre and music-hall bills and programmes, and other things as well.

The foregoing is mainly written for the benefit of those would-be collectors who either live in London or visit the city at regular intervals. To suggest an equivalent course of action to dwellers in remote areas or in other countries is well nigh impossible.

Consider the position of a book-lover really in the wilds. He is almost insuperably handicapped. He cannot himself decide what to buy at auction because the sales are over before the catalogues reach him. He must rely on a chosen bookseller to buy for him, and this involves a substantial deposit, and complete faith in the agent's judgment of condition or (if he collect by *subject*) in the agent's capacity for nosing out items relevant to that subject. He can order from catalogues, but only with the melancholy foreboding that when his order arrives the book will already have been sold. Indeed, I can think of but two things he can do, one of which could just rank as book-collecting, the other as training for book-collecting when he is once more at home. The first is to select a few contemporary authors whose work he admires, and place a standing order with a London bookshop to procure a copy of every new book by these authors. This is, admittedly, a restricted and somewhat automatic form of collecting; but it *is* collecting, and evades the worst problem of a man who cannot *see* before he buys—the problem of condition.

The second activity within his reach is to obtain and study the literature of bibliography. I cannot do more than indicate a dozen valuable works belonging to this immense subject, which, like all specialised literature, has its good representatives and its bad. Of general books he should not fail to read McKerrow's *Introduction to Bibliography* (1927, Oxford University Press, 18s.) and Besterman's *Beginnings of Systematic Bibliography* (1936, Oxford University Press, 21s.). Of books on specific authors, which often contain much interesting matter of general application, commendable examples are Macdonald's *Dryden* (1939, Oxford University Press, 30s.); Norton's *Gibbon*; Hazen and Kirby's *Strawberry Hill Press* (Oxford University Press, 66s. 6d.); Keynes' books on *Blake* (Nonesuch Press); *Sir Thomas Browne* (1924, Cambridge University Press, 42s.); *Hazlitt* (1930, Nonesuch Press, 10s. 6d.),

and *Jane Austen* (1930, Nonesuch Press, 16s.); Carter and Pollard's *Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth-Century Pamphlets* (Constable, 15s.); and (if I may be permitted to say so) my own bibliography of *Anthony Trollope*. For monographs treating of various aspects of eighteenth and nineteenth century book production, the student may be referred to volumes in the *Bibliographia Series* (Constable, 24s. and 20s. per volume), and in another cheaper series *Aspects of Book Collecting* (Constable, 5s. and 2s. per volume), which were published during the years before the war.

A dweller in a foreign city is in a much happier position, even if he collects English books as well as the books of the country. The latter he will hunt along the lines already indicated as suitable to a Londoner. The former he may have the thrill of finding on the spot, while, if he buys from home, he has at least facilities for rapid and reliable communication (I am speaking of course of normal times).

Naturally the fact of living out of England, yet wishing to collect English as well as foreign books, will affect a collecting plan. Author-collecting will have so little scope as hardly to be worth while; but in the realm of subject-collecting are many themes of international purport. Early references to electricity, the literature of Communism, national sports and pastimes, the ballet—innumerable frameworks exist for the formation of a polyglot book-collection.

As a final paragraph let me impress on would-be collectors of every kind the vital importance of *condition*. From the illuminated manuscript and the incunabulum right down to the novel of yesterday *an item in poor condition is just not worth buying as a collector's item*—no matter how cheap it may be. Reading copies, books for reference—these are different. When you buy them you are not being a collector at all; you are a book-buyer or a student.

What is meant by condition? I can only tell you in detail within the boundaries of my own subject—which is the boarded or cloth-bound book published from about 1815 onward. A fine copy of a boarded book in original condition as issued has an unchipped spine, no splitting at the hinge, a label spotless and perfect, corners unbruised. Internally the sheets should be crisp, with keen yet sinuous, and unfoxed. A fine copy of a cloth-book in original condition should gleam with that gloss which cannot be faked, which can never be recaptured once it has dulled or suffered damp. The blocking should be sharp and clean-cut. The head and tail of the spine and the corners should not be crumpled or frayed. There must of course be no trace of a library label, and one is free to deplore those earlier owners who wrote their names in ink on the outside covers of their books. Examine the endpapers to make sure they are original. Open the volume with tentative gentleness. Does it seem faintly to resist? Do the endpapers show any sign of severance at the hinge? When you peer into the tiny chasm be-

tween the spine and the open volume, is there paper laid down on the sewn edges of the folded sheets which looks improbably fresh and even? If so, you will suspect the book has been what is called "re-cased"; and though all of us have from time to time been driven to buy victims of re-casing, we never become fond of them, and when fellow-collectors go peering round our shelves we push them unobtrusively out of sight.

One last point—trifling, maybe, but not without interest. Some people dislike a book with a stamp on the title page or half-title saying "With the Publisher's Compliments." I disagree. Such a stamp almost certainly means that this particular copy was a review copy or an advance copy of some kind. In such a case it belonged to the vanguard of the first edition, and has its special appeal to a collector who is first-edition mad.

Bibliophile Erlebnisse

13. G. H. Thommen / Goethes Werke, Ausgabe letzter Hand

Es war in jenen kritischen Herbsttagen des Jahres 1938. Ich weilte damals, in Kunstgenüssen schwelgend, in Florenz. Auf den öffentlichen Plätzen der toskanischen Hauptstadt ballten sich die Menschen um die Mittagszeit zu dichten Knäueln, um sich von den weithin schallenden Lautsprechern die Ergebnisse der Münchener Besprechungen eintrichten zu lassen. In diese Menschenmassen hoffnungslos eingeklemmt, gab es für mich oft halbe Stunden lang kein Entrinnen. Am liebsten wäre ich jeweils in die nahen Pinienwälder geflohen, um nichts mehr von diesem unerträglichen Getöse und diesen wilden Zusammenrottungen wahrnehmen zu müssen. Einzig in der wohltuenden Kühle von Kirchen, Museen und Bibliotheken, wo ich meine Zeit fast ausschließlich verbrachte, fand ich die ersehnte Ruhe. So in der herrlichen Laurenziana-Bibliothek, in der damals gerade eine einzigartige Ausstellung von Frühdrucken in griechischer Sprache gezeigt wurde. Ebenso kostliche Stunden verlebte ich, über Vitrinen gebeugt, in der neuen «Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale», deren Schätze vormals in den Uffizien beherbergt worden und dort kaum zur vollen Geltung gekommen waren. Von dem ungeheuren Reichtum dieser Bibliothek macht man sich bereits einen Begriff, wenn man bedenkt, daß sie nicht weniger als 3700 Inkunabeln besitzt, wobei Doubletten nicht mit eingerechnet sind¹. Dann und wann wühlte ich auch bei einem Antiquar, im reichhaltigen Lager des Signor Bruscoli am Lungarno z. B., den mir ein gelehrter Kenner aus Basel warmempfohlen hatte, oder auch beim hochkultivierten Leo S. Olschki, in seinem eigens hiefür erbauten Bibliothekspalast, von dem der Krieg keinen Stein mehr auf dem andern gelassen hat, und dessen Bücherschätze von feindlichen Tanks buchstäblich in das Straßenpflaster hineingewalzt worden sein sollen.

¹ Vergleichsweise sei etwa die bedeutsame Inkunabelsammung des Fürsten von Liechtenstein genannt, die, mit Einschluß der Sammlung Hauslab (Hofmarschall Kaiser Franz Josephs) 350 Nummern umfaßt, darunter allerdings Rarissima wie den Fust-Schöfferschen «Cicero» von 1465 in einem Grolier-Einband!

In einer nahe beim Klostermuseum von San Marco gelegenen kleinen Pension hatte ich mit Müh und Not Quartier gefunden. Neben kunstgierigen, leicabewaffneten Holländern und Deutschen, die für kurze Zeit abstiegen, lebten da-selbst auch einige Ortsansässige, so ein pfiffiger «Procuratore del Re», der mich ohne Umschweife zu den Hauptverhandlungen der Kriminalkammer mitschleppte, wo er, den überschlanken Leib in eine wallende Toga gehüllt, mit wahrhaft ciceronischer Beredsamkeit und gewaltigen Gesten seine Anklagen führte. Außerdem war da noch ein uralter Domherr, der heftig dem Wein zusprach und, in Laune geraten, männlich durch seine geistreichen Späße froh zu stimmen wußte. Von den deutschen Gästen unterhielt sich besonders häufig der behäbige Oberbaurat Schmitz aus Bayreuth mit mir. Abgesehen davon, daß es ihn sichtlich befremdete, bei mir so wenig «Anschlußfreude» und Verständnis für die großdeutsche Idee zu finden, nahm er mich gerne auf seine kunsthistorischen Streifzüge mit und erklärte mir meisterhaft die architektonischen Bedeutsamkeiten der Stadt.

An der Mittagstafel, die in einer glasüberdachten Veranda, im Schatten längst vertrockneter Fächerpalmen gehalten wurde, war mir von Anfang an eine gegen 80jährige vornehme Dame aufgefallen, die sichtlich allgemeine Verehrung genoß. Von der Pensionsinhaberin erfuhr ich bald, daß es sich um die Gräfin Gravina von Bülow, Tochter des bekannten Pianisten und Dirigenten Hans Freiherrn von Bülow und der Cosima Liszt, der nachmaligen Gattin Richard Wagners, handelte, die seit etlichen Jahren hier in völliger Zurückgezogenheit lebte.

Für den Herrn aus Bayreuth war es nicht allzu schwer, mit der Gräfin ins Gespräch zu kommen. In der gemeinsamen Begeisterung für die Wagner-Festspiele hatten sie sich gleich gefunden. Auch ich wurde später von der Gräfin freundlich in die Unterhaltung gezogen. Die alte Dame äußerte sich in anerkennenden Worten über die Schweiz, insbesondere natürlich über ihre alljährlichen Aufenthalte in Tribschen anlässlich der «Inter-