

Zeitschrift: Scholion : Bulletin
Herausgeber: Stiftung Bibliothek Werner Oechslin
Band: 11 (2019)

Nachruf: Nicholas Eric Kessler : Book collector, 1937-2018
Autor: Grigor-Taylor, Barbara

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: 18.04.2026

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

NICHOLAS ERIC KESSLER – BOOK COLLECTOR, 1937–2018

When Nicholas first entered my London bookshop he wished to see books on China, giving no other particulars. He selected a few modest books, paid, and gave us his name and address.

That was 1986, after he returned to Switzerland following many years in Hong Kong. He may have been at loose ends after his long career in Asia and so, with the recommendation by a fellow Old Etonian that Nicholas form a collection of China books with myself as adviser, we began an exciting and productive relationship that ended only in 2018.

The Kessler China Collection would be destined for Eton College Library to enhance its courses in Chinese language and culture, and was to be dedicated to Nicholas's brother Peter, who died tragically young. The focus of the collection was to be the accounts of early diplomatic missions – a reflection of Nicholas's background as the son of a Swiss ambassador.

Because the first diplomatic mission from England to China occurred as late as 1792, we began looking at the missions by Russia and the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, and the early trade missions by the Portuguese, Germans, Swedes and others. That led to the early Jesuit works that informed these missions, and the exploratory expeditions from Europe to Far Asia that opened the route. Nicholas was as keen to learn about and

acquire these books as I was to find them. So the collection grew to encompass all things Chinese before the fall of the Ch'ing dynasty in 1911 and Russia to 1860. Nicholas's enthusiasm grew proportionately with the expansion of his China and Russia collections at Eton, which by 2018 exceeded 1000 titles.

To encourage Eton students to consult original first-hand accounts of China and Russia, Nicholas asked me to prepare lectures illustrated with books from his collection, which I did with pleasure. Nicholas also had a personal collection of modern books on China that we expanded for the boys to read in class and the library. In the late 1990s he established the Xanadu Prize at Eton for the best essay on any China subject of any date. It remains popular with the boys and demonstrates their serious interest in the Far East.

Nicholas had quietly been forming a personal collection of James Joyce, also destined for Eton. He knew Joyce's works well, having come to them through his Eton years studying the Classics, which led him quite naturally to Joyce's *Ulysses*. I was not surprised to learn that Nicholas's father had been ambassador to Ireland. Taking part in the Bloomsday odyssey through Dublin each June 16 was one of Nicholas's delights. He and I had planned to do it in 2018. Sadly, this was unfulfilled. For many years Nicholas attended readings from Joyce's *Ulysses* given by Fritz Senn at Zurich's Joyce

Foundation, although in later years they seemed to intrude on his inner life. He returned to his Loeb editions of the Classics to re-familiarize himself with the original Greek and Latin texts. Nonetheless, at the Joyce Foundation he encountered imaginatively illustrated editions of *Ulysses* and copies were duly added to his Joyce collection. One day in 2017 he proposed reprinting a small book by Fritz Senn on the James Joyce Pub, Zurich. I had this translated into English while retaining format, illustrations and design. The finished publication delighted Nicholas, especially the additional colour photo of himself seated at the long bar of the James Joyce Pub. Later, we had a jolly evening there. This playful side of Nicholas was not apparent to all who knew him.

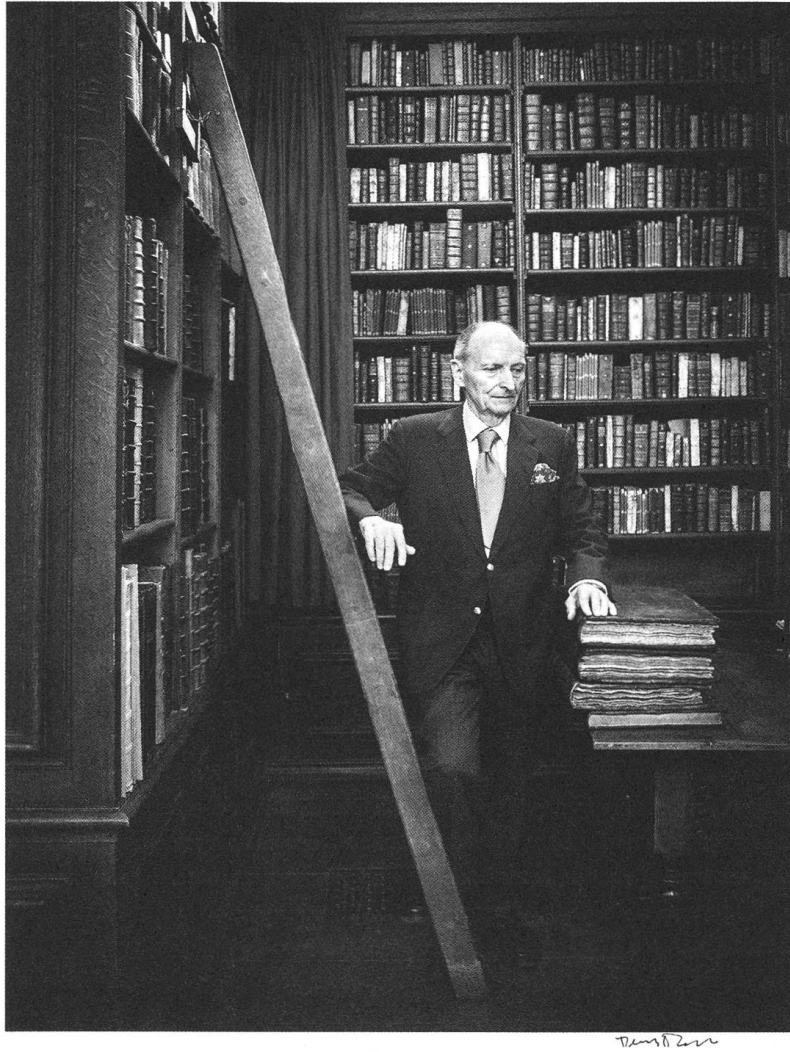
Not all the books procured for Nicholas's collections were my recommendations; he often proposed obscure titles or illustrated works that I was then tasked with procuring. He studied his subjects thoroughly. His surprise choices led to the betterment of the collections and stamped them forever with his character. At the same time he didn't hesitate to decline a book offered to him that didn't quite appeal at the time, or at all. And yet ... how surprised I was to see a finely bound copy of Fischer von Erlach's *Entwurff, einer historischen Architektur*, 1725, in the Stiftung Bibliothek Werner Oechslin when I visited in June 2019. Nicholas had been offered a number of copies in the past but showed little interest in acquiring the book.

In selecting copies of rare books for Nicholas, fine condition was my prime criterion, especially those with an interesting provenance. Such research can take considerable

time but Nicholas never questioned my many months thus spent. The results of my investigations pleased Nicholas enormously, expressed with rarely seen broad smiles. A few puzzles solved for Nicholas are now featured in library catalogues. A copy of Michel Boym's *Flora Sinensis*, the first illustrated Natural History on China, Vienna 1656, dedicated to the future Emperor Leopold, and sponsor of Jesuit missions to China, had entered the library of the Collegium Leopoldinum at Wiener Neustadt in 1699, and somehow escaped being taken to Vienna when the library closed in 1773 during the Jesuit suppression. Nicholas and I imagined that the librarian had secreted it from Maria Teresa's strongmen to protect and preserve it.

Nicholas didn't often purchase books at auction on his own account but in the late 1990s he succumbed to a spectacular copy of Du Halde's monumental *Description ... de la Chine*, Paris 1735, in four red morocco folio volumes. Its eighteenth-century provenance was clouded, the covers' gilt arms were suspiciously overstamped and the gilding was not that of a master binder. The Paris booksellers Nicholas asked for confirmation that the bindings were indeed eighteenth-century, and that the obscured arms were authentic, told him that all was a nineteenth-century concoction. He asked me to investigate. A full year later I could report that the bindings were definitely contemporary with the printing, and that this copy, from the library of the Marquis who first owned it, was sold at auction by his heirs. Nicholas was elated.

As Nicholas's collection grew, I happened upon a remarkable collection of Russia books.



Nicholas Eric Kessler (Photograph by Derry Moore)

By coincidence Nicholas had come to London from Zurich that same day. He barely hesitated to secure it. It now forms the backbone of Nicholas's Russia Collection at Eton and one item is its centrepiece. A ragged-edged Russian album of engraved views captioned in Russian and French proved to depict the settlements along the trade route from Moscow to China. But an inner wrapper titled in a late eighteenth-century English hand still needed identification. Nicholas gave me free rein to investigate and closely followed my progress. I discovered the album to be the rare *Collection of Russian and Siberian Cities* engraved at the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences from 1769–1771 under

the direction of Mikhail Makhaev, and its first English collector was proven to be Jeremy Bentham, philosopher, economist and social reformer. Bentham had resided in the Crimea in 1787 with his brother Samuel, who himself had travelled the route portrayed in the engravings. Nicholas commissioned English designer bookbinder James Brockman to create a box for this great rarity. Over the years he commissioned other bindings from Brockman, from Jean de Gonet, and from Swiss binder Roland Meuter. His preferred binding, however, when he could find a pristine example, was the Jansenist design of red morocco plainly labelled in gilt on the spine.

Pleased to have his books displayed and enjoyed, Nicholas hosted a number of lunches and exhibitions of his books at Eton, attended by friends and associates from far and wide. He was also secretly very generous. A book would appear from his personal collection to add to his Eton collections, bought from an acquaintance in need of funds or an artist with few commissions on the horizon. They give a further personal touch to his collections, although the circumstances of their inclusion are not recorded.

Nicholas grew enormously proud of his collections at Eton and began visiting private and small institutional libraries on the Continent and in England to compare their copies of similar books with his. I accompanied him on a number of these junkets and together we determined that his collection was superior to most, in terms of catalogue details, research notes, condition, housing and exhibitions. We had a fine time compiling our notes and writing reports. Nicholas handled all our projects and acquisitions in his business-like manner, which involved multiple daily email exchanges and regular meetings in London, usually at the Royal Academy of Art, to which he would bring notes of projects both underway and projected, and I would bring the latest books secured for his collections.

One library visit we made in 2010 was to Oundle School, where Joseph Needham, sinologist and biochemist, had been a student in 1918. Oundle seemed a suitable recipient of Nicholas's generosity. We completed the school library's collection of Needham's multi-volume series *Science and Civilization in China* and presented the librarian with a selec-

tion of China books covering the seventeenth to twentieth centuries.

A further visit we made was to the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 2012 to view the only manuscript account of the first English voyage for the discovery of a Northeast Passage to the Indies and Cathay, undertaken by Sir Hugh Willoughby and Richard Chancellor in 1553. Trading rights with Muscovy and the foundation of the Muscovy Company ensued. This precious account certainly was an item for Nicholas's Russia collection, or at least a copy of it. Nicholas was given permission to create two facsimiles, one for Eton College Library and one for the Pepys Library. Another year was spent tracing the journey of the manuscript from the Muscovy Company archives to private and then royal libraries, and ultimately to Samuel Pepys about 1666/7, and on printing an exact facsimile and replicating its sixteenth-century armorial binding. Other facsimiles followed, including a first reprinting of Horace Walpole's *A Letter from Xo Ho, A Chinese Philosopher in London to His Friend Lien Chi, at Peking*, 1757, with the anonymous response *An Answer from Lien Chi in Peking*, 1757. Nicholas's enthusiasm for these projects was boundless.

One of Nicholas's library visits in 2012 was to the Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge, where he had taken a degree in Law. Trinity's nascent collection of *livres d'artistes* attracted him. For many years he had collected Limited Edition issues of Classics for his personal library in Zurich, books illustrated by twentieth-century masters and literature illustrated by avant-garde and Surrealist artists, many in fine bindings. Their final

home was a concern; the Wren Library appeared ideal. Nicholas happily embarked on a mission to enlarge and enhance this collection. As more and more books were delivered to Trinity a series of exhibitions was initiated; receptions and lectures were arranged; guests came from afar, and Nicholas and I were present at all – until early 2018.

What most pleased Nicholas was that his books at Trinity were being used not only for teaching and exhibiting in the splendour of the library designed by Christopher Wren but had begun to attract further bequests of similar books. By 2018 the Kessler Collection at Trinity numbered over 300 titles and now ranks as one of the premiere collections of *livres d'artistes* in Britain. On his final visit to Trinity College Nicholas was privileged to occupy the rooms furnished for Queen Victoria on her visits to Cambridge.

Nicholas's final project was four years in completion. In 2014 he expressed the desire to publish a catalogue of his favourite books given to Eton College Library and the Wren

Library at Trinity College. Initially it was to contain thirty titles. It grew to thirty-five titles the following year and was then reduced to twenty-five; Nicholas wanted only a slim catalogue. The final number became twenty-two; Nicholas liked the look of that number on the catalogue cover. His precise wishes on format and design were followed; we selected illustrations for each title and I wrote the introduction and descriptive text. Before early April 2018 Nicholas had seen a proof of the entire catalogue. He left confident of the finished publication, which was printed in June 2018 with my additional notes and Derry Moore's portrait of Nicholas in the Wren Library.

Nicholas was a quiet and serious man, masking his kind and amiable nature. Farewell old friend.

Barbara Grigor-Taylor, Cavendish Rare Books

6 August 2019

grigorbooks@aol.com