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FOR 150 years the British Museum Library in London has possessed one of the great treasures of Switzerland — the second earliest surviving illustrated Bible in the world.

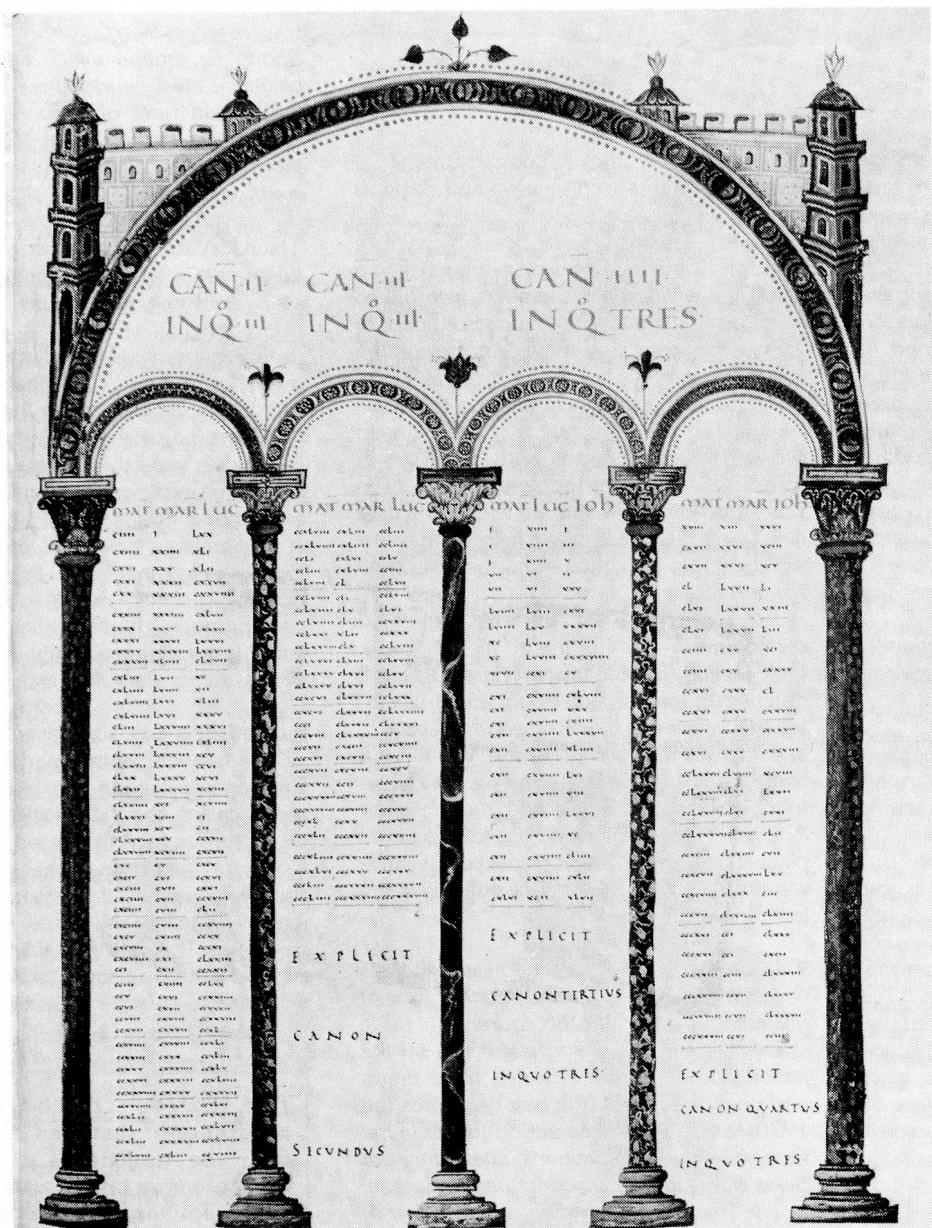
The Moutier-Grandval Bible, which dates back more than 1,100 years, has recently been returned to Switzerland — but only for temporary exhibition in Moutier itself and at the Historical Museum of Berne. So rare is the Bible that its value can never be measured in mere monetary terms.

But it is understood to be insured for more than £1 million. During its recent brief return to Switzerland it was given an armed police escort as it was transported from one exhibition venue to another.

At the packed opening ceremony in Berne, Derek H. Turner, head of manuscripts exhibitions at the British Museum Library, traced the origins and history of one of the world's great books.

We report here extracts from his address:

Moutier sees its million pound treasure once again



A page from the Moutier-Grandval Bible

THIS year Switzerland celebrates, after an absence of one and a half centuries, the visit of one of the country's great treasures, the Moutier-Grandval Bible, which is now in the care of the British Library in London.

It has been exhibited at Delémont, briefly at Moutier itself and is now in Berne.

More than 1,100 years old and dating from the early Middle Ages, (600 years before the invention of printing) the Moutier-Grandval Bible is one of the world's great books.

Its size, nearly 900 pages measuring 20in by 15in, and the quality of its writing make it an outstanding work of art and one of the finest copies of the sacred words of the Old and New Testaments. In fact it is the second earliest surviving illustrated Bible.

It owes its name to having belonged to the foundation of Sts Mary, Germanus and Randuald of Moutier, an establishment which began as a monastery founded in the Great Vale (Grand Val) of the Jura in the middle of the seventh century.

It was found in the attic of a house — which belonged to the canons at Delémont in the winter of 1821 to 1822 — by some children.

They thought it a fine toy and, in order to keep their places in the manuscript, they marked them with straws and seed pods.

At least the Bible escaped the fate of another large and beautiful book, a superbly illuminated, 14th century missal of the Carmelite friars in London, which was cut up and made into scrap-



The Israelites receive the Ten Commandments from Moses – another illustration from the Moutier-Grandval Bible

books by some children in London in the early 19th century.

The canons' house at Delémont had become the residence of the Misses Verdat. They sold the Moutier-Grandval Bible to Alexis Bennot, sometime mayor of Delémont, whose house in Delémont is now the Musée jurassien where the Bible has been on exhibition.

Johann Heinrich von Speyr, an antiquary of Basle, bought the Bible from Bennot in 1822 for 240 francs. It has been estimated that the sum is equivalent to the price of a sports car today.

Von Speyr decided, not entirely unreasonably, that his treasure was none other than the Bible thought to have been presented by Alcuin to Charlemagne on the occasion of his coronation as emperor on Christmas Day 800.

As such, von Speyr tried to sell the Bible to the king of France, Charles X, in 1830. Having failed in this attempt, he brought the Bible to London in 1835.

The manuscript went into the auction room with a reserve of £1,500 on it.

This was not reached, and on June 18, 1836 the Moutier-Grandval Bible was sold privately to the British Museum for £750 (about 18,000 francs).

This was quite a considerable profit, even if it was not as much as Speyr had been hoping for. He

asked the king of France for 60,000 francs in 1830, and the British Museum for £12,000 at the beginning of 1836.

Incidentally I should like to correct a misunderstanding which is rife in England, namely that the Bible belonged, or belongs, to the Crown of England. This has never been the case.

It was purchased from von Speyr by the British Museum, which had been established as a trust in 1753 by an Act of the British Parliament.

In 1973 another Act of Parliament brought into being a British Library, to which the collections of the British Museum Library were transferred.

Since 1836 the Bible has been in the keeping of the Department of Manuscripts of the British Museum Library, where it is permanently on display in the general exhibition galleries and has been so since 1890 at least.

Scholarly opinion places the origin of the Bible at the monastery of St Martin at Tours (the national shrine of France), circa 835.

In its heyday the scriptorium must have been a busy place. Some 20 scribes might be required for one of the large Bibles; in the Moutier-Grandval Bible, at least 24 hands have been traced.

Each Tours Bible demanded the skins of more than 200

sheep, and the skins had to be in perfect condition.

How did Moutier-Grandval get their Tours Bible? The community was never particularly rich or important, never a likely purchaser of something as luxurious as an illustrated Tours Bible; and it would be wrong to think that Tours Bibles were ever just given away.

It seems that many of them were executed for royalty or the nobility, by whom they might be given to a favourite church or foundation. Moutier must have had a good friend from whom they got the Bible.

There are two possible candidates for this honour, the father and son, Liutfred and Hugo, counts of Tours.

Liutfred is recorded in 849 as

lay abbot of Moutier, and Hugo occupied the same position in 866. Liutfred's sister, Irmingard, married, in 821, Charlemagne's grandson, Lothair.

Great Britain was not part of the Carolingian empire, but owes a lot to it and had close links with it (Egbert, in 829 the first high King of England, had passed several years at Charlemagne's court).

We now find ourselves guardians of one of the greatest of Carolingian relics, the Moutier-Grandval Bible. Let me assure you that we treasure and revere it greatly.

It has given us in the British Library considerable pleasure to have been able to lend the Bible to Switzerland. More, we count it an honour.

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