

Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: MLGB3

The dispersals of the libraries of religious houses came earlier to Great Britain and the scatter was wider and the losses more thorough than might be said for nearly any other country in Europe. It has meant that scholars who want to know what was where in Britain in the middle ages have had to work hard, and consequently provenance research is well developed; it has been proceeding in a scientific manner for more than a century. The foundational work of M. R. James (1862–1936) has been outlined by Richard Sharpe in the present volume. James was the first to make a systematic search in modern libraries for manuscripts bearing evidence of their medieval homes, and he also printed a number of surviving medieval catalogues of individual collections. These two streams of provenanced books and medieval booklists, where they combine, give the clearest view that is now possible of a medieval library. Since James's day, research in the area has been formalized in two discrete repertories: the Royal Historical Society handbook, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*, which reports provenanceable manuscripts, and the British Academy series, *Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues*. A new digital resource, MLGB3, unites these complementary research tools in a way that allows the evidence to be approached in an integrative manner¹.

The *Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues* aims to print and annotate the documentary evidence for the availability of texts and books in the institutional libraries of medieval Britain. The need for such a corpus was first discussed in the 1930s by two Oxford medievalists, R. W. Hunt (1908–1979) and R. A. B. Mynors (1903–1989), the latter happened also to be M. R. James's literary executor². A project committee, first discussed in 1961–2, was formally established in 1976 and the first volume in the series was published in 1990. Under the General Editorship of the late Richard Sharpe, sixteen multi-authored volumes have now appeared in twenty physical books. At the time of writing, the seventeenth volume, on the secular cathedrals, is in press and there are three left to come, to be overseen now by Tessa Webber who has taken over as General Editor. Material in the *Corpus* is grouped by species: Augustinian libraries are gathered into one volume, Cistercians in another, mendicant libraries in another; the universities of Oxford and Cambridge are covered separately, as are collegiate churches and secular cathedrals. Some institutions are witnessed either by substantial and sophisticated catalogues, such as that of Dover priory from 1389 or Syon abbey from c. 1500, or else by such considerable miscellaneous evidence, such as Peterborough abbey or Durham cathedral, that they are assigned their own volumes. So as to make the totality of this evidence indexable, volumes in the series are referred to by a letter-code and booklists are numbered, as are entries within a booklist. ('A1. 2' would indicate the second entry in the first booklist in the volume on Augustinian canons.) The cumulative index of identified authors and works, known as the List of Identifications, contains more than 40,000 entries for provenanced copies of about 8,700 texts, and is still growing.

The other stream of evidence for libraries is the positive evidence of surviving books, and this is the subject of the handbook *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* (universally known by the acronym *MLGB*). It lists, by its modern shelf-mark, every manuscript that bears evidence of its institutional home in the middle ages. The first edition by the Oxford

¹ An overview of the circulation and ownership of manuscripts in medieval England, which represents the first attempt to generalise on the basis of the totality of this evidence, is R. Sharpe, *Libraries and Books in Medieval England. The Role of Libraries in a Changing Book Economy* (Oxford, forthcoming).

² The account of the project's genesis has been well told by R. H. & M. A. Rouse, *Registrum Anglie de libris doctorum et auctorum veterum*, *Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues* 2 (London, 1991), pp. xxi–xxix, and in the memoirs of Hunt by Richard Southern and of Mynors by Michael Winterbottom in, respectively, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 67 (1981), 371–97, and 80 (1991), 371–401.

palaeographer Neil Ker (1908–1982) was published in 1941; it was revised and augmented by Ker in 1964, and a Supplement was published by Andrew Watson in 1987, five years after Ker's death³. Preparing this handlist involved examining thousands of medieval manuscripts for physical or textual evidence of their original medieval provenance (work that Ker carried out originally with collaborators, who included Mynors and Hunt). The information was recorded on file-cards, retained in the Bodleian Library. The evidence harvested in this way allowed lists to be drawn up of extant medieval books arranged according to the libraries they had belonged to. Since its first publication, *MLGB* has been a crucial port of first call for any scholar wanting to know about a medieval book or library or wanting to trace the descent of a particular text.

Presentation of the gathered information within the scope of the printed page produced a masterpiece of lucid concision: the expression of a book with provenance takes no more than a line, showing at a glance the extent of known survivors for each library. Books are listed by their medieval institution, ordered alphabetically. Each book is represented by its modern shelf-mark and followed by a signal of its date and suggestion of its contents in a few words: 'Augustinus, etc.'; 'Medica'; 'Sermones'. The evidence by which the provenance was established is signalled by an italic letter-code. For example, should the book contain an *ex libris* or *ex dono* inscription, an italic letter *e* supplies that clue to the reader. Ker's criteria for inclusion were positivist ones. He gave weight to such things as aspects of script or illumination known to be representative of a particular house (*s*), bindings likewise (*b*). His letter *c* stands for 'contents', where these are locally specific, such as would pertain, for example, to a house chronicle or to obits added to a kalendar. Similar to this last, there may be other liturgical clues to ownership (*l*), such as the addition to a kalendar of saints known to have been culted at a particular place. Marginalia (*m*) can also be a good clue to provenance, marks made against texts by known hands, such as the so-called 'Tremulous Hand' of Worcester cathedral priory or the annotator at Canterbury who used a particular set of signs to mark his interest in texts, mostly patristical, which he found in the cathedral library. Ker's letter *i* stands for an inscription of ownership by a known member of a religious house, although, as he recognised, that evidence may not always signal corporate ownership: mendicants, for example, were permitted the use of books and the freedom to carry them around as they moved house. To this list of Ker's I have added 'd' to signal the evidence of *dicta probatoria*—usually a *secundo folio*—fixing a match between a manuscript and a medieval catalogue entry; the evidence is rarely definitive on its own but can combine decisively with other data. The next element in the line reports any match that can be made with a medieval catalogue or booklist. Ker accepted that not every piece of evidence could be decisive and used a question mark at the end of a line to signal where there was some degree of doubt in the attribution of provenance. For Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, where evidence is frequently less firm but the desire to assign provenance more keen, Ker, himself an Anglo-Saxonist, must have known he was lowering the bar to entry; the pre-Conquest manuscripts assigned to Abingdon abbey, for example, are to be treated with some circumspection.

Ker's presentation is a model of lucidity, but the layout does restrict the quantity of information the user is able to draw on. To do more, to understand the contents of the book, gain details of its medieval or later ownership or interrogate the evidence on which the judgement of provenance has been based, one has needed until now to go to the medieval book itself, or to the book's description in a modern catalogue, or to the original file-card on which Ker and his collaborators recorded their judgements. Digital presentation offers scope for more.

³ There is much on the project's genesis in the two memoirs referred to in the preceding note, as well as in Ian Doyle's memoir of Neil Ker in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 80 (1991), 349–59.

Work on the digital version, called MLGB3, began in 2009 and the first release, hosted by the Bodleian Library, has been freely available since 2015 at <http://mlgb3.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>⁴. The first stage of work involved entering all the information on the 8,000 *MLGB* cards into the database. These held more detail than could be made available in the print version, such as the medieval inscriptions which Ker usually troubled to transcribe, and details of post-medieval ownership, an aspect of particular value where a book remained available to the market into the nineteenth or twentieth century. A secondary stage of work has aimed to enrich these data, notably by adding images of the evidence for provenance, be that an inscription or some aspect of the book's physical appearance.

MLGB3 was envisaged from the outset as an online third edition of Ker's work, so it was a natural decision to retain the familiar and helpfully concise presentation. It was also clear that that format would map very well on to a digital platform: each variable in the expression of a line—library, shelf-mark, date, contents, evidence for provenance—could be treated as an ontological unit and form the basis for searching or filtering the whole dataset. Using the advanced search function, users may restrict their enquiry by any of these variables: author or title; medieval library (searchable as place, or as type of institution, e.g. 'cathedral', 'priory', or as species, e.g. 'Franciscan', 'Cistercian'); modern location; modern library; shelf-mark (reducible to any one of its elements, e.g. 'Bodley', 'Royal'); evidence type; medieval pressmark; medieval catalogue entry (using the alphanumerical system employed by the Corpus); later ownership; or else by words occurring in the general notes. Additional filters are available for separating books according to whether they are in print or manuscript and for restricting a search to those entries that have images. The resource currently returns entries for 8,350 books.

A simple Browse function will present results for libraries in the familiar layout of the printed edition. But the new medium allows the user to open up any of these primary single-line entries and access more information about, and images of, the evidence of provenance or post-dissolution ownership, the contents of the medieval book, and how it was catalogued and shelf-marked in its medieval library setting, or to have an explanation of certain ambiguities that might exist around a particular provenance. There is educative potential in being able to see, for example, the wording of an inscription of ownership: the degree to which it is different or identical to other inscriptions from the same place will say something about the consistency of librarianship across the centuries of a religious house's existence. Being able to show an image alongside the transcription is a visible enhancement.

MLGB3 has also permitted integration with the Corpus, fulfilling the ambition of the sister projects' originators in a way that none of them could have foreseen. Searchability by author or title is possible across the whole dataset, opening to scholars the means of discovering quickly all known copies of a particular author or work, extant or attested, that can be provenanced to a particular medieval library. Data from the Corpus and its List of Identifications are available via two tabs on the MLGB3 homepage: 'Authors/Titles' and 'Medieval catalogues'. The first of these offers a means to return entries for identified authors or works across the whole Corpus, with the option of applying such filters as catalogue provenance, date range, and type of document. For example, the search term 'Augustine' returns well over 3,000 records; searching for 'bequests' of copies of works by Augustine between 1200 and 1500 returns more than forty results; narrowing the search to 'Oxford' brings the number down to ten. The 'Medieval catalogues' screen presents the data as they appear in the printed volumes of the Corpus, reconfigured into the shape of the original

⁴ The project has been under the direction of Prof. Sharpe and Dr James Willoughby and was made possible by grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Neil Ker Memorial Fund. The resource was built by Xiaofeng Yang and Sushila Burgess of Bodleian Digital Library Systems and Services, while Daniela Mairhofer, Peter Kidd, David Rundle, and Jacob Currie have all contributed to the work of populating it.

booklists and organized by species or place under the headings of the separate volumes. This presentation is reconstructed robotically from constituent entries in the List of Identifications and does not therefore include entries for anonymous or generic books, which have not been entered into that master index. So opening the evidence for Eton College, for example, from the list of Secular Colleges, displays headings for seventeen medieval booklists or records of bequest; of these, a dozen are live links which will display the sequence of entries of identified works for the whole booklist. The documents whose headings are not live are those that list only liturgical books, a category of text that has not been included in the List of Identifications. For the entirety of the evidence, as well as discussion of the documents themselves, one must refer, at least for the present, to the printed volumes.

A user working from either of these screens can click on index entries marked to show that the book survives and will be connected to the *MLGB* entry for the actual book, so linking documentary record and physical survival. For example, British Library, MS Royal 5 B. XVI, a copy of Augustine's *Confessiones*, belonged to Rochester Cathedral priory and was catalogued there in 1123 and again in 1202. Approaching from the Authors/Titles tab returns entries for those two catalogues, under the alphanumerical system used by the Corpus: B77. 15 and B79. 21. These references show as live, indicating that the book survives: clicking on them will take the user to the entry for the Royal manuscript on the *MLGB* side of the resource. Clicking instead on the link which explains that 'B77' refers to the 1123 catalogue will take the user to the 'Medieval catalogues' screen, where the entry for this book can be seen in the overall context of its list. Shortly before the dissolution the book was sequestered for the king and is visible in the inventory of the palace of Westminster of 1542 (indexed in the Corpus as H2. 576); it remains in the Royal Library to this day. The hope is that this interoperability of the two datasets will make the resource useful not only to historians wanting to know about the library of a particular house but also to scholars who are interested in the reception history of particular authors or texts.

Digital presentation also allows the expression of greater detail about post-medieval ownership. The printed edition relied on the user's being able to identify from a shelf-mark the sources for books, that 'Selden' or 'Douce' in a Bodleian shelf-mark, for example, refer to the collectors John Selden (1584–1654) and Francis Douce (1757–1834); but it could say no more in the span of the printed page about the varied sources for discrete collections such as these. Non-eponymous shelf-marks would require the user to know more, for example that many manuscripts in the Royal collection now in the British Library derived from the collection of John, Lord Lumley (1533–1609), which had absorbed the manuscript libraries gathered by Henry Fitzalan, 12th earl of Arundel, and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, men at the eye of the storm that surrounded the dissolution of monasteries in England⁵. While it is possible to acquire a reasonable expertise in these sorts of provenance histories without very much difficulty, it is clearly an advantage of the database that, in the augmented view for each entry in *MLGB3*, owners can be identified and, so far as they are recoverable, lines of transmission revealed from medieval into modern times.

A further area of enrichment has been in the scope of the data. The genius for concision in the expression of the printed page of *MLGB* extended also to the survey itself. Ker and his collaborators took the decision to exclude numerous books which survived the breach of the Reformation and have remained in their libraries since the middle ages—which in England means some cathedrals and some of the Oxford and Cambridge colleges. It is perhaps not well enough recognised that the printed edition is a handlist to books that have strayed, and that it passes over those that have not. To have aimed for more complete

⁵ S. Jayne & F. R. Johnson, *The Lumley Library: the Catalogue of 1609* (London, 1956), pp. 2–13; D. G. Selwyn, *The Library of Thomas Cranmer*, Oxford Bibliographical Society, 3rd ser. 1 (Oxford, 1996), pp. xxvi–xxxiii.

coverage would have swollen the extent of the handlist, and it might be remembered that the first edition of *MLGB* was printed in 1941 under wartime paper restrictions. However, the decision to exclude these static books has reinforced a general impression that the work is principally a repertory of monastic libraries. Cathedrals with medieval books still *in situ* were included in the second edition, but apart from Salisbury, this might be considered an extension of the monastic bias since the additions chiefly comprised the large holdings of Durham and Worcester, both Benedictine cathedral priories in the middle ages. The university colleges were still excluded, perhaps because the extent of their holdings was considered to be common knowledge, or at least accessible from H. O. Coxe's catalogue of 1852 of manuscripts in Oxford college libraries and M. R. James's catalogues of the Cambridge colleges.

The online edition has grown to include all provenanceable medieval books and therefore all 'medieval libraries' of which something can be said, including those university colleges that never lost their collections. This has changed the profile of the corpus very significantly. Where in the print edition university colleges accounted for just under four per cent of the total number of books, they now account for twenty-five per cent. It means that a small number of institutions of one class now proportionately outrank every other class, and the character of their libraries has become proportionately more visible. Of course, this profile is on the basis of comparisons drawn between institutions which survived and those which did not.

The continuing perception that *MLGB* is, first and foremost, a repertory of monastic manuscripts will shift again as the resource grows to include early printed books with medieval provenance. Ker included printed books in *MLGB* where he knew of them, but he made no dedicated search, doubtless seeing that modern holdings of editions printed before 1540 represented an ocean of material which bibliographers of print, guided by their own lights, had never catalogued with respect to recording provenance information. Emphases have changed in recent years, of course, as Cristina Dondi's account in this volume makes clear. For incunabula, there is good hope that books with British medieval provenance will be newly located by MEI. For books printed between 1501 and 1540, it is more difficult to envisage how the work could be done systematically, but copy-specifics are now routinely included in the cataloguing of print holdings by individual libraries, and this offers the hope that provenance notes can be harvested for *MLGB3* at some point in the future. The expectation is that the English university colleges will grow still further in the profile, an effect first of the sort of institutional continuity which has preserved their libraries and second of the enthusiastic way college fellows embraced print and went on to leave their books to their colleges.

Refinement and augmentation of the data happens continually, on both sides of the resource. A larger ambition for the *MLGB* side is to provide at least one image of the evidence for provenance for every entry. Another is to provide augmented contents descriptions for every book, supplementing Ker's necessarily stark 'Augustinus, etc.' with a full listing of every significant work in a volume. Coverage of this aspect is currently partial, but completion will improve cross-searching between the *MLGB* side and the Corpus side of the resource. It holds out the real prospect of being able to identify every provenanced copy of a particular author or work, extant or lost, from the institutional libraries of medieval Britain.

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