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Hidden Treasures

No Copy In Maryland?

Discoursing, the other day, upon first editions and their habit of increasing enormously in value, I mentioned the First Folio Shakespeare as the most valuable of them all, and ventured to deplore the fact that no copy of it was to be found upon a Maryland bookshelf. Now comes a bookish friend with the suggestion that I was wrong, perhaps, without knowing it.

“How do you know,” he demands, “that there is no copy of the First Folio in Maryland? That none is to be found in either the Pratt Library or the Peabody I am well aware, and that not one of the copies recorded by Sidney Lee is held by a Marylander I am also well aware, but for all you and I know to the contrary, there may be half a dozen copies in the counties, in ancient and forgotten Colonial libraries.”

“Fifteen or twenty years ago the old manor houses of Maryland, particularly in the lower bay counties, were perfect treasuries of early eighteenth century furniture and plate. The arts and crafts movement, in the nineties, started a vigorous demand for that sort of stuff, and since then dealers have gone about the country, buying it by the car-load. Today you will find more brass bedsteads than mahogany in the ancient homes of Maryland. The descendants of the colonists in the main are not rich, and so the dealers have tempted them sorely. In other cases, the old mansions are in alien hands, with their contents, and no sentiment has stood in the way of profit.

No Dragnet For Books

“But the antique dealers have sought only furniture and plate. The books in the old houses have been let alone. That there are hundreds of such books moldering away in the counties, in attics and ancient bookcases, is very likely. The early colonists, when they came from England with their household goods, must have brought a few books with them, too, and when, later on, they grew prosperous and sent home for more furniture, it is provable that they also ordered more books. A good many of those volumes, I venture to say, are still lying about.

“As a matter of fact, I know that this is case, for I have seen some of the books. I remember browsing for an hour in an ancient library somewhere on the Eastern Shore—I think it was in Kent County. It was years ago and I was young and unobservant, but I remember very well the long rows of calf-bound books, with their antique engravings and unfamiliar typography.

“Since then I have seen in Baltimore a number of interesting old books from Maryland libraries. Not long ago I bought a set of the Tenson Dryden, edited by Congreve in six volumes duodecimo. The set came from a Colonial mansion in Calvert County, recently bought and

stripped by a vandal. Another time I encountered a very early edition of Bacon's 'Novum Organum,' with a Colonial bookplate in it.

A First Folio Shakespeare

"There must be plenty of books still remaining in the old mansions, and it is certainly not impossible that a copy or two of the First Folio Shakespeare may be among them. Lucky the owner who discovers one. He will get enough for it to pay off the mortgage on his house and to buy half of his parish besides. Someday I propose to make a little tour of exploration. If the gods are with me. I may pick up a First Folio for a song. And if I do you'll hear my howls a long while before I heave in sight."

Well, why not? Cecillus Calvert got his patent in 1632, the very year that Isaac Jaggard sold the last of his 600 copies of the First Folio. The book had been issued in 1623 and it took nine years to sell the whole edition. In 1632, just at the time Calvert was made Lord of the Chesapeake shores, the Second Folio went to press.

It is perfectly possible, and even probable, that copies of either the First Folio or the Second were in the baggage of the colonists who landed at St. Mary's with Leonard Calvert in 1684. Most of those colonists, true enough, were far from bookish men, but Calvert himself and a number of others could certainly read and write, and if they brought books at all, what more likely than that they included among them the plays of Master Shakespeare? No doubt they had seen those plays acted at the Bankside theatres. Every young blood of that time knew "Hamlet" and "The Merchant of Venice," "Much Ado About Nothing" and "The Taming of the Shrew." Why shouldn't young Calvert stuff a copy of the First Folio into his carpetbag to read upon the long voyage, and to bring back, in the wilderness, pleasant memories of the great actors of the day and of the gay life of Southwark?

Some of Them Were Readers

The men who came to Maryland during the 20 years after the founding of St. Mary's were chiefly rough-necked adventurers, with very little love for books, but there were also men of finer metal among them, and these latter, no doubt, brought the love of reading with them. After the wilderness began to be subdued there was plenty of time for reading. In the long winters travel was well-nigh impossible. The colonists had to hug their fires, and since there were no newspapers and the game of poker was not yet invented, it is likely that all who could read spent a good deal of time with stout old calfskin volumes in their hands.

The First Folio Shakespeare, a book of 454 pages, cost £1—a very moderate price for a well-bound volume in those days. The publication of the Second, Third and Fourth Folio, in 1632, 1633 and 1685, kept the price from soaring, and it was not until toward the middle of the eighteenth century that the First Folio began to appreciate in value. A Maryland bookman of 1650 would have thought nothing of paying \$5 for a book of plays. His Bible cost him more than that, and so did his Plutarch, his Holinshed and his Chaucer.

The Four Folios

If there are any First Folios remaining in Maryland, it is probable that they are on the Eastern Shore. The Puritans who spread out over the Western Shore, settling Anne Arundel and

Charles counties, were not friendly to playbooks. After the Restoration of 1658, true enough, they began to give way to the Cavaliers, but by 1658 copies of the First Folio were already becoming scarce. All the copies of Shakespeare's plays that came in thereafter were probably either stray quartos or Second, Third or Fourth Folios.

But even these later editions of the great poet's writings are of such value that it would be worthwhile to hunt for copies. The Second Folio follows the First, page by page, though there are many changes in the text—probably efforts to correct errors. About a thousand copies were printed, and of these more than 300 remain. The record price 50 years ago was but \$700, but it is now \$2,700, and every succeeding sale shows a rise.

The Third Folio, printed in 1663, contains seven plays not in the two earlier editions, and in consequence it is a somewhat larger book. It is so rare that some students have suggested that a good many copies may have been destroyed in the great fire of London in 1666. In 1848 a fine copy sold for \$175 in London, but by 1907, the date of the last recorded sale, the price had gone up to \$7,500.

Who Will Search?

The Fourth Folio is a reprint of the Third, and was apparently farmed out to three different printers, for three faces of type appear in it. It is a big volume of nearly 1,000 pages, and like the three preceding Folios, contains the Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare. This copperplate was engraved by the artist (then a youth of 22) in 1623, and did service for no less than 62 years. So many impressions were taken from it that it finally became greatly mutilated. The Fourth Folio so seldom appears in the market that it is difficult to fix its present value, but no doubt a good copy would bring \$3,000.

Who will attempt a search of the Colonial libraries? It will be tedious work, true enough—but think of the possible prize! Think of finding a First Folio!

(Source: Parks Media Center, Iowa State University, microfilm collection)