

Balliol College Lending Registers LibA6 and LibA7

I. Introduction

In the archives of Balliol Library there are preserved two Folio ledgers, with dimensions suited for the task of recording tall columns of accounts.¹ These are now shelf-mark LibA6 and LibA7.² Alongside pages of bursar's accounts and a partial early library catalogue, they contain fragments of a lending register from the main college library, chronicling intermittent periods between roughly 1677 and 1712.³ Paul Morgan, in *Oxford Libraries Outside the Bodleian*, notes that this is an "unusual documentary survival" for the period.⁴ The ephemeral, varying content of both manuscripts means that they cannot be conventionally paginated; writing begins at each end of both. Different ends have accordingly been attributed the title of End A or End B according to the markings on the covers.⁵ The majority of the record is confined to pages 02-19 of LibA6B, with some additional entries on LibA6A p. 01 and 03 and LibA7A f. 03 and 04.⁶ The register consists of a total of 565 entries, including those that are illegible or too vague to be identified.⁷

It is somewhat difficult to say exactly how much the register can tell us about the historical intellectual community at Balliol. In *Balliol College: A History*, John Jones remarks that if one takes the register to be a picture of the college's scholarship, "the impression is left... of a dilettante approach, lacking in concentrated effort or application," an impression borne out by the dearth of meaningful academic work produced by the contemporary set of Fellows.⁸ This should not, however, necessarily put us off investigating the way that Fellows interacted on the page, and the entries offer an insight into the type of texts most commonly read in the wider period, as well as the specific, changing Balliol environment. After the Civil War, Balliol had been placed under the administration of the Bishop of Lincoln, William Fuller, in an attempt to remedy its ailing financial health. The Fellows and successive Masters were engaged in raising funds in order to pay down accumulating college debts, many originating from years of unpaid battels, and a charitable explanation for the lack of

¹ Both measure 47.5cm x 18cm x 2cm. LibA6 is hard-backed, with a binding made of vellum over pasteboard. LibA6 also bears staple-hole marks for chains, suggesting that at one point it was secured in the library. LibA7 is bound with limp vellum.

² Oxford, Balliol College Archives, Library Records A6. Catalogue of printed works A-M, late C17, and loans register 1693-1712. Oxford, Balliol College Archives, Library Records A7. Bursar's Accounts, 1676-77, Early Library Catalogue 1697, and loans register 1679-80.

³ The College also maintained a small undergraduate's library at this point, although no similar register survives. The main library was intended for Fellows, with some occasional exceptions.

⁴ Morgan, *Oxford Libraries Outside the Bodleian*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1980) p11. This was uncommon, but not unheard of; New College holds a similar lending register between the years 1665-1698 and St Edmund Hall between 1666-1674. It is likely that others existed that did not survive.

⁵ In previous library cataloguing, an archivist has opted to paginate LibA6 and foliate LibA7. For ease of us, these conventions have been maintained here. Henceforth "LibAXY," where X is the manuscript number and Y is the end from which the writing starts.

⁶ LibA6 End B p. 05 is blank. There is a list of books and their shelf-marks on LibA6 End B p. 01, but no discernible names are attached, suggesting that they are actually part of a catalogue continued elsewhere. Pages between 01 and 02 have certainly been removed and apparently discarded.

⁷ All of these entries can be viewed on the database [lending_register.xlsx](#).

⁸ Jones, *Balliol College: A History*. 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p148

academic output in the period might be that attentions were primarily focussed elsewhere. John Baron, Fellow from 1691 and Master from 1704, is the most prolific borrower recorded in the register, but then – as perhaps now – the role of the Master appears to have entailed being a tutor and a fundraiser as much as contributing regular scholarly work.

In 1673 the library was energised by the accession of Sir Thomas Wendy's personal collection, which amounted to over 2000 volumes. Soon after this point, Jones notes, a purchasing policy was formed for the library. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that borrowing records were inaugurated only a couple of years later. In this context, then, the college began to purposefully develop its collections, and the evidence of the lending register is that this led to an appreciable diversification of subjects held, as well as a general effort to keep up with the newest books and editions.

The use of the lending register was, however, haphazard. Any attempt to draw conclusions from the dataset must be prefaced with some caveats. A considerable portion (between 70-80) of the entries remain unidentified, for various reasons; some entries are scored out, presumably upon the book's return to the library, while others are no more than an abbreviated scribble or a faded pencil-mark. There appears to have been no agreed conventions for entering a record. One or more of the date, book, author, shelf-mark and even borrower name may be missing from any given record. The problems with the data are not impossible to overcome, and are not mentioned to dissuade researchers from utilising the resource, but they do mean that conclusions must be drawn with hesitancy. I expand below on how this principle has guided my methodology throughout the process.

II. The Borrowers

At the top of LibA6B p. 02 is a title, dated "April 27. 1693": "An Account of what bookes are out of ye Library, what letters they are marked with, & in whose Custody they are." This aspiration to a comprehensive account went unfulfilled, but the sentence does generally set out the four main categories of information in the record. Though not the earliest entry in the register – LibA7 features entries from the 1670s – this point does seem to mark a decisive break, where records seem to have been resumed, with a clear intention of how the book was to be used.⁹ The page is laid out to reflect this. It is equally divided up the tall sheet between the Fellows, whose names are inscribed in the left margin by the same hand that wrote the title, with a 4-5cm gap between each. It is not clear who organised the page this way; the variety of hands throughout the manuscript make it nigh-on impossible to tell who – if anyone – held an overarching responsibility for the register.¹⁰ Clearly whoever compiled the list had some expectation of who was likely to be using it; the list does not include the name of every Fellow. Their anticipation was mostly proved correct: names on this page such as Ralph Newham, John Pain, John Hughes, and Roger Mander (Master 1687-1704) are some of the most frequently recurring names in later

⁹ We cannot be certain whether record keeping had lapsed or whether this simply marked the start of a new volume, with the previous one discarded or lost.

¹⁰ Similarly, we cannot even be sure that the register was kept in the library. The bursar, whose accounts also appear on the adjacent pages, may have maintained it. The Senior Dean, John Pain, organised the library budget in the 1690s, and may also have been involved.

years. Only one Lewis Lawley, who was presumably occupied with other matters, has his name crossed out for want of use, in order that Hughes's prolific borrowing might be accommodated on the page.

This is as close to an ordered approach as the manuscript gets. Subsequent pages deteriorate into hastily scribbled notes wherever the borrower can find a gap; where the earlier pages mark out a specific borrower's space in advance, ready to be systematically filled with intermittent entries, later ones are covered in chaotic blocks where a new borrower starts on every line. Yet both of these approaches have advantages for the modern researcher. A reader who adds a book title to an existing list under their name allows an insight into the development of their reading, where previous books might be taken to inform subsequent borrowing. On the other hand, those who begin a new entry every time they borrow are more likely to date and sign their entries, and are thus easier to identify in the manuscript.

One of the advantages envisioned by the creation of this database is the ability to utilise both of these approaches. With the ability to cross-reference and sort by author, date, and book, it is possible to see the way readers were influenced by books they – and others – read, even when they are not consecutively recorded. Joseph Hunt, for example, a Fellow from 1700 and Master of the College 1722-26, borrowed a book of ancient geometry, Theodosius's *Sphaerics* (1596), on 8th February 1701.¹¹ He returned to the same volume on multiple separate occasions, in July 1702, April 1705, and September 1706. In the intervening years, he also borrowed an edition of Apollonius's *Conics* (1566), as well as consulting more recent mathematical books, including John Kersey's *Algebra* (1673) and Claude-Francois Dechaes's *Cursus seu Mundus Mathematicus* (1690). Steadily augmenting his scholarly expertise in the field, Hunt eventually grew dissatisfied with his century-old edition of Theodosius, and published his own in Oxford in 1707.¹² Hunt never recorded borrowing more than two books at a time, but compiling a list of all his entries together allows a picture of his progressing study to emerge.

Close inspection of the register reveals plenty of instances where a community of readers appear to recommend certain works to one another, suggestive of the kind of interaction between scholars at Balliol. The college subscribed to *Philosophical Transactions* and its rival journal, *Acta eruditorum*, from their first issues, and both were frequently perused by a variety of the Fellows.¹³ Plenty of books were seemingly passed around, some of them more obscure; five different people are recorded in LibA6 as having borrowed mostly-forgotten French writer Louis Ellies du Pin's 13-volume *History of Ecclesiastical Writers* (1692-99). On 10th November 1694, Ralph Newham borrowed the first volume of the Balliol copy, and the next entry on the page – which is not clearly dated – John Pain was recorded as having borrowed the same volume. Even if many of the Fellows weren't exceptional academics, the college could boast some

¹¹ Theodosius of Bithynia, *Theodosii Tripolitae Sphaericorum libri III*. (Rome, 1586). Balliol still holds this edition in its Special Collections, shelf-mark 470 c 22.

¹² Joseph Hunt, *Theodosii Sphaericorum libri tres*. (Oxford, 1707). Balliol holds this edition at 0470 b 22.

¹³ While the college is still subscribed to *Philosophical Transactions* today, *Acta Eruditorum* stopped circulating in 1734. Both are still held in the college archives, shelf-marks 1500 g 1 and 1500 a-d, 1-20 respectively.

pre-eminence in maths and science. John Keill was a Senior Commoner at Balliol and lectured in the University on the scientific theories of Isaac Newton, with whom he was a regular correspondent. Keill frequented Balliol Library between 1694 and 1698, and read widely in subjects including theology, contemporary politics, and Italian. He published his *Introductio ad Veram Physicam* in 1702, and contributed to the Balliol mathematics syllabus for undergraduates.¹⁴ Though never a Fellow of the College, Keill clearly had free access to the library, and likely discoursed with his confrères about what he was reading.

Indeed, the evidence of the lending register is that the rule that the library was for Fellows only was not strictly enforced. Quite a few names appear throughout the register that never registered as Fellows, although Keill was the only one to borrow repeatedly. Some names were students studying for doctorates; others were gentleman undergraduates who were afforded the privilege – for a fee – of being tutored by the Master and other Senior Fellows. It does not seem a great stretch to imagine that these privileges might have extended to library access, with class a dominant factor in Balliol’s social composition. Some one-off entries may simply have been undergraduates granted special dispensation to borrow a textbook; John Shapcote and William Harris, who were both teenage students, borrowed John Dee’s edition of Euclid’s *Geometry* in 1695. Jones speculates that undergraduates who were paid to maintain the library might have been permitted to access it as a “valued additional perk.”¹⁵ Certain other occasional records hint at a flexible policy for access when the situation demanded. Henry Clements, an Oxford bookseller between 1681 and 1721, borrowed a volume in 1706. George Harbin, the retired Bishop of Ely, consulted four books – of which no trace can be found in Balliol’s modern collections – between January and March 1698. Harbin is described by his biographer as widely read in English history and genealogy, and he produced two books on the English Constitution and the Crown of England in the 1710s.¹⁶ Sir Philip Sydenham also visited the College library in 1710. Sydenham had been an MP for Ilchester and Somerset until 1705, before devoting himself to scholarly pursuits. He built up a treasured library that he was forced to sell in the 1730s in order to pay off debts. His presence clearly indicates that the College was willing to accommodate visitors interested in its collections.

III. The Books

Of the 565 entries in LibA6 and A7, around 70 to 80 are at least partially unidentifiable. This can be for a range of reasons, although the most common is that entries are, understandably, written for the comprehension of other users, not by modern researchers. Another reader at Balliol in the 1690s would likely have understood immediately what was meant by an entry like “1 vol. of Tully,” but centuries of library reclassification make this harder to reconstruct today. Certain inferences have been made in the construction of this database, in order to produce the fullest possible set of data. If, for example, a borrower returns to an author they’ve already read but only abbreviates the title the second time, and

¹⁴ Jones (1997) p149

¹⁵ Jones (1997) p147

¹⁶ John Findon, “Harbin, George (c.1665–1744),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2167/view/article/12231> [accessed 31 July 2015].

there are no records of other books at Balliol by the same author, it is reasonably assumed that the new entry can be taken as matching the first. I have tried to make clear on the spreadsheet where such inferences have been necessary.

From the text that remains, a picture begins to emerge of a diverse 17th century library. Further research might profitably cross-reference the register database with the partial catalogue that survives from End A of LibA6, as well as comparing Balliol's holdings with other contemporary libraries, both private and collegiate.¹⁷ As we have already established, the diversity of the collection was well matched by the variance in the readership; the Fellows appear to have been broad if not close readers. Journals aside, no individual author was borrowed more than twelve times. 195 different authors are borrowed in total, of which many have multiple different entries. The library held volumes on a range of subjects, from contemporary mathematics to the classics, theology, anatomy textbooks, European dictionaries and many others.

Indeed, the polymath approach to reading favoured by the Fellows at Balliol seems to have partly arisen from the scope of the authors that they were reading. The most commonly borrowed author, Isaac Barrow, a Master of Trinity College, Cambridge in the 1670s, published influential works on both theology and mathematics. Barrow's student, Isaac Newton, later developed his work on the theorem of calculus. While all sorts of books were borrowed, the evidence of the lending register is generally that Barrow can be taken as a symbol of the broader interests at Balliol, of both theoretical science and church matters. Books that fall into one or both of these categories appear most often in the pages of the lending register, and it should be noted that this is as much because they attracted a large amount of readers as it is down to repeat borrowing. As Jones reminds us, these are the only fields in which anything of note was published out of Balliol between 1675 and 1725.

The nature of progress in mathematics is cumulative, and existing work is often superseded rather than occupying our cultural imagination for a long time. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the contemporary mathematicians studied are not household names today. Likewise, the debates that dominated 17th century theological discussions, broadly between Calvinism and Arminianism, were largely settled in England by the turn of the century. In a sense, this makes the lending register an invaluable resource, because it allows us to recover the names of people who shaped the discourse of their respective subjects – names such as Claude-Francois Dechales, Francois Turretin, Henry Hammond, and Louis Ellies du Pin – but might otherwise have been forgotten. It might be tempting for us to think of the 17th century as the era of *Paradise Lost*, but if Balliol possessed a copy of the poem – and catalogue records suggest that it did¹⁸ – then the lending register suggests that it didn't appeal to any of the

¹⁷ For further examples, see William Poole, *Wadham College books in the age of John Wilkins (1614-1672)* (Oxford, 2014); the library of Robert Hooke, *Bibliotheca Hookiana*, accessible online at <http://www.hookesbooks.com/> [accessed 30th July 2015]; and the British Library's Sloane printed books collection at <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/sloane/Home.aspx> [accessed 30th July 2015]. Numerous other examples abound from the period.

¹⁸ The library catalogue contained in LibA7 suggests that Balliol owned an octavo third edition of *Paradise Lost* (London, 1678), as well as a duodecimo copy of his *Miscellaneous Poems* (London, 1680) and an octavo *Paradise Regained* (London, 1680). The earliest edition currently held at Balliol is a quarto edition of *Paradise Lost, a poem in ten books* (London, 1669). No other 17th century copies survive in the library.

Fellows at the time. John Milton's only appearance in the register comes in 1679, when his *Defensio pro populo Anglicano* was borrowed in three separate instances. It would have been unusual for a college to maintain large verse and drama holdings, as literature was not considered an academic pursuit, though Balliol did retain certain volumes.¹⁹ The register offers a rare insight into what was actually read in the period, not simply owned or bought, and might force us to modify our understanding of what readers considered to be important.

IV. Methodology and Aims

The database has been compiled according to the principle that all editorial decisions should be evident and reversible. As such, in every field where some uncertainty remains, the original text has been transcribed alongside the deduced title, so that the basis for any assumptions on my behalf is clear. This principle has been followed even when interpretation of the manuscript appears to be obvious. For every recorded borrower, the name as it appears in the register has been transcribed and recorded alongside. For every book borrowed, the text used to identify the author and volume has also been transcribed.

The variable dating of the hands in the register means that "Certain Dates" and "Probable Dates" have been distinguished. The latter refers not to an exact probable date – which in most cases would be impossible to estimate – but to the earliest likely date that the book can have been borrowed. No assumptions can be made with regards to limiting the latest possible date, as it is common for readers to go back through the register, and enter dates out of sequence wherever they can find a space on the page. The "Page Number" and an individual "Entry Number" identifier have also been assigned to supplement the unreliable internal dating.

Correctly identifying the author, book, edition, and year of publication with absolute certainty is impossible for almost every entry. Books named in the manuscript have mostly been identified by consulting either the Balliol Library guard books or the holdings on SOLO, in order to ascertain which editions the college has historically owned. The database has also been randomly cross-referenced with the partial catalogue in LibA6, although this appears to be a somewhat unreliable resource, often erroneous with regards to dating.²⁰ Where the guard books and the catalogue differ, the record of the guard books has usually been preferred. As close as it has been possible, the year of publication of the Balliol copy has been preferred, which is not necessarily the first edition. This is most relevant for the oldest classics and the newest textbooks, which were often replaced. For this reason, some of the shelf-marks referring to the modern Balliol collection link to early 18th century editions; while these weren't the exact copies consulted by the borrowers, they have been included on the principle that since the library commonly disposed of older editions when the

¹⁹ The lending register records Fellows borrowing works such as Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* (1674-78) and the satires of Charles Davenant. When Dudley Digges bequeathed over a thousand books to All Souls in 1643, a catalogue list shows that 50 books of plays and verses were included, but doesn't record them individually, which is suggestive of the attitude that college libraries had towards "literary" works in this period.

²⁰ Limitations of time have meant that a full crosscheck between the two has not been possible, though it would be the logical way to corroborate the database if it ever needed to be triple-checked (or if the SOLO holdings and the guard books radically differed).

new one arrived, the new edition will still give a reasonable impression of what was read at the time.

Shelf-marks are the part of the database most commonly inferred from conjectural reasoning rather than manuscript evidence. Given that the shelf-marks that are noted are almost exactly consistent from the 1670s to the 1710s, codes that are absent from later entries have had corresponding earlier ones reapplied. All inferences have been explicitly stated where they have been necessary. Modern shelf-marks and SOLO records are included in the hope that future researchers will be able to navigate the register easily, moving from the record to the surviving holdings, and can access detailed bibliographic information in the meantime.

Above all, the principle has been to maintain transparency in the compilation of the transcript and the database. With such a complicated manuscript, full of changing hands and scrawled entries, users are recommended to cross-reference all records used with images of the original; errors have doubtless been made in transcription, and suggested corrections are welcomed, particularly entries that have thus far gone unidentified. I anticipate that the expertise of period specialists will make it easier to discern titles that aren't obvious to the inexperienced eye. It is my hope that the database of the lending register will prove a valuable resource for those investigating the collections and readers of other college and private libraries of the time.

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