
By W. H. James Wfale.

The History of Bookbinding in this country has hitherto been almost entirely neglected. I have for some time past been engaged in collecting and bringing together the materials for writing it, and have succeeded in identifying the work of a certain number of Binders, but this is not an easy matter and cannot be done in a hurry. Years ago when I commenced working at the History of Art in the Low Countries, I at first lost a great deal of time, owing to my having followed the lead of untrustworthy guides. I commenced by examining the different paintings assigned to Van Eyck, Memling, and others at Bruges, and trying to fix in my memory the peculiarities of each master; then I went to Antwerp, Brussels, and other towns, and found, as I journeyed on, the same names constantly turning up in picture-galleries and in churches, but attached to paintings differing in many respects from one another; at the end of some time I discovered that what I had to do was to try and forget all I had learned, and to start afresh on a surer basis; mentally to dissociate all old pictures from the artists whose names were attached to them, unless positive proof of their authorship was forthcoming; to try and class all the better pictures in groups, according to the composition, and to the peculiarities of drawing and of colour they presented. I soon found out that the last was the right basis, and that the similarity of composition was not to be relied on as a proof of identical origin. Having grouped the pictures, I searched the archives for documents, and was fortunate enough to get positive proof of the authorship of many a panel that had been up to that time attributed to other artists. Now it is certainly far more difficult to identify the authorship of a binding than that of a picture, unless one or more of the stamps used are identical. The composition of, say, a panel or band of the time of Henry VII. or Henry VIII. is no evidence of authorship; for binders were not organised into guilds in this country as in the Netherlands, and had no right of property in the design of the panels or bands with which they adorned the covers of the books they bound. Initials again are no sure guides, for instance three different binders with the initials G. G. were practising the craft in England in Henry VIIIth's reign, and using very similar designs. I have been fortunate enough to be able to identify all three. The initials G. R., J. R., and N. S., again each represent two or three contemporary binders. I think it well to insist on this point because The Bookbinder may do real good service if care is taken not to attribute a stamp into a different period.
or a binding to any particular binder without proof of its being his work. Assertions put forth with confidence in the organ of a craft are pretty sure to be reproduced by outsiders, and I fear that want of due caution may lead to the history of Binding in England being falsified before it has been written. I trust I may, without offence, cull a few specimens of the sort of thing I mean from recent numbers of The Bookbinder. In Vol. I., p. 146, it is said that the system of adorning the side of a volume with one, or at most two, stamps "was first devised towards the close of the fifteenth century, that this method originated probably at Ghent, spread rapidly into France, and from thence was introduced into England before the year 1500 by Julian Notary." Again, at p. 63: "It seems probable that the pattern-roller was invented in Germany and brought into England by John Reynes." And at p. 163: "English bindings of the sixteenth century owe their distinct character to the practice of cutting both stamps and rollers in intaglio on hard wood." A panel reproduced is thus referred to on p. 182: "One of the most beautiful and essentially English bindings of the period was fashioned in the workshop of John Reynes, dwelling at the sign of 'The George.'"

The three first quotations can easily be proved to be entirely destitute of foundation. The panels on the binding mentioned in the fourth, so far from having been fashioned in the workshop of John Reynes, are not English work at all, the cypher they bear is not his, though the initials are the same; the two indentations on these bindings are in themselves sufficient proof that these metal stamps were imported, and that the book was bound after the accession of Henry VIII., most probably not before 1534. What becomes of all the ingenious theories developed on pp. 182 and 183? It is pretty writing, I grant, but the sooner the reader forgets it the better.

Let me then implore the correspondents of The Bookbinder to avoid theories, and not to let their imaginations run away with them. Those who wish to proceed safely and surely, and add to our little stock of knowledge, should carefully note on their rubbings or photographs of Bindings, the title, date, and place where the contents were written or printed, and examine the insides of the cover, fly-leaves, etc., for evidence as to the original owner, make accurate note of printed matter in the covers, distinguishing between printers' waste and binders' waste. They may perhaps examine a dozen or more examples of a particular binding and find nothing; but let them persevere, they are certain now and again to discover valuable evidence, and one fact recorded in The Bookbinder will be worth more than a volume of pretty theories.

The obverse of the cover of the "Register of the Knights Templars" (see p. 3), bound in London at the end of the twelfth century, is adorned at both head and foot with a row of five palmated leaves, produced by the repetition of a stamp given full-size on page 4. The appearance of this stamp on a mediaeval English binding has taken some persons by surprise, and led them to doubt the authenticity of this specimen. It may, perhaps, be as well to commence this series of notes on early Bindings by some remarks on the various ornaments which occur on them, and I think I cannot choose a better one to begin with than this same palmated leaf, generally, it seems, looked on as being appropriate only for books relating to Pagan antiquities. Oddly enough, I have never met with it on any Greek, Italian, French, or Spanish bindings, but it occurs on English bindings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and was in use during the three following centuries all through Germany, from as far north as Lüneburg and Magdeburg, to Swabia in the south, and the borders of Hungary in the east.

[To be continued.]