

# McGill University

## Rare Books and Special Collections

### A collection of woodblocks

McGill's woodblock collection was very little known by the librarians, and even less by the public. It is only recently that the 822 items composing this collection were put together and inventoried. Not that the work had never been done before: between the acquisition of the collection and 1977, the collection was recorded twice! The index cards produced by former librarians held much information worth recording, and the newly produced inventory is a merger of the work accomplished before, to which data were added for research purposes.

The collection recorded in 1977 was composed of 802 items, purchased as a whole in 1932, except for five of them. Since then, McGill's Library acquired ten more blocks in 1987 and ten again in 2001, which had to be included in the new inventory.

This collection is very diverse, both in style and topics, but it is possible to draw up some outlines. As Christopher Heppner explained in his article "A collection of woodblocks and related materials at McGill University" in 1986<sup>1</sup>, the collection is mostly composed of blocks produced from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the North of England. Indeed, the names of Thomas Bewick (1753-1828) and John Bewick (1760-1795) are inscribed on several labels. Even if the blocks aren't always by their hands, the "Bewick School", as it is called, is well represented. Almost 250 blocks bear the name of one of the two Bewick brothers, and several of Thomas Bewick's pupils are also mentioned. These blocks complement McGill Library's Bewick Collection, holding 88 publications from 1775 to 2011 and several engravings by Thomas Bewick, which was probably the main interest of the library in purchasing the lot. About 160 blocks can be identified as Robert or George Cruikshank's work (1789-1856 and 1792-1878), as well as 14 blocks designed by William Blake. A large group of about 140 blocks offers examples of early work from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. One group also consists of blocks cut to illustrate children's books, which includes the blocks acquired by the library in 2001. A large number of blocks seem to have been used in chapbooks and have travelled from one printing office to another for different editions. Most of them are in good physical condition and were used for providing impressions for the index cards in the 1970's. As a whole, this collection documents the development and evolution of wood-engraving from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher HEPPNER, "A collection of woodblocks and related materials at McGill University", *The Book Collector*, XXXV, 1986, p.53-66.

Despite the organizational and descriptive work accomplished by 1977, the collection remained poorly known. The collection's origin itself was unknown, except for the fact that the woodblocks were believed to have been acquired between 1900 and 1945. An internal inventory from 1988 stated that the library's Bewick collection was constituted of "89 books; 700 blocks; mss". The collection's description is as follow:

Established c. 1969. Formed from items already in RBD general collections. Most of the woodblocks were acquired in 1932 from Blackwell's, and were formerly in the collection of G. Thorndrury. Other individual blocks were added to the collection over the years. 10 blocks acquired in 1987 with the assistance of SSHRC and Mr. David Lank are housed in the Blacker-Wood library.

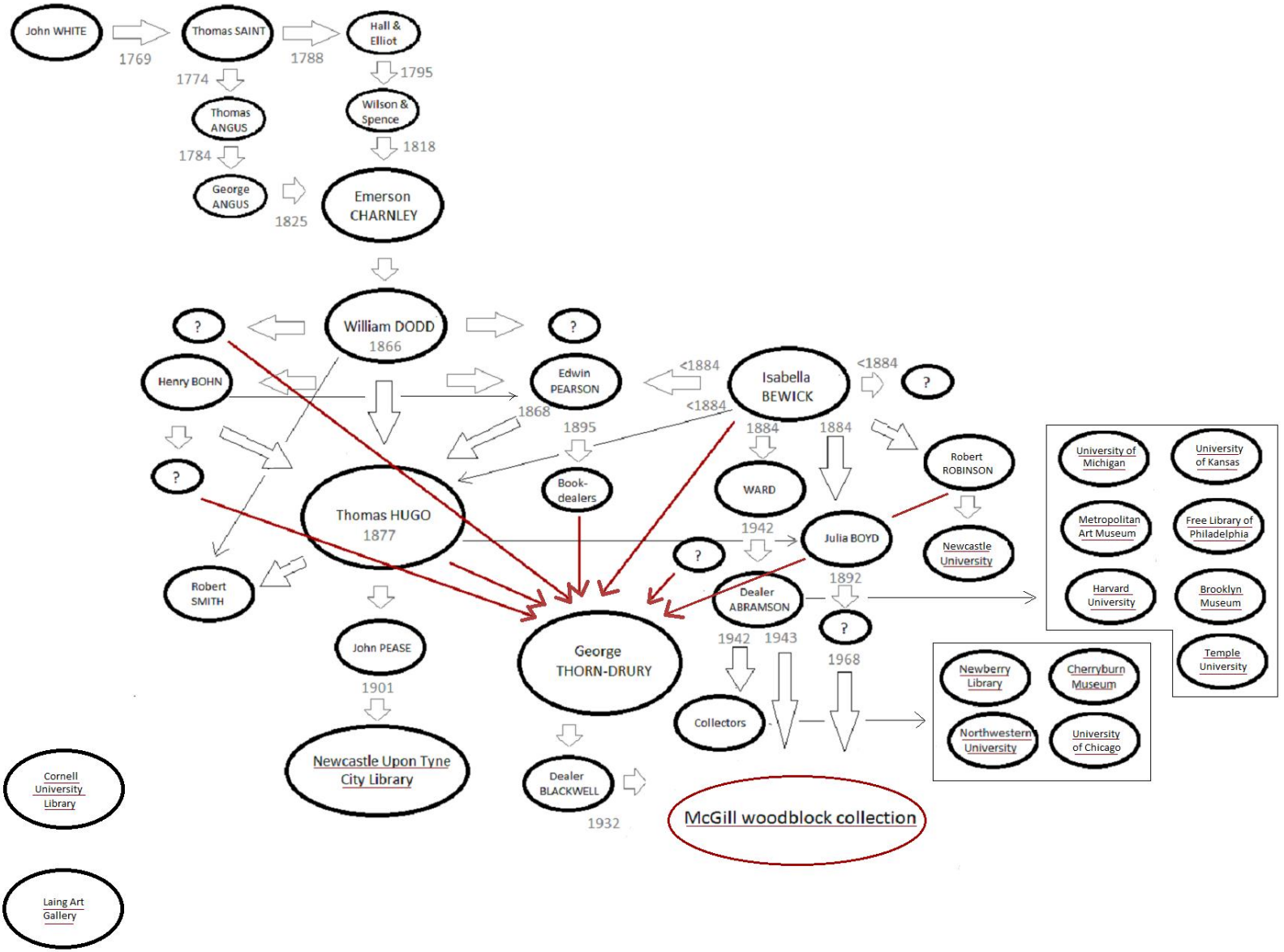
It only came to our attention after further inquiry that the woodblocks mentioned as part of the Bewick collection were the same woodblocks we were currently investigating. The provenance information provided here was confirmed by the library's order book, as we'll see below.

Very few references to McGill's collection were found: except for Christopher Heppner's article in the *Book Collector* in 1986, none of the studies regarding Bewick make mentions of this collection. In a 1968 article in *The Book Collector*, Frances M. Thomson wrote:

This was a collection of a large number of early cuts which were bought by a Newcastle bookseller, Emerson Charnley, in 1825, at the sale of the effects of the Newcastle printer George Angus [...]. The cuts were later acquired by another bookseller, William Dodd [...]. Unfortunately this collection of woodcuts has since disappeared without trace.

Around 1977, at the same time as Jennifer Peles was recording the blocks, Christopher Heppner, professor at McGill, investigated the collection and published an article in *The Book Collector*. This article brings to light several aspects of the collection. He mentions for example that Dodd's collection, mentioned by Frances Thomson, was sold in 1895 by Sotheby, and that the Newcastle copy of the auction catalogue (which he took the time to photocopy and leave for us to read) reveals the buyers' names: Armstrong, Kelly, Redway, Robson, Tuer and Truman. How the collection then arrived at McGill, however, or when, he didn't know.

The new inventory of the collection provides us with numerous leads to explore and find more about the blocks. With the help of information given by Christopher Heppner's article, we've been able to retrace the journey of McGill's collection before it arrived in Montreal. It's a complex history, and involves a collection originally much larger than the one purchased by McGill Library. This "map" can give us an idea of the blocks' route.



The “genealogical tree” of McGill’s woodblock collection.

The red links show the different potential provenances of Thorn-Drury collection. The underlined locations are the existing, important, and known collections of “Newcastle” woodblocks.

As explained by Christopher Heppner, the origin of the collection is John White’s printing shop. John White (1689-1769) was a printer in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He inherited his father’s collection of woodblocks from York, which explains that some blocks are older than the rest of them. His partner Thomas Saint inherited the blocks with the shop when White died. Thomas Saint is known to be the

printer of Bewick's first editions. A large group of Saint's blocks then passed to Thomas Angus, another Newcastle printer. Angus worked with Thomas Bewick until 1776 and his son George continued the business after his father's death in 1784. In 1825, George Angus went bankrupt and sold his woodblocks to another Newcastle bookseller, Emerson Charnley. A few years earlier, in 1818, Charnley had already bought the rest of Thomas Saint's blocks from the printers who purchased them after Saint's death. In 1825, then, Thomas Saint's collection is reunited in Charnley's possession. This enormous collection of several thousand blocks then passed to William Dodd, Charnley's successor. In 1858, Charnley's son published *Specimens of early wood engraving* with 730 blocks, and Dodd issued a new edition four years later with 806 blocks. At this point, Christopher Heppner doesn't know any more than Frances Thomson about what became of the collection.

The dispersal of the collection began with Dodd's sale. We don't know when Dodd began selling the blocks, but by 1866 it is believed that most of the blocks were bought by Henry George Bohn (1796-1884), Thomas Hugo (1820-1876), both collectors, and Edwin Pearson, a book dealer. Henry Bohn's collection was sold during his lifetime and at auction after his death.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hugo seems to have purchased blocks from Bohn and Pearson in the 1860's, especially during the 1868 auction of Pearson's collection.<sup>3</sup> The rest of Pearson's woodblock collection was sold at auction in 1895, along with other woodblock collections. It appears, as Christopher Heppner suggested, that most of the blocks now at McGill Library were sold during this auction. The blocks were sold by lots to the book dealers already named. Identifying the blocks from the catalogue's description is complex. Some connections are possible but considering the little information we have about the blocks and the brevity of the catalogue's description, it is hard to make any definitive assertion.

We don't know what happened to the blocks between their purchase at the Sotheby auction, and their purchase by George Thorn-Drury (1860-1931). We don't know when the blocks were acquired by this Oxford professor, or when they were sold to the book dealer Blackwell. We learned of these things thanks to the McGill Library order books. Page 481 of the 1931-1932 order book:

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew, H. C. G., B. H. Harrison, P. Oxford University and A. British (2004). "Oxford dictionary of national biography." Also known as: Oxford DNB.

<sup>3</sup> Deduced from Thomas Hugo's prefaces and books about his collection, see bibliography.

May 13th, 1932.

Messrs. B. H. Blackwell Ltd.,  
50 & 51 Broad St.,  
Oxford.

Gentlemen:

We beg to confirm herewith our cable of  
the 13th. inst., for the following.

We enclose herewith our shipping instruc-  
tions, to be carefully followed and two copies of the  
H.B. form. Kindly address all to the Order Department  
in this Library.

Faithfully yours,

Enc.  
DPH/IB.

Order Department.

AUG 16 1932 57069

Woodblocks.  
A unique and vastly interesting  
collection of nearly 800 original  
wood-blocks formerly belonging  
to G. Thorn-drury, Esq., comprising  
a number of curious early blocks  
from the White Collection, a large  
number of blocks from the hands  
of the Bewicks, with examples of  
their early work, many Cruikshank  
blocks (mainly engraved by other  
artists), and numerous other  
attractive and curious items.  
Cat. 308/1457. - £ 15.0.0.

George Thorn-Drury's library was sold at a Sotheby auction in 1931-1932, but based on the sale catalogue it seems that the blocks were not part of the sale. The librarians at the Bodleian Library, depository of Thorn-Drury papers, couldn't find any mention of a woodblock collection in Thorn-Drury's archives. Blackwell's archives are now at Merton College in Oxford, which I have contacted, but it seems that there is no surviving record of Blackwell's purchase of the collection from Thorn-Drury's estate, nor its subsequent sale to McGill in 1932. How the blocks ended up in the possession of Blackwell, and, maybe more importantly, how they ended up in the possession of Thorn-Drury, is still undetermined. Considering the content of the McGill woodblock collection, it is very possible that Thorn-Drury also

purchased blocks from other collections, especially from the sale of Henry Bohn's<sup>4</sup> or Thomas Hugo's<sup>5</sup> former collections. But in 1932, most of the existing McGill collection was in Montreal.

There is one group of woodblocks quite distinct from the others that we haven't yet mentioned. A collection of woodblocks remained in Thomas Bewick's possession, composed mostly of the blocks engraved for the *History of Quadrupeds*, the *History of British Birds*, *Aesop's fables*, and Bewick's autobiography. Bewick's daughters inherited the collection at their father's death, and the collection was sold at auction in 1884, when Isabella Bewick, the last surviving daughter, died. During her lifetime, she donated and sold some of her father's works to the British Museum and to collectors like Thomas Hugo and Robert Robinson.<sup>6</sup> The 1314 blocks of the four most famous works by Thomas Bewick, still in her possession when she died, were purchased by Robert Ward and son, Newcastle printers, cousins of the Bewicks.<sup>7</sup> A second sale with "residues" of the collection took place a few months later, and most of the blocks were purchased either by Julia Boyd, a Newcastle book collector, or by Robert Robinson, a book dealer and friend of Bewick's daughters.<sup>8</sup> Julia Boyd's collection was sold at auction in 1892. Only one block from her collection seems to have ended up at McGill, but this block was purchased more than thirty years after the rest of the collection, in 1968<sup>9</sup>. The Wards' collection was sold at auction in 1942, and was purchased by a Chicago book dealer, Ben Abramson, who sold the blocks individually to various North American institutions.<sup>10</sup> McGill possesses thirteen blocks from this collection, three purchased in 1943<sup>11</sup> and ten purchased in 1987.<sup>12</sup>

Different dates of purchase are applied to two more blocks. One block was purchased in September 1961, according to the order paper found in the item's box and to the order book from this date.<sup>13</sup> One other block may have been acquired in 1939, according to the date on the hand-written label.<sup>14</sup> But this purchase doesn't appear in the library's order books, and the label isn't very clear as to whether this number, "1939", is a date or not. For these reasons, we believe that this block was acquired in 1932 with the rest of the collection.

Ten woodblocks belonging to the Sheila Bourke collection have also been integrated into the inventory.<sup>15</sup> These blocks are quite different from the rest of the woodblock collection, as they were used in the 1860s' in New York. But they relate to the other blocks in their subject: they illustrate a small

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<sup>4</sup> Woodblock #402

<sup>5</sup> Woodblocks #173, #237, #238, #240, #247, #249, #283, #295, #364, #461, #506, #515, #518, #519, #520, #523, #556, #566, #569, #603, #630, #643, #720, #752, #755, #787, #792

<sup>6</sup> Cf Hugo Thomas' prefaces to his work on Bewick.

<sup>7</sup> Bewick, T. and R. Robinson (1885). *Bewick memento*. London : New York :, Field & Tuer [etc.] Scribner & Welford.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*

<sup>9</sup> Woodblock #297

<sup>10</sup> Hesterberg, W., T. Bewick and P. Hesterberg (2002). *Thomas Bewick, the blocks revisited : the story of the blocks in Chicago and the provenance of the nine blocks at the Hesterberg Press*. Evanston, IL :, Hesterberg Press.

<sup>11</sup> Woodblocks #47, #314, #326

<sup>12</sup> Woodblocks #803 to #812

<sup>13</sup> Woodblock #193

<sup>14</sup> Woodblocks #690

<sup>15</sup> Woodblocks #813 to #822

chapbook of the Cinderella fairytale. They were offered to McGill in 2001 as part of Sheila Bourke's donation to the Library.

The newly created inventory is a good starting point for studying and understanding better this collection. The next step would be to find the editions in which the blocks were used and integrate them to the inventory for research purposes. It is our hope that this collection, once known, will attract historians of the book and book illustration for further investigation.

Léa Constantin

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*twelve o'clock each day, by Messrs. Davison and Son ... Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Newcastle-upon-Tyne : Printed by Ward, 1884.*

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