

An Ancient History

GREGORY FREEMAN shares the background of a rare 16th-century find, a translation of a popular work written a dozen centuries earlier.

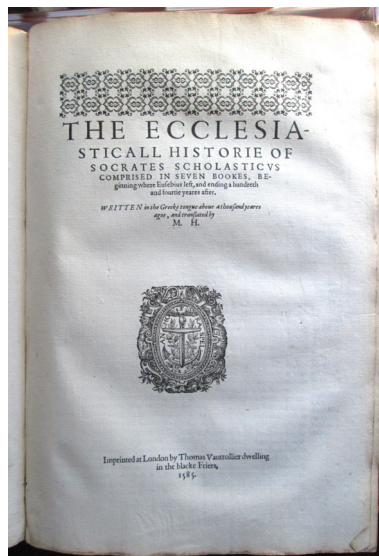
AT MACLEOD'S BOOKS, that venerable Vancouver bookshop, the story was told to me of two young women who discovered—somewhere down in the labyrinthine basement among the piles of boxes for which the shop is famous (or notorious, depending on your perspective)—a decrepit 430-year-old book in Tudor boards. Having made the discovery of a lifetime, perhaps with curiosity, hope and excitement, they brought their treasure upstairs to ask proprietor Don Stewart the price. Thankfully, they couldn't afford it, so the book was put on hold for me to see at a later date.

The folio is Meredith Hanmer's English translation of Eusebius, entitled *The Avncient Ecclesiasticall Histories of the first six hundred yeares after Christ, written in the Greeke tongue by three learned Historiographers, Eusebius, Socrates, and Euagrius. . . Imprinted at LONDON, by Thomas Vautroullier dwelling in the Blackefriers by Ludgate, 1585.*

Printer Thomas Vautrollier was a Huguenot born in Troyes in the early 16th century (the exact date is unknown). He arrived in England at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign. Soon after coming to London he set up as a bookbinder, then as a bookseller in partnership with Jan Dessersans, who had a business relationship with the famed printer Christopher Plantin of Antwerp.

In 1570 Vautrollier became a printer himself, notably printing Orlande de Lasuss' *Recueil du mellege* the same year, and quickly gaining a reputation for quality work. In 1575 he was chosen by Thomas Tallis and William Byrd to print their collaborative *Cantiones Sacrae*, the first fruit of Elizabeth's granting the two eminent composers a monopoly on printing music books. (Music enthusiasts will appreciate that the English vocal group Alamire, directed by David Skinner, superbly recorded Tallis and Byrd's *Cantiones Sacrae* on the Obsidian label in 2011.)

Vautrollier printed the first edition of *The Avncient Ecclesiasticall Histories* in 1577. The



Title page of Vautrollier's *Ecclesiasticall Historie* (1585). (Gregory Freeman photo)

translator, Meredith Hanmer (1543–1604), was immortalized by two 17th-century authors for reasons other than his linguistic skills: during his tenure as vicar of St. Leonard's, Shoreditch, he allegedly melted “the brass of several ancient monuments there into coin for his own use,” according to Weaver's *Ancient Funeral Monuments* (1631), a tale repeated in Anthony Wood's gossipy *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691–92).

Regardless of Hanmer's possible sacrilege and other accusations against him, his translation of the 4th-century Christian historian Eusebius proved popular and was printed several times up to the reign of Charles II. It supplied the want for martyr literature alongside the *Actes and Monuments* (a.k.a. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, first printed 1563) and perhaps buttressed the cause for Early Church simplicity in the contemporary church.

Reading Vautrollier's second edition of Hanmer, printed in 1585, has been a pleasure,



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Details of the author's copy of Vautrollier's Ecclesiasticall Historie. (Gregory Freeman photo)

not least of which because of his vocabulary: *hurliburly* (p. 153), variously spelled *whurlyburly* (p. 158) and *whurlyburlye* (p. 162); and *hugger-mugger* (p. 206). This is the first printing with Hanmer's dedicatory letter to Queen Elizabeth's favourite Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, dated December 15, 1584.

PECULIARITIES OF EARLY PRINTING

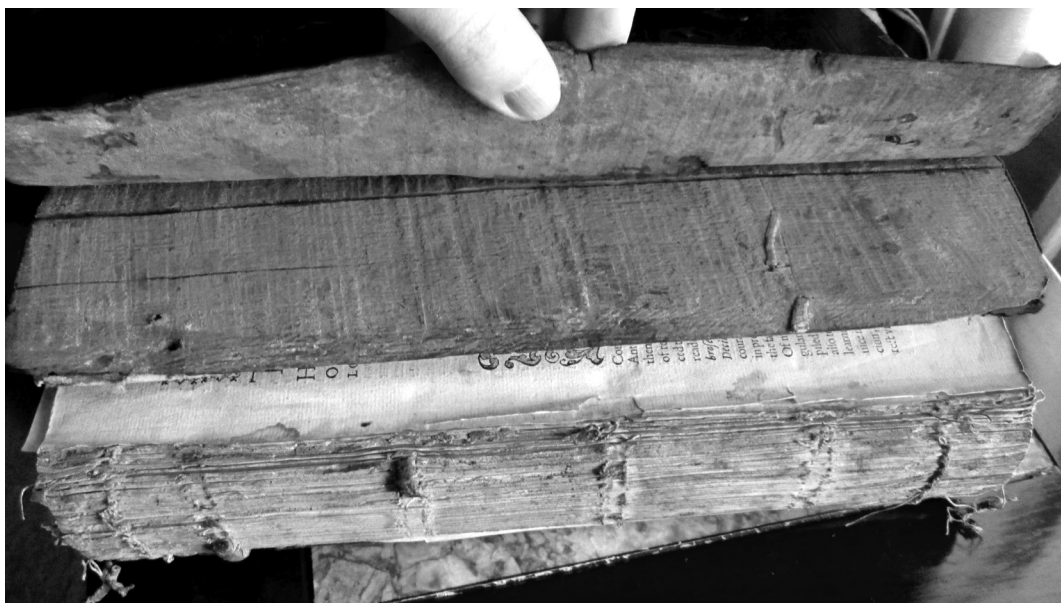
My copy is missing the general title page, but it does include the four following title pages as called for, each showing the printer's device of an anchor in an oval frame with the motto AN CHO | RA SPEI, *anchora spei*, or "anchor of hope."

Vautrollier's work is not quite perfect; besides the "Faultes escaped in the printing" there are a few insignificant imperfections, yet his work is exceptionally good. It was a common problem among English printers that the ink would show through the page, obscuring the lettering on the other side; in this edition, Vautrollier's print on the verso is only visible in white spaces and does not obscure any lettering. The blackletter and Roman fonts are clean and lucid, and not overly (but evenly) inked. In several places the black ink still has a sparkle in my copy.

The ligatures *oo*, *ee*, and *ct* appear in this book almost invariably, as opposed to their separate type counterparts. The double letters were cut upon the face of single shanks,

in precisely the same way that the more familiar ligature *æ* was produced. In studying the topic of 16th-century blackletter ligatures, it became apparent that Vautrollier was not alone in using these double letters: the practice dates back to the scriptoriums of the Middle Ages and was widespread in print for centuries. In England the specific *ee* ligature can be increasingly seen in books printed after 1550, as English steadily displaced the use of Latin. During the Great Vowel Shift—a phenomenon between 1350 and 1700 driven in part by the printing press and the standardization of English spelling—words formerly spelled *-ede* were changed to *-eed*, contributing to the use of that ligature (at least in Elizabeth's reign; as Roman replaced the use of blackletter in England during the 17th century, those vowel ligatures largely disappear).

It escaped my attention at first, but Vautrollier's catchwords are also printed on the verso only—that is, the first word of the top line of one page is printed below the bottom line of the preceding, but not on the recto. This is noted by McKerrow in *An Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students* as "a much-used method," however, the common practice in England before 1800 was to print the catchwords on both recto and verso. The book is paginated in the modern method of Roman numerals on both recto and verso at the top



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The exposed binding of the author's copy of Vautrollier's Ecclesiasticall Historie. (Gregory Freeman photo)

corner: this is notable, as the old folio system in England continued into the next century.

DILAPIDATED BINDING REVEALS ITS METHOD

What must have attracted the two women in MacLeod's basement to this Elizabethan pile surely was its binding. The spine is gone, and there are no cords left. The boards consist of embossed leather over quarter-sawn oak. The oblong binding stamps that surround the covers, creating a central rectangular panel, echo the engraved wood-block prints used to decorate the margins of early 16th-century pages. Interspersed along each row of stamps are human heads in medallions, not all easily discernible; one fellow seems to have his tongue sticking out. The stamps are extremely similar to those catalogued as HM. h. (11) 836 on plate 50 in J. B. Oldham's *English Blind-stamped Bindings*.

Long ago the book had clasps, of which the remains are but two sets of small circular nails on the front board and one pointed gothic metal boss on the rear board. The front board is vertically cracked: one can pull up the leather to see the wood split with two lacing channels (one vellum tag is extant) corresponding with the penultimate cords at either end.

One might ask whether I would have the book repaired, since the binding is so dilapidated. My answer would be no. A specially made box would be preferable. The binding is immensely interesting as it is. Refurbishing the spine would eliminate the rare access to view the wood and lacing channels beneath the leather. To keep the book safe I've tied it (when not in use) with the archival cotton tying tape used by rare books libraries. Other copies are for sale that have been re-spined or totally rebound and are easily obtainable as suitable reading copies.

In 1587, on Archbishop Whitgift's orders, John Knox's *History of the Reformation of Religion within the Realm of Scotland* was seized in Vautrollier's press, most likely on the sensitive grounds that Mary, Queen of Scots, who figures prominently in the history, had been executed in February that year. On July 10, 1587, Vautrollier wrote his will, which was proved on the 22nd of the same month. His press did not die with him: his widow and Richard Field continued under his device, which can be seen in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* of 1593–94.

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~ Gregory Freeman is a collector of antiquarian books and a regular contributor to *Amphora*. He lives in Surrey, B.C.