



## THE COVER

The Reverend Thomas Robbins (1777–1856) received on 28 July 1844 a letter from educator Henry Barnard offering him the position of librarian in The Connecticut Historical Society at Hartford. In his diary, Robbins, after noting receipt of the letter, remarked: “It is all of the great mercy of God.” A month later, on 25 July 1844, Barnard followed up that letter with another one that enthusiastically called Robbins, “the man of the Historical Society.” With those letters, Barnard relieved Robbins of a considerable embarrassment and ensured that The Connecticut Historical Society would have the services of one of the more eminent book collectors and antiquarians of the time. Robbins, a bachelor Congregational minister in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, and involved in a sex scandal over an innocent kiss, was in search of a new position; the historical society, trying to renew itself after fifteen years of lifeless inactivity and flush with the success of moving into new quarters at the newly constructed Wadsworth Atheneum, was in search of a librarian. With this appointment, a circle had come fully around. It was

Bookplate courtesy of The Connecticut Historical Society.

Robbins in 1822 who publicly called for the creation of a Connecticut historical society and when one was officially established in 1825 became its first corresponding secretary.

At the time of his removal from Mattapoisett to Hartford, Robbins was possessed of a substantial library of about 3,600 volumes concerning history and theology and about as many pamphlets. The society's elders were clearly just as interested in somehow acquiring the library as they were in acquiring Robbins's services. When Robbins was settled on as the society's librarian, one of his demands was an annual salary of \$300, a sum intended to cover not only his living expenses but also his book-collecting activities. When the society's funds could not cover that demand, Barnard personally guaranteed Robbins that amount. Later, when the society could not cover even the \$300, Robbins proposed to deed over his library to the society upon his death provided the society would pay him an annual salary of \$600. That condition was met, and upon Robbins's death in 1855, his library became the society's property, where it has remained ever since, each volume marked with the handsome bookplate shown on the cover.

Robbins's diaries detail the problems of moving such a substantial library. On 5 September 1844, he remarks that the books already filled forty crates. On 10 and 11 September they were loaded aboard a ship bound for Hartford, where they arrived on 19 September. In his diary Robbins expresses his concern about the arrival of the shipment; his anxiety over the matter was probably increased by the fact that as the shipment was being put aboard, "One box was broken and some books were injured. A very confused scene." But his mind was soon eased when upon unpacking the crates he discovered that the books had nicely survived the week's trip. Robbins had also had the foresight to request that his Mattapoisett congregation pay to remove his effects to Hartford. The congregation paid about \$450 for the privilege, a sum more than Robbins's annual salary as society librarian and the bulk of which went toward paying the freight on the book crates. The day after the ship sailed for Hartford, Robbins remarked in his diary of his library and personal finances: "I am not worth as much aside from my library as when I came to Mattapoisett, but would bless God for what I have."

Once the library arrived in Hartford and was unpacked and arranged in the society's rooms, it was the marvel of the city, a status it would hold for as long as Robbins lived. As he noted often in his diary, visitors were frequent even before the entire library was unpacked and put on the shelves, which delayed putting the books in order. Other problems, such as lack of an adequate heat source and improper shelves that had to be modified, also delayed the full opening of the library. But on 25

October 1844, Robbins remarked: "We finished putting up the books of my library. It was nearly done before the present week. It is much admired. It has required great labor." Robbins, however, seemed mindful of his role as librarian of the society. When Benjamin Lossing visited in 1847, his recollections indicate quite clearly that Robbins spent a good deal of time showing him the objects possessed by the society, as opposed to his own library, which he apparently kept separate from the society's collections. Many distinguished visitors, such as Peter Force, called on Robbins, and his library was visited regularly by people from far and wide. Robbins apparently treated each visitor with courtesy and respect and seems to have given a tour that would be the envy of any librarian to this day.

The library is rich in history and theology, with most volumes still in their original condition. Unlike some other collectors of his time, Robbins did not rebind his books into Morocco or other flashy bindings, so most of the bindings are original. Robbins does not appear to have been an extravagant collector, because all his bookplates record the prices he paid for the books to which they are affixed, and most of those prices are not exorbitant. He paid \$3.00 each for two slightly defective copies of the second edition of the Eliot Indian Bible, both of which he bought at the same time. He paid 50¢ for a copy of the first edition of Phyllis Wheatley's poems. One of the more amazing items in the library is a complete run of the *Journal des Sçavans*, in 385 volumes, the first scholarly periodical ever published, for which Robbins paid \$100. Because of his historical interests, Robbins also bought much older books. He owned two incunables: a copy of Aquinas's *Super quarto libro sententiarum* (Venice: Jensen, 1481), bought in 1839 for \$3.00; and a copy of Nicolaus de Lyra's commentaries on Matthew (Nuremberg: Koberger, 1493), one volume of the original four, which he bought in 1846 for \$8.00. He also owned a copy of Marcus Musurus and Aldus Manutius's Venice 1513 edition of Plato's works, which he bought in 1846 for \$30.00. But for the most part, the books were the substantial fare of the day: a copy of Jared Sparks's edition of Franklin's works (10 vols.; Boston, 1840), bought in 1848 for \$15.00; an edition of Jonathan Edwards's works (10 vols.; New York, 1829), purchased in 1834 for \$17.50; an edition of John Witherspoon's works (4 vols.; Philadelphia, 1800–01), acquired in 1819 for \$6.00; and a copy of Sparks's edition of George Washington's letters (12 vols.; Boston, 1838–39), for which he paid \$42.00 in 1840. One minor indication of bibliographic worldly vanity, against which Robbins continually asked God for strength, may be seen in his copy of Robert Watts's *Psalms of David* (London, 1783). Robbins's copy is in a magnificent contemporary binding of red straight-grain Morocco with gilt working. To this copy he added a small black leather label at the foot of the spine on which his

name is tooled in gilt letters. Other than this one manifestation, however, Robbins seems to have been content to leave his books as he found them.

Ironically, Robbins rarely recorded from whom he bought any of the books, so precisely how he built his library is a mystery. The first book in his collection is dated 1793, while he was a student at Yale, and was a gift from his father. His diaries do contain numerous mentions of booksellers and his dealings with them, but specifics are rarely revealed. He had an account with the Boston firm of Little & Brown, for example, and at one point in 1845 expresses his delight that it turns out he has a credit with them of \$22.00, when he believed instead that he owed them that amount. He also sometimes mentions buying books at auctions, such as a "public auction" he attended in November 1844, while in New York City for the fortieth anniversary celebration for the New-York Historical Society. On occasion, he also traded books, as in January 1845, when he noted: "Exchanged some of my books and pamphlets that were valuable for some large volumes very valuable." But the diaries rarely reveal the specific circumstances surrounding the acquisition of any particular volumes. Whatever book bills were in his personal papers have not survived.

Robbins's library has undergone numerous vicissitudes since it was bequeathed to the society. At some point, all the pamphlet volumes were disbound, and their contents disappeared into the general collections. Many of the individual volumes were also dispersed among the general collections, although that process was never completed, and in the early 1980s many of the volumes from Robbins's library sat as an uncatalogued group on the society's shelves. The society suffered a disastrous flood in 1955 and another in 1972, both of which resulted in the destruction of some volumes from Robbins's library. The latter flood was particularly disastrous to the collection, because it heavily damaged most of the folio and quarto volumes. The survivors were disbound and the sheets left on the shelves. Robbins's diaries make it clear that he also lent his books and contain complaints that borrowers failed to return items. To this day the society encounters and buys books in the marketplace that were alienated from Robbins's library, readily identifiable by their distinctive bookplate. In one case a book was restored to the library only through a shadow. The bookplate itself had been removed, but its image, still legible, had been offset to the front flyleaf.

In the past decade efforts have been made to restore Robbins's library. The pamphlets are impossible to recover, of course, but because of Robbins's steadfast habit of affixing a bookplate to every volume, most individual titles have been identified, removed from the general collections, and regrouped once again, sitting on the shelves in the order he intended. A conservation program, underwritten by a grant from the

State of Connecticut, has resulted in the rebinding of most of the damaged quarto and folio volumes. Other volumes are restored with the society's own funds. Thus, Robbins's library begins again to resume its former shape. Most of these titles have now been catalogued on OCLC. As part of Robbins's legacy, the society also received all his personal manuscripts. Among those manuscripts are the annual inventories he made of his library, thus allowing us to see exactly how the library grew over the years. As his library increased, Robbins had to have new furniture made to hold the volumes. The society also possesses all that furniture, including his original library tables.

Robbins was a deeply religious man who sought God's guidance and discipline in all things. The formation of his library was no exception, and the item bearing bookplate #1 is a Bible. Deep in contemplation about what was to become of the collection, he noted in his diary for 4 November 1845, "Last evening endeavored to consecrate myself anew to the disposal of God, particularly with regard to my property." He altered his will numerous times to provide different methods of ensuring his library's continued existence after his death, before finally contracting with the society on 27 May 1846 to bequeath the library to the society in exchange for an annual salary of \$600. Robbins was at one time considering giving the books to Harvard but heeded his sister's advice concerning the problem of adding to Harvard's "duplicates." Upon his death, the library became the society's property. Ever mindful of his mission, however, Robbins also left the society the sum of \$1,000 to be used for "the preservation and increase" of the society's library. To this day not only his library but also his bequest is being used for the benefit of all researchers at The Connecticut Historical Society.

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