

OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

McGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL, CANADA

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THE FORTSAS CATALOGUE*



ne of the most ingenious hoaxes ever perpetrated in the small but international world of bibliophiles and bibliographers is revealed in items 6964-6968 of the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* (fig. 1). They, particularly *Bibl. Osl.* 6964 and *Bibl. Osl.* 6966, are the basic published documents concerning the famous "Fortsas biblio-hoax" as it came to be known.

The incident took place in 1840. In July of that year, a catalogue appeared in Belgium (*Bibl. Osl.* No. 6964), announcing the sale of the private collection of a fanatical bibliophile, Jean-Népomucène-Auguste Pichauld, Comte de Fortsas, "né le 24 octobre 1770 à son château de Fortsas, près de Binche, en Hainaut... décédé au lieu même de sa naissance... le 1er septembre 1839." The biographical note preceding the catalogue indicates that the Count's main interest in life was his book-collection, which was composed entirely of "unique" works, not to be found in other libraries and bibliographies or catalogues. If the Count discovered that another copy of a work in his library had been seen elsewhere or noted in a list, he at once disposed of the offending volume. The result was that at the time of his death the collection had dwindled to a mere fifty-two volumes, every one of them of exceptional rarity.

The catalogue, produced with great care and bibliographical expertise, lists works in French, Latin and Flemish, ranging in date from the 15th to the 19th century, covering a wide variety of subjects: history (local and national, the French Revolution), antiquities, numismatics, memoirs, philology, theology, folklore, etc. There is at least one "roman à clef" and several satirical and "curious" works. There are many books of interest to the collector of imprints of local importance (Mons, Liège, Bruges) and of Elzeviers. Association or presentation copies bear autographs or notes in the hand of Daniel Elzevier, Leibnitz, Hotman. The lover of fine bindings has his choice of books bound in red, blue, green, yellow and even violet or puce morocco, vellum and gold-tooled calf. Some bindings are the works of famous artists such as Thouvenin.

The books, except for an occasional worm hole or tiny ink-blot, are noted as being in perfect condition, and of course "unique". The annotations stress the uniqueness by relating incidents which caused the disappearance of all of the other copies of a given book.

CHALON (Renier [Hubert Ghislain])
1802-89.

6964. Catalogue d'une très-riche mais peu nombreuse Collection de Livres provenant de la Bibliothèque de feu M.^r le Comte J.-N.-A. de Fortsas, dont la vente se fera à Binche, le 10 août 1840... 8°. *Mons, typogr. d'Em. Hoyois, libraire*, (1840).

An annotated list of 52 unique, unknown works, with an account of 'Jean-Népomucène-Auguste, cte. de Fortsas' (1770-1839). One of 132 copies. Bk.-plate of Gustave van Havre.

Chalon's famous hoax; both Fortsas and his collection were made plausible enough to deceive the bibliophiles.

A MS. note in the volume refers to an article by De Reiffenberg in the *Bibliophile Belge*, i, p. 167; this is partially reprinted in no. 6966, p. 190. [W. O.]

6965. *The same*. The Fortsas Catalogue. la. 8°. [*Lond. &c.*, 1884.]

Containing the fictitious titles with the descriptions translated. Extr. fr. *The Bibliographer*, vol. 6, pp. 8-12, 131-5.

The original is reprinted in no. 5356.

6966. Documents et Particularités historiques sur le Catalogue du comte de Fortsas; ouvrage dédié aux Bibliophiles de tous les pays, par Emm. Hoyois, imprimeur-éditeur... la. 8°. *Mons*, (1857).

By Hoyois, the publisher of the original catalogue, giving his correspondence with Chalon and others on a proposed reprint to which Chalon objected. Illustrated. One of 200 copies. Inserted: cutting from *The Times*, 5 Apr., 1909, referring to the Fortsas hoax, &c.

I bought this and the original at the Van Havre sale, Dec. 1905, for fl. 33. W. Osler.

CHESTRET DE HANEFFE ([JULES], Baron DE).

6967. Notice sur Renier Chalon... 8°. *Bruxelles*, 1900.

With portr. and bibliography. Extr. fr. *Annuaire Acad. Roy. des Sciences [&c.] de Belgique*, 1900, pp. 45-80.

Sent to me by Prof. Cumont, July 28th. I sat next to him at our Gaudy (1912) and asked him about Chalon. W. Osler.

D[EMAN] (E.).

6968. Catalogue des Livres... composant la Bibliothèque de feu M. Renier Chalon. la. 8°. *Bruxelles*, 1890.

Sale-catalogue. Introduction signed E. D[eman]. Some prices marked in pencil. Pres. by L. L. Mackall, Esq., 1914.

Fig. 1

*By Mlle Liana Van Der Bellen, Professeur assistant, Ecole de Bibliothéconomie, Université de Montréal.

The initial letter used on this page is reproduced from *Bibl. Osl.* 7556, a 16th century Florentine manuscript of the statutes of the gild-merchant of Florence.

The sale was announced for the 10th of August, at the office of a notary in the small town of Binche. M. Emmanuel Hoyois, bookseller at Mons, was accepting advance bids for the items. It appears that only 132 copies of the catalogue were printed and sent to carefully selected bookmen, as well as to institutions and bibliophile societies all over Europe. There was great interest and much curiosity towards the extraordinary sale. Nobody had heard of the Count and his collection, but with the secretive habits of this exemplary bibliomaniac this was really not surprising!

Many wrote to Hoyois to inquire about the sale and to place bids. Others, being somewhat sceptical, decided to come in person to Binche, to take a look at the books and to be present at the sale where competition promised to be intense and prices astronomical. The newspaper, *Patriote belge*, commented on the excitement generated by this event: "L'annonce de la vente du 10 août, jetée dans le public des amateurs de livres de tous les pays avec des circonstances aussi singulières, remua étrangement le public. Jamais tant de mouvement ne se fit parmi les bibliomanes de la France, de l'Allemagne, de l'Angleterre et de la Belgique..." Many famous and less well-known names are mentioned in the documents as having been seriously interested or having made the trip to Binche. The Roxburghe Club and the Camden Society sent representatives. Brunet, Techener, Nodier, Crozet, Lebeau, and Quérard of France either came or sent inquiries, not to mention the many Belgian bibliophiles, bibliographers and dealers. One of them exclaims in his letter to Hoyois: "Quelles richesses, Grands Dieux! Je viens (de) lire le catalogue et j'en suis encore tout étourdi... Bienheureux ceux qui en rapporteront seulement deux ou trois bijoux!" The Belgian ambassador to England sent open bids for eight books which he wanted "at all costs." Crozet, the bookseller to the Bibliothèque royale at Paris, ordered two items. Baron de Reiffenberg, the learned librarian of the Royal Library at Brussels was determined to secure about thirty of the valuable books for his collection. An urgent cabinet meeting had to be held in order to appropriate the necessary funds for this purchase.

Newspapers carried articles on the forthcoming sale. Many contradictory rumours circulated: some insinuated that the Count had never existed and the catalogue was a fake. They seemed to have been in the minority. On the other hand, an elderly gentleman suddenly recalled having visited the Count at his castle some years ago. A book collector insisted that he had seen or owned copies of the supposedly "unique" volumes in the Fortsas Library.

Be that as it may, driven by curiosity or acute bibliomania, many bookmen found their way to Binche, either openly or secretly, travelling incognito by devious routes. On the eve of the sale, the local inns were doing a roaring business, and excitement was running high. The townspeople were amazed, and not a little alarmed by the sudden influx of so many foreigners, some distinguished, some suspicious-looking, all of whom were roaming the streets and inquiring the way to the "étude" of Maître Mourlon. A group of citizens, fearing a revolutionary conspiracy, alerted the Chief of Police.

Before the authorities could decide on a course of action, the visitors departed as suddenly and furtively as they had arrived! There was no more reason for them to linger in the town after the arrival of the evening newspapers which carried the following "Avis":

"Le public est informé que la belle bibliothèque de M. le Comte Fortsas ne sera pas vendue aux enchères. Mrs les amateurs l'apprendront sans doute à regret; mais cette précieuse collection ne sera pas perdue pour ce pays: elle a été acquise par la ville de Binche pour sa bibliothèque publique..."

Reports had already spread that the office of the auctioneer was not to be found. Moreover, it was soon discovered that Binche did not have a public library. Nobody in town had ever heard of the Count and his château was certainly not on the map! Records reveal that some of the "victims" of the hoax took it as a very successful and clever joke. Many were furious because it was a real blow to their pride as expert bookmen. However, nobody lost much more than the expense of the trip to Binche and most were now the lucky possessors of a catalogue which itself was fast becoming a rare collector's item.

Who was responsible for this bibliophilic joke? How to explain the fact that many of Europe's leading bookmen were duped? The author was not Hoyois, the printer, but his good friend, president of the Société des bibliophiles de Mons, Renier Chalon, well-known for his learned writings on archaeological and numismatic subjects, but equally famous for his practical jokes directed at his fellow scholars. It seems that on several occasions he made up ancient coins to be discovered and reported on by gullible antiquaries. His bibliographical pleasantries include among others the publication, under the anagram of Heleno Cranir, of a parody on scientific "mémoires," entitled *De la vitesse relative et anacoustique de l'akinésie d'un corps solide au repos* (1840). His authorship of the catalogue was guessed by some of his compatriots even before the sale. One of them, M. L. Polain, archivist of Liège, sent a notice to a paper timed to appear on the 10th of August, in which he noted: "La vente de Binche est tout bonnement une nouvelle facétie, une mystification du président de la Société des bibliophiles de Mons, M. Chalon, dont on connaît l'esprit caustique et railleur."

The examination of the catalogue reveals some of the reasons for the success of the deception. At casual perusal it appears perfectly authentic: the description of the items and the annotations are obviously devised by someone very familiar with the literature of the various subjects and the collecting trends of the time. Not all the titles are outright fabrications. Sometimes a non-existent work is attributed to a real author, sometimes a title is slightly altered. Good examples are items 30 and 75:

30. *Le Sardanapale de ce temps*. A la Sphère, 1699, in-12 de 304 p., vél. blanc.

Satire hollandaise contre Louis XIV. Cette pièce obscène est de l'infâme et mystérieux Corneille Blessebois, qui se nomme dans l'avant-propos ...

Pierre-Corneille Blessebois (1646?-1700?) was a 17th century author of scurrilous works, although of course there is no record of this title. On the other hand, many satires on Louis XIV were published in Holland during the 17th century, under such titles as *L'ancien bâtard protecteur du nouveau* (1690) and many others. In item 75, everything corresponds to an existing edition of the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, with annotations by Denis Godefroy (Gothofredus), published by Elsevier in 1663: However, there is no record of this particular "unique" issue of one copy on vellum, for the "Etats de Hollande." There is no such book as no. 8. *Honestes voluptez des plaisirs de la table ...*, but there are other works on the culinary arts beginning with the words *L'honnête volupté, ouvrage traitant des plaisirs ...* etc.

The author of the Fortsas catalogue was familiar with the interests of many individual collectors, for whom he made up particular items. Examples of this are items 79 and 199, both supposedly printed by Arend de Keyser in the 15th century. They were included for the benefit of the librarian and archivist of Gand, Voisin, who was collecting Keyser imprints for a study. Item 48, *Mes campagnes aux Pays-Bas*, anonymous (and scandalous) memoirs of the Prince de Ligne, could have interested him also, since he is the author of *Souvenirs de la bibliothèque des comtes de Ligne*. One of the many rumours circulating after the publication of the Fortsas catalogue insinuated that a descendant of the prince had commissioned Voisin to obtain item 48 at any price. M. Octave Delepierre, author of many books on the history of Bruges and a passionate bibliophile, could be counted upon to bid for No. 11: *Histoire des antiquités et prérogatives de la ville de Bruges ...*. M. Lebeau of Paris, collector of books and pamphlets on the reign of Louis XIV, would certainly make the trip to Binche to acquire items 30 and 43. Many other examples could be given.

It has been said that in preparation for his catalogue, Chalon personally visited several of his future "victims" leading the talk to their particular interests and "desiderata" taking mental notes for future reference.

Chalon never denied having compiled the catalogue and some years later his statements and actions in connection with a project to reprint it definitely established his authorship.

Hoyois had been solicited by many bookmen to bring out a new edition of the catalogue, which had become a rare collector's item. In 1855, he set about to prepare the reprint and sent around about 250 copies of a prospectus announcing that subscriptions were accepted. However, he had been collecting clippings and articles from newspapers and journals that had appeared before and after the "sale" and he had kept his correspondence "si précieuse, des notabilités en bibliophilie pour l'achat de certains ouvrages." He was going to append all this, as well as his own commentary, to the catalogue. He justified his action by the fact that many of those concerned had since died, and that for others "les réputations sont des mieux établies et à l'abri de toute critique..."

Chalon, however, was violently opposed to this publication, particularly of some of the letters of which he had himself passed copies on to Hoyois. He obviously did not want to revive the memories of this practical joke of his (relative) youth. The two men corresponded privately and publicly; Chalon warned the members of the Société des bibliophiles not to subscribe to the new version of the catalogue. He even threatened court action against Hoyois, for "abus de confiance" and "attentat à la propriété littéraire et privée." Hoyois could not reprint the catalogue under those conditions. However, he published all the pertinent documents and letters, including his latest exchanges with Chalon, in the volume *Documents et particularités historiques sur le catalogue du comte Fortsas* (Bibl. Osl. 6966). Practically all the items from the catalogue were reproduced within the text, when mentioned in the letters or articles. The bitter controversy had ended a lifelong friendship and association between Hoyois and Chalon. Hoyois, in his *Documents* goes as far as to intimate that Chalon had stolen his ideas from a friend and fellow-bibliophile, Henri Delmotte, an archivist and librarian at Mons. Delmotte was apparently also a great humorist and author of several vaudevilles and facetious works, such as *Voyage pittoresque and industriel dans le Paraguay-Roux et la Paligénésie australe, par Tridace-Nafé-Théodrome de Kaout-chouk, gentilhomme breton* (1835). Delmotte had died around 1838. He had been particularly fond of telling stories about the adventures of the Prince de Ligne which were incorporated into the Fortsas catalogue as item No. 48.

In later years the catalogue was reprinted many times, some reprints were authorized by Chalon, some by Hoyois, some were completely unauthorized versions. Occasionally they are even indicated as being new editions. Often, the catalogue appeared in bibliographical journals, accompanied by commentaries, in France, England, the United States and elsewhere. Gustave Brunet reproduced it in his *Essai sur les bibliothèques imaginaires*. The most recent reprints are: *The Fortsas Bibliohoax*, by Walter Klinefelter, with a reprint of the Fortsas Catalogue and bibliographical notes and comment by Weber de Vore. New York: Press of the Woolly Whale, 1942. (72pp.) and *The Fortsas Catalogue. A*

Whale, 1942. (72pp.) and The Fortsas Catalogue. A Facsimile, with an introduction by Lessing J. Rosenwald. North Hills, Pa., printed for the Philobiblon Club (by the) Bird & Bull, 1970. 13pp. (Facsimile of first edition of the catalogue in pocket at end of the volume.)

Editorial Committee for the Newsletter: Ellen B. Wells, Editor; E.H. Bensley, M.D., Advisor; Karl Holeczek, Photography.

MEETINGS

It looks as if 1972 will be the year of the trek. The following meetings may be of interest to readers of the *Newsletter*:

- May 3-6 AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE, Montreal, at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel. Members of the Association will receive the usual re-registration information in the spring, and non-members may write to the Secretary-Treasurer, Dr. Geneviève Miller, 11000 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44106, U.S.A. for further information.
- May 4 AMERICAN OSLER SOCIETY, Montreal, at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel. Although the dinner meeting is closed to non-members, it will be followed by an open meeting for the Presidential Address by Dr. George T. Harrell, Dean, Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine and Director, Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, Hershey, Pa., and the guest speaker, Dr. Wilder Penfield. Inquiries may be addressed to the Treasurer-Historian, Dr. Alfred R. Henderson, 5208 Danbury Road, Bethesda, Md. 20014, U.S.A.
- Sept. 2-9 23rd INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE, London. Inquiries may be addressed to D. Geraint James, General Secretary, at the Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Rd., London N.W.1, England. As we go to press, a program has been made available. On Sept. 5th there will be a joint meeting of the Osler Club of London and the American Osler Society at the Royal College of Physicians. Dr. James is also arranging for a reception at the College for as many Osler societies from various parts of the world as can come.
- Aug. 21-30 24th INTERNATIONAL GEOLOGICAL CONGRESS, Montreal. There will be papers given on the history of geology and items from the Adams Collection of the History of Geology will be on display at McGill University. Inquiries may be addressed to the Secretary-General, 24th International Geological Congress, 601 Booth Street, Ottawa 4, Ontario, Canada.

DUPLICATE SALES

The sale of duplicate items listed in Garrison and Morton's *Medical Bibliography* and Blake and Roos' *Medical Reference Works*, and of 19th century Canadian medical journals, offered to Canadian medical school libraries, resulted in a billing of \$660.

Newsletter Sale No. 2 netted receipts of about \$650. *Newsletter* Sale No. 3, just ended, grossed about \$4500 from a total of fifty-nine participants. There is still a residue of sale duplicates. These 1200 volumes are mostly secondary materials (biographies, histories of specialties, history of medicine by time or country), as well as more Osleriana. The latter will be offered to *Newsletter* readers. The 1200 volumes are to be sold en bloc to the dealer or institution making the highest "bid," probably in the summer of 1972.

CHARAKA CLUB SAFARI TO THE LIBRARY

The Charaka Club, an amiable group of physicians who get together to visit and converse on non-medical matters, was founded in New York in 1898. Many collectors and libraries have the eleven volumes of their published *Proceedings*, 1902-1947.

Dr. Wilder Penfield, a member, acted as a local host to Club members who flew to Montreal on October 27th for a day's visit. After lunch at the Montreal Neurological Institute, and a talk, "Birth of an Institute," by Dr. Penfield, the group came to the Osler Library. A brief program was presented in the W.W. Francis Seminar Room including talks by Dr. E.H. Bensley ("Osler in Montreal"), Dr. D.G. Bates ("Some Highlights in Osler's Collection"), Miss E.B. Wells ("The Development of the Osler Library") and Dr. W. Feindel ("Some Thoughts on Thomas Willis"). After a sherry interlude, Club members visited the Library and looked at the exhibit, "McGill Medical Faculty - Glimpses of Earlier Days."

Dinner at a local restaurant was followed by remarks from the President of the Club, Dr. Philip Weidel, and two talks: "The Charaka Club - 1898 and Onward" by Dr. Grant Sanger and "William Osler, the Man I Remember" by Dr. Penfield. Then the indefatigable safari members made their way back to the United States.

APPOINTMENTS

The Board of Governors of McGill University has approved two recommendations made by the Board of Curators of the Osler Library. The first of these was to accept the resignation of Dr. Donald G. Bates as Acting Osler Librarian, and the second to appoint Miss Ellen Wells to succeed him as Acting Osler Librarian. These changes became effective October 1, 1971.

Dr. Bates, as Chairman of the Department of the History of Medicine, remains a member of the Board of Curators and Chairman of the Standing Committee of this Board. With her new appointment, Miss Wells becomes Secretary to the Board.

For the three years prior to taking this position, Miss Wells had been Associate Osler Librarian. In announcing the appointment of Miss Wells, Dean McGregor, Chairman of the Board of Curators, said, "I think McGill and the Osler Library are extremely fortunate."