

The Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library, the First Folio, and 'The Napoleon of Booksellers'

From its very conception, the Shakespeare Memorial Library in Birmingham was an ambitious venture. When charismatic minister, and author of the 'Civic Gospel', George Dawson, wrote in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* that he wanted it to contain 'every addition and translation of Shakespeare', this no doubt included a copy of the prestigious 'First Folio'. This 'jewel in the crown', the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays, was published in 1623 (seven years after the Bard's death). It is estimated that around 750 copies were produced, of which around 230 have survived. To help them in their quest to purchase this important work, the library looked to bookseller, Bernard Quaritch. But who was he, and did he help the library to realise their ambition?



Bernard Quaritch by unknown photographer, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

In business in London between 1847 and 1899, it is estimated that as many as fifty copies of the First Folio passed through Quaritch's hands. A prolific seller, he stocked 'scholarly and rare works in virtually all fields of knowledge and imagination', a feat which earned him the nickname 'the Napoleon of Booksellers', although he is known to have held Bonaparte 'in horror and contempt'. As Quaritch's reputation grew, so did his clientele list. His personal acquaintances included Benjamin Disraeli, William Gladstone, John Ruskin, William Morris, and Ellen Terry, together with most of the wealthy British collectors of the day.

But buying a First Folio was becoming an expensive business. During the nineteenth century the average price rose from £38 to £354. Indeed, in 1864, the 'Daniel copy' (so named because it was purchased when the library of George Daniel, a writer and book collector, was auctioned), realised £716 due to its 'unrivalled beauty'.

Bernard Quaritch had a long-standing relationship with the library in Birmingham. They looked to buy a copy of the First folio from him in 1870, but with the hefty price-tag of £520, it was thought that one could be 'procurable before long, at a much lower cost'. This was, quite possibly, a fortuitous decision, because in January 1879, a devastating fire destroyed much of the library's collection. Quaritch quickly contacted the library to extend his support, offering to donate wholesale stock to the value of £100 'as soon as I am called to do so'. But this was also a business opportunity for him. Later in the year he wrote again, this time with a schedule of cash discounts against his listed catalogue prices.

Just two years after the fire had caused so much devastation, the dream was realised. In 1881, a copy of the First Folio was purchased from Quaritch for £240 (which included a £10 discount against its listed price), and bearing in mind the escalating price-tags, it seems the library got quite a bargain! Quaritch certainly played a prominent role in helping the library to achieve its goal, but sadly, Dawson didn't live to see the acquisition (he died in 1876). However, as the library was also able to acquire a Third Folio (1664) from Quaritch at the same time, it (or perhaps more accurately, the people of Birmingham) could now boast a full set of folios (one to four) – something Dawson would, no doubt, have been very proud of!

Sources

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Joan Turner

'Everything to Everybody' Heritage Ambassador



Using Birmingham's forgotten past to inspire our future
Unlocking the world's first great people's Shakespeare Library for all

