CHAPTER II

THE SELECTION OF TEXTS
BY CHETHAM’S LIBRARY

‘By the discretion of the said Richard Johnson...’

In the fulfilment of Chetham’s testamentary instructions, the Library acquired a large number of books for a number of different reasons throughout the seventeenth century. The central principle for the Library’s trustees was that books bought and received should be of both immediate and longer-term value for learned readers in the town. The age of the books acquired did not matter; knowledge, whether theological or scientific, did not become obsolete as quickly as it does today. The trustees drew, inevitably, on the large quantities of second-hand books necessary for any scholarly library. The trustees and booksellers used the topics studied as typical university curricula as their starting point; hence, useful theological, historical and scientific titles preceded the acquisition of material of less immediate use to the divines of Manchester, such as literary and dramatic works. For example, no works by William Shakespeare were delivered to the Library by the end of the seventeenth century, and John Milton’s Paradise Lost did not arrive until the middle of the eighteenth century. Milton and Geoffrey Chaucer, the only two literary figures whose works were acquired by the Library in the seventeenth century, were more of interest in historical terms than as literature. Milton’s 1671 History of Britain was delivered in the year of publication, and the 1602 Islip edition of the collected works of Chaucer was delivered in 1665.1

The analysis of the Library’s acquisitions between 1655 and 1700 begins with the examination of the process of book selection by the Library trustees. This chapter considers the difficulties involved in such a study, particularly in the reconstruction of the trustees’ intellectual and bibliographical intentions, and the acknowledgment of the varieties of use to which early modern texts were put at the Library.

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While the evidence of books the Library bought and the price paid is obvious from the entries in the Accessions Register, the processes involved in the choice of books are unclear, partly through a lack of extant evidence and partly because of the multiple hands at work in the selection and distribution of the books concerned. The chapter begins with biographies of the four major figures in the Library’s early history: its original three trustees, Richard Johnson, John Tilsley and Richard Hollinworth, and the most influential of the later trustees, Nicholas Stratford, the Warden of the Collegiate Church between 1667 and 1684. It considers their competing views of the Library’s intended purpose, and identifies the libraries from which the trustees drew their ideas for Chetham’s Library. The chapter moves on to explore the Library’s choice of Robert Littlebury, as a bookseller, probably through Richard Johnson’s work at the Temple Church, where he fled after the establishment of Presbyterianism in Lancashire in 1646. The Library’s collections show that the choice of Littlebury was an excellent one. Littlebury was an acknowledged and well-established second-hand book dealer, an importer of books from the Continent, as well as a publisher in his own right.

The books purchased for the Library were a mixture of the trustees’ collective and personal orders, built upon their own tastes and experiences of other libraries, of unsolicited gifts from readers, and titles chosen with the guidance of eminent clergymen and the Library’s booksellers. This last aspect of the process of selection sometimes had less desirable effects, in that booksellers used the sale of books to Chetham’s Library in order to rid themselves of unmarketable stock. Selection included accepting the ‘best edition available’, even if that copy of that edition was in some way flawed. In order to have the requisite title in the Library, the trustees accepted works with missing volumes or works with material problems, such as misbound volumes, extensive marginal annotations or censors’ marks. The best editions available, intellectually and materially, were equally dependent upon the vagaries of the book trade and what the trustees were prepared to accept for the Library in spite of the book’s intellectual and material problems.

This chapter undertakes some statistical assessment of the Library’s acquisitions both as a whole and in specific periods of time during the