

**University of Aberdeen, Scotland**

**Special Libraries and Archives**

***Infinite Riches:  
Five centuries of Historic Collections***



*Doves, from the Bestiary, f32r*

***An Information Document***

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The library collections of an ancient university inevitably become a microcosm of the known world. They represent the development of knowledge of the world and all that it contains. The great library and museum collections of the University of Aberdeen are the amalgamation of the collections of the fifteenth century King's College and the sixteenth century Marischal College, with continual enrichments from donors whose names are still remembered to this day. It is this history of long and continuous accretion which gives this library collection its claim to world-class importance.

Aberdeen has an enviable collection of Incunabula and early printed books, but its interest is immeasurably deepened when we reflect on the history and associations of its holdings. The University has 26 works that have been at King's College since the fifteenth century as part of the founder's own library, another book arrived from Paris in the luggage of the first Principal, another is the gift of Robert Wilson, a nineteenth century grandee who travelled dangerously and in disguise from Cairo to India, and there is also a de-accessioned book from the library of King James VI and I, bequeathed to the relatively newly founded Marischal College Library by Thomas Reid (d. 1624), Latin Secretary to the King. This line stretches from the works given by Bishop Elphinstone over five centuries ago, to major recent acquisitions of book and manuscript material, so the outline following can touch only on a selection of representative treasures.

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## The Aberdeen Bestiary

By any standards, one of the outstanding treasures of the Aberdeen collection is a sumptuous manuscript, written and illuminated in England around the year 1200, which attempts to encompass the world within its pages. It is known as 'The Aberdeen Bestiary' but goes beyond descriptions of animals to attempt an account of all of creation. This catalogue of the 'book of the visible world' includes animals and birds, fishes, plants, monsters and imaginary beings. The manuscript is profusely illustrated, the pictures of the creatures emerging from burnished gold-leaf backgrounds, a gleaming world which hints at the purposes and designs of its Creator.

The interest of the Aberdeen Bestiary is deepened by the inclusion in its margins of some working sketches and the survival in the manuscript of other indications of the techniques which went into its creation. This is one of the finest manuscripts of its type to survive, and its quality intrinsic value is appropriate for a royal patron. From 1542, the manuscript was in the Old Royal Library at Westminster Palace. It came to Aberdeen as part of Thomas Reid's 1624 gift of over a thousand books

and manuscripts, and remains one of the greatest treasures of the University's collection.



*Adam naming the Beasts, from the Bestiary, 15r.*

# The Hebrew Bible and Judaica Collections

Also from Reid's donation comes a very different illuminated manuscript, but every bit as glorious as the *Bestiary*: a priceless illuminated codex of the Hebrew Bible dated to the winter of 1493-94, and written in exile by a Sephardic scribe, Isaac ben David Balsani, who was working for a patron from one of the oldest and most honoured Jewish families of Spain, Joseph Albelia, who had also been recently expelled from his native land by the Royal edict of 1492.

The work was almost certainly undertaken at Naples in the brief period of peace enjoyed by the Jewish community there before the French invasion in the February of 1495. The Aberdeen Codex is a brief glimpse of the kinds of works which would have been created for enlightened Jewish patrons of the high Renaissance, had circumstances offered more interludes of peace to the Sephardic communities of southern Europe. The rich illuminations are the work of professional artists and show a cosmopolitan



*The Hebrew Bible, f8v.*



*The Hebrew Bible, f5v*

range of artistic influences including the newest renaissance re-discoveries of classical antiquity. The great Dr Samuel Johnson particularly admired this codex when he visited Aberdeen in the August of 1773.

The University also holds the Biesenthal Collection, acquired in c.1872 and consisting of some 2,000 volumes. Described at the time of purchase as 'one of the finest Rabbinical collections in Great Britain', approximately 800 books are printed in Hebrew or Hebrew characters. Representing almost the entire published Hebrew output before 1872, the collection contains thirty-seven books printed in the 16th century. The Biesenthal Collection includes many editions of the Hebrew Bible; commentaries by classical, medieval and modern authors; Hebrew and Yiddish translations of the New Testament; editions of and commentaries on the Mishnah, Talmud and medieval codes; works of medieval Jewish mysticism; prayer books; medieval Hebrew poetry and modern Hebrew literature; and modern and classical grammars and dictionaries.

## The Blairs Collection

While not yet part of Aberdeen's collections, the University has a unique opportunity to acquire the Blairs Collection and the historic archives of the Catholic Church of Scotland. The paintings, books and manuscripts that make up the Blairs Collection – the library of the now-closed Blairs College, located just outside of Aberdeen – are of such intrinsic importance that the Collection can truly claim to be a national treasure. Founded in 1829, St. Mary's College, Blairs, became the main repository for collections of books and artefacts of Catholic interest that had been accumulated during previous centuries. This included the collections of the Scots Colleges in Douai (1576-1793), Paris (1602-1793), the Royal Scots College in Spain (Madrid: 1627-1734, Valladolid: re-founded 1771), the Pontifical Scots College in Rome (founded 1600) and the Scots Benedictine Abbey of St. James in Ratisbon, Bavaria (also known as the *Schottenkloster*). Many of the 27,000 books and manuscripts in the Collection are closely associated with famous or distinguished individuals, some of whom played a key role in Scotland's history. The Collection's links with the Aberdeen area make its acquisition by the University and return to the North East a matter of some significance, while its contents so perfectly complement the historic libraries of King's and Marischal Colleges that the jointly-housed collections would enhance the attraction of all three collections to scholars. However, the University will only acquire the Collection if it can offer adequate facilities in which to store it and to make it available to scholars and the wider community.

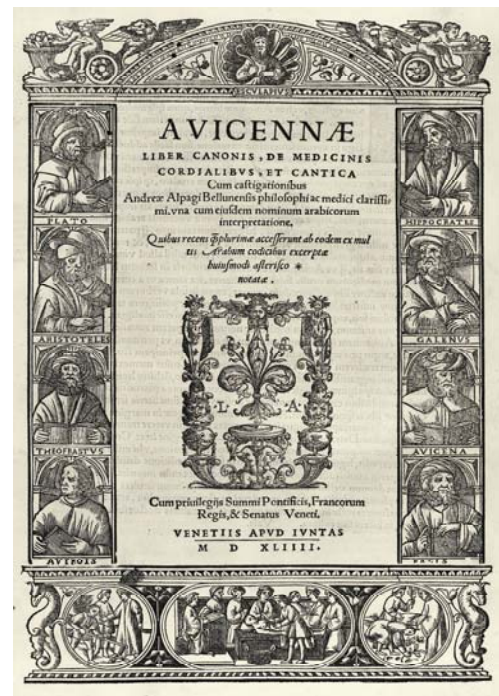
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## Medical Collections

A consistent element in the Aberdeen collections – from the books which arrived with the first Principal, Hector Boece, to collections from Africa in the twentieth century – is a great tradition of Medical works.

Such a depth of medical collections is appropriate for a university which boasts the oldest Chair of medicine in the English-speaking world, founded in 1497, and also holds one of the best collections of early western medical and scientific texts in Europe. Among the early donations to the library of King's College is a magnificent folio of the medical works of the Arab physician Avicenna, printed at Venice – then the confluence of east and west – in 1544. Excellent collections on oriental medicine include a very rare early record of Chinese medicine, Andreas Cleyer's *Specimen of Chinese Medicine* published in Frankfurt in 1682. Historic Collections also hold a copy of a student's notes of the course of medical lectures delivered at the University of Leiden in 1734 by 'the father of modern medicine', Hermann Boerhaave (1668-



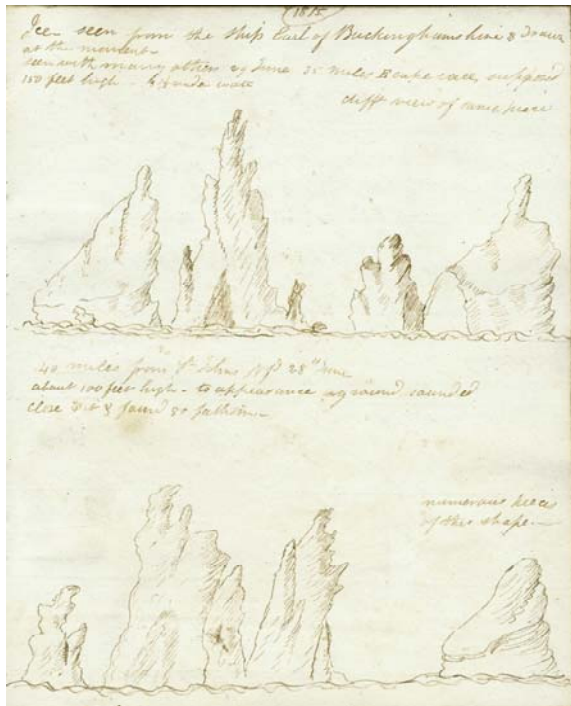
From: Avicenna: *Liber canonis, de medicinis cordialibus*.  
Venice, 1544

1738). Dr Jonathan Troup's illustrated record of his residence in the Caribbean in 1791-2 includes fascinating notes on medical practise among the enslaved Africans of Dominica.

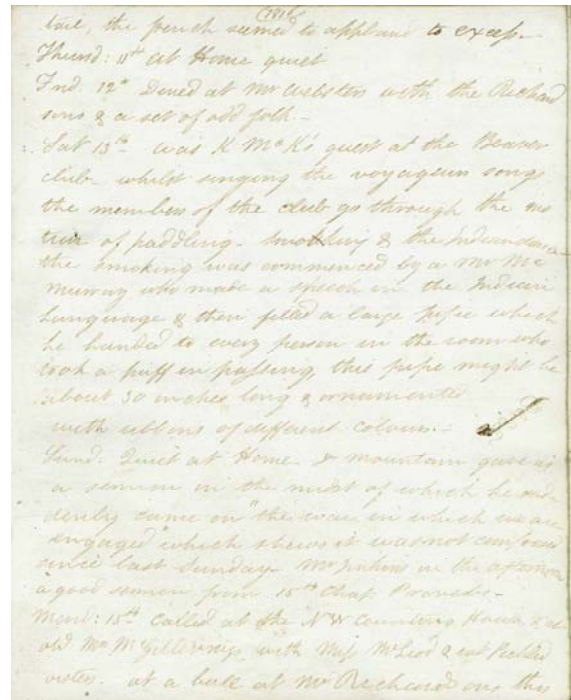
From the nineteenth century, Aberdeen holds the papers of Robert Laws (1851-1934) an Aberdeen graduate who worked in Africa from 1875 to 1927. He was active, after the First World War, in supporting the formation of the 'native associations' which later became the Nyasaland African National Congress. The letters from his daughter Amelia Laws (1886-1978) document in detail medicine at the front in the First World War.

## Journals and Life-Writing

Aberdeen holds one of the finest collections in Europe of journals and life-writings from the seventeenth century to the present day. For each century there are major collections of unpublished



Sketches of icebergs (40 miles from St John's, Nfld.) made by Francis Burnett of Elrick on his journey from Greenock to Quebec. From v. 1 of his diary, covering 1815-18.



Pipe smoking at the Beaver Club. From v. 1 of the diaries of Francis Burnett of Elrick.

papers – records of lives, histories and travels – awaiting the scholars of the future. In form, they range from the little pocket notebooks in which Isabella Duncan, wife of a Banff merchant skipper, recorded her voyages with her husband, to the sumptuous vellum-bound folios in which Robert Wilson recorded his progress from Egypt through the dangers of Arabia and as far as the Mughal court of Agra. Some have been in the University's collection for centuries; one of the most important was acquired only recently - the three-volume travel diary of James Fraser (1634-1709), Episcopalian Minister of Kirkhill near Inverness, documenting wide travels within Britain and across Continental Europe in the years 1657-1660.

## Cartography

The University of Aberdeen participated fully in the internationalist *republic of letters* of the Renaissance, the Latin networks of scholarly exchange which united the old world with the new in



Double page illustration to accompany the description of Innsbruck in Georg Braun and Franz Hohenberg, *Civitates orbis terrarum*, Cologne, 1577-1581

the epoch of the great voyages. Ownership of the great Renaissance works of cartography combined with exotic collections sent home from abroad illustrates a continually changing representation of an expanding world. Of the many works of this kind, this fine plate is from the *Description of the Cities of the World* produced in the circle of the great geographer Abraham Ortelius (1527-98). It is the product of that circle of northern European scholars, travellers, artists and printers who were the first to try to understand the whole of the geography of the earth. Although they achieved an exponential advance in the mapping of Europe and the New World, the edges of their vision still faded, at the extremes of north and south, into uncertain territories, regions peopled by the monsters and wonders of the mediaeval imagination.

## The MacBean Stuart and Jacobite Collections

A magnificent donation of the early twentieth century – the Stuart and Jacobite collection given by the New York businessman, William MacBean – offer particularly rich documentation of the northern Scottish element of the dynastic and political struggles of seventeenth and eighteenth century Britain and Europe. This is a resource of international importance, the finest collection of its kind outside the British Library, containing numerous unique items. Some 3,500 books, 1,000 pamphlets and numerous engravings cover many aspects of the histories of the Stuart royal family and the Jacobite risings that attempted to restore them to the throne. The conflict which began with



Prince Charles Edward (the young Pretender), 1745: John Sobieski Allan & Charles Edward Allan: *Costume of the Clans*, Edinburgh, 1845.

the 1688 flight of the Catholic James II and his replacement by the Protestants William and Mary, continued unabated in a series of risings and suppressions, until the decisive defeat of the Jacobite forces at Culloden in 1746. Few people in the three kingdoms were entirely unaffected; many of the most eminent writers and intellectuals of the early eighteenth century felt the backlash of these events. The repercussions of the Jacobite risings extended to the eastern seaboard of America, and it is with items of North American interest from Aberdeen's collections that this brief account ends.

## The Birkwood Collection

### *The Papers of Thomas Reid*

Thomas Reid (1710-1796) is internationally known as the chief founder of the Scottish School of Common Sense. Born near Aberdeen, Reid was a student at Marischal College and then ordained into

the Church of Scotland. While he was the minister of New Machar, Aberdeenshire, he studied Hume's Treatise. By the time he was appointed to a Regentship at King's College, Aberdeen his principle interest lay in philosophy. In 1764 he was appointed Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, succeeding Adam Smith. His major works - *An inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), *Essays on Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785) and *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788) - established him both as a trenchant critic of Hume and a major figure in the formulation of the Common Sense alternative. Marked by a striking lucidity of thought and expression, Reid's philosophical ideas remain of great interest.

The collection comprises over 800 items relating to his writings and teachings. The manuscripts range from copies of papers on specific topics to miscellaneous research notes, abstracts of works read, and occasional mathematical calculations. Having lost their original coherence by the time of their first listing for the Library, the manuscripts were at last adequately catalogued in 1998 as a result of the Carnegie Trust-sponsored Reid Project.



Thomas Reid (1710-1796): Copy of Raeburn portrait in Fyvie Castle or possibly portrait in Glasgow University.

## American Connections

An interesting American postscript to the Enlightenment collections is our copy of the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society Vol I. Printed at Philadelphia in 1771, the volume contains the fascinating manuscript inscription: "The American Philosophical Society held at Philadelphia humbly desires to cooperate with the University of Aberdeen, in their laudable Endeavours for the Advancement of useful Knowledge. . ." with the further inscription "Dr Smith begs that Dr Franklin would direct this copy to Dr John Chalmers, Principal, for the library of King's College, Old Aberdeen, in which place Dr Smith had his Education." This Dr William Smith (1727-1803) was born in Aberdeen and matriculated as a student at King's College in 1743. In 1751 he immigrated to America and subsequently served as first Provost of the College of Philadelphia which became the University of the State of Pennsylvania



Plan of the New Town of Charleston 1691.

in 1779. In his early years in New England, Smith wrote a revolutionary theoretical treatise on what an American university could be, his 1753 essay *A General Idea of the College of Mirania*, which counted Benjamin Franklin among its admirers.

Among the papers of one of the most generous donors to Aberdeen's library buildings and collections, James Fraser II (1645-1731), a significant piece of early Americana has recently been re-discovered. This is a twenty page illustrated manuscript describing the environs of Charleston, South Carolina as they were in 1691, full of information about trade, flowers, animals and the customs of the native Americans. The carefully-coloured plan of the city, on its new site at the junction of the Ashley and Cooper rivers, may be one of the earliest depictions of Charleston to survive.

A much later depiction of the natural world is found in the rich collection of papers and objects bequeathed by the Aberdeen ornithologist and Professor of Natural History, William MacGillivray (1796-1852). MacGillivray played a substantial part in the writing of the *Ornithological Biographies* which accompanied John James Audubon's world-famous publication of *The Birds of America*. Audubon commemorated his collaborator in the naming of two American birds, both illustrated in *The Birds of America* – 'MacGillivray's Ground Warbler' and 'MacGillivray's Shore Finch'. Aberdeen's historic collections hold MacGillivray's copious ornithological notes, interspersed with beautifully observed records of his field-expeditions in northern Scotland. Also amongst the MacGillivray manuscripts is an extraordinary glimpse of Audubon at work on his *magnum opus* – short of funds, argumentative, full of energy, speaking French-accented English and muddling his scientific Latin. MacGillivray's written record of a quarrel between the collaborators and their subsequent reconciliation is only one of many windows into the past offered by Aberdeen's five centuries of rich collections.