

Our Mayflower Bible



The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin is a large rare

book, manuscript, film, and photography collection. It is now best known as a superb repository of twentieth-century literary books and archives, although it contains many noteworthy collections of earlier books and manuscripts. It evolved from a rather modest rare book collection, and still retains some of the remnants of its humble origins. This is an account of one of them.

For many years we kept, near the reference desk, a small book truck full of treasures. These were to show to the casual visitor, who, it was hoped, would be intrigued, astounded, and delighted. There were locks of hair, a silver binding, first editions and manuscripts by authors known even to the imperfectly schooled, odd plates by Blake, and other bibliographic flotsam.

About ten years ago we decided to retire this truck and return its cargo to the stacks. Perhaps we had become too sophisticated; perhaps we no longer had very many casual visitors; or perhaps we thought that our vigorous exhibition program provided enough items to see—I doubt if much thought went into the retirement: it just happened. As the items were being put away, one caught the eye of a reference librarian who decided to investigate its claim to treasuredom: our *Mayflower* Bible.

Sez who? he harrumphed, and I'm sure that his suspicions arose from his perception that the book was too good to be true. Here was a Bible that had not only come over on the *Mayflower* in 1620, but had belonged to some of the most prominent early settlers, according to annotations on its pages. And there was nothing obscure about its claims: arrivals, marriages, births, and deaths were not only recorded, but were illustrated. There was a small full-length portrait of Peregrine White, the first white child born in New England; Indians with bows and arrows; the first houses; and even the *Mayflower* itself—all in pen-and-ink drawings in margins and other blank spaces. Could it be true?

Our skeptical librarian began an investigation, and I was soon enlisted to help. Where to begin? I decided to look at how we got it, its history as a *Mayflower* Bible, and its provenance in general. This information was obtained easily by looking at annotations in the book, and by reading newspaper clippings and exhibit labels found at the back of the book. The Bible had been unearthed in 1892 by Charles M. Taintor, a bookseller from Manchester, Connecticut, and was purchased the same year by S. W. Cowles of Hartford. The price was twelve dollars. Mr. Cowles allowed it to be written up and encouraged the curious to see it in his home. The Bible was inherited by a Mrs. S. W. Cowles, presumably his widow or daughter, who took it with her when she migrated to Los Angeles. There it was shown and concurrently ballyhooed, with reproductions of some of the drawings, in a 1912 newspaper article. Sometime between then and the mid-1920s Miriam Lutchter Stark, of Orange, Texas, bought it, and in the late 1920s it came to us, with the rest of Mrs. Stark's library, as a gift.

Besides the early *Mayflower*-related inscriptions, and the later paraphernalia related to its New England and West Coast surfacings, there were a few

annotations in the margins of the text that showed that the Bible had been in England during a portion of the eighteenth century. This was all of its history that the book itself was going to surrender. The gaps in its ownership and its three Atlantic crossings were troubling but did not disallow its authenticity.

I next looked for articles about any *Mayflower* Bible. I found a single citation—to a 1959 article in the *Texas Quarterly*—which turned out to be about our own copy, complete with the over-familiar illustrations.

I grew subtle. Maybe current scholarship demonstrated conclusively that some widely accepted fact about the Pilgrims was untrue—perhaps someone died a year earlier or a year later or a marriage may have never taken place. If our Bible had been tarted up in the nineteenth century there might be an irrefutable historical error, then believed to be true, incorporated into the process. Unfortunately, after carefully checking the events, dates, and historical figures found in the annotations against a great deal of current writing on the Pilgrims and the *Mayflower*, I was unable to find such an error.

My final sally captured the prize—certainty as to whether or not this Bible had actually come over on the *Mayflower*—although not at all in the way that I thought it would. I proceeded again to examine the book itself. What I was trying to see was whether or not this edition of Scripture was a likely one for a Pilgrim to take on this voyage, even though I knew that the answer would not be conclusive in determining whether or not we had a manufactured rarity among our treasures.



Marginal drawing of the Mayflower

The Bible was the Geneva version of 1588, a satisfactory edition. Before it was bound a substantial fragment of a *Book of Common Prayer*. This was somewhat incongruent: why flee religious persecution with a Bible which was accompanied by a prayer book sanctioned by the official church of the country you were fleeing? But some Pilgrims may have considered themselves adherents of England's established church even as they sought to reform it, and there was

always the possibility that this Bible had been purchased without much thought given to the fragmentary material bound up with it. But I needed to know more to complete this final aspect of my investigation: which edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* was bound in?

As I said, the prayer book was a fragment, and was missing its title page. To even begin to establish the edition I would need to do a collation, so that I could identify it, based on its format, pagination, typography, and the like, by comparing it with Online and printed bibliographic sources. Actually, it had no pagination, and I could see right away that it was in black letter, two columns to a page. A brief inspection revealed that it was in a quarto format, gathered in eights. All signatures present were complete in eight leaves, except signature B, which had, no matter how many times I recounted, eleven leaves. Of course, it is not possible to have eleven leaves in one gathering of a quarto book. A very careful examination revealed how this came to be: the first eight leaves of gathering B were from one edition of the prayer book, and continued the text from the preceding A gathering; leaves nine through eleven of gathering B were actually the last three leaves of signature B of another quarto edition of the prayer book. That is, in what had been a seriously damaged book, two fragmentary texts of the *Book of Common Prayer* had been joined together to make the best possible whole. I knew that the only hope of identifying these fragments was to look at the state prayers they contained: the prayers for the head of the Church of England, the reigning king or queen at the time the fragments were printed. These prayers in the second fragment were for Queen Elizabeth. I was unable to date this edition with certainty, but it is one of five or six printed between 1587 and 1601, which fits in nicely with the 1588 date of the Bible.

The first fragment also had a section of state prayers. To my great surprise, these were for King Charles, who ascended the throne in 1625; Queen Mary; and Prince Charles, who was born in 1630. Since significant early inscriptions—notably, “William White his booke 1619” and “This booke to Mr. William Brewster his booke from Susana White 1623”—appear in this first fragment which I later established as a 1634 edition, our *Mayflower Bible* is a fake.

I did not have mixed feelings when I made this discovery. I was elated. It is very seldom that you can prove that something is a fake—usually even strong suspicions remain in mental coffins without the final nail. But I was sorry that we had shown off this clever pastiche, as the real thing, to generations of school children and other awed visitors, and sorry too that we had lost one of the most intriguing out-of-scope artifacts in our collections.

In wondering how so many could have been fooled for so long, I came up with the moral for my tale:

LOOK AT WHAT’S IN FRONT OF YOU.

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