

THOMAS J. COBDEN SANDERSON - TRANSCRIPT

This segment is about modern bindings and their decoration. And any discussion of modern binding decoration needs to focus on, and why not start with Thomas J. Cobden-Sanderson because he changed the whole course of English bookbinding. Everything before him was one way and everything after him was another way. He brought rejuvenation to binding that had stagnated for more generations--well actually, since probably Roger Payne, English bookbinding was imitative and he was original. He also was an absolutely, he was almost lunatic, almost maniacal in his precision as a binder.

This is a binding that he did with his own hands. He bound books from 1884 to 1893. There's a book by Marion Tidcombe that looks only at his bindings. He did 167 only in those 10 years, which means he did a binding about once every three weeks. But with just those 167, he did change the course of English bookbinding. He went on later on to found the Doves Bindery where his hand is continued to be felt because he did the designing of those bindings, but he only did 167 with his own hands. To own a binding that Thomas J. Cobden-Sanderson did with his own hands is a very special treat. Before this time, I have only have one in inventory and now I have two, and I cannot explain my good luck or I cannot get over my good luck.

This is the more decorative of the two, and it is one of the most attractive bindings we've ever had and probably the most important binding we've ever had. Now, it was commissioned for a birthday gift. It was meant to be given to a man named Bertram Midford, whose initials BM are on the cover. And it was a gift from his wife, Clementine and her initial is right here as well. It's a fascinating binding for a number of reasons. There are some technical things of interest, Cobden-Sanderson used this particular tool for the first time and used it many times later. He treated the leather in a special way to make it more receptive to gilt tooling for the first time and continued to use that.

The spine is concave, which was a new design, and some people didn't like it. But the main way it interests me is that, he obviously did it under pressure. The birthday was 24th of February. And we know from a note in the back that it was delivered on the 23rd of February, the day before. And so it's not hard to imagine that he was rushing to finish it. And on the front cover, all of the Ms for Midford are as they should be. We have all these compartments made out of roses and the Ms are in between. But on the back, he messed it up. The Ms are perfectly all right on the top half, but on the bottom half they're inverted, and so they're Ws. And for someone who is as fastidious and almost lunatic in his precision, to make this kind of mistake, well, it's just virtually unheard of and so delightful that I can hardly get over it. It's like a postage stamp that was upside down or doesn't have the right number on or something.

It's a beautiful binding with funky story that makes it, as far as I'm concerned, absolutely irresistible. Cobden-Sanderson said in his journal that the inversion of the M was an accident, but he says it makes it all the more interesting. A great improvement is actually what he said. A great improvement. And then he talks about how much he charged for the binding. I think it was 54 shillings or something. Oh, I'm sorry. He spent 54 and three quarters hours, 54 and three quarters hours doing it and he said he undercharged for it. Anyway, it's a lovely binding. Bertram Midford was an important person. He had important daughters, including Jessica. So the provenance is important as well.

Now the other Cobden-Sanderson binding I have is much more straightforward. There's not as convoluted a story, but it's an amazing book in very simple way. I mean, the story here is not nearly so difficult to comprehend. You look at the book, and you say, Oh, my word. Yes, I see he signed it in the

back 1890. And the decoration is, the decoration that you see in the books that have been written on Cobden-Sanderson, you know that the binding has been recorded. Just like that binding has been recorded. And if you look at the book, you can see your face in it. I mean, it is so beautifully preserved. And of course, the reason it is preserved was because it was produced by the giant of bookbinding even at the time. Now, this also has a romantic story. It was bought by an important official in the British Museum as a wedding present for the wedding of H.M. Stanley, the famous African explorer. And we know this again from the, these books are written about by scholars and are kept track of because they are so important as collectibles.

Anyway, another reason why this is such a desirable Cobden-Sanderson binding is because it's very much more affordable. Neither one of these is expensive, but this one is a lot more costly than this one. This costs about half as much. In 1893, when Cobden-Sanderson stopped binding books with his own hands, he founded the Doves bindery. And as I mentioned, he continued to design the bindings that were executed at the Doves Bindery until his death in 1922. So the Doves Bindery was in existence from 1893 until Cobden-Sanderson died. The main personnel, Charles Wilkinson was the forwarder. Bessie Hooley was the sower. Charles McLeish was the finisher. His name is probably the most important one. Except for the apprentice, who was Douglas Cockerell, and his name is in terms of importance in the 20th century book world. His name is right up there in anybody's top 10.

This is a typical Doves binding where the story is pretty simple. This is Ruskin's lecture on female education. The text is of some interest. The binding is pretty simple. These are typical Doves binding tools. It's relatively simple despite the fact that some of Cobden-Sanderson's bindings are very ornate, he still felt that the beauty of a book is mostly resident inside rather than on the cover. The other part of the story here is that the book comes from the collection of Edith Rockefeller McCormick, and she had the largest collection, apparently, of Doves bindings ever assembled. Or at least an auction house sold more Doves bindings from her collection than had ever happened before. 121 titles, more than 150 volumes. So it comes from a very good library.

Another book, another Doves binding from a very good library is this lovely little Kelmscott Press book. This is a book that was produced by William Morris' press, the Kelmscott Press. It's a medieval, couple of medieval tales that were translated by Morris, and it's put into quite a sweet little ornate, red Morocco Doves binding, again, with the same kind of Tudor rose tools that you saw on the Ruskin book. Tidcombe, who keeps track of Doves bindings, says that this was the John Sachs copy. Now, John Sachs books normally have book plates in them, but if she says it's from his collection, I'm willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. John Sachs owned, and this helps me feel a little bit more humble. He owned six books that were bound by Cobden-Sanderson's own hands, which takes my breath away. The Doves Bindery did a lot of binding of Doves Press books, and some binding of books from other private presses, but it's not terribly common to see this kind of thing.

But it's a lovely conjunction of Cobden-Sanderson and William Morris, of Doves and Kelmscott with a lovely provenance. This set, and these are scientific and philosophical writings by Ruskin, also comes from the Edith Rockefeller collection. And if you can say that there are different styles of Doves bindings, then this is their strapwork style, where they have interlacing designs with this kind of scalloping and paneling with the wreath in the middle. This is typical of a certain style. They were of three or four different styles. And again, because of the collection that it came from, from Edith Rockefeller McCormick, it has distinction as in terms of its provenance. All of these books that are in wonderful condition, and again, you can understand why because they were always felt to be precious, valuable as objects because of where they came from.

The final Doves Press or Doves binding example is this set of Charles Lamb. Charles Lamb's life was full of horror and difficulty. But he's like the king of the essay, at least in 19th century England. And so his works are worth having. You can see still a third Doves binding style here. Not the wreath with the Tudor roses, not the strap work, but the spade like leaves. And this is unusual in that it's a set. Most Doves bindings are on one volume, occasionally on two volumes, but rarely do you see it on a set of seven. And that makes it special.