A Key to the Identification of Franklin's Books

What books were in the library of Benjamin Franklin and what happened to them have been the subjects of scholarly research for many years. The collection was judged by Manasseh Cutler, who saw it in 1787, to be "the largest, and by far the best, private library in America," and was estimated by the appraisers of Franklin's estate to have contained 4,276 volumes. A number of books with Franklin's signature, his autograph notes, or a presentation inscription to him have been obviously identifiable as his. Three sets, given to three institutions in accordance with provisions in his will, are still in their possession. And still others can be traced to the sale of Franklin's library conducted by the Philadelphia bookseller Dufief over the counter in 1801 and by auction in 1803.¹

However, the total number of books definitely known to have belonged to Franklin which have been located up to the present time is comparatively small, because Franklin had no bookplate, wrote his

name or notes in few, and did not use any personal mark of ownership, like the well-known cipher of Thomas Jefferson. But at last a key to the identification of Franklin’s books has been discovered. The present brief statement, which I hope to expand into a more definitive article, is a plea to librarians, dealers, and collectors to let me know what Franklin books they are able to discover in their collections, using the below described mark as a key.

As early as 1935, Dr. William E. Lingelbach and Mrs. Gertrude Hess, of the American Philosophical Society, noticed that many of the books which were bought by that institution at the Dufief sales in 1801 and 1803 bore in the front a distinctive pencil mark—a C followed by one number and an N followed by another—which they provisionally called a “Dufief mark.” This was brought to my attention at the sale of the books from the estate of the late Nannie T. Bache at Freeman’s in 1949. Beyond a feeling that this mark had something to do with Franklin ownership, none of those who knew of it did more than file that feeling in their memories.

Recently, I was stimulated to look into the meaning of the mark further by John B. Shipley’s recent article on the purchases made by Franklin at the sale of the books of his old friend James Ralph in 1762. An incomplete check of the Library Company copies of such of the listed titles as were in its collections revealed that six of them bore the pencil mark. The mark was also found in a considerable number of other volumes, including the set of Arts et Métiers which came to the Library Company in 1790 after Franklin’s death in accordance with a provision of his will. Here was compelling evidence that the mark had Franklin significance, and had nothing to do with Dufief, for the bequest came directly from the shelves of Franklin’s library without passing through any bookseller’s hands.

Although Eddy, 20, stated that he had “ascertained the titles of 1350 volumes that were in Franklin’s library,” an examination of the cards, now among his papers at Princeton, reveals that his total included books which Franklin’s correspondence, some miscellaneous manuscript lists, and other external evidence showed he owned, as well as actual volumes from Franklin’s library which Eddy had located.

Most of these books were sold as from Benjamin Franklin’s library, and many of them had the pencil shelf mark, but in spite of the fact that they had belonged to a Franklin descendant there was widespread skepticism about the validity of the claim that they had been Franklin’s.

S patterst paper to be

D. Elizabethe, Dei gratia Anglie, Francie, &
Hibernie Regne.

Sermmon Preached at Pauys
in London the 17. of November, Ann. Dom. 1599, the
one and fortieth yeare of her Maiesties reigne, and aug-
mented in those places wherein for the shortnesse of the
time, it could not there be then delivered.

Whereunto is adjoyned an Apologetical discourse,
whereby all such scandalous accusations are fully
and faithfully confuted, where with the Honour of
the Reader hath beene uncharitably traduced by
some of our outhraters in some nationes, and at
home for obseruing the 17. of November yeere in
the forme of an Hug. day, and for the saithfull exerci-
ses, and Courtesie triumphs on that day in the honour
of her Maiestie exhibited.

By THOMAS HOLLAND, Doctor of Divinity,
& her Highnes Professeor therof in the Univer-
sity of Oxford.

A great charactor of
this Holland, in word.

AT OXFORD,
Printed by JOSHUA BARNEs, and are to be solde in
Pauls Church-yard at the signe of the Bible,
As is noted in a copy of a list of books delivered to Benjamin Franklin Bache by William Temple Franklin, in which each title is preceded by two numbers, the C stands for Case and the N for Number. On the basis of such information as I have been able to discover—still incomplete—I believe the mark to be a shelf mark representing a volume's position in the second-floor library which Franklin housed in the wing he added to his house after his return from France.

Franklin speaks in his will of 1788 of a catalogue of his books, and, although Temple Franklin was to get the bulk of them, Benjamin Franklin left such to Benjamin Franklin Bache, William Bache, and Jonathan Williams "as I shall mark on the said catalogue" with their names. The catalogue has not been found. That it was arranged by subjects is known through a letter of Williams to Franklin's executors in which he speaks of his bequest as "that part of his library particularized in his catalogue under the head of medicine, Surgery, &c." From an examination of such shelf marks as I have seen, it would seem that the books were not arranged on the shelves by subjects. Hence, it is logical that the marks were put in the books and on the catalogue so that they could be located.

The mark is in pencil and is usually found inside the front cover, frequently covered by a later bookplate. Sometimes it is on a flyleaf, half-title, or, in a few cases, title page. Since its significance was not known, the mark was destroyed when some books containing it were rebound, or covered when others were rebacked. Two examples of the mark are pictured here. I would appreciate a note of its existence in any books which come to the attention of readers of this brief account. Its presence in a book is a positive indication that the volume was in the library of Benjamin Franklin in 1787-1790.

Library Company of Philadelphia

EDWIN WOLF, 2ND

5 Typewritten copy among the papers of George Simpson Eddy at Princeton of an original formerly in the possession of the late Franklin Bache, but now untraced.
7 Certified contemporary copy of a letter from Williams to the Executors of Doctor Franklin's Will, Philadelphia, Oct. 27, 1790, Knox Manuscripts, XXVII, 37, Massachusetts Historical Society.
8 I have seen books or records indicating that there were at least as many as 117 cases, with as many as sixty-three duodecimo volumes in one case.