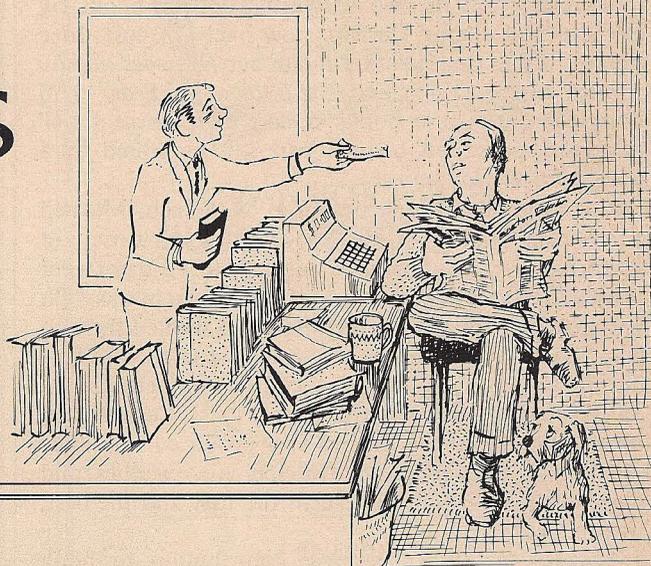


A RARE BOOK'S ODYSSEY

by George D Gopen



“I enclose an anecdotal article for your consideration. Its details are quite accurate, and I thought it might entertain your readers. It occurred during the early days of my collecting, but I grow fonder of the incident each year . . .”

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I knew precious little about rare books in 1968, but I enjoyed poking about in the shops and talking with the booksellers. Two years earlier I had spent three terms at the University of Reading and had been shanghaied every weekend by my travelling companion into antiquarian bookshops all over the South of England. He would crawl around looking for bargains for three hours at a stretch, while I, totally ignorant, tried to find relief from boredom by reading the titles on hundreds of fading spines. Eventually he suggested that I should collect something, just for the sake of the hunt, that Morris and Swinburne had both written prolifically and had not yet come into vogue (but soon would), and that at sixpence or a shilling per volume I could collect the complete works of both, volume by volume, for a total expense of about three pounds. I took his advice and soon became as addicted as he; but even two years later my knowledge about books, authors, publishers, and printers was still limited to the details I had encountered at random.

One simmering July day in 1968 I happened upon an

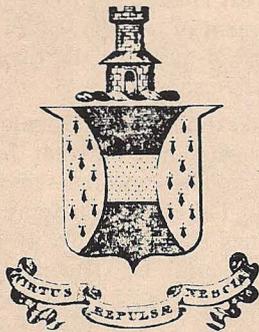
appealing 1762 edition of the poems of Horace on the dollar table of a Boston (Mass.) bookstore. It was bound in what appeared to be the original calf, and it was in excellent condition, creased in the way that only careful, loving, and constant reading can produce. The pages showed no trace of foxing, and the print was extraordinarily pleasant to read. The antiquity of the book, the beauty of it as an object, my love of Horace, and the price of one dollar combined to produce in me that certain excitement which accompanies a minor “find”, and I had already decided to purchase it when I discovered the inscriptions.

On the inside cover was the bookplate of one Richard Dennis Hoblyn with a coat of arms and inscribed in a strikingly beautiful hand, “Died 22 August 1886, aet. 83.”

On the facing page, in the same beautiful hand, were the following paragraphs:

This little book occupied many of the later hours of my Father's life. It was his constant

R.A. Hoblyn.



Richard Dennis Hoblyn.

died 22 Aug. 1886. aet. 83.

*Greatly valued by C.D. Hoblyn
a Son of the above -*

This little book occupied many of the later hours of my Father's life: it was his constant companion in his wakeful morning time.

A scholar would value it for its contents and rarity: a son, not necessarily a scholar, sets a much higher value on this book, the great comfort of his Father's declining years.

R.A.H. Aug. 1886.

E. A. H.

April 1906

Much valued - by a daughter & a sister - as a memento of the beloved. —

companion in his wakeful morning time.

A scholar would value it for its contents and rarity; a son, not necessarily a scholar, sets a much higher value on this book, the great comfort of his Father's declining years.

R.A.H., Aug. 1886

Below this, in a different hand, was inscribed:

Much valued by a daughter and a sister - as a memento of the beloved.

E.A. Hoblyn, 1906

Turning over the page I found a third inscription, in yet another hand:

This book has come to me through the kindness of my sister Evelyn and will to my wish become an heirloom in the family.

Charles Dennis Hoblyn, 1915

And there it was on the dollar table in a Boston bookshop, mixed in with the slightly out of date touring guides and the Book of the Month selections for 1952. My delight at finding the book had been transformed into a pressing desire to return the book to its family, whose name was unusual enough to raise some small

hope of success in the search.

The sleuthing began. I went to the Boston Public Library and looked for the name Hoblyn in the Boston and Manhattan telephone directories. As I had hoped and expected, I found none. I theorized: A turn-of-the-century family that cherished an 18th Century book of Latin poems, published in Birmingham, England, the descendants of whom showed not a trace in Boston or New York, probably lived in England, assuming the line had survived. (The provincialism of this theory did not strike me at the time.)

Hot on the trail, I sped off to the periodical room and found a microfilm of *The Times* for August 1886. On the front page of the August 24 edition I found the following obituary notice:

On the 22nd inst., at 2, Sussex-place, Regent's-park, RICHARD DENNIS HOBLYN, M.A., Oxon., eldest son of the late Rev. Richard Hoblyn, Rector of All Saints', Colchester, in the 84th year of his age.

For the first time it came to me that I was dealing with real people and not with fictitious characters. A romantic inscription in an old book is one thing; the mundanity of newsprint, especially in the obituary column, is quite another. Intriguing as it was to find that Richard Dennis Hoblyn had actually lived and died, still the notice in *The Times* had brought me no new leads. The obituary was a dead end.

Back to the telephone directories: I looked up the name Hoblyn in the latest London listings. I found six individuals, all living at low or moderate income addresses (as far as I could remember London geography) and a stock brokerage firm of Hoblyn, Dix, and Maurice at an EC2 business address. Second theory: families who prized old Latin books and talked about creating heirlooms in 1915 are well enough established to live in Sussex or Surrey or Kent and commute daily to their stock brokerage firm in London's financial district.

My next stop was a plastic little store that sold roots. For a moderate price, this firm would create for you your very own coat of arms. For an additional price they would do research so that the coat of arms might have some relevance, however metaphoric, to your name. There I found all the necessary heraldry books and the people who knew how to use them. They found the Hoblyn coat of arms, exactly as it appeared on the bookplate, and were able to trace it back several centuries but no further forward than the end of the 19th Century. I could concoct no new theory from this information and therefore discontinued the search temporarily, knowing that I would be in London for Christmas and could take it up again there with greater hopes for progress.

December came and I went to London, taking *Horace* with me. The delightful attendant at the Royal College of Arms, a vital, energetic man of 75 or so, in his striking uniform of office, at home with the faded fragments of ancient flags, directed me to the office upstairs of a resident expert. That Victorian young gentleman, surrounded by the Victorian furniture and the magenta flocked wallpaper, possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of Britain's coats of arms. He recognized the Hoblyn arms at once and without consulting a single book or paper informed me that no one had used it since the end of the 19th Century, when the Hoblyn family intermarried with a family which had its own coat of arms. Together they created a new configuration using two quadrants from each of the originals. Again an interesting experience had produced no new leads.

I walked the 45 minutes from the Royal College of Arms to the EC2 address of the stock brokerage firm, trying to decide how to phrase my opening question as inoffensively as possible. After all, even if the *Horace's* family had been connected to his firm in 1915, the odds were not promising that male Hoblyns had survived 53 years (through two world wars), or if they had survived that they continued till the present moment to serve the same profession and the same firm. Still, "Have you got any Hoblyns here?" would not do.

I found myself in the lift without having formulated the proper question, feeling confident that staring at the door of the firm would somehow help me to summon the adrenalin to overcome this mental block. As the door to the lift opened, I was disconcerted to discover there was no door at which to stare. The firm occupied the entire floor, and I found before me not a door but a receptionist, asking me if she could be of help.

"Is Mr. Hoblyn in?" (Why hadn't I thought of that earlier?)

"Which Mr Hoblyn did you wish to see?" (Dear me, an embarrassment of riches!)

"Any one of them will do, thank you." (An inelegant but accurate response.)

She rather thought that Donald and Peter had not yet returned from lunch but that John might be in. She paged him, and he appeared – reserved in manner, about 32 years old, tall, slender, in appropriate business attire – all the things Americans like to think a young British businessman must be. The next question I had been practising for weeks.

"Mr. Hoblyn, have you relatives of some fifty years ago named Richard, Evelyn and Charles?"

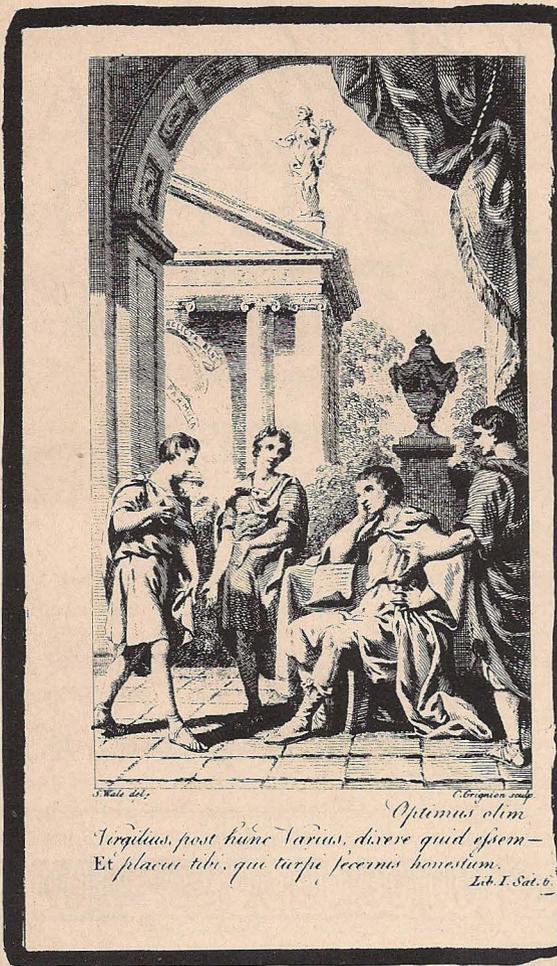
He was only slightly taken aback. "What? Uncle Dick? Aunt Evie? Uncle Charles?"

In that eurekaish moment I borrowed as much restraint from my surroundings as I could and extended the book to him, saying, "I believe this belongs to you."

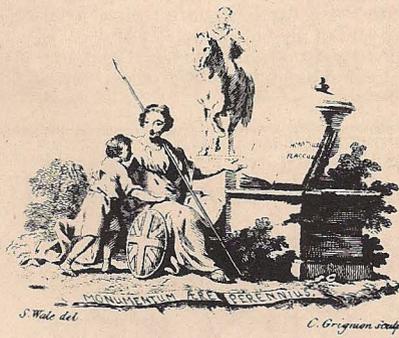
He did not know quite what to do with the book at first, but he had the presence of mind to invite me into his office, where I told him the entire story. As he came to understand how strange an odyssey this book had undergone, crossing the Atlantic twice in a half-century and returning to its owners, he became slightly more animated. What a pity, he told me, that Peter and Donald had not yet returned, because they were older than he and would have better memories of the book's inscribers.

We talked long enough for Peter to return. Now it was John's turn to tell the story, which he did with admirable accuracy. Peter, some ten years older than John it seemed, and therefore closer in time to the signatories, was taken with the incident more immediately and more emotionally. Yes, he had known Evie and Charles Dennis somewhat, but what a pity it was, he said, that Donald had not yet returned, for he was still older and knew them better. (At this point it all should have sounded vaguely folkloric to me, the three Hoblyns like so many bears of different sizes, ages, and powers; but my mind was elsewhere.)

We talked long enough for Donald to return. Now it was Peter's turn to tell the story, which he did rather well, especially considering he had it at second hand. Donald, perhaps 60, was even more moved, for he remembered well his grandfather, Charles Dennis Hoblyn, who had founded the firm. The family resided in Kent and commutes daily to EC2.



Q U I N T U S
H O R A T I U S
F L A C C U S .



B I R M I N G H A M I Æ ;
Typis JOANNIS BASKERVILLE.
M D C C L X I I .

At one point Donald suddenly registered a look of surprise, went to the safe, and brought back from it a document which he had brought in recently for Xeroxing: a carefully constructed family tree, tracing roots back to the Carew family in the Renaissance and, through marriage, back to William the Conqueror, each name written in that striking and now family hand of R.A. Hoblyn, son of R.D. Hoblyn, son of the Rev. R. Hoblyn. It was a stunning coincidence.

Donald offered to pay me for the volume, but of course that was out of the question. Then he invited me down to Kent for the re-enshrining of *Horace*, which I would have greatly enjoyed, but for which my travel plans did not allow. In the place of such remuneration I requested my own Xeroxed copy of the family tree.

A short while after my return to Boston I received the Xerox and a lovely note from Donald, assuring me that the book had indeed made its way home and that I should please make time for a trip to Kent when I was next in London.

One would think that would suffice for one adventure, but there is yet an epilogue. Once back in Boston I decided to do a little research on the book itself. It had

been such a handsome thing that I felt somewhat irresponsible for not knowing more about it. That was how I learned that I had purchased for one dollar the Baskerville *Horace*, of which Edward Harwood wrote:

This is the most beautiful little book, both in regard to type and paper, I ever beheld. It is also the most correct of all Baskerville's Editions of the classics, for every sheet was carefully revised by Mr Livie, who was an elegant scholar . . .

(*A View of the Various Editions of the Greek and Roman Classics*, 4th edition, London, 1790, p. 226.)

Appreciation had led to knowledge, and knowledge was soon to lead to another opportunity to appreciate. In 1969, at the same Boston bookstore, I found Baskerville's beautiful quarto *Milton*, both volumes in mint condition in contemporary tree-calf, priced only twenty dollars (its worth at the time being between ten and twenty times that price). Someday I trust I shall stumble upon another copy of the *Horace* (it seems inappropriate to search for it) and bring the story full circle.