A Philosopher and His Books: The Gilbert Ryle Collection at Linacre

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Gilbert Ryle was an eminent philosopher and possessed numerous important philosophical works, but this survey of the books formerly owned by him and now in the Linacre College library is more concerned with the books than with the philosopher — although the two are evidently and necessarily intertwined.¹ Any book person, be they a collector, librarian, or bookseller, knows that the merest glance at someone’s shelves will reveal something — and perhaps much — about the owner of the books in question. The number of books, their size, the nature of their bindings, the presence or absence of uniform series, the proportion of paperbacks to hardbacks, finally the visible titles, all contribute to give an early impression of the owner. Then the immediate insides, the endleaves, with or without the signatures or bookplates of earlier owners, libraries or booksellers, all tell a tale about the history of the volume in question and how it came to be in its present surroundings. The interest here is therefore more in the books, their history, and what they tell us about the owner, than in the textual contents.

The basic facts of Ryle’s background and life are immediately relevant.² Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976) and his twin sister, Mary, came from a family of distinction, being the eighth and ninth children of Reginald John Ryle MD, a

¹ Together with certain other senior academics (e.g. Sir Isaiah Berlin), Gilbert Ryle, a professorial Fellow of Magdalen, became a Senior Member of Linacre at its foundation. Such persons, not all of whom were members of the governing committee, attended occasional dinners and in general gave their advice and support to the fledgling college. Mr John Bamborough, the founding Principal of the college, kindly provided information on the role of such members and on the gift itself.


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general practitioner, and his wife Catherine Scott, and were born at 15 German Place, Brighton. Their great grandfather was John Ryle, a private banker educated at Christ Church, Oxford, and sometime Member of Parliament for Macclesfield, and their grandfather was John Charles Ryle (1816-1900), the strongly evangelical first bishop of Liverpool, known as “the Prince of Tract Writers” for his command of an unusually pure and nervous English. Ryle’s parents had shed the strict evangelicism of their upbringing but seem to have maintained a high intellectual tradition for their children. Ryle’s eldest brother, John Alfred (1889-1950), another physician, became Professor of Social Medicine at Oxford in 1943, just two years before Gilbert Ryle was made Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy. Ryle won a classical scholarship to the Queen’s College, Oxford in 1919, from whence he gained first class honours in, successively, classical honour moderations, and the honour schools of *literae humaniores* and philosophy, politics, and economics (1924), being invited to sit for the new school in the latter in order to set a standard for first class performance in it. Joining athletic to academic achievement, he was captain of the Queen’s College Boat Club and rowed in the University trial eights in 1923. By 1925 he was a student and tutor in philosophy at Christ Church, remaining there until moving to Magdalen on election as Waynflete Professor.

These facts are relevant since a number of his books, particularly bulky, serious, late nineteenth-century editions of Aristotle (the *Nichomachean ethics*, translated by R. Williams, 1869) and the like, bound in dark maroon cloth with matt black endleaves, bear the signature of his father. Others include Arnauld, *La Logique*, translated by T. S. Baynes, 1880, Bacon, *Opera inedita*, 1859, A. Bain, *Mental and moral science*, 1884, Baynes, *New analytic of logical form*, 1850, A. Campbell Fraser on Berkeley 1898, T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to ethics*, 3rd ed., 1890, Pascal’s letters (in English), 1862, Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism*, 1893, K. Pearson, *The grammar of science*, 3rd ed., 1907 (“with the author’s affectionate regards”), and the *Chief works of Benedict Spinoza*, 1887. Gilbert’s mother, Catherine Ryle, is the most obvious identification as the signatory on Herbert Spencer’s two books *Social statistics* and *Man versus state*, both signed in the year of edition, 1892. She also owned R. L. Nettleship, *Lectures and remains*, 1897. Further a Greek and English *New Testament* is inscribed “Reginald John Ryle, given by his father August 1866. John 5.39, 1 Peter 2.2 and given by him to his daughter Effie Ryle 19 May 1901”. Effie probably also owned the copy of Euripides’ *Fabula*, Oxford, c. 1920, and the five volumes of Plato’s *Opera*, 1899-1906. Further one can note that the copy of the English translation of Bacon’s *Novum Organum* is equally inscribed “Margaret
Caroline Ryle from her father 11 March 1909". Another Margaret also regularly gave Gilbert Ryle books as birthday or other presents but these were probably from Margaret Macdonald, the philosopher, pupil of G. E. Moore and some time editor of the periodical, Analysis: Virginia Woolf’s The common reader, 1933, for Christmas 1941, Eliot’s Little Gidding (1st ed.) for Christmas 1942, and The letters of Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple, 1932, that informative account of seventeenth-century sexual relations, this being inscribed “To Gilbert, who despised the feminine epistolary style. August 1940”. This book also bears the earlier signature of Sir Denys Page, sometime Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge. One of Ryle’s earliest books however was probably L. Whibley, A Companion to Greek studies (3rd ed., 1916), given to him by a Miss Horton at Christmas 1919 and in which his signature is still somewhat adolescent.

Ryle’s days at Queen’s show up not just in his possession of R.H. Hodgkin’s Six centuries of an Oxford college (1949) and Peter Haigh-Thomas and M. A. Nicholson’s The English style of rowing (1958), but also through the presence of a number of books to which the Queen’s college arms have been added in gold on the upper cover (A. Aliotta, The idealistic reaction against science, 1914; Aristotle, De anima, 1907; Metaphysics, 1910; E. Caird, The critical philosophy of Kant, 1909; Hegel’s Phenomenology of mind, 2 vols, 1910; H. A. Rayburn, The ethical theory of Hegel, 1926; W. D. Ross, Aristotle, 1923). These are likely to be items bought with college prize money and to which, in the manner of certain Oxford colleges, the recipient could have the college arms added. They bear no other inscriptions. Equally Ryle’s wartime career surfaces in his possession of L. F. Ellis’s The Welsh Guards at war (1946).

By 1924 Ryle had moved to Christ Church. His lengthy stay there is also marked by the possession of various works concerning the college, but what is particularly evident is that he then started buying quite a number of texts, many of which were acquired second hand, often at Blackwell’s, Thornton’s, Parker’s, and the then popular old Drawda Hall secondhand bookshop, wedged in between All Souls and Queen’s. In the twenties he inscribed these with his name, college and the year of acquisition. Some books had long Oxford provenances and were ‘recycled’, as one might say today, from the libraries of former local scholars; for example, Ryle’s copy of J. S. Mill’s Utilitarianism, 4th ed., 1871, had belonged to Sir Herbert Warren (1853-1930), the modernising President of Magdalen.

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Virginia Woolf’s The common reader is explicitly from Margaret Macdonald in the same hand as those just signed “Margaret”.
It seems probable that in general Ryle bought few new books but relied largely on getting the older philosophical texts he needed secondhand, sometimes going for the serious standard late nineteenth-century editions of the kind his father had owned but also favouring either the later standard Clarendon Press blue-bound Scriptorum classicorum bibliotheca Oxoniensis (these coming in a variety of forms, hardback gilt, paper over boards, or paperback) or the very handy sized green bound Loeb editions, with the even smaller, pocket sized, Tauchnitz versions being a favourite among older editions, but, being initially paperback, requiring binding. Early dated acquisitions include 1924, Saint Anselm, Prologium, Monologium, and appendix on behalf of the Fool by Gaunilon and Cur Deus homo. With introduction, bibliography and reproductions of leading philosophers and writers on the ontological argument (Chicago 1903), and in 1925, Kant's Introduction to logic, translated by T. K. Abbott, “with a few notes by Coleridge” (1855), The works of Thomas Reid, 4th ed. (1854) dedicated to Victor Cousin, R. Ward, The life of Henry More (1911), and Adolf Reinach, Gesammelte Schriften (1921). The French paper-bound (and therefore now crumbling) edition of the nine volumes of Thomas Aquinas probably also date from the mid-twenties.

Ryle’s life-long interest in the notion and history of thinking results in a wide-ranging collection of all sorts of texts. The oldest is, appropriately in view of its present home, a collection of Galen texts, some edited by Thomas Linacre, and starting with the De differentiis symptomatum, Paris 1528, in a contemporary calf binding and with the signature of Bernard Mourier 1589. Among his older books one also finds a copy of Aristotle’s Ars rhetorica, edited by A. Riccoboni (Frankfurt, A. Wechsel, 1588), in a period vellum binding with yapp edges and the title inscribed on the spine in pen. This volume has a history since it bears a largely illegible signature (perhaps: C. H. Oug orco?) with the date 1666, then “Geo. Harding e Coll. Wad. 1681”, the name Cotton and the date 1785, followed by the inscription: “To the Rhetoric Lecturer at Christ Church for the time being, This useful book is presented by Henry Cotton Student 1818”. Cotton (1789-1879), a bibliographer and historian, is listed in the Dictionary of National Biography. Thomas Campanella’s Philosophia rationalis, 1638, bears the pen shelfmark and gold armorial stamp of the great French historian and collector, Jacques Auguste de Thou, a contemporary of Sir Thomas Bodley, the arms being combined with those of his second wife, Gasparde de La Chastre. With the later seventeenth century the number of older texts increases. Ryle’s copy of the Ars logicae of William Ockham, the second founder of nominalism and the promulgator of “Byzantine logic”, was published at Oxford in 1675,
while both his copy of Antoine Arnauld’s *La logique ou l’art de penser, contenant outre les règles communes, plusieurs observations nouvelles propre à former le jugement* (6e édition, Amsterdam, vellum bound, pen lettered title) and a work by one of the founders of biochemistry, J. B. van Helmont, *Paradoxical discourses concerning the macrocosm and microcosm* (London, contemporary stained calf), date from 1685. The Malebranche, *De la recherche de la vérité* (Amsterdam, 120, speckled calf; gilt spine) is of the fourth edition published in 1688 while the next decade provides the Cambridge theologian, Henry More’s *Enchiridion ethicum* (Amsterdam 1695, plain calf, signature of John Meeres and inscription from J. Drake to Mrs. Newton 1842) and Marcus Antoninus, *De rebus suis libri xii, locis haud paucis repurgati, suppleti, restituti, lectionibus item variis, locisque paralleliis ad marginem adjectis . . . studio Thomae Gatakeri Londinatis* (2nd ed., half vellum and green paper). The latter work contains a fine frontispiece portrait of the author by one of the best English engravers of the century, William Faithorne. Another book connected with Christ Church is by the solitary representative of Malebranche’s theories in England, John Norris, being his *Essay towards the theory of an ideal and intelligible world* (1st ed., 1701, contemporary speckled calf), marked as a duplicate from the college library. Ryle’s copy of W. Smith’s English translation of Longinus, *On the sublime*, 1770, had been that of another Fellow of Magdalen, George Hutton, in 1783, and that of T.D. Weldon; *States and morals*, that of the former President of Magdalen, T.S.R. Boase.

It must be borne in mind that the circumstances of Ryle’s gift to Linacre are largely undocumented and that one does not know what books he had apart from those now in the college. This is particularly relevant when, as happens occasionally, one finds gaps which may seem strange in a philosophy tutor’s library. The almost complete absence of Descartes is a case in point: of course Ryle’s major book, *The Concept of Mind* (1949), was a sustained attack on the ‘official’, or Cartesian, theory of mind, calling it the myth of “the ghost in the machine”, but even so it is surprising and unfortunate that the collection contains virtually nothing by Descartes, whether annotated by Ryle or not. Equally it may seem surprising to find no works by that very Oxford figure, John Locke. The large volumes of works by Berkeley present probably came from a member of the family since they are accompanied by old proofs for some dictionary article by a “Doctor Ryle”. However, in general, books reflecting certain aspects of the early European Enlightenment continue after the turn of 1700, including J. Bernouilli’s *Ars conjectandi* (Basle, 1713, 40, stiff nineteenth-century vellum), the second edition of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury’s, *Characteristics of men*
(1714), Robert Boyle’s philosophical works (1725, the first collected edition), and James Harrington’s great republican work, *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (Dublin 1737, ownership stamp of A. L. Smith, possibly the sometime Master of Balliol, 1850-1924). The selection continues with Ralph Cudworth’s *True intellectual system of the universe* (2nd ed., 1743), with Samuel Clarke’s *A discourse concerning the unchangeable obligation of natural religion* (1749), with both the English and Latin versions of the *System of moral philosophy*, 1755, by the great promoter of the ‘common sense’ school of philosophy, Francis Hutcheson, with John Petrin’s *Letters concerning mind* (1750), and finally with William Wollaston’s *The religion of nature delineated* (1750). There is also a work of both general and local interest: *Ethices compendium in usum juventutis academiae. Auctius et emendatus editum. Cui Methodus argumentandi Aristotelica*, Oxford 1789. As with certain other texts, Ryle possessed two copies of Isaac Watts’ *The improvement of the mind* (1811, 1815). There is also Whewell’s *History of the inductive sciences*, (3rd ed., 1837). The Condillac, *Traité des sensations*, dates from two years after the first edition (1754, with the signature George J. Gowing “Donarium propter commiserationem suam 1849”), but a very late edition, so to speak, is the English translation of Pierre Bayle’s famous dictionary, *An historical and critical dictionary* (4 volumes, London 1826, with, however, a good engraving of the author). This raises the question of Ryle’s reading in foreign languages: an excellent classical scholar, he evidently also read both French and German, important works in these languages being among his books. One is however left with the impression that he often preferred to read many authors, both philosophical and other, in English translation.

Finally one can note an intriguing oddity: the copy of David Hume’s *Private correspondance*, 1820 quarto, is bound in contemporary linen with blue paper sides. The latter bear the evidently rare label of a firm of Southampton booksellers which reads: “Best and Snowden’s (late Coupland’s) Library and Reading Rooms”, vaunts their possession of “new works in history, biography, travels, Divinity, etc. as soon as published, Best and Snowden having a parcel from London three times a week [. . .]”, not forgetting their services in printing, binding, lithography and the sale of “genuine” patent medicines.

Ryle undoubtedly had a liking for eighteenth century English literature: one finds Steele (W. J. Loveday’s copy of the eight volumes of an eighteenth-century edition of *The spectator*), Pope, Swift, Akenside (notably the “Pleasures of Imagination”), Sterne, and an extensive set of Fielding. In this department the nineteenth century is not represented by many of the standard
major figures but rather by a few works by Thomas Love Peacock, Borrow, Surtees (a number), Mark Twain (The innocents abroad, 1882), Maupassant, Melville, and Kipling (several, noticeably all pocket editions bar the first edition of Many inventions, 1893). His copies of those very Christ Church books, Lewis Carroll’s two Alice’s, are of a modern edition. For Ryle the major fiction writer was Jane Austen. He wrote an excellent article on “Jane Austen and the Moralists” (printed in this volume of The Linacre Journal) and it is recorded that once, when asked if he ever read novels, he is said to have replied: “Oh yes, all six of them every year.” Here one can add that of modern works he possessed Amis’s Lucky Jim (7th impression, 1954), Musil, The man without qualities, 1955, and Tom Stoppard, Jumpers, 1973 (first 1972). The Poems of Edna St Vincent Millay are inscribed “Towards the broader education of Gilbert from his cynical friend J. K. G.”

Ryle’s coverage of the ancient philosophers was evidently good and a word must be said of the holdings of more modern writers. One could start with the run of the Proceedings and of the Supplementary publications of the Aristotelian Society, the former starting in 1888, the early volumes containing interesting “Rules of the Society”, “Lists of members”, and even “Suggested subjects for papers” such as “Hegelian dialectic”, “The relation of existence to reality”, and “The concept of mental activity”. Among the classics of the eighteenth century one finds Kant, Hegel, Herbart, and Bolzano. This line continues in the nineteenth century with Brentano, Frege, and Husserl, the latter met during a walking tour in Germany. One might be tempted to see the English contingent starting with S. T. Coleridge’s Aids to reflection, with Boole, Bosanquet, William James and of course very particularly Moore (but only a late reprint of the Principia ethica), not to forget eventually Russell (The principles of mathematics, 2nd ed., 1937). The French side is limited to Victor Cousin, and the two Henris, Bergson and Poincaré, while the only Sartre element is Iris Murdoch’s book on him, Sartre, Romantic rationalist, 1953. With Ludwig Wittgenstein the collection contains the 1922 first edition of the Tractatus logico-philosophicus as well as the fourth and fifth impressions (1951, 1954), G. C. M. Colombo’s 1954 edition and the 1961 English translation. To say that Ryle annotated his books would be to overstate the case somewhat: what he did seems to have been to use several copies of certain authors, central to his interests, be they Aristotle, Plato or Wittgenstein, and in some of them to mark paragraphs in the margin in pencil, to underline certain words, and sometimes to add very brief comments or notes, such as “Where?”, “God”, and the like.

There are clearly other books by Ryle’s Oxford contemporaries and pupils (D. J. Allan, Anscombe, Austin) but hardly any bear signs of being
presentation copies: the exceptions are those by A. J. Ayer, who in his *Language, truth and logic* (1936) thanks Ryle, describing him as Ayer’s “original tutor in philosophy”. The copy of *The foundations of empirical knowledge* (1940) is inscribed “To Gilbert from Freddie. Tam Minerva quam Mars! Sandown Park October 1940. A. J. Ayer”. F. M. Cornford’s *Plato’s theory of knowledge*, 3rd impression 1949, was bound to be of interest to the author of *Plato’s progress*, just as the former author’s *Microcosmographia academica, being a guide for the young academic politician* must have delighted Ryle, the practised university man, as it has so many others. Other items include the first edition of Isaiah Berlin’s Home University Library *Karl Marx* (1939) and his *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1954 reprint following the 1953 1st ed.). The range of contemporary interest is wide and covers Sigmund Freud, *The psychopathology of everyday life* (7th impression, 1921) and *The interpretation of dreams* (1923; the first is of 1913).

Among modern publications the net is cast wide and evidently prompted by an open minded curiosity. Thus one finds three issues of Street and Smith’s *Astounding science fiction* (December 1954 to February 1955), Lancelot Hogben’s *Mathematics for the million* (6th impression but the year of publication is 1936), and E. Hubble, *The observational approach to cosmology* (Oxford 1937). There is too *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Darwin’s *Origin of species* (1929, the Thinker’s library), the works of Confucius and Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese written character as a medium for poetry: an ars poetica*, introduction and notes by Ezra Pound (1936).

Finally there are numerous other books relating to other interests and periods of Ryle’s life: the Boccaccio with the words: “To Gilbert from Firenze and Brownie 20 February 1926”; and John Bailey’s *Dr Johnson and his circle* (1927), bearing an illegible signature and the words: “To Gilbert in memory of a Sussex September in 1929”. Ryle was a walker and so one finds both Clifford Bax’s *Highways and byways in Essex* (1930) and P. Anderson Graham’s similar work on Northumbria (1921), each decorated with fine engravings. His visit to Australia in 1958 evidently accounts for the Australian National University *Calendar* 1957, Thistle Y. Harris’s *Wild flowers of Western Australia* 1951, and probably J. D. Pringle’s *The Australian accent* (1958). Both Ryle’s interest in language and his editorship of *Mind* may lie behind the presence of two copies of Horace Hart’s classic *Rules for compositors and readers at the University Press, Oxford*, not to mention Sir Ernest Gowers’ *Plain words* (HMSO 1948).

Incidentally, all of these books are housed in the glass-fronted bookcase which, for many years, graced the office of the Linacre Professor of Zoology,
whose Chair is derived from two lecturerships set up in 1549 under the will of Thomas Linacre.

Ryle does not feature in Sir Muirhead Bone’s picture of eminent Oxford scholars of the day standing and examining new books at the entrance to Blackwell’s bookshop. He was, one suspects, more likely to be found in the secondhand and antiquarian section, then at the back of the shop, for the bulk of his books are of an older vintage. Some have been in Oxford for a good three hundred years so far. They exemplify, both externally and internally, much of the continuity of intellectual interest and curiosity associated with their authors and owners and, like the solera system for the production of port, one hopes they acquire increasing refinement. The present survey has attempted to explore this aspect of what at first sight may seem to be not only a random but also a slightly faded and worn collection of books. However as Terentianus Maurus wrote some one thousand eight hundred years ago: Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli, “the fate of books depends on the capacity of the reader”, a suitable motto perhaps for a college library! Thus lastly, and to end on a note underlining the very varied nature of this valuable and eclectic collection, the reflection of a remarkable background and mind, some other works which readers can amuse themselves with by slotting into place in their interpretation of the erstwhile owner: Florence Nightingale’s most famous book, Notes on nursing: what it is and what it is not (1860, signature of Isabelle Ryle 4 May 1880), the beginning of her post-Crimean campaign to reform the training not so much of nurses as such but rather to provide advice to every woman who had personal charge of the health of others, whether invalid or child;4 W. Robinson’s The English flower garden (1893, fully grangerised), C. M. Doughty’s Travels in Arabia deserta (1928 reprint), Mark Spade’s extracts from Punch entitled How to run a bassoon factory (1926), Raymond Chandler’s The big sleep (1950), and Kathleen Nott’s The Emperor’s new clothes (1953). However the work giving the College Librarian most hope is a rare Lewis Carroll item: Curiosissima curatoria, by “Rude Donatus”, “Printed for private circulation” 1892, a valedictory exercise by Dodgson on relinquishing office as [senior] Common Room Curator and including the sentence: “An enthusiastic computator of Averages will discover, from Chap. 1, para. 9, (1) (8), that the average time spent by a C. R. Librarian in not completing a Book Catalogue is 29 years”.

4 It also bears the name “Mrs. Daniel”, which may well be that of the wife of C. H. O. Daniel (1836-1919), sometime Provost of Worcester College and well-known for his private press. Mrs. Daniel’s work in organising the making of bandages and supporting nursing in Oxford during the First World War was celebrated by the Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, in his volume, Verses written for Mrs. Daniel, 1932.
REFERENCES:


Giles Barber, Fellow of Linacre from 1962 to 1996, and now Emeritus Fellow, was the College's first librarian and is now, again, librarian. He ran the Taylor Institution Library for many years and has written extensively on printing, on the book trades in Europe, on book collecting and binding, and on Oxford library history. He has given the Panizzi Lectures in London and the Sandars in Cambridge and is Officier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres for his work in French studies.