‘One of the Most Remarkable Things in London’: A Visit to the Lord Treasurer’s Library in 1713 by Samuel Molyneux

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Samuel Molyneux was the only surviving child of the astronomer, philosopher and constitutional writer William Molyneux (1656-98) and his wife Lucy Domvile (d. 1691). As the author of the influential pamphlet *The Case of Ireland being bound by Acts of Parliament in England, Stated* (1698) William Molyneux was considered by some, including Jonathan Swift, as a treacherous campaigner for Irish independence. For others he was revered as a distinguished scientist who founded the Dublin Philosophical Society and rated amongst his friends and correspondents Robert Boyle, John Flamsteed, Edmund Halley, Robert Hooke, Christiaan Huygens, John Locke and Isaac Newton.¹ His death, soon after returning from exile in England, saw the infant Samuel being raised in Dublin by his physician uncle, Thomas Molyneux (1661-1733) who, like his brother, was a fellow of the Royal Society. Following in the family tradition Samuel was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, where in 1707 he took his BA and was elected secretary to the Dublin Philosophical Society where he successfully forged closer links with the Royal Society in London through regular correspondence with ‘the Ingenious Dr. Hans Sloan’.² He received his MA from Trinity College in 1710.

By October 1712 the 23-year-old Samuel Molyneux was in London. It remains unclear whether his arrival in the capital was in anticipation of his enrolment as a fellow of the Royal Society, which took place in December 1712, or if he had already been selected by the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough for diplomatic service abroad. Nonetheless, between December 1712 and April 1713 (when he departed from Harwich to Ostend) he wrote a series of seven remarkable letters, most likely to his uncle in Dublin, where he describes, amongst other things, some of the greatest antiquarian collections of the early Enlightenment. His correspondence constitutes a learned and far-reaching dialogue based on the intellectual elitism of antiquities, history, nature, philosophy and science; thereby portraying a man on a journey of edification and self-improvement; a scientist engrossed in the past yet showing belief and hope in the future; an antiquary with one eye on collecting and classification and the other on the conjectural history of the free-thinking world. Such scholarly content sets the letters apart from other contemporary tourists, such as Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach (1710), Daniel Defoe (1724), Don Manoel Gonzales (1731) and John

² SCA D/M 1/2.
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Loveday (principally 1730s), who for the most part commented on London’s customary, political, social, theological and topographical arrangements.³

Molyneux’s ability to access so many outstanding private collections appears, in the first place, to have stemmed from his late father’s reputation.⁴ Indeed, on 24 June 1707 in a letter to the distinguished scientist Francis Hauksbee he actively sought an introduction to ‘the ingenious Mr Derham’ who was ‘well known to the Gentlemen of the Royal Society’; he wrote

Sir I know not whether my Father, Wm. Molyneux, had ye honour of being known to you during his life. If he had the happiness of your acquaintance, I beg it may in some way excuse the ill manners of his son in thus troubling with an impertinent letter a person no otherwise known to him than as he is to the whole learned world by his great worth and learning.⁵

Yet, Samuel was well connected in his own right and brought to London his own letters of introduction, one of which was from the notable art collector and scholar Sir Andrew Fountaine. Moreover, according to his published family history, he was a man of ‘winning manners and obliging temper, and united Irish wit to social accomplishments’⁶ – clearly a beneficial quality when in the company of, amongst others, ‘the Duke of Marlborough, My Ld. Pembroke, My Ld. Hallifax, the Duke of Devonshire, my Ld. Sunderland, the Archbp of Canterbury, the Bishops of Ely, Bangor & Litchfield, Mr: Addison, Mr: Steel, Mr: Congreve, Dr: Swift, Mr: Phillips, Sr: Isaac Newton, Dr: Sloan, Mr: Halley [and] the Fam’d Dr: Sacheverell’.⁷

In consideration of the whole manuscript it is difficult to determine whether Molyneux was a practical authority or simply a theoretical enthusiast. Thomas Hearne’s opinion of the Irishman was quite unambiguous when, after a vitriolic meeting at the Bodleian Library in 1713, he wrote in his diary ‘I really found that his Knowledge was only superficial […], taking up his Accounts from Conversation with Gentlemen, and not from study’.⁸ Molyneux’s visit to the Harleian collection goes some way in endorsing Hearne’s peevish appraisal. The Irishman’s companion that day was Francesco Bianchini (1662-1729), a Roman Catholic priest, archaeologist, antiquarian, astronomer and collector of antiquities who was known to Conrad von Uffenbach as Francesco Benedetti.⁹ After studying in Italy, Bianchini became Gentleman of the Bedchamber to the Pope, President of the Antiquaries of Rome, foreign associate of the Académie Royale des Sciences and was elected as a fellow of the Royal Society on 29 January 1713, two months after Molyneux, both men had been proposed by Sir Isaac Newton, President of the Royal Society between 1703 and 1727. Such a knowledgeable ‘Gentleman’ would have been an ideal guide around London’s antiquarian collections and bookshops: indeed, so high was Molyneux’s respect for his learned Italian friend that when his opinion was offered it was duly recorded for the benefit of his erudite uncle.¹⁰

4 Sarah Markham, John Loveday of Caversham 1711-1789: The Life and Tours of an Eighteenth-Century Onlooker (Salisbury, 1984).
5 SCA D/M 1/2.
7 SCA D/M 1/3, f. 148.
9 Quarrell and Mare, op. cit., pp. 70 and 183.
10 SCA D/M 1/3, f. 151. Molyneux writes of several book dealers, his favourite being ‘my good Friend Mr: Bateman who I believe is the best Bookseller for choice Editions and old Librarrys in the whole world’
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Bianchini most likely initiated the meeting between Molyneux and Harley’s ‘Library-keeper’ Humfrey Wanley (1672-1726). The visit took place on, or shortly before, 18 February 1713 at York Buildings, Duke Street, near the Strand. Absent that day was the collection’s founder Robert Harley (1661-1724), who had loyally served Queen Anne as Speaker of the Commons (1701-5) and Secretary of State (1704-8) and was created 1st Earl of Oxford and Mortimer in 1711, and his only son Edward Harley (1689-1741), who assumed partial care of the collection in 1711 when his father was appointed Lord Treasurer. Edward Harley eventually took full control in 1715 after his father’s impeachment and imprisonment in the Tower of London, an event in which Molyneux himself played a part.\(^1\) There is no evidence to suggest that Molyneux ever met either Robert or Edward Harley. His associations with the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough would not have curried favour with Harley nor would have the Irishman’s Protestant Whig politics; perhaps this was reason enough for Jonathan Swift to foil a meeting between the two men in October 1712 when, in his letter to Stella, Swift wrote ‘I presented Pratt (Provost of Trinity College, Dublin) to Lord-Treasurer, and truly young Molyneux would have had me present him too; but I directly answered him I would not, unless he had business with him’.\(^1\) Harley was however mentioned twice more in Molyneux’s letters. Of his lodgings in Windsor, he wrote

Windsor […] consists of a very large irregular Court of Buildings, the one side being entirely taken up in the State Apartments the others in several Offices and lodgings for the Lords Treasurer, High Steward &c.\(^1\)

And again on his hopes for the notable gem collection amassed in the seventeenth century by Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel (1585-1646),

I think may be very well employed in letting you know I have been since I came to Town to see the very valuable Collection of Antique Arundelian Gems which are now in the hands of Sr John Germain, I send you herein also enclos’d a Catalogue of them and can only tell you that I compar’d it with the Gems and find it very exact and am fully satisfied of what several have assured me to be true that there is not such a Collection in the World so good work so valuable so many and so well preserv’d. The Pope and some others are treating about buying them but I am in hopes my Lord Treasurer who has been apply’d to on that head will not suffer them to go out of England when so small a sume as 6000ld is their purchase.\(^1\)

Molyneux’s description of the Harleian collection was written at a time when Harley had been collecting for seven years and Humfrey Wanley, antiquary, palaeographer, non-juror and later founding member of the Society of Antiquaries, had been working for that period as his part-time ‘Library-keeper’. Wanley commenced his *Catalogus brevior* in 1708,\(^1\) took

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\(^1\) E. Gregg, ‘Marlborough in Exile 1712-1714’, *Historical Journal*, xv (1972), pp. 613-14. Molyneux was present when the 83-year-old Sophia, the Dowager Electress of Hanover, suddenly collapsed and died in the Herrenhausen garden in June 1714. He executed her dying wish that the Duchess of Marlborough would have sight of a series of letters in which Harley attempted to gain favour with the Dowager Electress in the event of a Hanoverian succession. The Duchess saw to it that these letters were published three weeks later in London effectively eroding Harley’s support.

\(^2\) Swift, *Journal to Stella*, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford, 1948), vol. ii, p. 298, entry dated 28 October 1712. This was the first record of Samuel Molyneux in London and it would appear to place him at the anniversary celebrations of the Protestants of Ireland residing in London. The same entry by Swift writes of rumours of the Duke going abroad and true to his word the Duke departed from Harwich for Ostend on 24 November 1712.

\(^3\) SCA D/M 1/3, f. 105.

\(^4\) Ibid, f. 143.

\(^5\) British Library, Add. MSS 45701-45707.
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full responsibility for the collection from 1715 and actively collected and catalogued until his death in July 1726. As was often the case with curious visitors, Molyneux was shown some of the greatest Harleian treasures. Hearne’s notion that Molyneux’s knowledge was only ‘superficial’ again resonates in that his descriptions follow closely those in the preface of the library catalogues published between 1808 and 1812 of which Wanley himself had compiled the entries up to number 2,407.\(^\text{17}\)

Transcription of Southampton City Archives, D/M 1/3, ff. 98-102\(^\text{18}\)

Water mark evidence would suggest that the copy-book was produced c. 1724. The manuscript is incomplete, the pages being foliated 30-43, 58-63, 77-112, 118-159 and dated London 20 December 1712, 14 February 1713, 18 February 1713, 28 February 1713, 15 April 1713 and Harwich 20 April 1713. Footnotes identify particular books and manuscripts with, where possible, the description given in the preface and body of the text of the Harleian catalogue. The final reference is to the British Library online catalogue, with date accessed.

Dear Sir

London Feb: 18: 1712

Of the Few Curiositys which I have left undescrib’d in London, one that I had the fortune to see yesterday & the other today do very well deserve I should give you a particular account of each of them. What I saw yesterday was the present Lord Treasurer’s Library, and this indeed is one of the most remarkeable things in London, It consists almost entirely of Manuscripts of which I believe the greatest Number relate to the State affairs of these kingdoms however not without a great many Curiositys of other Sorts. The Principal of these I took down on my book and shall name them to you, Wee saw an Irish Testament about 700 year old,\(^\text{19}\) A Latin one & very fair being one of those sent by Pope Gregory into England about the Year 600,\(^\text{20}\) a copy of some of St Pauls Epistles with Fragments of others extreamly ancient,\(^\text{21}\) and this I remember the Library keeper told us

\(^\text{16}\) During his visit Molyneux noted 2,000 ancient manuscripts, 13,000 deeds and 1,000 rolls, a figure not dissimilar to Wanley’s 1715 total of 3,000 printed and manuscript books, 13,000 charters and 1,000 rolls. By the time of Harley’s death there were 6,000 volumes of manuscripts and 14,500 charters and rolls and in 1741, at the time of the 2nd Earl’s death, there were 50,000 volumes, 400,000 pamphlets and 41,000 prints. See C. E. Wright, ‘Humfrey Wanley, Saxonist and Library-Keeper’, Proceedings of the British Academy, xlvii (1960), pp. 99-129. Wanley’s diaries kept between 1715 and 1726 are BL, Lansdowne MSS 771 and 772 and are published as The Diary of Humfrey Wanley 1715-1726, ed. C. E. Wright and R. C. Wright, 2 vols (London, 1966). Edward Miller, That Noble Cabinet: A History of the British Museum (London, 1973), pp. 45-6. C. E. Wright, ‘Portrait of a Bibliophile VIII: Edward Harley, 2nd Earl Oxford, 1689-1741’, The Book Collector, xi (1962), pp. 158-74.


\(^\text{18}\) A transcription of the whole manuscript will be published by the London Topographical Society in 2011. This section of the manuscript is reproduced by kind permission of Southampton City Council.

\(^\text{19}\) Harley MS. 1802, Gospels of Maelbrigte dated 1138. Catalogue, vol. i, Preface, pp. 11-12: ‘The Four Evangelists, written in the Irish Character, by Brigadianus, or Mael Brighte, for the Use of Gilla, Coarb, or Vicar of the Church of St Patrick, supposed by Father Simon to be Eight hundred Years Old; though Mr. Wanley will not allow it an earlier Date than the Twelfth Century’; Catalogue, vol. ii, pp. 229-43. \url{http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8828&CollID=8&NStart=1802} accessed 1 December 2009.

\(^\text{20}\) Perhaps Harley 2833/4. Preface, p. 8: ‘A Latin Bible, with St Paul’s Epistle to the Laodiceans, finely illuminated; written in the 11th century; and formerly belonging to the Cathedral Church of Anjou’; vol. ii, p. 714.

was the Fragment of the French Manuscript which Signore Bianchini though he had found in the Cotton Library, and assur’d me that the Cotton Fragment is a part of the Gospels and not of Paul’s Epistles, which since I have found to be true as he says being a Fragment of Chap: 14th & 15th of St John & 26th & 27th of St Matthew. A very fair copy on Paper of Homer about 1450, a Lucan somewhat older very fair of 1300 or thereabouts, a Copy on Paper (somewhat of the same Age) of Pindar, which they pretend to be the fairest in the world, together with Orpheus Lycophroim, Homer’s Hymns and some other Greek Poets never printed. An Observation the Library keeper made on this Copy is what makes it extremely valuable and that is, that he finds at the beginning the words Ἀγάθῃ Τευκρώ ὧν Ἢκε σος Φορτουνα, which it seems was an old Pagan Motto and often plac’d in the beginning of their most ancient Manuscripts, from whence he concludes this must have been a copy of a Manuscript of the greatest Antiquity. The most remarkable Curiosities he shew’d us relateng to these Kingdoms were, the Chapter of Battle Abby an Original, founded by William the Conqueror on the Famous Field of Battle where he gain’d England, A Grant of Coin=gulpḥs one of the Kings of Mercia dated Anno 814, these two ancient Parchments I observ’d were subscrib’d both of them by the names of all the Nobles and Magnates of the Realm as well as by the King, but all plainly in the Clerk’s hand, so that this must be either a Copy or else they none of them could write at all, they are sustain’d to be both Originals but I thought the writing not so old; A more perfect and beautiful Original my Lord certainly has of H:7th Charters of the foundation of his Chappel in Westminster Abby the Privilges of which are as extensive and full as those of some Colleges in Oxford; there are four of these Charters & a fifth uniting them all together with as many Seals under the Great Seal of England, they are mostly neatly bound as they were at first in one Volume in red velvet with the Royal Arms neatly enamelled on the outside and are as fresh as the first day, I must not forget


26 Not identified.


28 Harley Charter 38.A.1. Cenwulf King of Mercia dated 814 AD

29 Harley 1498. Preface, p. 20: ‘A most noble and curious Book covered in crimson Velvet, and richly adorned with Bosses and Hasps of Silver gilt and enamelled; the Cover and all the Leaves indented at the top; containing Four original Indentures of Covenant, illuminated and embellished with historical Miniatures, dated 16th of July, in the 19th Year of King Henry VII and made between that King and the Abbot and Convent of St Peter’s Westminster, for certain Masses, Collects, &c to be ever said in the Chapel of the Virgin Mary, then determine to be built at the East End of that Church as a Place of Reception of the Bodies of the King, Queen and Royal Family; after their respective Deceases’; vol. ii, pp. 74-8. http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=7602&CollID=8&NStart=1498 accessed 30 November 2009.
here a Seal he shew’d us in green Wax mill’d round with Letters near 300 years old belonging to a Deed of the Bishoprick of Norwich, which seal the Bishop still has & uses. And of these I remember Sir Andrew Fountain shew’d me another much of the same Age. For Miscellaneous & more modern Curiosities we saw a French poem in Manuscript relating to the History of Rich: 1st together with History Paintings therein better than could be expected in a Work 400 years old. Another exceeding richly gilt containing in little Oval Gothick Pictures the History of the new Testament somewhat older than the other, a Book of Representations somewhat Mystical of several of the Popes done about 1431 & extremely well for that time, a Paper Manuscript in High Dutch with vast number of Figures of Encampments, Marches, Engines &c relating to the Art military since the Invention of Guns, but it is a vain attempt I must confess to pretend by a Few we light on here and there to give any true notion of all the Curiosities that my Lord Oxford has here got together. I believe I shall do him better Justice by endeavouring to name no more particulars and by letting you know that certainly as he is a curious & learned Man himself he has employ’d one in this Collection that is equally so too one Mr Wanley who is now his Library keeper, and this so successfully that Mr Wanley assur’d me in about 7 years which is the utmost time of their Collection they have got together above 1000 Rolls, 13000 Deeds, and 2000 other Antient Manuscripts, and now have now in their Presses within the one single room that makes the Library the entire furniture almost often Monasteryes.


31 Harley 1526, 1527. Preface, p. 9: ‘Two very noble Biblical Books, upwards of five hundred years old; being Part of a most richly illuminated Manuscript, the first Volume thereof, beginning at Genesis, and ending with Job, is preserved in the Bodleian Library (Arch. A.154). They consist of Texts according to the Vulgar Latin, selected from the Books of the Maccabees and New Testament, with the subject of each Text, represented in an illuminated Picture, included in a pretty large Circle placed opposite thereto. Underneath each Text is likewise set down, in Latin, the Meaning of the same, according to the Opinion of the Author, who generally applies such Text to demonstrate the Benefits of a good Life, and the Punishments attending a bad one. These Explications are also represented in historical Paintings placed under the other; all columnation, and the whole adorned with illuminated Ornaments’; vol. ii, p. 116. http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8525&CollID=8&NStart=1526 accessed 30 November 2009.

Later on his visit to the Bodleian Library, Molyneux writes ‘They shew’d us also a more modern MSS of the Old Testament to Job done in Little Oval Pictures upon gilt grounds exactly like one of the Gospels Lord Treasurer has as I told you and possibly may be the first Volume of the same Work’ (SCA D/M 1/3, f. 122).

Books are a recurring theme throughout the whole manuscript. Amongst the libraries he visited were the Bodleian and Trinity College libraries in Oxford; the Cotton collection and Lord Halifax’s library in the palace of Westminster and St Paul’s Cathedral library in London. As a bibliophile himself he inherited a large collection from his father much of which was brought across from Dublin in 1716 and stored in a room in Pall Mall.33

Once abroad Molyneux was a noteworthy presence at the Hanoverian court and was duly rewarded at the succession in 1714 with a senior position as Secretary to the Prince of Wales, later King George II. He later represented constituencies in both the English and Irish parliaments and made a significant contribution to science from his observatory near Kew House. In 1726 he and the respected surgeon and anatomist Nathaniel St André were derided for supporting the claim of Mary Toft from Godalming that she was giving birth to live rabbits. Molyneux’s death soon afterwards provoked rumours that he was murdered by St André who, in the meantime, had eloped to Southampton with Molyneux’s wife, Elizabeth. In 1776 Molyneux’s collection of books and papers was bequeathed to the children of Mary Pitt, a maid servant, and passed thence into the collections of the Corporation of Southampton.

33 D/M 3/1. 7 January 1716. See A Catalogue of the Pitt Collection (Southampton: Hampshire County Library, 1964).