

Notes on American Bookbindings

EXTRA-GILT BINDINGS OF ROBERT AITKEN 1787-88

One of the most spectacular bindings in the Papantonio Collection at the American Antiquarian Society is the Blair's *Rhetoric*, no. 13 in the Papantonio Catalogue. This thick paper copy of the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, printed by Robert Aitken in Philadelphia in 1784, is one of five known copies bound by Aitken in 'chinoiserie' style. The Papantonio copy, in red morocco, was originally the property of Charles Thomson, secretary of the Continental Congress, and was purchased at a sale of his books in Newark, Delaware, by a James W. Dale. There is no record of the source from which Papantonio obtained it.

Robert Aitken's reputation rests mainly on his skill and enterprise as a printer. His ambitious *Pennsylvania Magazine* (1775-76), edited by Tom Paine, and his 'Bible of the Revolution' of 1782, the first edition of the Bible following the commencement of the Revolution, as well as the first three volumes of the *Transactions* of the American Philosophical Society, all attest to his ability. His peers knew him as an equally skillful bookbinder. William McCullough, in his 'Additions to Thomas's *History of Printing*' (*Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 31 [Apr. 1921]:105), said, 'There was no better finished binding ever done than some of the books executed in his shop.' Aitken's present fame as a binder depends partly on the skill evident in the hundreds of his bindings still in existence, and partly on the ample documentation of his long career. Aitken was a well-known figure in Philadelphia almost from his arrival in 1771, when he opened a stationer's shop which stocked his own publications and those of other printers;

this business is well documented in his Waste Book or daily account book from 1771 to his death in 1802; he used a printed binder's label (although for only a short period, at the end of his career); he left descendants to carry on the business and the family name; and he played a part in local civic and church affairs.

In contrast to his less-known contemporaries, Aitken might seem a topic without possibility for further research. And yet there is an Aitken mystery that centers on Blair's *Rhetoric*, one that seems unlikely ever to be solved. An analysis of the Aitken Waste Book indicates that gilt bindings made up no more than ten percent of his sales. Why then, in 1784, the year the Blair was published, did Aitken invest in a set of elaborate finishing tools of a style entirely different from anything he had used before? The answers are merely speculation.

There is no doubt that Aitken, the hardheaded Scot, was also something of a gambler, who could see an opportunity and seize it. (The 'Bible of the Revolution' was certainly one of these opportunities.) He may have been offered a set of the chinoiserie tools by a recent emigrant from Scotland, where the style was being used by James and William Scott of Edinburgh. He may have seen a binding in that style and purchased the tools for it, thinking to be the first American binder to offer it to his customers. If the real answer is ever found, it may be entirely different from either of these possibilities. It will have to take into account another aspect of the mystery: why, having acquired the tools and used them so effectively, did Aitken abandon their use as a border? To my knowledge, the chinoiserie border which appears on the five Blairs was used again by Aitken only on a manuscript volume bound for P. S. Du Simi-tière in 1784. Instead, individual tools from the border were used on the spines of a great many bindings of all sizes, and on the sides of some, from 1785 to the end of Aitken's career.

The five small books shown here are all Aitken bindings using tools from the Blair border. The one from the Papantonio



Robert Aitken bindings, l. to r.: Thomas Percival's *Father's Instructions, Consisting of Moral Tales*; Hannah More's *Sacred Dramas*; William Cowper's *The Task*; Edward Moore's *Fables for the Ladies*; and William Falconer's *The Shipwreck*.



Robert Aitken's binding of Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*.

Collection is Edward Moore's *Fables for the Ladies* (Philadelphia: Dobson, 1787); the other four are all from the library of Isaiah Thomas. They are Cowper's *The Task* (Philadelphia: Dobson, 1787), Hannah More's *Sacred Dramas* (Philadelphia: Dobson, 1787), William Falconer's *The Shipwreck* (Philadelphia: Dobson, 1788), and Thomas Percival's *Father's Instructions, Consisting of Moral Tales* (Philadelphia: Dobson, 1788). Their sides are polished, marbled calf, their spines gilt, with red morocco title labels. They are attractive to view and a pleasure to hold in the hand, but they are a far cry from the exotic flavor of Blair's *Rhetoric*.

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