



Joseph Milligan's binding of John Colvin's *Historical Letters, Including a Brief but General View of the History of the World*, 2d ed.

Notes on American Bookbindings

THE MARCH-MILLIGAN CONNECTION, OR, SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT JOHN MARCH AS A BINDER FOR THOMAS JEFFERSON

The 1972 exhibition catalogue of Michael Papantonio's *Early American Bookbindings* lists John March as the binder of item 42, John B. Colvin's *Historical Letters*, 2d ed. (Georgetown, D.C., Joseph Milligan, 1821), now at the American Antiquarian Society. The source for the attribution is E. M. Sowerby's monumental *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson*, published by the Library of Congress in five volumes between 1952 and 1959. In it, Sowerby introduces three bookbinders employed by Jefferson: Thomas Brend of Richmond, Virginia, and John March and Joseph Milligan, both of Georgetown. Of the three, Joseph Milligan receives special attention for his role in appraising Jefferson's 'great library' prior to its purchase by Congress, as well as for handling the duties involved in transporting the library from Monticello to the capital in 1815, and also for printing a catalogue. Sowerby's introduction to Milligan closes with a tribute from Jefferson, 'for elegant bindings to choice books there is no one in America to compare with him.' Working from Jefferson's account books, Sowerby identified over 150 books said to be bound by March between 1801 and 1807, and about one-third of that number bound between April 30, 1808 and July 13, 1815, that were credited to Milligan. A comparison of the tools used for ornamenting the copy of Colvin's *Historical Letters*, shown here, with those exhibited on rubbings of a number of volumes in the Jefferson library, which Sowerby attributes to John March, reveals that the border rolls and the back ornaments are identical. Hence, the attribution to John March as the binder of Papantonio no. 42.

Almost immediately after the Papantonio catalogue was published, further research led to the invaluable imprints file in the card catalogue of the American Antiquarian Society, which included brief chronologies of the work of March and Milligan. There, an important discovery was made: John March was recorded as stationer, bookseller, and printer in Georgetown from 1801 to June 2, 1804, the date of his death. His bookstore, one of the earliest in the nation's capital, specialized in music and musical instruments. Advertisements in the *Washington Federalist* as early as November 2, 1800, refer to March as a stationer only. Notice of 'Bookbinding in general' did not appear until the following month. The files also reveal that after March's death, Joseph Milligan was appointed administrator of his estate. An inventory of the March bindery was filed under date of July 14, 1804, and for the next five years J. March's bookstore was run by Joseph Milligan. Thus, March could no longer be credited with the binding of the copy of Colvin's *Historical Letters*, since it had been printed seventeen years after his death.

Joseph Milligan, who was recorded as publisher and bookseller between 1807 and 1825 in Georgetown, might be considered a candidate for binder of the Colvin, which he had printed, if one assumes that he had kept the tools listed in the March inventory. Letters in the Jefferson papers in the Library of Congress make brief allusions to Milligan's binding work after 1818, the year in which he was succeeded as Jefferson's bookbinder by the Richmond binder Frederick A. Mayo. In a letter replying to a request from Jefferson that his account be promptly remitted, Milligan wrote on January 18, 1819, 'Your books are now in the Binders hands.' The letter does not name the binder, which suggests that the work was done by an employee. In another letter to Jefferson, dated November 27, 1820, Milligan reported that the bookselling part of his business had passed into other hands in June 1819. Financial constraints had severely depleted Milligan's monetary resources

and forced him to turn over his bookselling business to a young man who had been with him from boyhood (Mr. James Thomas). Milligan added that he himself would continue his publishing business in hopes of success, but he was 'only up to his knees in trouble.' Another letter refers to a nephew in his employ. But not until 1829 is a bookbindery mentioned, in a sale of a large two-story brick house 'lately occupied by Joseph Milligan as a book bindery.'

Milligan died on September 10, 1834. Information about when and where he was born, or where he received his training (Jefferson referred to him as an Englishman), or when he first became associated with March is not known. Neither March nor Milligan signed their work with printed labels or tickets, a custom followed by Jefferson's Virginia binders, most systematically by Frederick A. Mayo of Richmond. That Milligan was highly valued as Jefferson's binder is well documented in correspondence in the Jefferson papers, held in the Library of Congress; that he did the work with his own hands, after giving up bookselling in 1818, is extremely doubtful. Thus, nothing more specific than 'From the Workshop of Joseph Milligan' would be an appropriate attribution for the copy of Colvin under discussion. The second edition of *Early American Bookbindings from the Collection of Michael Papantonio*, published by the American Antiquarian Society in 1985, makes this correction. In any case, the attribution to John March is invalidated by his death seventeen years prior to the book's publication by Milligan.

Hannah D. French

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