

*The Enigma
of the Bay Psalm Book*

BY ZOLTÁN HARASZTI

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 56-5128

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, CHICAGO 37
Cambridge University Press, London, N.W. 1, England
The University of Toronto Press, Toronto 5, Canada

© 1956 by *The University of Chicago. Published 1956*
Composed and printed by THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
PRESS, Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.



A

262345

Preface

IN 1640, within ten years of their arrival in America, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay produced their first book and printed it on their own press. The volume was the Bay Psalm Book—a literary monument of the cultural and religious aspirations of the early settlers of the country.

The work, entitled *The Whole Booke of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre*, was published in seventeen hundred copies, of which only eleven survive—five complete and the others lacking a varying number of leaves. The fascination of the book was dramatized with uncommon force when, in January, 1947, a copy sold in New York for \$151,000, the highest price ever paid for a volume at a public sale. It was also the highest price paid anywhere for a book in the English language, a copy of the First Folio of Shakespeare being a poor second at \$77,000.

The volume has often been described; yet, apart from its external features, it has never been examined. It is always spoken of as the first book *printed* in America, never as the first book *written and printed* in America. Moses C. Tyler, the brilliant nineteenth-century historian of American literature, decried it as “a sort of prodigy,” and his opinion has been echoed ever since. There have been notable efforts in our time to place the poetry of the New England Puri-

Preface

tans into a just perspective, but the Bay Psalm Book has not profited by them. To be sure, the work is no literary treasure trove; yet much of the ridicule heaped upon it seems undeserved, especially when, on nearer inspection, the despised passages turn out to be literal transcriptions from the King James Version.

This essay tries to correct some of the errors that have grown up around the famous book. It is shown that the Preface, which is a concise theological treatise by itself, was not written by Richard Mather, to whom it has been generally ascribed, but by John Cotton, who was indeed the logical man to do it. This wrong attribution was partly responsible for placing Richard Mather in the forefront of the enterprise—a place which belongs to John Cotton.

Nor was the Bay Psalm Book “the Eliot-Welch-Mather version,” as most historians have dubbed it; it was the work of “the chief Divines” of the Bay Colony, as Cotton Mather clearly stated. However, by regarding it merely as a contrivance of the three men who did not write any other verse, scholars have felt exempt from making any attempt to identify the authors. The late George Parker Winship even announced that the Bay Psalm Book was so “consistently uniform” that it might have been composed by a single person! Nothing could be more unfounded. An attentive reading of the book reveals rather a variety of hands; some of them bad, incredibly bad, but quite a few good or even excellent. Thus the writer has succeeded in identifying John Cotton as the author of the Twenty-third Psalm, and in assigning other

Preface

psalms to John Wilson and Peter Bulkeley. But these are the results of a few experiments only. Many others should be made; in fact, the whole translation should be thoroughly studied.

Whatever the literary value of the Bay Psalm Book may be, every exploration of the work has its reward. To quote one more example: For over three hundred years Richard Lyon, one of the two revisers of the Bay Psalm Book and probably the sole author of the first American hymnal, has been an almost entirely unknown figure. To discover who the man was—or to clear up at least part of his still mysterious career—has been a pleasure indeed.

The publication of this facsimile edition will meet a real need. The original copies cannot be used in research that requires their free handling; on the other hand, the small reprint issued in 1862 has nearly disappeared, and the facsimile edition of 1903, too, has become rare. It is hoped, however, that, beyond the circle of special students, the volume will appeal to the general reader. One does not have to be overly sentimental to appreciate the immense symbolical significance of the Bay Psalm Book.

Grateful acknowledgment is expressed here to the Boston Public Library, its Trustees, and its Director, Mr. Milton E. Lord, and to the Old South Church in Boston, its Minister, Dr. Frederick M. Meek, and its Deacons, for permission to reproduce one of the two original copies of the book preserved in the Prince Library. The Old South Church is the legal

Preface

owner of this great collection of Americana, while the Boston Public Library has been its custodian since 1866.

The idea of the publication of a facsimile edition originated with Mr. Barry D. Karl, then with the University of Chicago Press. The present writer was supposed to contribute a brief Introduction; in the writing, however, the paper grew and grew until it became a separate volume. Mr. Karl also read the larger part of the manuscript and made valuable suggestions.

The writer, who is Keeper of Rare Books at the Boston Public Library, is greatly indebted to several of his associates. Miss Harriet Swift, Curator of Americana, Miss Margaret Munsterberg, Mrs. Mary L. Malany, Miss Ellen M. Oldham, and Mr. John L. Spicer were always ready to assist him in his research—the main burden falling on Mrs. Malany.

Dean Eisig Silberschlag and Dr. Joseph Marcus, Librarian, of Hebrew Teachers College, Boston, Massachusetts, were helpful in interpreting the Hebrew text of the Psalms (chap. vi). Dr. J. A. Venn, President of Queens' College, and Archivist of Cambridge University, read the chapter on Richard Lyon, as did Mr. R. C. Anderson of Greenwich, England. Their conjectures will be of great value in further research. And, last but not least, the writer is indebted to Edmund S. Morgan, Professor of American History in Yale University, and his wife Helen M. Morgan, whose comments upon the completed manuscript resulted in the elucidation of many a passage.

Preface

The expert craftsmen of the Meriden Gravure Company, under the supervision of Mr. E. Harold Hugo, prepared the facsimile reproduction of the book with devoted care.

Many are the writer's debts; the responsibility for errors, however, is solely his own.

ZOLTÁN HARASZTI

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS
July 1956

The Enigma of the Bay Psalm Book

Singularly enough, at the head of every left-hand page is printed "Psalm," and at the head of every right-hand page, "Psalme." The spelling seems too irregular even for the time. The leaf of errata lists only seven mistakes, but the number could probably be multiplied by ten. "The rest [of faults], which have escaped through oversight," the reader is graciously told, "you may amend, as you find them obvious."²¹ Yet with all its shortcomings, the printing was not worse than most provincial printing in England when, after the outbreak of the Civil War, innumerable private presses sprang up everywhere.

This is the work which, written by stern Puritan ministers and printed by a locksmith, has maintained itself as one of the most coveted volumes in the world.

X

The Extant Copies

BY 1640 the population of the Bay Colony was about ten thousand—and, in determining the size of the edition of their psalm book, the clergy may have allowed a copy for every family. Of the seven-hundred copies thus printed, eleven have survived—five complete and six lacking a varying quantity of leaves. This is a fairly large number, considering that most of the early publications of the Cambridge Press are lost or exist only in a single copy, like the first edition of the New England Psalm Book. The preservation of so many copies of the Bay Psalm Book is partly due to the collecting zeal of Thomas Prince, who accumulated five for his library.

With one exception, all the existing copies are in public institutions, and all but one are in America. They are listed here as follows:

1. John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Rhode Island. Perfect, but a small portion of the margin of the title-page and the lower, blank part of the leaf of errata are cut out. In the original calf binding, rebacked. Richard Mather's note "Richardus Matherus eius liber" appears several times on the flyleaves and covers.

2. Yale University Library. Small portions of the fore-margins of eight leaves have been repaired, with the addi-

The Enigma of the Bay Psalm Book

tion of a few letters or numbers on the errata leaf. Bound by Francis Bedford, in dark-brown crushed levant morocco, the sides studded with gold stars and corner and center ornaments.

3. Prince Collection, Boston Public Library. A small part of the bottom of leaf Ee is torn off. Rebound in 1850. This is the tallest, although not the widest copy. A leaf measures $7\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{3}{8}$ inches, as against $6\frac{7}{8} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$ inches of the John Carter Brown copy.

4. Prince Collection, Boston Public Library. A small portion of the bottom of the "Finis" leaf is torn off and the leaf of errata is lacking. Rebound in 1850.

5. Lenox Collection, New York Public Library. The upper corner of leaf G is torn off, with portions of three lines. Twelve leaves, mended and re-margined, were inserted from another copy. Bound by Francis Bedford, in red morocco.

6. Bodleian Library, Oxford. Perfect, but greatly soiled. Bound in green calf *ca.* 1820. The volume was a bequest from Thomas Tanner, Bishop of St. Asaph, in 1735. When Tanner removed his books from Norwich to Oxford, where he served as Canon of Christ Church, they fell into the river and were submerged for twenty hours.

7. American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. Lacks the title-page and the leaf of errata. A corner from the first page of the Preface and the upper portion of the next to last page are torn off. In the original vellum binding. Isaiah Thomas' copy.

8. Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Lacks the first four and the last three leaves. In the original calf binding. It belonged once to the Shuttleworth family. Since then it was owned by a Boston bookseller; Bishop John Hurst of Washington, D.C.; Dodd, Mead & Co., New York; and E. Dwight Church of Brooklyn.

9. Rosenbach Foundation, Philadelphia. Bought in Ireland in 1934. Lacks eight leaves, including the title-page. In original binding.

The Extant Copies

10. Harvard College Library. Lacks the first six and the last four leaves. It was a gift from Middlecott Cooke of Boston. Rebound in 1900.

11. Mr. A. Van Sinderin, Brooklyn, New York. Lacks the title-page and eighteen leaves. In the original calf binding.

Numbers 1-4 and 11 were the five copies that once belonged to Thomas Prince. A friend and disciple of Cotton Mather, Prince was the first great American book collector. The early Puritans loved their books, and many of them, ministers and magistrates, assembled substantial libraries; but Prince went at his task systematically, thinking not only of his own needs but of those of posterity. From his college days he hunted for books relating to New England. The partial dispersal of Cotton Mather's library, after his death in 1728, gave Prince an especially rich opportunity. At least one copy of the Bay Psalm Book—Richard Mather's own—must have come into his possession at that time. "I made the Collection from a public View and Desire," he wrote in his will in 1758, "that the Memory of many important Transactions might be preserved." In bequeathing his books to the Old South Church, he stipulated that the collection must be "kept entire." Even his bookplate emphasized that the volumes were "to remain forever" in what he called "The New-England Library."

The collection, housed in the steeple of the church, suffered some losses during the Siege of Boston in 1775-76. In 1814 it was removed to the parsonage on Milk Street, a part of it being sent to the Massachusetts Historical Society. Then in 1866 the whole

← DONATED
TO LIBR.
OF CONGRESS
IN LATE 60s.

The Enigma of the Bay Psalm Book

collection was, to assure its greater usefulness, deposited in the Boston Public Library, where it has been ever since. But by that time only two of the five copies of the Bay Psalm Book were left. The other three had passed into private hands. Edward A. Crowninshield, a wealthy bibliophile of Boston and Salem, acquired one in 1849;¹ an incomplete copy went, at the same time, to George Livermore of Cambridge;² and finally the third was obtained, ten years later, by Dr. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, physician, antiquarian, and a future mayor of Boston.³

The way in which the three copies were alienated from the Prince Library is a strange story, important details of which have remained unknown until recently.

Crowninshield's bold adventure is commemorated in one of the two copies of the Bay Psalm Book—Number 4—still in the Prince Library. On a flyleaf, former Lieutenant-Governor Samuel T. Armstrong, a deacon of the church,⁴ wrote in pencil: "This book was bound at the cost of Mr. Ed. Crowninshield and given in Exchange for No. 259 in the Catalogue. Jan. 1850 S.T.A."⁵ If the grammar is correct, the note means that Crowninshield gave the book in exchange for the copy which he had received and that, in addition, he had it newly bound. However, this was not the case. Crowninshield gave only the binding and not the book, the title-page of which still has the shelf-number it had in the parsonage of the Old South Church. The new binding was cardboard covered with imitation leather, which could hardly have cost

The Extant Copies

him more than a dollar. But it would have been better if Crowninshield had spared himself this generous outlay of money. The margins would have escaped the binder's knife, and the volume would be twice as valuable today.

As for Livermore's copy, no record of the barter seems to exist. It is not unlikely that he was responsible for the binding of the second copy—Number 3—still in the Prince Library, which is of the same kind as the one supplied by Crowninshield. Yet it was through Livermore's activity that the earliest information about the "exchanges" transpired.

Henry Stevens, Vermont-born London bookseller, had been looking for a copy of the Bay Psalm Book for years, on commission from James Lenox, the famous New York collector. Then, to his amazement, in January, 1855, he picked up an unknown copy in a London auction room. But the volume turned out to be incomplete. "Knowing," he recalled, "that my old friend and correspondent, George Livermore of Cambridge, N. E., possessed an imperfect copy, which he and Mr. Crowninshield, after the noble example of the 'Lincoln Nosegay,' had won from the Committee of the 'Old South' in Boston, together with another and perfect copy, I proposed an advantageous exchange, and obtained the four missing leaves."⁶ In fact, Livermore traded away not only four but twelve leaves to Stevens, who sold the copy thus completed to Lenox. As part of the latter's great collection of treasures, the volume is now in the New York Public Library.⁷

The Enigma of the Bay Psalm Book

"The Lincoln Nosegay," mentioned by Stevens, was the title of a pamphlet published by the Reverend Thomas F. Dibdin about 1814. In it the famous antiquarian advertised for sale nineteen volumes, several of the choicest Caxtons among them, which he had purchased for an unusually low price from the library of Lincoln Cathedral. It is a fair guess that it was Dibdin's exploit at Lincoln that inspired Livermore and Crowninshield, who were great admirers of the loquacious Englishman, to get their copies of the Bay Psalm Book. In fact, Dibdin's paper was reprinted in 1849—early enough to start them on their enterprise.⁸ Yet not everyone appreciated Dibdin's smart deal. "The guardians of the temple slept, and Mammon prevailed," the historian of English cathedral libraries commented. In quoting the "noble example of 'the Lincoln Nosegay,'" Stevens therefore could not have had anything redolent in mind.⁹

Crowninshield's library, upon his death in 1859, was acquired by Henry Stevens, who offered the Bay Psalm Book to the British Museum; and when they were reluctant to purchase, sold it, washed and rebound, to George Brinley of Hartford for 150 guineas. At the Brinley sale in 1879, where it was of course the star item, the volume was bought by Cornelius Vanderbilt for \$1,200. This is the copy for which the Friends of the Library of Yale University paid in 1947 the fabulous price of \$151,000. After Livermore's death, in 1865, his books were deposited at Harvard and, in 1894, sold at auction. His copy of the Bay Psalm Book, lacking by then the title-page and eighteen leaves, realized \$425. It was purchased

The Extant Copies

by Alfred White of Brooklyn, from whom it was inherited by the present owner.

Dr. Shurtleff, too, was a book collector, and he had known Crowninshield's library well. As the author of an obituary of Crowninshield, he extolled his late friend as "a great lover of literature," whose "taste in bibliography was exquisite." In describing the library, he spoke with special warmth of its "perfect copy of the old Bay Psalm Book, probably the only one owned by a private individual in New England."¹⁰ Dr. Shurtleff's temptation to get such a perfect copy was great. He could have purchased now the Crowninshield copy from bookseller Stevens; instead, he wrote a letter—on December 30, 1859, less than two months after the sale of the Crowninshield library—to Loring Lothrop, a deacon of the Old South Church:

MY DEAR SIR:

I am very desirous of obtaining one of the duplicate copies of the old Bay Psalm Book belonging to the Old South Church Library, having a strong veneration for the old volume. I think I have books in my library, such as would be not only appropriate for the Library of the Old South Church but also valuable for reference and for the use of those who may rely upon the library for works suitable to be consulted. Among the books which I happen to think of, are the original editions of Winthrop's New England, and Belknap's New England Biography, appropriate I think for Prince's New England Library, and which I would gladly give in exchange [for] one of the duplicates. If you will have the kindness to give this request the proper direction, you will much oblige your friend etc.

NATH. B. SHURTLEFF

The Enigma of the Bay Psalm Book

Deacon Lothrop, a former master of the Girls' High School, quickly responded.¹¹ Within a fortnight Dr. Shurtleff was in possession of the best copy of the Bay Psalm Book—the one once owned by Richard Mather.

Dr. Shurtleff was right in describing his two books as "not only appropriate for the Library of the Old South Church but also valuable for reference." He carefully avoided, however, mentioning the relative monetary values—a curious omission, considering that in the catalogue of the Crowninshield library the Bay Psalm Book was estimated at \$525, while Winthrop's *New England* was rated at \$5 and Belknap's *American Biography* (this was the correct title) at \$3.¹²

Mayor Shurtleff died in October, 1874, and a year later his library was put up for auction. However, the prospective sale of the Bay Psalm Book aroused considerable commotion in the Boston papers.¹³ The Old South Church had to take action. On December 2, 1875, Deacons Avery Plumer and Frederick D. Allen filed a complaint with the Supreme Court of Massachusetts against Dr. Shurtleff's estate; and the same day an injunction restrained the auctioneers from selling the volume.¹⁴ In the ensuing lawsuit the widow maintained that the Bay Psalm Book came into her husband's possession "by sale or barter," in proof of which she quoted his letter to Deacon Lothrop. The exchange, she declared, was "fair and proper, and made by her testator in good faith." She further argued that, by not having filed their bill within six

The Extant Copies

years, the deacons "have been guilty of such *laches* and want of due diligence that they are not entitled to any relief."¹⁵

The trial took place on April 15, 1876. As to the fairness and propriety of the exchange, any apprentice in a Boston bookstore could have given expert opinion.¹⁶ But the voiding of the claim because of the lapse of time was a different matter, and, in accordance with the Statute of Limitations, the court dismissed the complaint.¹⁷ The deacons appealed to the full court but afterward dropped the charge and paid the expenses. The road was thus cleared for the sale of the book. On October 12, 1876, it was sold to Sidney S. Rider, a Providence book-dealer for \$1,025. From him the volume went to C. Fiske Harris, upon whose death in 1881 it was acquired, with a copy of the 1647 edition, for the John Carter Brown Library at Providence. The price was \$1,500 and a number of "valuable" books.¹⁸

Thus the story ends well. Two of the copies have found their way to public institutions, and one could not wish for better places for them. The third, still in private hands, has done useful duty in doctoring up the copy in the New York Public Library. To be sure, the original "exchanges" could have taken place in a less imaginative manner, such as the payment of a decent price; but the thing itself was bound to happen sooner or later. The possession of five copies of the Bay Psalm Book by any library was extraordinary even a hundred years ago; today it would be a monstrosity.