

## William Henry Ireland's 'Authentic Original Forgeries': An Overdue Rediscovery

The tale of the Shakespeare manuscript forgeries of young William Henry Ireland in 1794-96 is now so familiar it needs no extended reprise. Since 1930 some fifteen substantial accounts of the perpetrator and his works have appeared, from book length to chapter to capsule – none, alas, altogether satisfactory, and the best of them (by G. Hilder Libbis, c. 1954) remains unpublished.<sup>1</sup> What still fascinates us about these audacious but clumsy impostures, with their absurd 'antique' orthography, phraseology, and penmanship, is their once-debated authorship – they are certainly the creation, solely, of a nineteen-year-old boy bent on impressing his father and emulating his literary hero Thomas Chatterton<sup>2</sup> – and the astounding success of the hoaxes (which ranged from trifling rous and theatrical memoranda, to love letters and 'testaments', to fragments of 'Kynge Leare' and 'Hamlette', and the original play of *Vortigern and Rowena*) in deceiving a whole gallery of eminent contemporaries. Ireland's earliest victims, after his unswervingly credulous father, included such men of literary taste – if perhaps uneven critical faculties – as James Boswell (who famously knelt before the relics, and kissed them), Dr Samuel Parr, Joseph Warton, John Pinkerton, Thomas Caldecott, and George Chalmers. And even though the truly informed Shakespearians of the day (Ritson, Steevens, and Malone) had no trouble in dismissing the fakery, the intensity and duration of the ensuing controversy between 'believers' and sceptics, which raged in print long after William Henry himself published a full and circumstantial confession (*An Authentic Account*, December 1796), constitutes a huge implicit compliment to the perverted talents of the young wordsmith, and one that he proudly acknowledged and advertised for the rest of his life.

In the eighteen short months of his forging activity, William Henry composed and generated at least 170 'Shakespearian' manuscripts, nearly all of which he presented to his father, swapping them for books, or – pathetically – for parental affection and respect, rarely otherwise manifested. The harsh family relationship, the dark side of this history, has rightly exercised William Henry's biographers, for Samuel went to his grave believing in the relics, and not in his son, whom he ever regarded as too dim and shallow to create such accomplished pastiches. The elder Ireland, a dedicated book collector and *marchand amateur* with a particular passion for Shakespeare, treated his new treasures with appropriate idolatry, exhibiting them (at a fee, by ticket) to a reverent public, publishing for subscribers a selection of texts and facsimiles in an imposing four-guinea folio (1795-96), and negotiating a production of *Vortigern* by John Philip Kemble at Sheridan's Drury

- 1 Derek Bodde, *Shakespeare and the Ireland Forgeries* (Cambridge, MA, 1930); Zoltan Harazsti, *The Shakespeare Forgeries of William Henry Ireland* (Boston, 1934); John Mair, *The Fourth Forger* (London, 1938); Bernard Grebanier, *The Great Shakespeare Forgery* (New York and London, 1965); Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1993), pp. 135-67; Jeffrey Kahan, *Reforging Shakespeare* (Bethlehem, PA, 1998); Joseph Rosenblum, *Practice to Deceive* (New Castle, 2000); Nick Groom, *The Forger's Shadow* (London, 2002); Patricia Pierce, *The Great Shakespeare Fraud* (Stroud, 2004); Paul Baines, 'William Henry Ireland', in ODNB (2004); Jack Lynch, *Becoming Shakespeare* (New York, 2007) and *Deception and Detection in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot, 2008); Doug Stewart, *The Boy Who Would Be Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA, 2010). A typescript of G. Hilder Libbis, *The Ireland Shakespeare Fabrications* is in the Milton Eisenhower Library of Johns Hopkins University; a new biography by Jack Lynch is in progress.
- 2 The latter motive is confessed by Ireland in an autobiographical account, written in 1797 for Albany Wallis (see below, note 5), but not elsewhere: clearly he came to realize that mere emulation was not as creditable as innovation.

Lane Theatre. The ensuing disaster of 2 April 1796 (Malone's devastating exposure coincided with the first and only performance, which the actors helped to sabotage) may have hastened William Henry's decision to confess and move on, but in no way shook Samuel's faith in his hoard. He had the manuscripts bound up in fashionable russia leather in three grand folio volumes, with clasps, and commissioned wooden boxes tipped with green morocco (the standard 'green livery' of his own rare book library) for three special deeds, an otherwise undiscussed 'Shakespeare' commonplace book, and a supposed lock of Anne Hathaway's hair. The published folio of facsimiles, issued by subscription in January 1796, was reprinted in a reduced format that circulated widely and is still a common book; and in 1799 Samuel again courted ridicule by committing *Vortigern* and its unstaged successor *Henry II* to print. But as the popular verdict of pamphleteers, newspapers, and caricaturists turned steadily against all these, Samuel turned on his son, who left home (they were never reconciled) and attempted to make a literary life for himself. Embattled and bitter, and widely suspected of complicity in the forgeries, Samuel succumbed to diabetes in July 1800; his heirs put his books and relics, including 'The Complete Collection of Shakespearian Papers' and some seventy early volumes with Shakespeare's ownership entries and annotations (all likewise supplied in 1794-96 by William Henry), into auction at Sotheby's in May 1801.

The signed and annotated books, catalogued as 'Shakespeare's Library' (with a few scattered elsewhere in the sale), fetched a disappointing total of just under £52 from a range of curiosity seekers – no more, usually, than the books themselves were worth – and most of them are still to be found in institutional and private collections. But the iconic russia-bound folios with the separately-cased relics did not meet expectations, and were bought in by the family under their *nom de vente* 'Scott', at £130.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently William Henry's mother and sisters, left well enough off in Samuel's will, tried to rid themselves of the Shakespearian onus: they destroyed the remainder of the 1795/6 *Miscellaneous Papers and Legal Instruments*, and sold the 'original' forgeries *en bloc* to the banker, politician, and bibliophile John 'Dog' Dent, MP, for the more respectable price (it is said) of £300.<sup>4</sup> Dent may later have added a few stray papers and related insertions, such as the 1797 caricature of Samuel by Gillray prefacing vol. I, which Samuel himself is unlikely to have cherished.

Meanwhile, however, William Henry had found a way to parlay his celebrity, or notoriety, into hard cash, which habitual extravagance, constant borrowing, shifting of abode, and a new marriage had rendered emergent: he began forging his own forgeries for souvenir hunters and friends within months of his published confession, beginning perhaps in March 1797 with a 'set' of ten specimens, worked into a narrative of the whole affair, for his old neighbour, lawyer, and loyal advisor Albany Wallis (1713-1800).<sup>5</sup> These re-fabrications were the pattern for a long and fairly lucrative sideline

3 That they were bought in is confirmed from sale-room data in William Clarke's *Repertorium Bibliographicum* (1819): 'Scott' was the buying-in name throughout the sale. The unlikely story that Edmond Malone was the underbidder at 120 guineas (£126) originates with Mair (1930, p. 227), and is unconfirmed elsewhere; this is converted by Pierce (2004, p. 212) into Malone *buying* the lot for £130.

4 There can be no doubt that Dent's set was the original 1801 offering: William Henry himself (with nothing to gain) confirms it in at least two letters to potential buyers of transcripts (one quoted by Harazsti, p. 22), and Dent himself, who was personally acquainted with Samuel during the late 1790s, stated in his 1825 privately-printed catalogue that these were 'the identical papers which caused so much controversy in the literary world, &c.' Finally, it would be obstinate indeed to attribute the identical physical descriptions in 1801 and 1827 (three russia leather folios, green morocco-tipped wooden cases for the deeds and the lock of hair) to coincidence or conspiracy.

5 William Henry may have provided others (e.g., the Romantic publisher Joseph Cottle of Bristol) with 'sample' Shakespeare signatures shortly before this, but we know of no such elaborate constructs before 1797. The Ireland to Albany original (if it really existed) is now unknown, but of course may turn up: a manuscript was offered as such by Sotheby's on 10 July 2012, lot 46, making £32,450, but it turned out to be another 're-forgery' by William Henry, on paper watermarked 1804 (four years after Wallis's death), and was subsequently returned.

in forged forgeries, which stretched over four decades and hundreds of manufactured artefacts, often claimed by Ireland to be the famous 'originals' of 1794-96 – none of which, of course, existed outside of the collection now owned by Dent – or even 'rough drafts' of them. Dozens of such artful assemblies, executed between 1797 and the mid-1830s, survive today, along with innumerable single-sheet copies and slips. Jack Lynch has personally examined twenty-three copies of the 'Profession of Faith' in English, Scottish, and American institutions, and observes that 'others certainly remain to be catalogued'; two further collections of samples, in fact, have resurfaced at auction in mid-2012. Such retrospective manuscripts still attract high prices from collectors, and although some may provide 'clues to [Ireland's] strange life before and after *Vortigern*' (Lynch), I am not sure that scholarly utility quite justifies current prices. But the mystique remains stubbornly healthy in bibliophile circles.

But what of the 'true originals' from which all these re-forgeries by Ireland must ultimately descend, even if based immediately upon the facsimiles his father had published? (In early days he once claimed to be working from 'memory' alone, after leaving his father's house, but I think we can dismiss that boast.) At John Dent's sale in 1827 the entire collection, three folio volumes and five boxed documents and relics, was purchased by Robert Tunno, a keen Shakespearian and stalwart of the Stock Exchange, for a mere forty-four guineas, the abrupt drop in price indicative of waning interest in an old scandal. Tunno died, aged ninety-two, in January 1840, and the forgeries were disposed of by his executors to an unnamed dealer, who sold them on to William Harrison of Samlesbury Hall, near Preston, Lancashire, another Shakespeare collector with out of the way tastes. Harrison (very fortunately) described all 176 constituents, including bound-in material, in exemplary detail, in a privately-printed inventory of his collection, *A Descriptive Catalogue of a Collection of Shakspeareana* (1866), pp. 1-47, plus items II-VI in boxes, the only full listing to date of the 1794-96 forgeries. At Harrison's posthumous sale (1881) the three volumes were purchased by J. Pearson & Co., leading dealers in Shakespeariana, for £125.

This sequence of ownership was established in 1938-54 by G. H. Libbis, for whom the trail then went cold: 'the writer has not traced the after possessor of these items'. But in 1966 Bernard Grebanier (who was unaware of Libbis's unpublished work, and thus missed the Tunno-Harrison-Pearson links in the chain) confused the originals with another 'complete set' of Ireland's forged forgeries belonging in the mid-century to the dramatist W. T. Montcrieff, later given by the Shakespeare forgery specialist C. M. Ingleby to the Shakespeare Memorial Library at Birmingham, where 'in 1879 all the papers were destroyed by fire. *Sic transit*'. This canard, based on a misreading of Sidney Lee's long entry in *DNB* (1891), was dismissed by the present writer in 1970,<sup>6</sup> but has been trustingly followed by four recent biographers, 2000-2010, Rosenblum, Pierce, Kahan ('lost'), and Stewart. Meanwhile the boxed reliquary material, sold separately in 1881, passed at modest figures to Pearson (the commonplace book, now in the Rosenbach foundation), to the bookseller J. W. Jarvis, to the eclectic collector John Eliot Hodgkin, and to one A. Smith (ten shillings for the lock of Anne Hathaway's hair). Hodgkin's two purchases – the 'deed of gift' from Shakespeare to the imaginary forbear and namesake of William Henry Ireland, who had saved the playwright from drowning in the Thames, and a theatrical contract between John Lowin, Henry Condell, and Shakespeare (along with the lock of hair, presumably acquired from Smith) – were bought at Hodgkin's sale (1914, lots 1405-07) by Maggs Brothers, and sold on to the rising star of American booksellers, A. S. W. Rosenbach of Philadelphia; there again Libbis loses sight of them. They should normally have gone, at that date, to Henry Clay Folger, but they didn't, and I haven't (yet) found them.

Setting aside Grebanier's dead-end solution, however, the search for the missing three folio volumes – a reassuringly bulky bibliophile's grail, be it said – has gone on for another near fifty years, without reward heretofore. Professor Lynch, who has pursued and examined dozens of the

6 In my edited reprint of Ireland's *Vortigern* and *Henry the Second* (Frank Cass, 1971), p. [8]. The Montcrieff 'set' is described in *Notes and Queries*, 5th Series, vi (1879), p. 160.

secondary Ireland forgeries in America and Great Britain, concluded in 2004 that ‘which, if any, volume [of Ireland manuscripts extant today] contains the authentic originals is unknown, and perhaps unknowable.’ Yet the ‘authentic originals’ might well have been traced much further, if only from published records. In their heyday Pearson’s of Pall Mall had cultivated and catered to the avid American market in Shakespeariana, and – directly or indirectly – their 1881 Ireland purchases passed into the substantial collection of John Augustin Daly, a well-known New York theatrical impresario, playwright, and producer of revived Elizabethan plays. Daly died in 1899, and in one of his posthumous sales (American Art Association, 26 March 1900) the grand originals – correctly described, if with minimal detail – were offered as lot 3046, making \$900. The auctioneers knew just what they had, noting that ‘although Ireland ... was prone to give proofs of his handiwork – for a consideration – these are the actual originals in all their completeness; and as a monument of misdirected skill and genius they have no peer’.

The next owner was the pre-eminent American Shakespeare collector of his day, Marsden J. Perry of Providence, Rhode Island, who owned the B. B. MacGeorge set of the four Shakespeare Folios in contemporary bindings, and the celebrated Edward Gwynn copy of nine 1619 quartos, constituting the abortive earliest attempt at a published collection of Shakespeare’s plays. After dominating the market for decades, in May 1919 Perry – stung by Henry E. Huntington’s outbidding him for the great Devonshire holding of early English drama – abandoned his pursuit (‘I will not take second place’), and sold his entire Shakespeare/Shakespeariana collection to the venturesome Rosenbach, who soon recovered most of his cost from Henry Clay Folger and Joseph Widener, and more than the rest from Huntington and others. But Rosenbach retained the three russia-bound Ireland-Dent-Tunno-Harrison-Daly-Perry folios, perhaps from a personal penchant for Ireland – he had already acquired other Ireland material, including the Hodgkin relics, from Maggs in 1914, for a lot price of £149 – and in January 1924 the *New York Times* reported a ‘twenty volume’ collection of Ireland’s forgeries in his vaults. This ‘set’ was valued by the owner at no less than \$65,000 – a deliberately prohibitive figure, it might seem, which helped to ensure its remaining *in situ*. For the next published notice of the Daly volumes, unless I have missed a Rosenbach catalogue offering, appears at the beginning of an essay titled ‘Shakespeare Jr.’, contained in the 1946 *Festschrift* for the bookseller at seventy, *To Doctor R*: here the play of *Vortigern* is described as ‘contained in a large folio volume [i.e., vol. III], bound in old russia ... flanked by two other Ireland forgeries’, which rest together ‘on the shelf of the Doctor’s vault in New York City’. This contribution, which goes on to demonstrate – rather superfluously – that *Vortigern* could not possibly be an Elizabethan composition, was by the already renowned bibliophile Mary Morley Crapo Hyde (1912-2003), perhaps the greatest female collector of her time, or indeed female scholar-collector of all time, who with her husband Donald Hyde (1909-1966) formed the incomparable library of Johnsoniana at Four Oaks Farm in Somerville, New Jersey, and (as Viscountess Eccles) bequeathed it largely to Harvard. Rosenbach died in June 1952, still in possession of the Ireland originals, but the Hydés subsequently acquired them from his successors in December 1952 for \$3000 – together with the interesting autobiographical *Full and Explanatory Account* of the 1794-1805 events, from the same Daly sale (lot 3046b, \$410 then, now just \$685).<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, and despite their invariable generosity to qualified scholars, and contributions to exhibitions and compilations, the Hydés rarely publicized, and never really vaunted their acquisitions. A hint, however, of the whereabouts of the Ireland originals appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* for 19 May 1966, in a rather-too-generous review – anonymous, of course – of Grebanier’s *The Great Shakespeare Forgery*. Correcting his account of their destruction – five years before I did – the reviewer points to their reappearance at the Daly sale, and concludes, without

7 The latter dates and figures are from the Hyde archive at Harvard, courtesy of John Overholt. After the 1952 purchase Donald Hyde marked lots 3046 and 3046b in his copy of the Daly sale catalogue (now in a private collection in America), with the word ‘Hyde’.

entirely spilling the beans, that ‘the invaluable relics that Boswell knelt before and kissed still survive.’ Thanks now to the on-line *TLS Historical Archive*, we can see that the anonymous reviewer of 1966 was none other than Mary Hyde herself. But in the 1967 volume devoted to the library at Four Oaks Farm, the brief description of the Hyde forgery collection makes no special claim for the authenticity of the manuscripts, beyond their being (as ever) in the autograph of William Henry – they might just as well be another set of his forged forgeries, like those multiplied at Folger, Huntington, the British Library, and (formerly) Birmingham.

Perhaps modesty or discretion went a little too far, in the end, because when in 2004 the formidable Hyde bequest was received at Harvard’s Houghton Library, the dedicated cataloguer there had no clear indication of just what he confronted in MS Hyde 60, volumes 5-7. Nor, seemingly, did Ireland specialists like Samuel Schoenbaum, who had used and quoted from the manuscripts while still at Four Oaks Farm, nor any who viewed them at Harvard in the last eight years. Until now the otherwise efficient on-line catalogue notes, available on Harvard’s ‘OASIS’ website, gave no early provenance, nor (what might have alerted some searchers) descriptions of the size of the volumes, or of their distinctive bindings, which are still as they always were: full russet leather, with clasps remaining only on vol. 1, just as recorded in the Daly sale a century ago. The order of the contents, never disturbed since Dent’s ownership, matches precisely that in Harrison’s 1866 inventory, as I am kindly informed by John Overholt, Curator of the Hyde Collection at the Houghton Library. *Eureka*, if I may, and *sic probo*.

The practical value of this overdue rediscovery may be at best moot – although if anyone ever chooses to edit *Vortigern* as a literary work, here is certainly the *ur*-text, and there are probably some 140 unreproduced minor forgeries that Samuel Ireland did not include among his 1795-96 facsimiles – but at least prospective biblio-sleuths (like myself) can now call off the search for the three missing volumes. For die-hards, three individual boxed ‘originals’ and one lock of hair (probably supplied by one Polly Thompson,<sup>8</sup> or William Henry’s fiancée, Alice Crudge) remain to be located.

Arthur Freeman, London  
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8 Many years later William Henry told John Philip Kemble he had cut it from the head of ‘Polly Thompson or some such person’: Libbis, p. 69.