The University of London’s Earliest Books: ‘185 Volumes Presented by Nathaniel Vye, Esq.’

K.E. Attar


The University of London was established by royal charter in November 1836, and its first donations of books are recorded in Senate Minutes of 1838.¹ The list begins, atypically for the years before 1871, with two bulk donations. The first of these summarises: ‘Parliamentary Reports and Papers on Education in England, Scotland and Ireland. Presented by the Chancellor and Mr. Warburton’, and refers to minutes of the Committee of the Faculty of Medicine for a full list. These minutes show the reports to date from 1809 to 1837, and to focus on Ireland; most are on primary or secondary education, and appear unrelated to universities (a local English example is ‘Reports from the Select Committee on the Education of the Lower Orders in the Metropolis’).² The record of the second bulk donation states briefly: ‘185 volumes. Presented by Nathaniel Vye, Esq.’ Nothing indicates the further identity of the donor or the motivation for the donation, and, unlike the educational reports, no list survives elsewhere. It is this hitherto unidentified group of books which forms the basis for this article.

Nathaniel Vye appears not to have been a University man; certainly nobody of that name is recorded in Foster or Venn.³ The Vye family was an established one at Ilfracombe in Devon (with a family tomb in the churchyard and monument in the church there), and Nathaniel was a family name: the 62 men sworn in as special constables and listed on a handbill from the ‘Ilfracombe Association for the Preservation of the Peace’, dated 7 December 1830, included, alongside William Vye and W.B. Vye, both ‘Nathaniel Vye senior’ and ‘Nathaniel Vye junior’;⁴ a third Nathaniel Vye, ‘eldest son of Nathaniel Vye, of Ilfracombe, Devon’, was a student of the Middle Temple on 14 January 1840 and was called to the bar on 5 May 1843.⁵ The eldest of the three Nathaniel Vyes mentioned here, born in 1759, is named in the first decade of the nineteenth century as selling brigs,⁶ and was also a banker, dissolving his partnership in Ilfracombe with William B. Vye and G. Harris in 1828.⁷ Having died in 1835, he could scarcely have donated books in 1838 – although he could feasibly have owned them -- and his lawyer grandson, born in 1818, is somewhat young to have been the donor. This leaves the middle Nathaniel Vye (1791-1840), evidently a man who took an interest in the community; he is mentioned in 1837 as Vice-Chair at a Devonshire Reform Dinner in the Ilfracombe Rooms.⁸ Professionally, he was a medical man,

¹ University of London Archive, UoL/ST/2/2/1: Senate minutes, 1837-1843 (1838, ‘Presents’).
² University of London Archive, UoL/ST/3/2/1: University of London, Minutes of the Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, May 10th 1837 to February 11th 1839 (8 Nov. 1837).
⁴ TNA, HO 52/6/92.
elected as a Fellow of the Medical and Chirurgical Society of London in 1826, and listed as a surgeon and agent in the Civil Service Department of the Navy. He was well known enough for his death on 24 October 1840, aged 49, to have been noted in the Gentleman’s Magazine and amplified both in a local paper and in The Times: ‘an eminent medical practitioner in that Town and neighbourhood, during a period of 27 years. Remarkable for the kindness and urbanity of his manners, as well as for his professional skill,’ ‘after a short illness, universally and most deservedly lamented, Nathaniel Vye […] an eminent surgeon’. The medical connection could explain his sense of the new University of London as a repository worthy of benefactions, for that body had strong medical representation. Of the thirty-seven men named as constituting the first Senate of the University, fifteen are medical, and nine of these were, like Vye, Fellows of the Medical and Chirurgical Society of London at the time of his donation. Two early examiners for the University of London, Alexander Tweedie and Jonathan Pereira, were also Fellows. Several of these men (Pereira, Tweedie, Archibald Billing, Sir James Clark, Thomas Hodgkin, Sir James McGrigor and Peter Mark Roget) were to give books to the University: Vye could have known them and joined the general spirit of generosity.

Construction of the Vye gift began with the serendipitous discovery of a few volumes of eighteenth-century German theology containing his name. Similarities among the bindings led to the discovery of further volumes by perusing spines on shelves in the same sequence. A systematic search followed, based on the catalogue of the University of London Library printed in 1876: I read through the catalogue, listed books printed before 1838 not noted as entering the Library from another source, and hunted for titles. The search revealed 141 of the 185 volumes definitely given by Vye, as identified by a pencilled note in the volumes. Forty-three further volumes can reasonably be ascribed to Vye on the basis of the subject matter, author, and/or binding, and, in three instances (see below), former ownership. The first volume of Christian Felix Weisse’s five-volume Beytrag zum deutschen Theater was lost some time during the twentieth or twenty-first century; the binding, especially the endpapers, of the other four volumes proclaims the work to have been Vye’s, and the discovery of the first volume (the one in which Vye provenance was invariably noted) would result in 146 volumes noted as coming definitely from Vye, with a reasonable ascription of 38 more. A forty-fourth volume (a German translation of Hamlet, printed in Hamburg in 1777), cannot so confidently be ascribed to Vye, but there are two native German plays printed at about the same time in the Vye group (in addition to drama printed as part of complete works, for example by Johann Elias Schlegel), and the language and the date and place of printing render it possible.

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10 The Navy List, Corrected to the 20th March 1834 (London: John Murray, 1834), p. 139.
13 The Times, 6 Nov. 1840, p. 7.
15 A tenth member of the Senate, Thomas Hodgkin, was elected in 1840.
17 Catalogue of the Library of the University of London, Including the Libraries of George Grote and Augustus De Morgan (London: Taylor and Francis, 1876)
Rebinding in twentieth-century library cloth with modern endpapers has destroyed potential evidence in some cases; possible provenance evidence (and also early library shelfmarks) have been erased from some volumes; and occasionally a large University bookplate covers a possible inscription. Three titles (four volumes) which on the basis of language, place and date of publication, and analogous title or subject matter with items definitely in the Vye gift, could have formed part of the 1838 donation, can no longer be found in the Library. A note in the marked-up archival copy of the printed catalogue from 1900 states that one of these (Süssmilch’s *Göttliche Ordnung in den Veränderungen des menschlichen Geschlechts*) was discarded as a duplicate of a copy in the Goldsmiths’ Company’s Library of Economic Literature, which entered the University of London in 1903; the theological ring of the title (although the book is in fact an economic work on population) makes it reasonable to place the book in the category of books which can fairly be ascribed to Vye, while the subject matter of the others renders them plausible candidates.\(^{18}\) A margin for error exists. Working outwards from the known probabilities of works in German and works of theology or literature (usually a combination of the linguistic and subject elements) is a predictive process. Given the definite inclusion in the list of Vye books that do not fit the general pattern, such as the Abbé de Vertot’s French history of Roman and Portuguese revolutions and Louis Joblot’s *Observations d’histoire naturelle* (the latter picked up by chance in a vain search for Blumenbach’s *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte*) it is possible that books which linguistically or subject-wise seem unlikely could replace likely ones; and it is also conceivable that one or more Vye books was accidentally omitted from the 1876 catalogue and remains undiscovered.\(^{19}\) However, it is improbable that future amendments would affect the general nature of the gift. Statistical work conducted on the basis both of the incontrovertible Vye titles and of the total number reveals similar proportions in both sets of calculations: the proportions based on the total figures merely accentuate the majority features (German language, German imprints, octavos) by up to four percentage points.

The 185 volumes are physical volumes. They comprise 98 titles and cover in particular German eighteenth-century theology. The volumes include two Sammelbände (one of three publications by Karl Wilhelm Ramler; one of plays by Johann Anton Leisewitz and August Gottlieb Meissner), and several multi-volume works. The figure, as pencilled in the books themselves, is of the number of volumes as they were bound and entered the University of London from Vye, not of the number of bibliographical volumes as issued: for example, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’s *Oeuvres diverses* is intended as a two-volume work, but counts as one for purposes of reconstituting the Vye list because the two volumes of the Vye copy are bound together as one. The 98 titles represent works by 69 predominantly 18th-century authors or editors, with between one and seven titles per author; the greatest number of titles is by Louis Bourdaloue (sermons for various occasions), with Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Jerusalem and Georg Joachim Zollikofer also well represented.

The reconstituted list (Appendix 2) contains 186 volumes (99 titles), one volume too many. To bring the figure back to 185, for the purpose of statistical analysis I am discounting one literary German octavo from the 1770s: these are the characteristics of two of the three tenuous titles, Shakespeare and Frederick II. Seventy-three titles were definitely Vye’s. Of these 73 titles, 59 titles (four-fifths of the total) are in German, with the remaining fifth in

\(^{18}\) University of London Archive, UL/8/1: *University of London, Hand-Catalogue of the Library, Brought down to the end of 1897* (London: H.M.S.O., [1900]). Annotations continued to be made until about 1930. The other books which have since disappeared are Frederick II’s *Ueber die deutsche Litteratur, die Mängel, die man ihr vorwerfen kann*, not recorded in the University Library’s card catalogue and presumably also discarded as a duplicate, and Blumenbach’s *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte*.

\(^{19}\) As a precedent, *Der Wohlthäter* is not listed in the catalogue, and was discovered by serendipity. For deficiencies in the 1876 catalogue, see Attar, pp. 55-6.
French. The country of publication, unsurprisingly, is above all Germany (53 titles; 72.6%),
with four German-language titles printed in Switzerland, one in England, and one in
Denmark. Of the books printed in French, three titles were printed in the Netherlands (4.1%),
four in France, and the seven Bourdaloue titles in Belgium. Almost four-fifths of the titles are
octavos (57; 78.1%), followed by duodecimos and quartos in that order; the duodecimos are
all French-language publications. All but two titles (of 1682 and 1696, both French
duodecimos by François Eudes de Mézeray) are eighteen-century imprints. The dates of
publication focus strongly on the 1760s and 1770s (between them, 47 titles (64.4%)).
Proportions remain similar if the analysis of books definitely given by Vye is expanded to
include the books which can confidently be ascribed to his gift; comparative statistics are
given in Appendix 1.

Across all 185 volumes, theology (especially devotional works) constitutes the main
subject matter (48 of the 98 titles). The strongly devotional character is apparent even from a
fleeting perusal of titles, sixteen of which include the word ‘sermons’ or ‘Predigten’, with
‘Andachten’, ‘Gebete’ and ‘göttliche Betrachtungen’ in seven titles. The German theology is
Protestant, the French Catholic (Bourdaloüe was a Jesuit). Also represented are literature,
history of various countries and philosophy, with two titles in economics, one each in
language, anthropology, social sciences, and geography, and one or two in natural history.

Theology might well have been intended, or been perceived as being, a more binding element
than it is. Subject divisions can be fluid, with philosophy merging into theology, and
literature sometimes having a devotional bent (seen most clearly in Ramlér’s Geistliche
Kantaten, and in a section named ‘Geistliche Oden oder Lieder’ (with a separate section on
‘Weltliche Oden oder Lieder’) in the Sammlung von Johann Christian Günthers, aus
Schlesien, bis anhero herausgegebenen Gedichten). Sometimes a writer represented by a
theological work is also represented by a non-theological one: for example, Anton Friedrich
Büsching’s church historical Geschichte der jüdischen Religion and his geographical Neue
Erdbeschreibung), and possibly some non-theological works were sold in lots in a hasty
assumption from their titles that they were theological: Recueil des ouais funèbres by
Esprit Fléchier (1768) and by Jules Mascaron (1725) and the two economic works, Die gute
Nachbarschaft durch die Zunahme von Handlung und Reichthum sowohl in der Nähe als
Ferne by Nicolaus Magens and Johann Peter Süßmilch’s Die göttliche Ordnung in den
Veränderungen des menschlichen Geschlechts, already mentioned.

The Vye ascription takes the form of the note ‘N. Vye, x Vol’ or ‘Nath Vye, x Vol’,
usually in the centre of the verso of the front free endpaper or of the front flyleaf and
occasionally on a front pastedown. The position is abnormal for an ownership inscription, as
is the fact that the note is invariably pencilled and that it states the number of volumes. The
same hand appears in a pencilled binding instruction, ‘L.U. ¼ Mor.’, in another early
acquisition, apparently unconnected with Vye, the third edition of Gilles Ménage’s
Menagiana (1713; bound in quarter morocco and marbled boards by U.P. Gray & Son of
Cambridge). This suggests that the scribe was a University employee, probably with the
unfulfilled expectation of later having a donation bookplate inserted. All the books definitely
or putatively given by Vye have the earliest University of London stamp, a rectangular black
ink stamp on the verso of the title page, measuring 55 by 17 millimetres and bearing the
words ‘Univ. Lond.’ in capital letters, surrounded by a double-ruled border with the corners
replaced by an inward-facing curve: this stamp was used on other early acquisitions, but had
been discarded by 1871, when the foundation collections of Augustus De Morgan and George
Grote entered the University. Many have an early shelfmark pencilled at the head of the title
page, in the form of a roman numeral, a letter, and an Arabic numeral (e.g. IX.c.5). In some
the shelfmark was subsequently erased (all Vye books have been reclassified at least once).
The juxtaposition of extant shelfmarks indicates that arrangement was random. The range of
shelfmarks (from III to IX, with a concentration around VIII-XI), with up to 48 books on a shelf, indicates that shelfmarks must have been imposed considerably later than the donation, and the books interspersed with others: not only are the shelfmarks not all consecutive, even allowing for erasures, but shelfmarks remaining on items donated in later years interrupt the Vye sequence.²⁰

Provenance information about the volumes is sparse. Many of the books have German binding, implying original purchase in Germany. Several are bound in marbled calf with gilt borders and with five false raised bands on the spines, with gilt tooling in the spine compartments (a flower and cornerpieces). The endpapers are sometimes plain and sometimes marbled. Often they are bright blue paste papers, occasionally (for Friedrich Wilhelm Zachariä’s Poetische Schriften (1764) and for some volumes of Johann Lorenz Mosheims Sitten-Lehre der Heiligen Schrift (1753-70) and of Michael Ignaz Schmidt’s Geschichte der Deutschen (1784-91)) deep pink, a typically German kind of endpaper very popular in the final third of the eighteenth century.²¹ Vye acquired the books second-hand, as can be deduced from the fact that in ten volumes an ownership inscription has been cut away. He, and at least one earlier owner, acquired the books in England. This can be inferred from the London imprint of two of the books, Magens’s Gute Nachbarschaft (1751) and Einige Predigten von Heinrich Otto Schrader, Hofprediger zu St. James’s, und Lehrer der deutschen Sprache bey Ihren Königl. Hoheiten den Prinzessinnen von Gross-Britannien (1779); it makes more sense for the rest of the books to have travelled once to England than for the books printed in England to have travelled to Germany and to have been brought back. Gute Nachbarschaft, moreover, is copiously annotated, chiefly in the margins in German, with annotations in a different hand on the back free endpaper in English. The only known former owners are, furthermore, English. Thomas Abbt’s Vermischte Werke (1770-71) has the bookplate of Philip Van Swinden, recorded as having been awarded a MA from Trinity College, Oxford in 1772 and as having been ordained the following year,²² and seven books stem from three members of the Mello family, Arnold, Anne and Abraham: Hamburg-born Arnold Mello (1730-1809) was from 1754 a merchant in London (naturalised in 1755), Anne his wife (1734-1797), and Abraham Mello (1757-1833) their son.²³ Abraham Mello had a son Joshua (1807-1886), and a Joshua Mello (the same man?) is named with the Vyes on the ‘Ilfracombe Association for the Preservation of the Peace’ mentioned above. Several German churches thrived in London in the eighteenth century and German devotional literature was readily available there, especially in the 1760s and 1770s through Carl Heydinger in Grafton

²⁰ E.g. N. Mouawiev, L’Univers et ses Mondes; et L’Homme et ses Espèces (1840), donated 1841, has the shelfmark IV.d.g [sic]; Sir John William Lubbock, On the Determination of the Distance of a Comet from the Earth, and the Elements of its Orbit (1835), also donated 1841, has a shelfmark beginning III.d.
²³ Rainer Dörry, ‘Mello’, http://www.rainer-doerry.de/Ahnenforschung/html/Doerry/p000233.htm (accessed 30 Mar. 2015); Family Maw, http://www.family-maw.co.uk/getperson.php?personID=115824&tree=Maw (accessed 30 Mar. 2015). The books owned by Abraham Mello are the two earliest in the collection, Mézeray’s Abrégé chronologique de l’histoire de France (1682) and his Histoire de France avant Clovis (1696). Vye’s name is noted in neither of these. Vye’s name appears in the books belonging to Anne (Johann Adolf Schlegel, Sammlung einiger Predigten (1757-1764)) and in three of the four books belonging to Arnold, Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Jerusalem’s Betrachtungen über die vornehmsten Wahrheiten der Religion (1768-79), Gottfried Less’s Beweis der Wahrheit der christlichen Religion (1768), and Hermann Samuel Reimarus’s Die Vernunftlehre (1758); the fourth book is Ludwig Heinrich von Nicolay’s Vermischte Gedichte (1778-86).
The books could easily have been purchased in Devon. Ilfracombe itself was not devoid of booksellers, while Exeter was rich in them; Exeter’s booksellers included notably Gilbert Dyer, praised both by Thomas Dibdin and William Hone, with Hone commenting particularly on Dyer’s large stock of theology.

The University of London did not appreciate the Vye donation when it was given, presumably because it regarded the books as being of negligible practical benefit. This explains why, unlike the educational reports which entered the University at the same time, the gift was not itemised. Old books generally were not valued. I have written elsewhere on the basis of donations listed in Senate minutes that early donations were all recently published books. However, the 1876 catalogue includes a small number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century books from unidentified sources which are absent from the donation lists. The Senatorial silence implies that such books were not considered worth listing – a situation which changed only after the influx of antiquarian books from the De Morgan and Grote libraries in 1871. The Vye donation is at odds with the other pre-1871 donations to the University in several ways, most of these being nineteenth-century publications given by the author, editor, or the corporate body responsible for generating them. Even allowing for the other second-hand books unacknowledged as gifts but present in the catalogue, the German language does not feature otherwise in early donations, and theology, let alone devotional books, is with very occasional exceptions (mostly biography) markedly absent. Moreover, there is no clear connection between the donor and the books, i.e. Vye clearly did not generate them. He may not even have been a former owner; there is no knowing whether he assembled them, or whether they merely passed through his hands, possibly inherited from his father. And why give a University books that are in the main so un-academic? If the hope was that members of the University would benefit morally from the content, why give books in German rather than English, and why not give exclusively theology? Had the books indeed belonged to Nathaniel Vye’s late father, and was he using the new University as a sort of charity shop for books which either presented painful memories for him, or simply were of no use to him? Knowledge of the substance of Nathaniel Vye’s gift is a cornerstone in the history of the University of London Library, answering one large question. Many smaller questions remain.

**Appendix 1: Statistics of the Vye donation**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 1: Language</th>
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27 For an analysis of early donations, see Attar.

28 See, for example, Antoine Arnauld, *Histoire de dom Jean de Palafax* (s.n., 1690); Guy Bentivoglio, *Mémoires du Cardinal Bentivoglio*, trans. by Jean de Vayrac (Paris, 1713); Louis de Sacy, *Traité de la gloire* (The Hague, 1715); François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon, *De l'éducation des filles* (new edn, Paris, 1719) and other works.

29 I should like to thank Keith Manley for his suggestions concerning this article, in particular for amplification about the various members of the Vye family.
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Table 3: Format

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*Multi-volume works that span more than one decade are listed in the decade in which the first volume was published.

Appendix 2: the Vye donation

1. Books marked as having come from Vye (141 vols)
Boileau-Despréaux, Nicolas, Oeuvres diverses du Sr. Boileau Despreaux, avec Le traité du sublime ou de merveilleux dans le discours, new edn (Amsterdam, 1707) (12mo)
Bossuet, Jacques Bénigne, Jacob Benignus Bossuet, Bischofs von Meaux, Einleitung in die allgemeine Geschichte der Welt, bis auf Kaiser Carln den Grossen, trans. and ed. by Johann Andreas Cramer, 6 vols (Leipzig, 1757-86) (8vo)
Bourdaloue, Louis, *Retraite spirituelle a l'usage des communautés religieuses* (Liege, 1773) (12mo)

-----, *Sermons du Pere Bourdaloue de la Compagnie de Jesus pour l'avent*, new edn (Liege, 1773) (12mo)

-----, *Sermons du Pere Bourdaloue, de la Compagnie de Jesus, pour le Carême*, 3 vols (Liege, 1773) (12mo)

-----, *Sermons du Pere Bourdaloue de la Compagnie de Jesus pour les dimanches*, new edn, 4 vols (Liege, 1773) (12mo)

-----, *Sermons du Pere Bourdaloue de la Compagnie de Jesus pour les fêtes des saints et pour des vêtures & professions religieuses*, 2 vols (Liege, 1773) (12mo)

-----, *Sermons du Pere Bourdaloue de la Compagnie de Jesus sur les mysteres*, new edn, 2 vols (Liege, 1773) (12mo)

-----, *Exhortations et instructions chrétiennes*, new edn, 2 vols (Liege, 1773) (12mo)

Bürger, Gottfried August, *Gedichte* (Göttingen, 1778) (8vo)


-----, *Geschichte der jüdischen Religion, oder des Gesetzes: ein Grundriss* (Berlin, 1779) (8vo)

Canitz, Friedrich Rudolf Ludwig, *Des Freyherrn von Caniz Gedichte, mehrentheils aus seinen igenhändigen Schrifften verbessert und vermehret*, ed. by Johann Ulrich König (Leipzig and Berlin, 1727) (8vo)

Cramer, Johann Andreas, *Andachten in Betrachtungen, Gebeten und Liedern über Gott, seine Eigenschaften und Werke* (Schleswig and Leipzig, 1764-5) (8vo)

Dalencou, G, *Denkmahl für die Nachkommenschaft, in einer getreuen Abbildung und Beschreibung derjenigen Wasser-Fluth, mit welcher die Hamburgischen Gegendern im Jahr 1771 heimgesuchet worden sind, nebst Beylagen* (Hamburg, 1772) (8vo)

Engel, Johann Jacob (ed.), *Der Philosoph für die Welt* (Leipzig, 1775-1777) (8vo)


Feddersen, Jakob Friederich, *Würden und Glückseeligkeiten des Christen in vermischten Betrachtungen* (Flensburg, 1766) (8vo)

Fénelon, François de Salignac de La Mothe-, *Oeuvres philosophiques*, new edn (Paris, 1775) (8vo)


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