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## The Purchase of the *Life of St Cuthbert* for the Nation: Art, History and Politics c. 1903-1920

On 12 April 1920, the Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum, Frederic Kenyon, wrote to express his thanks to the National Art-Collections Fund (NACF) for their contribution of £ 1,000 towards the purchase of a twelfth-century manuscript of the *Life of St Cuthbert*, now British Library, Yates Thompson MS 26 (Fig. 1). He declared: «The MS., with its large number of illuminations, represents an interesting phase of national art, which made it a very desirable addition to the national collection. It was, in fact, the one MS. in that sale which could be said definitely to fill a gap in the art history of the country, as represented in the British Museum».<sup>1</sup>

The *Life of St Cuthbert* was the first manuscript bought with the support of the NACF, which had been founded seventeen years earlier in 1903.<sup>2</sup> The NACF's involvement in the purchase was a recognition both of growing interest in manuscripts as works of art and of the booming international market for manuscripts that made it increasingly difficult for British collectors or institutions to acquire such books. The creation of the NACF, to which each member initially contributed a minimum of 1 guinea per year, had been prompted by concerns about the exodus of works of art from Britain in the context of limited government funding to purchase works for the nation.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the British government

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1. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter from F.G. Kenyon to NACF, 12 April 1920.

2. *Twenty-Five Years of the National Art-Collections Fund, 1903-1928*, Glasgow 1928, pp. 26-28, 31, 36-37. The Fund had previously facilitated gifts of printed books and manuscripts to the British Museum and the Library of the India Office.

3. R.C. Witt, *A Movement in Aid of Our National Art Collections*, in «Nineteenth Century and After», LIV/320 (1903), pp. 651-659; *The National Art-Collections Fund*, in «The Times», 12 November 1903, p. 6; *Twenty-Five Years*, pp. 1-24.

was reluctant to take measures to control the trade and, unlike in France and Italy, restrictions on the export of works of art were only introduced in Britain during the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> In January 1920, Julius Gilson, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum, presented the NACF with a list of four manuscripts in the up-coming auction of part of Henry Yates Thompson's collection, including the *Life of St Cuthbert*, that he considered would be desirable acquisitions.<sup>5</sup> The decision to focus solely on obtaining the St Cuthbert manuscript was pragmatic, given the challenges of raising funds, and political, as this manuscript was identified as one around which a campaign of support for its acquisition could be built on the grounds of its "national significance". This essay will focus on the history of the St Cuthbert manuscript from the foundation of the NACF in 1903 to the manuscript's purchase by the British Museum in 1920. It will explore how ideas about the national significance of illuminated manuscripts developed in this period and how they contributed to shaping both the St Cuthbert manuscript's fate and the wider discourse about the international trade in medieval manuscripts.

### 1. *Defining National Treasure*

The concept of manuscripts (both illuminated and not) as potential "national treasures" was a familiar one in Britain at the start of the twentieth century. In 1897, in the context of a parliamentary debate about the interpretation of part of the 1896 Finance Act on the taxation of inherited goods, Earl Stanhope: «rose to move a humble Address to her Majesty praying that she would be graciously pleased to take such measures as were necessary to preserve in the country «such pictures, prints, books, manuscripts, works of art, and scientific collections not yielding income as are of national, scientific, or historic interest».<sup>6</sup>

Although others supported him, the motion failed. Among the problems raised during the debate were how a system for determining the historic and national value of works should be administered and who might be called upon to make those decisions.

Manuscripts were not a high priority for the NACF at its foundation, with attention focused instead on acquiring paintings for the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery. At the inaugural meeting on 11 November 1903, the chair of the NACF, Lord Balcarres, reported that the Fund had 308 members and had already raised £ 700, but this was a very small sum compared with the

4. See *Works of Art and the Finance Act*, in «The Times», 29 May 1897, p. 10; A.N.L. Munby, L.W. Towner, *The Flow of Books and Manuscripts, Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar, March 30, 1968*, Los Angeles 1969, p. 8.

5. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter from J.P. Gilson to NACF, 22 January 1920.

6. *Works of Art and the Finance Act*, p. 10.

government's recent commitment of £ 20,000 a year for purchases.<sup>7</sup> Inspired by similar groups on the Continent, it was «proposed that the fund should be an entirely independent body», with decisions about purchases to be made by a small committee.<sup>8</sup> A group of men and women with the leisure to devote to such activities were therefore to determine which works of art should be acquired for the benefit of the nation. The NACF also worked to facilitate donations of artworks. To attract support, the initial remit was very broad, with room «for every variety and shade of artistic opinion», and Lord Balcarras' statement that «all tastes and shades of opinion could co-operate in this scheme, for underlying it was a great national object which was deserving of national sympathy» was met with cheers.<sup>9</sup> However, just a month later the need for the Fund and its limits were the subject of public discussion, as when a manuscript of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* came up for auction: an article in «The Times» observed that «the purchase of books and MSS. was not included in the original rather vague programme of the National Art Collections Fund; but, after all, poetry is an art, and to help the British Museum Library is as important as to help the Renaissance or Classical Department».<sup>10</sup> Demand for help from the new Fund was potentially limitless, and there was never going to be enough money or energy to acquire everything that might be suggested.

By 1920, one of the founders of the NACF, Robert Witt, was prepared to concede that it was foolish to think everything could be kept in Britain, but he declared that there were «a limited number of works of art which should in no circumstances be allowed to go out of the country. Of those the members of that society [the NACF] had been appointed by public opinion to be the sentinels to guard the treasure».<sup>11</sup> However, while public opinion was a means of assessing, what was important to the “nation” it could also be manipulated by those (almost exclusively from the middle class) who volunteered to be «sentinels» and who, in order to achieve their aims, worked closely with collectors and museum professionals.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. *The St Cuthbert Manuscript*

In July 1906, two manuscripts owned by Sir John Lawson, whose estates were in Yorkshire, were sold at Sotheby's.<sup>13</sup> Both books had been made in north-eastern

7. *The National Art-Collections Fund*, p. 6; for government funds see also Witt, *A Movement*, p. 653.

8. *The National Art-Collections Fund*, p. 6; see also Witt, *A Movement*, pp. 656-657.

9. *The National Art-Collections Fund*, p. 6.

10. [Untitled article], in «The Times», 16 December 1903, p. 11.

11. *Our Choicest Art Treasures*, in «The Times», 2 June 1920, p. 13; R.C. Witt, *Abridged Report of the Annual General Meeting*, in *National Art-Collections Fund Seventeenth Annual Report 1920*, London 1921, p. 8.

12. See A. Geddes Poole, *Stewards of the Nation's Art: Contested Cultural Authority 1890-1939*, Toronto 2010, pp. 101-109.

13. For Lawson see *Obituary*, in «Yorkshire Post», 12 December 1910, p. 12.

England. One was a York Ritual (sold for £ 300 and now Harvard University, MS Widener 1) and the other was the *Life of St Cuthbert* that would later be acquired by the British Museum. The *Life of St Cuthbert* is a small volume, its 150 leaves measuring just 135 by 95 mm. However, forty-five of its pages contain (or contained) painted and gilded images telling the story of the saint's life, death and miracles. At the top of folio 2v an inscription in red reads «liber sancti Cuthberti», identifying the book as having belonged to Durham cathedral, where the saint's relics had been housed since the tenth century. Despite having been in a private collection for at least one hundred years, in 1906 the St Cuthbert manuscript was not unknown to scholars. The Lawsons had lent the book to exhibitions and allowed individuals to study it. The resulting publications provided foundations for attitudes to the manuscript in the following century, but also demonstrate the extent to which a book's significance shifts according to who is studying it.

Thanks to the Lawsons' generosity in facilitating access to it, the St Cuthbert manuscript, also known as the Brough manuscript (after Brough Hall, the Lawsons' estate), played an important role in the mid-nineteenth-century debate over Catholic emancipation in Durham. Anglicans and Catholics cited the scenes of St Cuthbert's life in the miniatures to support arguments about the validity of the cult of St Cuthbert.<sup>14</sup> A quarrel between the canons of Durham cathedral and the fellows of the nearby Catholic seminary at Ushaw College played out over the course of the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Led by their librarian, James Raine, who published *Saint Cuthbert: With an Account of the State in Which His Remains Were Found upon the Opening of His Tomb in Durham Cathedral* in 1828, the clerics at the cathedral sought to prove that Cuthbert's corporeal remains were both present in the tomb in the cathedral and undeniably decayed.<sup>15</sup> In telling a story of St Cuthbert that culminated in the opening of the tomb in 1827, Raine drew upon the text of Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert* from the Lawsons' manuscript and included illustrations copied from some of its miniatures.<sup>16</sup> Ripostes came from scholars at Ushaw College, who were determined to prove that Cuthbert's body was buried elsewhere, and could therefore be, as the cult of St Cuthbert maintained, miraculously still incorrupt.<sup>17</sup> These pamphlets were followed by Charles Eyre's 1849 volume, *The History of St Cuthbert*, which did

14. R. McCombe, *Two Exhumations and an Attempted Theft: The Posthumous Biography of St Cuthbert in the Nineteenth Century and its Historicist Narratives*, in «The Archaeological Journal», 171/1 (2014), pp. 381-399; C.O'Brien, *Attitudes to St Cuthbert's Body during the Nineteenth Century*, in «Northern History», LIII/2 (2016), pp. 236-248. See also J. Raine, *Saint Cuthbert: With an Account of the State in Which His Remains Were Found upon the Opening of His Tomb in Durham Cathedral, in the Year MDCCCXXVII*, Durham 1828; C. Eyre, *The History of St. Cuthbert: Or, an Account of His Life, Decease, and Miracles; of the Wanderings with His Body at Intervals During CXXIV Years; of the State of His Body from His Decease Until A.D. 1542; and of the Various Monuments Erected to His Memory*, London 1849.

15. Raine, *Saint Cuthbert*.

16. *Ibid.*, p. IV.

17. [John Lingard], *Remarks on the "Saint Cuthbert" of the Rev. James Raine*, Newcastle 1828; O'Brien, *Attitudes to St Cuthbert's Body*, pp. 238-240.

not reproduce the manuscript's images but acknowledged the use of the «Brough MS», in furnishing parts of Cuthbert's life story, and identified the book as having been produced at Durham as part of «a school of illumination that supplied an infinite number of exquisitely embellished works».<sup>18</sup> Eyre also noted that the manuscript had been appraised by Frederic Madden, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum from 1837, who valued it at one hundred guineas (£ 105).<sup>19</sup>

In addition to its importance as a source for the life of St Cuthbert, the manuscript was in demand for its illuminations. The Lawsons lent it to an exhibition at the South Kensington Museum organised in conjunction with the International Exhibition in London in 1862 and to the National Exhibition of Works of Art at Leeds in 1868. In the catalogue for the former, the manuscript was introduced as a «most precious specimen» of English illumination, while in 1868 it was displayed in the «Museum of Ornamental Art» where it was described briefly as «MS Life of St Cuthbert, by the Venerable Bede, illuminated by British artists».<sup>20</sup>

Later in the nineteenth century, the St Cuthbert manuscript was lent to Canon J. T. Fowler who used it in the design process for the restoration of a large part of the fifteenth-century St Cuthbert Window at York Minster, and in 1888 the Scottish Catholic Rev. William Forbes-Leith reproduced all forty-five miniatures in his edition of the anonymous monk's *Vita sancti Cuthberti* (a text used by Bede for his *Life of St Cuthbert*).<sup>21</sup> Both Fowler and Forbes-Leith drew on material from the earlier sectarian debate. Fowler borrowed Raine's illustrations based on Lawson's manuscript and described both Raine's and Eyre's books as being particularly useful, and Forbes-Leith was inclined to wax lyrical about the superiority of Eyre's *History of St Cuthbert*.<sup>22</sup>

In the nineteenth century, then, the St Cuthbert manuscript helped shape the historical imagination of scholars, as they sought to defend Anglicanism from Catholic encroachment or protect Catholicism from Anglican supremacy. Both groups' primary concern with the manuscript was the extent to which its illuminations could be used to represent historical truths regarding the saint's life and works. Raine and Eyre drew on the images and text to rewrite the story of St Cuthbert's life, works, and posthumous translations. The impact of this concern extended beyond Durham when Fowler included the miniatures in his

18. Eyre, *History of St. Cuthbert*, p. X and pp. 275-277.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 276 n. 1.

20. *Catalogue of the Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Mediaeval, Renaissance, and more Recent Periods, on Loan at the South Kensington Museum, June 1862*, ed. by J.C. Robinson, London 1863, pp. 582-584; *National Exhibition of Works of Art, at Leeds, 1868. Official Catalogue*, Leeds 1868, p. 200 n. 521.

21. J.T. Fowler, *On the St Cuthbert Window at York Minster*, in «The Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal», IV (1877), pp. 249-376: pp. 256-257; W. Forbes-Leith, *The Life of Saint Cuthbert. Written Anonymously about the Year A.D. 700*, Edinburgh 1888. See also Eyre, *History of St. Cuthbert*, p. 277.

22. Fowler, *On the St Cuthbert Window*, p. 258; Forbes-Leith, *The Life of Saint Cuthbert*, p. VII.

comparison of all known images of Cuthbert to select scenes for the restored St Cuthbert Window at nearby York, alongside images of Cuthbert's life from an earlier illustrated copy of Bede's *Life* and scenes painted on the back of the choir stalls at Carlisle cathedral. In Scotland, Forbes-Leith followed the English Catholics in using the twelfth-century miniatures to lend credence and imagery to the eighth-century version of the *Life of St Cuthbert*. At the same time, the manuscript was recognised as an important example of art produced in England in the Middle Ages as it was displayed with manuscripts of diverse content.

### 3. *The 1906 Sale*

When the manuscript went to auction in 1906, little of the nineteenth-century legacy featured explicitly in the Sotheby's sale catalogue, although the entry noted that the book had been appraised by the «Rev F. Fowler» [*sic*], a canon Greenwell (of Durham) and Madden.<sup>23</sup> Otherwise, the description for lot 515 reads as a standard, though relatively substantial, catalogue entry, identifying the lot as «A very valuable and important English Medieval Manuscript. The Miniatures especially are of a very interesting nature, and represent Scenes connected with the Birth, Life, and Death and Miracles of St. Cuthbert». The catalogue mentions the book's probable execution by «a Durham monk» and notes the quality and «peculiar tone» of the miniatures, the use of *grisaille*, and the textual content of the manuscript. It also includes photographs of the manuscript.

At Sotheby's the St Cuthbert manuscript caught the eye of a regular visitor: Sydney Cockerell. Cockerell had worked for the famous socialist and designer William Morris (who had collected manuscripts in the 1890s) and in 1906 he was making his living advising and cataloguing manuscripts for private collectors, including Yates Thompson and Charles Dyson Perrins.<sup>24</sup> On 19 July 1906, Cockerell wrote to Yates Thompson:

I went to Sotheby's yesterday and saw the very important little Durham life of St Cuthbert c. 1200 45 miniatures. This is a book that you ought to possess – an English book of the most notable kind – & it belonged to Durham cathedral when it was made – & a more important relic of Durham than its own life of its own great saint cannot be imagined.<sup>25</sup>

23. Sotheby, Wilkinson, Hodge, *Catalogue of Valuable Books and Illuminated and other Manuscripts [...] which will be sold by auction [...] on Monday, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 1906*, London 1906, p. 73.

24. W. Blunt, *Sydney Carlyle Cockerell, Friend of Ruskin and William Morris and Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge*, London 1964; C. de Hamel, *Cockerell as Entrepreneur*, in «The Book Collector», 55/1 (2006), pp. 49-72; W.P. Stoneman, «*Variouly Employed*»: *The Pre-Fitzwilliam Career of Sydney Carlyle Cockerell*, in «Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society», 13/4 (2007), pp. 345-362; R.A. Linenthal, *Sydney Cockerell: Bookseller in All But Name*, in «Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society», 13/4 (2007), pp. 363-386.

25. British Library, Yates Thompson, MS 54, f. 138.

To Cockerell the specific English provenance was a significant part of the book's appeal. Moreover, following the nineteenth-century scholarship, Cockerell's reasoning situated the manuscript as integral to the history of Durham cathedral and St Cuthbert. Yates Thompson was convinced. He gave the bookseller Bernard Quaritch Ltd a maximum commission bid of £ 2,300, and obtained the manuscript for £ 1,500.<sup>26</sup> It was the most expensive item in the sale, which was otherwise mostly comprised of printed books that sold for no more than £ 100.

High prices are only achieved at auction when at least two bidders want a manuscript. The British Museum was among those who also wished to obtain the St Cuthbert manuscript in 1906. Bernard Quaritch's commission books indicate that the Museum instructed the firm to bid up to £ 700 for the *Life of St Cuthbert*, by far the highest amount the Museum had bid for a manuscript since at least 1900 and far more than it was willing to bid for many years. Between 1906 and 1909, the average bid placed at auction by the Department of Manuscripts (excluding the St Cuthbert) was £ 38, and on pre-modern manuscripts that price rose slightly to £ 60 for the same period.<sup>27</sup> Yet despite bidding over ten times its average price for a medieval manuscript, the Museum could not hope to match Yates Thompson's resources.

The sale of the manuscript received some comment in the national press, with «The Daily Telegraph» printing an article in which the author imagined how «when Richard Coeur de Lion set forth on his crusade a patient monk sat down in his Durham cell and, in Gothic letters and red rubrics, transcribed afresh Bede's life of Cuthbert, to keep the memory of the saint alive».<sup>28</sup> The writer was not wrong to place the probable production of the manuscript in the reign of Richard I (1189-99), although the sale catalogue had been less precise, instead attributing the manuscript to the twelfth or thirteenth century. However, the references to «Lionheart» and the crusades (echoing the statue of Richard I installed outside the Palace of Westminster in 1860) evoked an idea of Britain that, as Mike Horswell has explored, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries combined «a Romantic revival of interest in the medieval past; an increasingly imperial militarism; and a “muscular” Christianity».<sup>29</sup> The manuscript could be used to present a view of the Middle Ages that suited early twentieth-century Britain, and all publicity helped to reinforce its status as an important book.

#### 4. *Made in England*

Yates Thompson's deep interest in his manuscripts is indicated by his decision to write entries for the third catalogue of part of his collection, published in 1907,

26. Quaritch Archive, Commission Book 1903-1909, p. 182.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-440.

28. *MSS. of Holy Men*, in «The Daily Telegraph», 25 July 1906, p. 11.

29. M. Horswell, *The Rise and Fall of British Crusader Medievalism, c. 1825-1945*, London 2018, p. [X].

including a lengthy description of the St Cuthbert manuscript.<sup>30</sup> Probably assisted by Cockerell and Montague Rhodes James, Yates Thompson's catalogue draws on information from Forbes-Leith's 1888 edition to describe the physical state of the manuscript and its rarity. Indeed, Forbes-Leith had gone so far as to draw an explicit comparison with continental manuscripts, echoing the 1862 exhibition catalogue when he declared:

It is, I think, admitted that as early as the twelfth century the English illuminators produced works superior to those of the same date on the Continent. England, however, possesses now very few biographies as completely illustrated as the «Life of St Cuthbert» and the Lawson Manuscript may be considered as a valuable and rare specimen of English pictorial art of the thirteenth century.<sup>31</sup>

To support this claim of rarity, Yates Thompson added a list of the known illuminated saints lives from England: another version of the Life and Miracles of St Cuthbert at University College Oxford; a life of St Edmund, then in the collection of Sir George Holford; a life of St Edward the Confessor in the University Library at Cambridge; and the St Guthlac Roll in the British Museum.<sup>32</sup>

In 1908, the value of the St Cuthbert manuscript as an exceptional illuminated book was reiterated when it was one of seventeen items lent by Yates Thompson to an exhibition of illuminated manuscripts at the Burlington Fine Arts Club. Most of the work for the exhibition was done by Cockerell, but his diary records that Yates Thompson was present at an initial meeting about the exhibition in December 1907, together with George Warner, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum, George Reid, Perrins and Edward Dillon.<sup>33</sup> In February 1908, the official committee for the exhibition's organisation was confirmed as: Cockerell, Lord Balcarres (David Lindsay, son of the Earl of Crawford), Dillon, James, George Babington Croft Lyons, Falconer Madan (the Bodleian Library's librarian), Perrins, Charles Hercules Read, Yates Thompson and Warner;<sup>34</sup> of these, Lord Balcarres and Read had been founders of the NACF. The project may have been, in part, a response to an exhibition of *Les Primitifs français*, held at the Bibliothèque nationale and Palais du Louvre in Paris in 1904, which had included over 200 manuscripts and to which Yates Thompson had also loaned books.<sup>35</sup> Certainly, the Burlington exhibition was ambitious in its scale, with 269

30. See also C. de Hamel, *Was Henry Yates Thompson a Gentleman?*, in *Property of a Gentleman: the Formation, Organisation and Dispersal of the Private Library 1620-1920*, ed. by R. Myers and M. Harris, Winchester 1991, pp. 77-89: pp. 85-86.

31. Forbes-Leith, *Life of St Cuthbert*, p. VI.

32. H. Yates Thompson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Twenty Illuminated Manuscripts, Nos. LXXV to XCIV. (Replacing Twenty Discarded from the Original Hundred)*, Cambridge 1907, p. 81. The manuscripts are now University College Oxford, MS 165; Cambridge University Library, MS Ee.3.59; New York, Morgan Library, M. 736; British Library, Harley Roll Y 6.

33. S.C. Cockerell, *Diary for 1907*, British Library, Add. MS 52644, 3 December 1907.

34. S.C. Cockerell, *Diary for 1908*, British Library, Add. MS 52645, 24 February 1908; S.C. Cockerell, *Burlington Fine Arts Club. Exhibition of Illuminated Manuscripts*, London 1908.

35. *Les Primitifs Français exposés au Pavillon de Marsan et à la Bibliothèque Nationale du 12 Avril au 14 Juillet 1904. Catalogue Illustré*, par H. Bouchot, L. Delisle, J.-J. Guiffrey, P.-



catalogue entries, and in its claims for illuminated manuscripts, and particularly those made in England, as important works of art.<sup>36</sup>

The *Life of St Cuthbert* was one of eighty-five items in the Burlington exhibition identified as being definitely or probably of English origin. It was displayed in Case A «Early Schools» between another illuminated copy of Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert*, also attributed to Durham, in the possession of University College Oxford (MS 165), and the *Life and Miracles of St Edmund* probably made at and for the Benedictine house at Bury St Edmunds then owned by Holford (Fig. 2).<sup>37</sup> A review of the exhibition in «The Athenaeum» noted that «a special effort has been made to get together the finest examples of English workmanship».<sup>38</sup> The author singled out the *Benedictional of St Æthelwold*, lent by the duke of Devonshire, as the «chief glory» of Case A, but added that «the Hereford Gospels, the St. Edmundsbury Testament and life of St. Edmund, and the two Durham lives of St Cuthbert lose nothing by its side». The appreciation of “English” art of the High Middle Ages was not new. However, following in the footsteps of the 1862 exhibition, the Burlington display brought both the argument that English art could match that produced on the continent and the St Cuthbert manuscript to a wide audience.

«The Times» was among the papers that drew a comparison between the Burlington's exhibition and *Les Primitifs français* staged in Paris in 1904, while the correspondent of the «Morning Post» believed that the English manuscripts «should be compared with the finest French work».<sup>39</sup> In addition, «The Times» reminded its readers of the highly-publicised gift of a manuscript and miniatures by Jean Fouquet to the Bibliothèque nationale in 1906, by Yates Thompson and the king of England, which reunited those works with the companion volume in Paris.<sup>40</sup> However, in addition to welcoming gifts, the Bibliothèque nationale was actively pursuing a policy of repatriating “French” manuscripts. In 1908, Henri Omont had concluded an agreement with Thomas Fitzroy Fenwick, heir to the enormous library created by Sir Thomas Phillipps, for the purchase of 272 manuscripts for the Bibliothèque nationale at a cost of £ 4,125.<sup>41</sup> The ambition and organisation of

F. Marcou, H. Martin et P. Vitry, Paris 1904; see also *The Burlington Fine Arts Club*, in «The Times», 21 May 1908, p. 16; K.A. Smith, “*Specially English*”: *Gothic Illumination c. 1190 to the Early Fourteenth Century*, in *A Companion to Medieval Art. Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. by C. Rudolph, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., Hoboken 2019 [2006], pp. 569-600: p. 580.

36. Cockerell, *Burlington Fine Arts Club*.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

38. *Illuminated Manuscripts*, in «The Athenaeum», 23 May 1908, p. 645 n. 4204. The *Benedictional of St Æthelwold* is now British Library, Add. MS 49598.

39. *The Burlington Fine Arts Club*, in «**The Times**» **data?**, p. 16; *Burlington Fine Arts Club. Illuminated Manuscripts*, in «Morning Post», 21 May 1908, p. 3.

40. The manuscript is now in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. nouv. acq. 21013. See also *Fifteenth-Century Miniatures Presented by the King*, in «Illustrated London News», 24 March 1906, p. 23; H. Yates Thompson, *Illustrations from One Hundred Manuscripts in the Library of Henry Yates Thompson*, 7 voll., London 1907-1918, VII, *The Seventh and Last Volume with Plates from the Remaining Twenty-two MSS*, 1918, pp. III-IV.

41. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Phillipps-Robinson, c. 716; A.N.L. Munby, *The Dispersal of the Phillipps Library*, Cambridge 1960, pp. 32-36.

this and other purchases by the Bibliothèque nationale was in stark contrast to the acquisitions by British museums.

Those, like the NACF, wanting to retain manuscripts as national treasures in Britain had two tasks: they needed to raise money to buy the books and they had to justify the expenditure. As a consequence, they sought to establish criteria for their acquisitions. The most common reason for retaining a work of art was that it had been made in Britain and therefore formed part of the art history of the nation. Indeed, Witt went so far as to declare that «A picture is happiest in the country in which it was painted».<sup>42</sup> Of course, pictures and manuscripts do not have feelings, but Witt captured the emotive power of an argument for retaining something on the grounds of a local association.

A local connection could be extended to manuscripts that had been made in Europe, but which had had notable British owners. In 1901 the press reported that the treasures of the Rylands Library in Manchester were to be enriched by the addition of the manuscripts of the earls of Crawford, including «the marvellous assemblage of mediaeval Western MSS., and Eastern MSS. of all ages», which were sold by the 26th Earl of Crawford and 9th Earl of Balcarres, James Ludovic Lindsay.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Yates Thompson identified notable provenance as one of the qualities he looked for in manuscripts, setting himself in a line of notable collectors. He declared:

I cannot deny myself the pleasure of pointing out for the encouragement of collectors what a variety of interesting personages and institutions is encountered in connexion with the picture-books of the Middle Ages. It seems as though the greatest potentates had vied with one another for the possession of these treasures.<sup>44</sup>

Having been acquired by a notable British collector could add lustre to a potential national treasure, whatever its place of production.

Yet the power of the idea of local geographic origin had a specific, perhaps unforeseen, consequence for the formation of British collections, in that it made it more difficult for those in charge of museums to justify the acquisition of other items. On Alfred Henry Huth's death in 1910, his will stipulated that the British Museum was to select fifty items from the collection before it could be sold. In the resulting catalogue, Kenyon observed that this «allowed the national collection to acquire exactly those books which to it were of the greatest importance, and which it could not hope to be able to acquire in competition at public auction».<sup>45</sup>

42. R.C. Witt, *How to Look at Pictures*, London 1920, p. 30.

43. Lord Crawford's *Manuscripts*, in «The Evening Mail», 4 September 1901, p. 5; see also J.R. Hodgson, 'Spoils of Many a Distant Land': *The Earls of Crawford and the Collecting of Oriental Manuscripts in the Nineteenth Century*, in «The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History», 48 (2020), pp. 1011-1047.

44. H. Yates Thompson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Second Series of Fifty Manuscripts (Nos. 51 to 100) in the Collection of Henry Yates Thompson*, Cambridge 1902, p. VII.

45. F.G. Kenyon, J.A. Herbet, A.W. Pollard, A. Esdaile, C. Dogson, *Catalogue of the Fifty Manuscripts and Printed Books Bequeathed to the British Museum by Alfred H. Huth*, London 1912, p. V.

Strikingly, only one of the thirteen manuscripts selected had been made in England. Kenyon commented «Since the British Museum already possesses by far the finest collection of English illuminated manuscripts in existence, this preponderance of foreign examples [in the Huth Library] is entirely to its advantage».<sup>46</sup> British manuscripts alone were not deemed sufficient for a national collection, in a decision that echoed Witt's view in 1903 that the National Gallery was particularly lacking in French painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>47</sup>

### 5. Henry Yates Thompson

Unlike Huth, Yates Thompson decided to sell most of his collection in his own lifetime. In January 1918, Cockerell, who by this time had succeeded Montague Rhodes James as the Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, was distressed at the news of the sale. Writing to Yates Thompson, he declared «Your collection as it stands, gathered together with rare taste and judgement during a quarter of a century which has been rich in opportunities is now splendidly complete. In its way it is quite without a rival – kept together it is one of the great artistic and spiritual assets of England».<sup>48</sup> Cockerell claimed that he «had assumed that you would leave them to Mrs Thompson, who has shared with you the pleasure of the collection», but he had hoped that the books might ultimately come to the Fitzwilliam.<sup>49</sup> He asked for the opportunity to raise the money to buy the manuscripts at cost price, declaring «if you will give me the chance and a time limit I will at least try my utmost to save them from the hands of ignorant millionaires who do not know how to handle or appreciate such inestimable treasures».<sup>50</sup> This appears to have been a misjudgement on Cockerell's part, as Yates Thompson seems to have had no interest in keeping the manuscripts in Britain, let alone in museums where they would be accessible to a relatively wide audience. Indeed, in his public announcement of his intention to sell, Yates Thompson stated «I prefer that the volumes should be in private hands, rather than merged in any public collection».<sup>51</sup>

Cockerell was not alone in his horror at Yates Thompson's intention to sell his manuscripts. James wrote an extensive letter to Yates Thompson in September 1918. He declared:

46. *Ibid.*, p. VI.

47. Witt, *A Movement*, p. 653.

48. Draft letter to Yates Thompson dated 24 January 1918, British Library, Add. MS 52755, f. 210\*\*\***recto or verso?\*\*\***.

49. *Ibid.*; Blunt, *Cockerell*, p. 145. Yates Thompson did give some manuscripts to his wife and she inherited others on his death. She bequeathed the collection to the British Museum. See also C. de Hamel, *Cockerell as Museum Director*, in «The Book Collector», 56/2 (2006), pp. 201-223: pp. 208-211; S. Panayotova, *I Turned It Into a Palace: Sydney Cockerell and The Fitzwilliam Museum*, Cambridge 2008.

50. Draft letter to Yates Thompson dated 24 January 1918, British Library, Add. MS 52755, f. 212v.

51. F. Herrmann, *Sotheby's: Portrait of an Auction House*, London - New York 1980, p. 187.

This is too bad. S.C.C. [Cockerell] has told me now the dreadful news that you mean to sell your books. I can't say what a grief this is to me. I did think they at least were safe for England & were not, once gathered, to be dispersed again among Boches, Jews, & Transatlantics. If I were by you I would go down on my knees to beseech you to give up the idea.<sup>52</sup>

While Cockerell was not allowed to try to raise funds to buy the whole collection, and Perrins, who considered buying it «apprehensive [...] that your volumes will go to swell the Morgan collection in New York», ultimately felt he could not justify the price, James' plea did not fall on entirely deaf ears.<sup>53</sup> Yates Thompson presented the Fitzwilliam Museum with his fourteenth-century Metz Pontifical, and he donated the St Omer Psalter to the British Museum in honour of James, Cockerell and Warner.<sup>54</sup> «Mr. Yates Thompson's Gift to the Nation» was reported in «The Times» and further publicised in articles in «The Illustrated London News» in early 1919.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, his responses to both Cockerell (who he instructed to «be reasonable») and James were firm, and displayed the extent to which the private collector's priorities were sometimes at odds with the scholar's:

If like you I were a scholar and an expert in history & art I should probably agree that the B[ritish] Museum was the only place for the mss. at any cost. I am however only a collector of art bijoux [...] and I don't want to see mine merged in any public institution, however great.<sup>56</sup>

At the first Yates Thompson sale, held in London in 1919, the British Museum left instructions with Quaritch to obtain lot 3, a fourteenth-century French collection of four religious treatises under the title «La Sainte Abbaye, etc.», with four full-page images, for up to £ 5,000.<sup>57</sup> The Museum wanted the manuscript, in part, because

52. Quoted in J.Q. Bennett, *Portman Square to New Bond Street, or: How to Make Money Though Rich*, in «The Book Collector», 16/3 (1967), pp. 323-339; pp. 325-326; Herrmann, *Sotheby's*, p. 187; de Hamel, *Was Henry Yates Thompson a Gentleman?*, p. 87. The original letter is in the Lilly Library at Indiana University and has not to our knowledge been published in full. Unfortunately, due to the global pandemic we have yet to see the original.

53. University of Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library, LAdd/4570; see also Herrmann, *Sotheby's*, p. 189; Bennett, *Portman Square*, p. 328.

54. The Metz Pontifical is now Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 298. The dedication in the inside cover of the St Omer Psalter, British Library, Add. MS 39810 begins: «Given to the British Museum by Henry Yates Thompson on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, December, 15. 1918 in grateful recognition of the invaluable aid given to him in the preparation of his catalogue of 100 illuminated MSS. (4 vols. 1898-1912), by three learned experts on the subject, namely: Dr. Montague Rhodes James, provost of King's College, Cambridge; Mr. Sydney C. Cockerell, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum; Sir George F. Warner Kt., Keeper of the MSS. In the British Museum»; see also Herrmann, *Sotheby's*, p. 188.

55. *The St. Omer Psalter*, in «The Times», 15 January 1919, p. 11; *The St Omer Psalter*, in «The Illustrated London News», 25 January 1919, pp. 106-107; S.C. Cockerell, *The Metz Pontifical*, in «The Illustrated London News», 1 February 1919, pp. 140-143; see also *A Famous Manuscript: Magnificent Gift to Fitzwilliam Museum*, in «Cambridge Daily News», 14 January 1919, p. 3.

56. Quoted in Bennett, *Portman Square*, p. 326.

57. Quaritch Archives, Commision Book 1917-1920, p. 1352.

they already owned a manuscript that it had once been bound with (British Library, Add. MS 28162, bought in 1869). If the bidding went higher and the Museum was unsuccessful, Quaritch was to bid up to £ 1,500 for lot 11, a Martyrology from Montecassino, and up to £ 2,000 for lot 15, a fourteenth-century Italian pontifical. If either of those were also lost, they would settle for lot 16, a fifteenth-century Florentine manuscript of the *Secreta Secretorum*, for which the Museum would pay up to £ 800.<sup>58</sup> The Museum sought help from the NACF in raising the money for purchases at this sale, but the Fund declared it was unable to support them.<sup>59</sup> At the auction, Quaritch obtained the Sainte Abbaye manuscript for £ 4,200 (now British Library, Yates Thompson MS 11).<sup>60</sup> According to *The Guardian*, the auctioneer «at the instance of Messrs. Quaritch, the purchasers, said the book would be “returned” to the British Museum, but, being corrected on the word “returned”, said there would be a home-coming».<sup>61</sup> Quaritch also bought the *Secreta Secretorum* for £ 500, which the Museum also purchased, paying their usual commission of 5% (now British Library, Yates Thompson MS 28). The purchase of the Sainte Abbaye manuscript was reported in the «London Letter» of the «Aberdeen Daily Journal», under the sub-heading «Acquired for the Nation».<sup>62</sup> Once again, therefore, the Museum chose to invest in manuscripts that were not made in Britain, and the acquisition attracted wide geographic coverage in the British press. A week later «The Times» reported that the French Sainte Abbaye manuscript was on display at the Museum next to the other portion of the manuscript and in the same case as the St Omer Psalter. The report concluded «The comparison is interesting, and neither country has any reason to be ashamed of it».<sup>63</sup>

The «Aberdeen Daily Journal»’s report noted that both Kenyon and Warner had attended the sale, suggesting that it held particular importance to them, though Cockerell’s diary records that Warner had lunched with Yates Thompson and Cockerell and that they encountered many friends in the sale room, emphasising the tight-knit nature of the community interested in manuscripts.<sup>64</sup> The following day Cockerell visited Quaritch and «was relieved to learn that many of the MSS will stay in England», although the firm immediately offered some of its purchases to the Morgan Library in New York.<sup>65</sup> The collections of the British Museum and the Fitzwilliam Museum (amongst others) were therefore formed through the actions of scholars, collectors and dealers.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 1352.

59. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter from J. P. Gilson to NACF, 22 January 1920.

60. See also Bennett, *Portman Square*, p. 330.

61. *Sale of Old Manuscripts*, in «The Guardian», 4 June 1919, p. 6.

62. *London Letter*, in «The Aberdeen Daily Journal», 4 June 1919, p. 4.

63. *14th-Century Illuminated MSS.*, in «The Times», 10 June 1919, p. 13.

64. S.C. Cockerell, *Diary for 1919*, British Library, Add. MS 52656, f. 25v.

65. *Ibid.*; L. Cleaver, D. Magnusson, *American Collectors and the Trade in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts in London, 1919-1939: J.P. Morgan Junior, A. Chester Beatty and Bernard Quaritch Ltd.*, in *Collecting the Past: British Collectors and their Collections from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, ed. by T. Burrows and C. Johnston, London 2019, pp. 63-78: p. 65.

## 6. *The 1920 Sale*

In 1920, another twenty-six manuscripts from Yates Thompson's collection were sent to auction at Sotheby's, including the *Life of St Cuthbert*. Gilson identified four of these books as being particularly desirable for the British Museum and wrote to the NACF in search of financial support. He explained that the costs of the previous Yates Thompson sale had been achieved «by a heavy draft upon our reserve fund, which I cannot expect the Trustees to repeat», while «A special grant from the Treasury is, I am afraid, hardly to be hoped for».<sup>66</sup> Three of the items on his wish-list were English manuscripts: the *Life of St Cuthbert*, a thirteenth-century book of Hours (known as the Salvin Hours, now British Library, Add. MS 48958), and «the Psalter of John of Gaunt» (now Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum MS 38-1950). The fourth was a Psalter described as having been made in Padua (now Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum MS 36-1950). Gilson estimated that the manuscripts would raise between £ 1,000 and £ 5,000 each.

By 9 February 1920, Gilson had focused his attention on just one manuscript, the St Cuthbert. In a letter to the NACF, he declared «it seems to us the one [manuscript] by the purchase of which the Museum stands to gain most, and by the loss of which from the country we stand to lose most».<sup>67</sup> He emphasised the rarity of illuminated saints' lives, but also identified the manuscript as being valuable as an example of «Northern English art», as distinct from a “Southern” tradition represented by the schools of Winchester, Canterbury, St Albans, and Bury St Edmunds for which the British Museum was well supplied «to trace its transition from the early Anglo-Celtic period to its greatest achievements in the 14<sup>th</sup> century». He argued that «Apart from Bishop Pudsey's Bible», which was at Durham cathedral, «this volume is nearly the only example for Durham miniature work of the 12<sup>th</sup> century». Although this was rather over-stating the case, it was true that many Durham manuscripts were either still at Durham or in Oxford and Cambridge libraries which would be unlikely to sell them. Gilson thought that in both its art and subject the *Life of St Cuthbert* should be «a book of exceptional appeal to English men in general, and to North country men in particular, one that they cannot allow to go out of the country without an effort, if they care for the literature and art of the North». In this the manuscript's imagery, history and precise English place of origin combined to create a narrative that Gilson sought to use to raise the money to buy it.

The NACF's first effort was to explore whether Yates Thompson would sell the St Cuthbert manuscript directly to the British Museum, thereby avoiding the risk that it would be raised to an unobtainable price at auction, but he refused.<sup>68</sup>

66. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter from J.P. Gilson to NACF, 22 January 1920.

67. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter from J.P. Gilson to NACF, 9 February 1920.

68. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter to C.H. Read, 16 February 1920.

Members of the NACF also set about soliciting wider support. On the 24 February, Sir Michael Sadler, Vice Chancellor of the University of Leeds, wrote to Dugald Sutherland MacColl (Keeper of the Wallace Collection and a founding member of the NACF) declaring «What a good plan to try & secure that great book for the Nation. We will gladly give £ 10».<sup>69</sup> In the meantime, Gilson was also actively seeking support from those in northern England. However, on 4 March, he reported to Witt «I did hope that I might get something from various quarters in the North of England, but most of them have failed us».<sup>70</sup> He had by then promise of just £ 100 towards the book. The £ 100 mentioned might have come from John Meade Falkner, who Gilson described as having pledged that amount in a letter of the 24 March.<sup>71</sup> Falkner was resident in Durham and had made his money working for the arms manufacturer Armstrong Whitworth.<sup>72</sup> By 1920, he was chairman of the company and building his own collection of manuscripts, focusing on liturgical books (his collection was sold after his death in 1932).

Another group of potential supporters approached by Gilson were British manuscript collectors, though in his letter to Witt of 4 March 1920, Gilson gloomily remarked that «Over here everybody interested in MSS seems to be selling instead of helping to buy».<sup>73</sup> The importance of American buyers at this time is suggested by Quaritch's commissions for the 1920 Yates Thompson sale, which included bids from the Morgan Library, the New York Public Library, Henry Walters, the dealer A.S.W. Rosenbach (although Rosenbach failed to buy any manuscripts), and the American-born though London-based collector Alfred Chester Beatty. Walters, the New York Public Library and Rosenbach all sent bids for the St Cuthbert manuscript. Morgan's librarian, Belle da Costa Greene, had considered the manuscript for the Morgan Library in 1919 when Yates Thompson had announced his sales, but in 1920 it was not included in the Library's commissions.<sup>74</sup> Rosenbach, on the other hand, sent a garbled cablegram indicating that he was particularly «anxious to secure one of Yatehompson [...] manuscript» [*sic*], and that Quaritch should pay more than his £ 1,600 limit for the St Cuthbert if necessary (incidentally, the same amount the New York Public Library had bid).<sup>75</sup> The British Museum was up against stiff competition, though

69. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter from M.E. Sadler to D.S. MacColl, 24 February 1920.

70. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter from J.P. Gilson to NACF, 4 March 1920.

71. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter from J.P. Gilson to R.C. Witt, 24 March 1920.

72. See K. Warren, *John Meade Falkner 1858-1932: A Paradoxical Life*, Lewiston-Queenston-Lampeter 1995.

73. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter from J.P. Gilson to R.C. Witt, 4 March 1920.

74. Quaritch Archive, *List of Manuscripts Desired from H.Y. Thompson Collection*, bound into 1919 sale catalogue.

75. Quaritch Archive, *Telegram from Rosenbach to Quaritch, 22 March 1920*, bound into 1920 sale catalogue.

not from home shores. Yet while British collectors were slow to answer the Museum's call, the collective efforts of the NACF may have reduced domestic competition: no other British institution or collector placed a bid through Quaritch.

Slow though they may have been, British collectors and private philanthropists did respond to Gilson's and the NACF's pleas. The documentary record of the NACF's campaign to acquire the St Cuthbert is silent on how Gilson managed finally to raise the required funds, but in that silence we may begin to discern the private discussions and cajoling conversations that took place among networks of bibliophiles. Gilson's gloomy letter to Witt on 4 March 1920 was followed twelve days later by one of slightly happier tone, in which he calculated he had been able to raise £ 3,000, though he did not expect this to be enough to secure the manuscript. Gilson's postscript hints at the speed of developments: «It is only within the last two days that I have begun to feel that we have a chance of getting it and even now one cannot be confident».<sup>76</sup> Eight days later, Gilson confirmed to Witt that the manuscript had been purchased for the British Museum at auction for £ 5,200 (including Quaritch's commission) using the NACF's contribution and fourteen private donations made directly to the British Museum. Falkner's £ 100 was one of these. In the final weeks, Perrins had pledged £ 500. Despite his concerns about his finances, Perrins also bought two manuscripts for himself at the 1920 Yates Thompson sale, for a total of £ 4,740, or £ 5,214 with Quaritch's commission. All other donors preferred to remain anonymous, including someone who gave more than Perrins. The donor who made the largest contribution may have been Frederick Walter Dendy of Newcastle, a solicitor and local historian, who was named in the NACF's annual report, suggesting that significant support did ultimately come from a North country man.<sup>77</sup> The £ 2,200 found between the 16 March 1920 and the sale probably came from the Trustees of the British Museum authorising the director to draw from the Museum's acquisition fund.

The high price paid for the St Cuthbert manuscript in 1920 led to it being mentioned in accounts of the sale, but the purchase attracted relatively little public attention. However, at the end of March 1920, Gilson wrote an article for *The Observer* in which he reflected on the increasing value of manuscripts.<sup>78</sup> He noted that in producing catalogues and photographs of manuscripts, collectors like Yates Thompson had increased the value of their possessions. He drew attention to the collections of the British Museum and other British libraries, claiming that the Museum's collection of English manuscripts was «able to challenge comparison with the rest of the world's libraries put together, while for Irish, French, or Flemish MSS. it is only surpassed by the capital cities of those countries». However, he concluded by observing that:

76. Tate Archive, TGA 9328, National Art-Collections Fund, Acquisition File 292, Letter from J.P. Gilson to R.C. Witt, 16 March 1920.

77. *National Art-Collections Fund Seventeenth Annual Report 1920*, p. 28.

78. J.P. Gilson, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, in *The Observer*, 28 March 1920, p. 8.



there are a few manuscripts still in private hands which for one reason or another are national monuments and should not be allowed to leave the country. They are known to those who take an interest in such things, and if they must be sold there is still money enough in the country to secure them, but it sometimes happens that too hasty vendors forget that we have such an institution as a National Art Collections fund, or that it takes time for that and other agencies to get quietly to work and bring together the means that are required.

This comment was presumably prompted by his hard work trying to raise funds over the previous weeks. In the aftermath of the purchase of the St Cuthbert manuscript, Gilson sought to remind sellers that collaboration with institutions might ultimately be in their interests as well as those of the nation.

The case of the St Cuthbert manuscript demonstrates how difficult it was for museums in Britain to acquire certain kinds of material in the early twentieth century. The British Museum and similar institutions did not have the financial resources to compete with private collectors for the most desirable books. Yet the purchase of the St Cuthbert manuscript in 1920 was possible due to the combination of its intrinsic qualities, the state of research into the circumstances of its production and the politics and economics of the early twentieth century. The book's high level of decoration allowed it to be classified as a work of art, which made it eligible for NACF support. Moreover, its ownership by Yates Thompson identified it as a work of exceptional quality. The evidence for the manuscript's production at and for Durham presented the opportunity to make a case for retaining the book in Britain as part of the nation's cultural history. In addition, the book found a champion in Julius Gilson, who persuaded the NACF and other donors to contribute to a fund to acquire it.

In a nation the size of Britain, someone had to decide what should be preserved in public collections on behalf of the wider population. The creation of the NACF was an attempt to provide an alternative to what the group saw as inadequate government action in the context of increasing international demand. Yet the arguments generated by these, mainly middle class, volunteers and professionals like Gilson did not always resonate with the public they saw themselves as serving. The response from those in the north of England to the appeal for support for the acquisition of the St Cuthbert manuscript, in particular, proved a disappointment to Gilson, although it appears that at least two North country men, Falkner and Dendy, ultimately made significant contributions. Moreover, those wanting to obtain manuscripts "for the nation" had to operate within the existing structures of the market. Yates Thompson, who seems to have been unmoved by the idea of manuscripts as "national treasures", gave the St Omer Psalter to the British Museum, but he forced the Museum to bid for the St Cuthbert manuscript at auction, raising the possibility that they might not obtain it and increasing the probability that they would have to pay a high price, thereby reducing their ability to buy other books.

The large volume of manuscript material on the market provided a further challenge for those trying to raise funds for purchases. A case had to be made for

spending large sums on particular manuscripts, such as the *Life of St Cuthbert*, when the British Museum already had an impressive collection and other books were being obtained much more cheaply. In addition, the number of available manuscripts that curators thought desirable was constantly more than they could afford. In this context, most manuscripts that were bought by the British Museum and other institutions were not fêted as being “saved for the nation”. Instead, just as the St Cuthbert manuscript was used to make a range of arguments at different times, so the slippery designation of “national treasure” was used in different contexts to evoke a special status for particular manuscripts and their owners. This included instances when a case was made for the exemption of such works from taxation as well as when making an argument for a purchase. The idea of “national treasure” could cast a positive light on a manuscript, its owner (whether individual or institutional) and the nation, but part of its power lay in not invoking the phrase too often.



Fig. 1. *The Life of St Cuthbert*, British Library, Yates Thompson MS 26, ff. 53v-54r (Ph. Authors).  
Fig. 2. The *St Cuthbert* manuscript exhibited at the Burling Fine Arts Club, 1908. [credit??](#)

