

Classifications in Time: The Rise of the Shelfmark on the Failure of Provenance

Provenance. 1. the place of origin or earliest known history of something.
2. a record of ownership of a work of art or an antique.

(Concise Oxford Dictionary)

The subject of the provenance of books in any library, especially one of such antiquity as New College, can be a source of much confusion and contention. Ideally, a benefactor/owner would inscribe their donation/possession with the full details of its history, from the precise time, date and location of purchase or acquisition, to the cause of every mark or blot with which it is blighted (within the realms of decency of course).

Possession of a complete record of the history of a book, including full details of ownership, allows that history to be traced, if possible to its origin, adding to the authenticity of the item. It may

item within a particular ownership or institution, for example. However it cannot be denied that some of the gaps in the story of these items have been filled and, in other cases, a fuller picture may well be achievable.

What lessons may be learned from this exercise? To start with, the importance of having luck on one's side can never be underestimated (just ply it with alcohol and upset it). Most importantly, while engaging on a, shall one say, 'dedicated' search of this nature, always maintain some sort of perspective of the important things in life—for, to misquote a wise and venerable Jedi Master, once you start down the nerdy path, forever will it dominate your destiny!

Jason Morgan
Assistant Librarian
(with acknowledgement to the Senior Tutor for the original enquiry)