

New College Library houses a remarkable collection of no fewer than seven books of hours within its manuscript collections.¹ Among these, only one owner had been definitively identified until recently. MS 160 belonged to John Bryne, who had very kindly scribbled his name in many pen trials all over ff. i–4 and 127–130. In 1984, the library's collection was enriched by the generous donation of two 15th-century manuscript books of hours from Sir John Nicholson, MS 369 and MS 371, and a late 13th-century book of hours and psalter, MS 372. The library received another 15th-century book of hours, MS 370, from Nicholson's sister, Mrs E. M. Vale. These manuscripts arrived with minimal provenance information and have largely remained underexamined over the past four decades. However, revisiting these manuscripts has unearthed significant clues about their previous owners, including identifiable names. From the mid- to late-14th century, books of hours became prevalent in France, England, and the Netherlands, integrating monastic religious routines into the daily lives of devout laypeople. These precious volumes were meant to be handled, read, and treasured, often passed down as heirlooms. Typically, books of hours contained a calendar, the Office of the Virgin, Penitential Psalms and Litany, and the Office of the Dead, usually in this sequence, though variations were common. These texts vary slightly between dioceses or towns, and their liturgical content is known as their 'use' (such as the use of Rome, use of Utrecht, use of Rouen, etc.). By the 15th and 16th centuries, many books of hours were produced for wider distribution rather than individual commission, complicating the task of identifying specific owners. However, personalisation was not uncommon. Owners often annotated their books with marginal notes, added personal patron saints in the calendars, and included devotional prayers in the vernacular. Provenance clues in books of hours also reside in their script, decoration, calendars, and litanies. Miniatures or illustrations within the manuscript might depict the owner or their family. Studying the specific prayers or saints included, which might be unique to certain regions or personal devotions, can also indicate ownership. Additionally, popular prayers like *O Intemerata* and *Obsecro te* were frequently included. In *Obsecro te* the masculine or feminine endings in phrases like 'ego sum facturus/a, locuturus/a, aut cogitaturus/a' might hint at the patron's gender.

New College Library, Oxford, MS 369, ff. 146r, 9r, and 128r
This and following manuscript images © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

burnished gold on divided pink and blue backgrounds patterned with white. It has six large miniatures with arched tops, seven historiated initials, and full-page borders embellished with sprays of flowers and fruit in gold, blue, green, red, and pink interspersed with gold disks and leaves. The face of St John at the beginning of the book (f. 9r) is worn away. This is likely from devotional touching or kissing, affirming the manuscript's active use in personal affective piety. One particularly beautiful illumination above the 'memorie de sainte Anne' depicts St Anne reading to her young daughter Mary (f. 128r), with another young girl, without a halo, praying behind her. This image could possibly represent a young patron, potentially a member of Claude's family or the individual for whom the book was originally commissioned.⁴ The vernacular rubrics

⁴ I am grateful to attendees of New College's books of hours workshop on 19 February 2024

was buried in Loppersum, and Maria remained in the home as a widow. Their firstborn son, Roelof, as mentioned in the manuscript, married Ida Onsta around 1560 and had ten children. Johan, another son, became part of the cathedral chapter of the Archdiocese of Riga, likely with the help of his uncle Jasper van Münster.¹⁶

Agnes van Münster, Maria and Roelof's daughter, married the feared Groninger heretic hunter, Johan de Mepsche, around 1561. Before and during the Dutch Revolt, de Mepsche was a prominent Catholic authority and staunch supporter of the Spanish monarchy. As Provost of Loppersum, he had had pastors and churchgoers kept under surveillance, citizens banished from Groningen, and distributed the belongings of exiled heretics to his Catholic faithful (and himself).¹⁷ In 1574, as son-in-law to Maria van Selbach, de Mepsche conducted a lawsuit on behalf of Maria and her heirs before the German Reichskammergericht against her half-sister Catharina regarding their father's inheritance.¹⁸ He died of the plague in his home, Den Ham, in 1585, and was buried in the church at Loppersum, of which he was a patron. After de Mepsche's death, Agnes attempted to maintain authority and continue his legacy in Groningen with the support of the new governor, Verdugo.¹⁹ Abel Eppens, a contemporary anti-Catholic chronicler, writes scathingly of the pair for taking it upon themselves to appoint churchwardens without the knowledge of the community or patrons, an arrangement Agnes continued after Johan had died.²⁰ After Agnes's death, or perhaps after Johan de Mepsche's death, Duirsum passed to their son Roelof de Mepsche. Their daughter, Mary de Mepsche (born after 1560), married Johan Kyff van Frens and inherited this precious book. Beneath the record of births, in another hand, is a record of the book's journey between the women in the family:

This book is left as inheritance to Lady Agnes van Münster's daughter Mary de Mepsche, and further to Egbert Clant and Beatrix van Ewssum who gave the same to their daughter Mary Catherine Clant, 4 April 1639.

As this book has a tradition of being passed down between the women of the family, it is possible that Jutta, as Maria van Selbach's mother, could have been a previous owner. Another possibility is that Roelof's mother, Bauwe Heemstra, acquired it from a monastery in Groningen, near Duirsum, and left it to her son as inheritance along with Den Ham. Books of hours are known to have been particularly attractive to women as vernacular and lay devotional texts, and acted as a 'special kind of legacy from a woman to her female heirs', as Virginia Reinburg has pointed out.²¹ MS 371 is the first book of hours at New College that we know, by name, to have been owned by women, but it is likely not the only one. Maria de Mepsche did have a daughter, Johanna, in 1600. But this book passed instead to her sister Johanna's son Egbert Clant and his wife, the

¹⁶ Johannes A. Mol, 'Traitor to Livonia? The Teutonic Orders' Land Marshal Jasper van Munster and his Actions at the Outset of the Livonian Crisis, 1554–1556', *Ordines Militares* 19 (2014), 205–

There is much work still to be done on MSS 371 and 369, and the other books of hours in New College's collections. MS 323, a beautifully decorated 16th-century manuscript, includes an inscription on f. 246v that begins: 'Estas horas van Lohesi(?)'. This name is possibly the Flemish name 'Lodewijk', as we know the book itself to be from Flanders. The text beneath, 'das [. . .] dan bolnez(?)', looks to be signed 'Señor Carpio'—possibly the Spanish title, Marquess of Carpio.²⁶

New College Library, Oxford, MS 323, detail of the Coronation of the V

Jhesu for thy holy name
And thy bitter passion,
Save me fro synne and shame
And endles dampnacion
And bring me to the blis
That neuer shal mys; Amen.