

The Life of a Dissenting Tract Collection

This paper considers the formation and use of the little-studied tract collection at Harris Manchester College, Oxford. Many of the volumes of tracts now held at Harris Manchester have their origins in collections made by late seventeenth-century nonconformists, ranging from the influential Presbyterian diarist Roger Morrice, to the modest Baptist upholsterer Lawrence Fairclough. In the first part of the paper I will examine the differing motivations and practices of these collectors: how much did they pay for their tracts and how might they have obtained them? how did they arrange and package their collections? what were the effects of the new bibliographical objects they created? These tract volumes subsequently passed through various ministerial libraries into the custody of three institutions dedicated to the higher education of dissenters: Warrington Academy, Exeter Academy, and Manchester College. The second part of the paper will consider the role the tracts played in these new locations. Using the library catalogues and loan records of these institutions, I will show how they were used by students and tutors for the purposes of dissenting education. The surviving tracts from these three dissenting academy libraries are now held at Harris Manchester, where they form part of a 900-volume collection of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century tracts. The final part of the paper will reflect more broadly on the place of collections like this one in academic libraries today, where they are so often neglected by cataloguers and scholars alike. If we recognise the way in which tract collections have resulted from the accretion of volumes from different sources, organised (and re-organised) over the course of several centuries, then their material forms have much to tell us about the reading practices of the past.

Dr Rosemary Dixon
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies
Queen Mary, University of London