

Bibliomania: Causes, Cases, and Prevention
Final paper for Preservation 259

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Theft is a problem for many libraries and those who steal books and their reasoning are varied as what they steal. This paper will look at bibliomania and its causes. It will also look at real life cases, including two of the largest cases of bibliomania ever, Stephen Blumberg and Sir. Thomas Phillipps. Lastly, it will look at what can be done to help prevent book theft.

Thorough out history there have been collectors and book lovers. Without them, the world would not have some of the most treasured libraries in the world. However, when does that passion for books turn into a sickness? The following paper will look at the disease that is bibliomania; cases of bibliomania, and finally it will look at what can be done to help prevent book theft. Taking books is not something new. Rulers have been “stealing” books as a consequence of war for as long as writing has been around. During the Middle Ages, some abbeys and monasteries went so far in order to prevent book loss that they did not allow the loaning of books at all (Anderson, 2003). Other means to aid in prevention included chaining the books to the shelf (Jackson, 1950) or even putting a curse on stealing books. “For centuries, refined book lovers and greedy con men have brushed up against one another in the rare book world” (Bartlett, 2009, 6).

There are discrepancies on when the term bibliomania was first used. It was most likely that it was first used by Philip Dormer Stanhop in 1750 (Basbanes, 1995). However, Kenny (2000) says that “bibliomania began to be identified as a phenomenon in France in the second half of the seventeenth century (253). The first time it was used to describe the disease was in 1809 in a poem by John Ferriar (Davis, 2008). The person, though, that gets credit for the term in most circles is Reverend Frogmal Dibdin, who used the term sometime in the early 1800s (Bartlett, 2009). According to him, there were eight different types of bibliomaniacs, based on what they stole (Dibdin, 1809, 68-72) as well as describing it as a disease of males and “specifically people in higher and middling ranks of society” (Davis, 2008, 122).

Roughly before 1950, many men who today would be considered bibliomaniacs were considered bibliophiles, which is a lover of books. So what is the difference? Jackson (1950) put it: “bibliomania overthrows the natural judgment” (525). “The distinction between an acceptable bibliophila [*sic*] and a pathologized bibliomania is nevertheless difficult. Book love and book madness belong together” (Metz, 2008, 254). There is a very fine line between the two. Kenny (2000) says that bibliomania is more than just a love of books, it is about control and it has “an almost complete disregard for the most common use of books: reading” (254).

This begs the question: “Why steal?” There can be a multitude of reasons. One, according to Jackson (1950) is out of revenge against the library (351). Another is for money. Books can be sold for money and if someone is desperate enough to steal something of value, they will not hesitate to sell it. Lastly, this person is sick and they are sick with bibliomania and one aspect of bibliomania is bibliokleptomania. Bibliomania, or book madness “is from the Greek *biblion* = book + *mania* = madness” (Hart, 2010). The causes of the disorder are not researched but more than likely it stems from the same causes of obsessive-compulsive disorder due to the fact that most bibliomaniacs “collect” books “The books bought are generally not even looked [at] but are simply bought and hoarded” (Health Grades, INC, 2011, para. 1). Anderson (2003) writes that “bibliomania is more than just a desire to collect the written word; it is a consuming and obsessive passion to acquire texts”. Like hoarding (another off-shot of obsessive-compulsive disorder), bibliomania can be stemming from a need to control something in the person’s life when the rest of it seems out of control. Or it could be the manifestation of a need to control early childhood traumas. Symptoms of the disease include obsession with collecting, collecting abnormal amounts, “feelings of relief upon collection” and “reduced anxiety brought on by

collecting books” (Health Grades, Inc., 2011, para. 2). There is no cure for bibliomania (or bibliokleptomania), only treatment such as “psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, and exposure and response prevention” (Health Grades, Inc., 2011, para. 3).

Bibliokleptomania or stealing books is a part of bibliomania. Bibliomaniacs do this when they have no other way of acquiring books or they feel that something wrong with those who own the books. “Most book thieves prefer libraries to bookstores because of the wider selection (including greater access to books of varying values) and the minimal danger of being caught in the act” (Nathe, 2005, 8). There are many ways to steal of books as will be discussed later but one of the ways that jumped out was one Bartlett (2009) talked about. This is the “wet yarn method” (29). This is where the criminal would keep a piece of wool yarn in the cheek, and then put it inside the book that he wanted a page from, at the spine. Then he would close the book and leave. After a period of time, he would come back, the yarn would have dried and shrunk, cutting the page from the book (Bartlett, 2009). However, I talked to Washington State University conservator Jennifer Juras and she said that this method most likely would not work, that it is possible but not likely (Juras, 2011).

Over the centuries there have been many cases of bibliomania and/or bibliokleptomania around the world. The following stories are just a sampling of them, including two of the biggest. For sources of other bibliomaniacs, please see appendix A¹. One of the first well documented cases (Anderson, 2003) was a ruler in ancient Nineveh and was well known for his library of “20,000 clay tablets” (Ashurbanipal, 2004). His justification for collecting was that the tablets

¹ Just one footnote and one mention in Nicholas Basbane’s book that I felt should at least be mentioned at how bad this disorder can get. He talks about an 82 year old man who, when his house was searched, it was found to be supporting eight times the legal limit in weight (Basbanes, 1995, 22).

were “prizes of war” and he used a curse to protect his library (Anderson, 2003). Next, there was St. Columba who lived from 521 to 597 CE and was a scribe in Ireland. He helped establish monasteries in both Ireland and Scotland (Anderson, 2003). His family ruled North Ireland in the Middle Ages, which gave him access to many libraries. Because he had access to many valuable materials, he stole and copied a book. This theft would eventually lead to a prince’s death and St. Columba was excommunicated (Anderson, 2003). Another man who worked for the Russian Imperial Public library “committed the largest theft of books on record for a European Library from 1869 to 1871” (Abbot, 2001, 1646). He was finally caught and was found to have 4,000 volumes (Abbot, 2001).

Two rarities among bibliomaniacs are violence and women. While bibliomaniacs are sick, they are rarely violent. However, one known violent one was Don Vincente. He was a Spanish monk who was also a librarian. He left the library at the monastery that he was working at when there was a theft. He then opened a rare bookshop. He “gained attention as a man who bought more books than he sold and refused to part willingly with anything of value” (Basbanes, 1995, 33). He turned violent when in 1836, after failing to receive a rare book, he went, stole the book, murdered the owner, and then burned down his shop. He would go on to commit no less than 7 other murders. When he was finally arrested and charged, Don Vincente, when asked in court why he never took any money, he replied “I am not a thief” (Basbanes, 1995, 33-34). Cases of women bibliomaniacs are rare as well. Eileen Brady, a librarian at Washington State University whom I interviewed, said that she knows of women who stole and then sold the books but never of any bibliomaniac women. Nevertheless, two women who did steal were found in research. One woman stole from the University of Texas at Austin because her boyfriend had

been fired from there (Nathe, 2005). The other, Kathleen Wilkerson was “sentenced to seven years’ psychiatric probation for the theft of \$1.8 million in rare books and documents from the University of Pennsylvania” (Thefts, 1998, 3). There are more likely more women who would be classified as bibliomaniacs but they are far fewer than men.

The first of the three major cases that will be talked about is Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792-1872). He was a baron, a title which he inherited from his father (Kemeny, 2009) but he did not “rescuing” manuscripts until he reached his 30s. He did, however, show “bibliomaniacal behavior by the age of twenty” (Kemeny, 2009, para. 3) so much so that his father wrote angrily to him saying that he did not approve of buying when he did not have any money (Kemeny, 2009). Phillipps would describe himself as a “vello-maniac” (Davis, 2008, 122) who wished “to have one copy of every book in the world” (Basbanes, 1995, 120). One of the possible reasons for his stealing and buying is that he was distressed over the “losses of medieval manuscripts” (Kemeny, 2009) by Napoleon tramping through Europe. Another was that this attitude was popular around Great Britain and Europe at this time (Kemeny, 2009). Phillipps had one of the largest collections of books and manuscripts ever held by a single person (Davis, 2008) and “by the end of his life he had acquired over fifty thousand books and a hundred thousand manuscripts” (Davis, 2008, 123), though the number of manuscripts is in debate as Kemeny (2009) puts the number closer to 60,000 (para. 1). The house that Phillipps and his family lived in was very dilapidated and in poor condition because he had no money to pay for repairs (Davis, 2008). His wives and daughters were second to books and many times used as servants to his books (McKie, 2008). His relationships with them was so strained that when the suitor of his eldest daughter came to ask if he could marry her, Phillipps refused. The daughter and the suitor

ran off and came back married. This elopement caused Phillipps to hate the suitor's family. Due to inheritance issues, the house he was living in would go to that family and although Phillipps tried to circumvent the process, nothing worked and Phillipps ended up moving (McKie, 2008). This move required 103 wagon loads that would be drawn by 230 horses and using 160 men (Davis, 2008). There is one thing that made Phillipps different from other bibliomaniacs; he allowed scholars to look at his books, however, he would only allow them if they were not Catholic (McKie, 2008). When Phillipps finally died, the sale of his collection lasted until 1977 because there were so many containers and items (Kemeny, 2009, para. 6).

The second major case that will be discussed is Gilbert J. Bland who was known in many circles as “the Al Capone of cartography” (Abbot, 2001, 1646). Bland's real name was James Perry (Foley, 2005), who as a young boy, was abused by his stepfather. As an adult he served in Vietnam and it is possible that he had some sort of Post-Traumatic Stress disorder which most likely contributed to his bibliomania (Nathe, 2005). Bland was very bold in his stealing (Foley, 2005) of at least a “million dollars' worth of rare maps” (Abbot, 2001, 1646), some roughly two hundred and fifty of them (Foley, 2005). He would steal the maps by cutting them out with an X-acto blade (Foley, 2005), roll them up, and carry them out, sometimes shoved down his pant leg (Brady, 2011). What is sad about Bland is that in 1994, he and his wife opened up an antique dealership specializing in maps, which of course, he acquired by stealing (Foley, 2005). Bland was finally caught at the Peabody Library at Johns' Hopkins University (Foley, 2005). It was there that the curator, Jennifer Bryn, saw Bland and thought he looked fishy. She told officials about it and Bland took off (Foley, 2005, 14). When he was caught he did admit to taking a 1763 map and even offered compensation. The police released him (Foley, 2005, 15). Later, a

notebook left by Bland was found and in it was a list of rare maps and the places they were located. On those places, some of them had already been crossed off (Foley, 2005). Though he was convicted, “only four of the nineteen intuitions victimized felt it worthwhile to press charges against him” (Strassberg, 2002). He only served “less than two years in jail and paid less than eighty thousand dollars in damages” (Foley, 2005, 16).

The last case is the largest book theft case of the 20th century. The story and its main character crisscross a continent leaving damage in their wake. Stephen Carrie Blumberg was born in St. Paul Minnesota in 1949 and as a young boy began an obsession with all things Victorian (Brady, 2011). He would venture into abandoned Victorian houses and “collect” antique things such as doorknobs, fixtures, and stained glass windows (Anderson, 2003). Blumberg’s home life left something to be desired. While he was close to one of his grandparents (so much so that he legally changed his middle name to reflect the spelling of hers, Carrie) and from this grandparent, upon her death would receive an annual income of \$72,000 (Brady, 2011). However, the rest of family was not pleasant. There was a history of mental illness in his family, including his mother who was schizophrenic and she believed that the TV and radio “had special messages for her” (Nathe, 2005, 28). Blumberg would also spend time in a mental hospital from 1965 to 1969 (Anderson, 2003), where he was diagnosed with delusions (Nathe, 2005). Though he would later appear to be knowledgeable about the items he stole, he was semi-literate and did not even finish high school (Brady, 2011). Blumberg would have some odd behaviors as he grew up. Because he was obsessed with all things Victorian, he would wear Victorian woolen underwear (Brady, 2011); he would only bathe when he was appearing as one

of his aliases, and finally, he would carry around a bag of gold coins and a 19th century revolver (which he never fired) (Brady, 2011).

Blumberg's thefts start in local areas but soon moved to traveling around the country. In order to do that, Blumberg would steal more antiques and sell those (Doughty, 2004) to dealers or people rebuilding old homes. The items he stole were books and manuscripts, but he had a special fondness for those items relating to American history (Basbanes, 1995). When all said and done, Blumberg would remove 23,600 books and manuscripts from 268 (an average number, there have been both higher and lower estimates) libraries in "forty-five states, two Canadian provinces and the District of Columbia" (Basbanes, 1995, 467). There is also the possibility of more (Brady, 2011). Many, including Eileen Brady (2011), believe that he had another stash somewhere else, possibly in the southwest.

So how was Blumberg able to get into all those libraries and intuitions? One way is that he would simply pick the locks with dental tools (Huntsberry, 1991, 182). Another way is to steal keys. He would watch the library and notice, if the library did have security, when they would do a shift change. One way he got into Washington State University (WSU) was because of his size. Blumberg is a very small and wiry man and he would climb elevator shafts and over the top of caging (Jouras, 2011). Both Eileen Brady and Jennifer Jouras (2011) believe that he slept in the library as well. Once he stole items, he do take measures, including licking the glue (Basbanes, 1995), to remove identification of the owner of the book. He would "write a little code in pencil to suggest they had been bought from secondhand dealers at prices of 'anywhere from five cents to a dollar'" (Basbanes, 1995, 471).

How Blumberg was caught is also a story of one detective's dogged determination. WSU employees started to notice items were missing. In the end, "357 books and 3,500 manuscripts" (MASC, 2011), "among them were six incunabula and an 18th century Mexican document (Huntsberry, 1991, 18) were stolen. Steve Huntsberry, of the WSU police, was called in to start investigating. Huntsberry was instrumental in helping to catch Blumberg (Brady, 2011). In a talk he gave, he showed video of Blumberg's house, which was a four story, four bedroom home, all of which, except for one room, were filled with books and manuscripts (MASC, 2011). He was also able to show the shelves upon shelves of books and manuscripts that were in the warehouse in Omaha (MASC, 2011). He never believed whoever stole the books was a local (Huntsberry, 1991). When the theft did occur, he sent warnings to all college, public, and university libraries on the West Coast (Huntsberry, 1991). It was then that he found out that both University of Oregon and Claremont College had also been hit. The warning he sent out, however, was not for Stephen C. Blumberg. It was for a Matthew H. McGue. Huntsberry started to dig into the name and kept running into problems. He finally discovered that the Minnesota driver's license that Blumberg used was a forgery (Huntsberry, 1991). A break in the case (for Huntsberry) came in 1988 when a person named Matthew McGue "was arrested by the campus police at the University of California Riverside for trespassing in the library archives and for possession of burglary tools" (Huntsberry, 1991, 182) (while he was being caught there he would go one to eat a rubber stamp that said "University of Minnesota" and when asked why he ate it, he replied "How else was I going to get rid of it?" (Basbanes, 1995, 473)). The reason Huntsberry heard about this was that in "McGue's" possession was a WSU library schedule of hours and somebody remembered Huntsberry's warning (Huntsberry, 1991). Unfortunately, even though

Blumberg was arrested and fingerprinted, he was released on bail (Huntsberry, 1991). The print card, after being sent to Minnesota crime lab, matched the name Stephen Carrie Blumberg.

Huntsberry would go on to backtrack 20+ years, tracking Blumberg as best he could. He would later turn all this over to the FBI when Blumberg was arrested (Huntsberry, 1991). The FBI was led to Blumberg's location by a former acquaintance of him, who "turned him over to the Justice department for a \$56,000 'finder's fee'" (Reed, 1997, 3). When they arrested Blumberg, three keys belonging to WSU in his pocket (Huntsberry, 1991).

Many of the items Blumberg stole were valued at or over \$5,000, and were transported across state lines; this is a violation of the "National Stolen Property Act" (Thompson, 1967, 136). By violating this act, it enables the FBI to step in. However, because many of the libraries had no proof that Blumberg actually stole the items, he was charged with transporting stolen property across state lines (Basbanes, 1995). He was sentenced to "serve 71 months [in jail] and pay a \$200,000 fine" (Reed, 1997, 3). It was this case that the only time in United States history that a "not guilty by reason of insanity defense had ever used to explain the consequences of criminal bibliomania" (Basbanes, 1995, 480). He was released December 29, 1995 after only serving 4.5 years of his sentence (Reed, 1997, 3). The "Blumberg Collection" would take a 40 foot tractor trailer filled with "eight hundred and seventy-nine cardboard packing boxes. It took seventeen people two days to get them all out" (Basbanes, 1995, 467). In trying to sort the items out and which intuitions they went to became a big mess. Part of the problem was that many of the libraries and intuitions did not know they had been robbed. "Every intuition we called, without exception, either had no idea what they lost, or didn't understand the extent of their losses" (Basbanes, 1995, 467). This theft was the "largest such seizure in the FBI's history"

(Huntsberry, 1992, 46). Originally valued at \$20 million (Brady, 2011) but was finally settled at \$5.3 million (Reed, 1997). The FBI with the help of a local archivist helped to try to return all the books (Brady, 2011), however, there are books still in FBI custody that have not been returned because the libraries are ashamed to admit they were hit by him (Brady, 2011) and because Blumberg removed identifying marks, they are not sure who the books belong to. Blumberg claimed that he would “return them one day” (Doughty, 2004). Part of the conditions of his parole were that he could not enter any abandoned building and was required to give a letter to any library or bookstore staff to explain that he was a book thief. Also by entering any library or bookstore he was giving consent to a full search (Nathe, 2005). In the mid-1990s Blumberg was arrested again because he broke his probation. He was again given a “light” jail sentence and released on parole. He was not seen again till 2003 when people noticed a different car parked on the street in front of an abandoned house every night and called police (Lutzi, 2003). Officers entered the house and found Blumberg, 54 and Steven Worden, 27, in the house. They, according to Captain Tom Crew, were “in possession of doorknobs” (Lutzi, 2003). Neither man’s story matched why he was in the house, so criminal investigation was called. The bank owned the house and had given neither man permission to be in there, so police charged them with third degree burglary. He was put on probation and has not been seen since (Brady, 2011)².

In today’s world, many libraries have security measures in place, however, “book theft from libraries is an increasing problem” (Abbot, 2001, 1647). Part of the problem with thefts that have already occurred is that libraries, institutions, and book dealers do not want to admit they were burglarized in fear of being blacklisted and donors drying up (Bartlett, 2009). In terms of libraries, the “special collections, rare books, an archives are particularly vulnerable, as many of

² To read more on Stephen Blumberg, I have included a bibliography as Appendix B

the items they hold are unique and of high monetary and historical value, and therefore irreplaceable” (Foley, 2005, 2). To prevent theft there needs to be security measures put in place. There are two major problems in implementing these measures. The first of these, especially in today’s economy, is the budget (Kovarsky, 2007). The other is that those who do steal, they receive “relatively minimal punishment (Kovarsky, 2007, 2).

There are several ways that libraries, special collections, institutions can do to prevent theft. The first, call anybody that can help with the recovery process (Foley, 2005). Another way, suggests Huntsberry (1991), is to control access to keys and keycards (183). A third way to prevent theft is protect the more valuable things. Huntsberry (1992) suggest that as the value of item increases, the access to that item decreases (49). This will not deter all thieves, as was the case with Blumberg at the University of Oregon, but it will help minimize contact with valuable items. It is “the idea is to impede and frustrate the suspect so that he either becomes discouraged or makes a mistake” (Huntsberry, 1992, 49). Lastly, to help stop thieves, it is important to know what is on your shelves. Jackson (1950) tells Henry Bradshaw, as the librarian at the Cambridge University librarian, “he found shelves of books which had all in probability had not been dusted for centuries” (415). If you do not know what is on your shelves, you do not know when you are missing something.

For any library, there are measures that they can take to help prevent theft. They should have a Library Security Officer (LSO). This person should help administration develop a policy for the library about security. It should have procedures dealing with theft as well as other security measures. They should know the law enforcement contacts and should be involved in

disaster planning (American Library Association, 2011). Another measure that should be considered is the area in which the special collections are housed. This area should have as few points of entries as possible and all entries should be controlled (American Library Association, 2011). There are many other points that American Library Association makes that will serve any library well and this resource can be found in the reference. Fourth, one measure that WSU does not implement, and suspected many other libraries do not as well, is for all employees to have background checks done (Huntsberry, 1991, 183). Lastly, one possible way to have measure is to have photographic evidence which can show marks that will be part of the item's record (Kovarsky, 2007). It is important for the public, who cannot find a book on the shelf to let staff know. That way the staff can either find the book if it has been misplaced for they can deal with the possibility of theft in the appropriate manner (Huntsberry, 1992).

“Library collections constitute the bedrock for services and provide to the community and serve as important assets to the library” (Maidabino and Zainab, 2011, 15). The books, documents, and items in libraries need to be protected. Throughout history there have been men who stole books for their own sanity. Blumberg, Bland, and Phillipps have affected many aspects of the biblio culture and affected the way libraries, institutions, and other places deal with prevention of theft. It is important to know about these thefts as well as other in order to figure which the ways that theft can happen at any institution. It is important to look into prevention of theft and what measures could be taken in order to protect the world's cultural treasures.

Appendix A

The Gutenberg Project has its own bibliomaniac shelf:

http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Bibliomania_%28Bookshelf%29

The Rare Book Manuscript Society has a list of thefts from 1986 to 1996:

http://www.rbms.info/committees/security/theft_reports/theft_reports_1987-1996.shtml

And the 1996 – 1998 report is here:

http://www.rbms.info/committees/security/theft_reports/theft_reports_1997-1998.shtml

Nathe's Master's Thesis has some excellent other stories of Bibliomaniacs, including stories of people who stole from the Library of Congress:

<http://etd.ils.unc.edu/dspace/bitstream/1901/187/1/master%27s+paper+PDF.pdf>

The Rare Book and Manuscript Society along with the American Library Association have a formulation of a plan in case of left. It can be found here:

http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/security_theft.cfm

There are a lot of psychology articles on PubMed as well as the other psychology databases provided by SJSU.

The article from Harvard Magazine "Biblio Klepts" has several other stories on Biblioklepts.

Appendix B: Blumberg Bibliography

Eileen Brady of Washington State University has graciously provided this bibliography on Stephen Blumberg compiled on April 11, 2011. Note all formatting is her's.

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