A Dynasty of Librarians.

THE greatest library in the world is, as every one knows, that which has been successively called the *Bibliothèque du Roi*, then the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, then *Impériale*, then *Royale*, then *Nationale* again, then *Impériale* again, and now once more, but for how long we know not, *Nationale*. For the number of its volumes it is without a rival (indeed, its actual contents are so vast that portions of them are almost *terra incognita*, even to the zealous, learned, and accomplished librarians to whose charge it is committed). But it is not so well known that, for a century and a half, it was almost uninterruptedly ruled by the members of a single family, who formed a dynasty of librarians without parallel in the history of libraries.

From the accession of Jérôme I in 1642 to the death of Jean Frédéric in 1783, the Bignon family reigned supreme in the *Bibliothèque du Roi*, so that, in a report to the *Assemblée Nationale* in 1795, M. Villiers referred to the library as having been “*reservée à quelques familles privilégiées dont elle sembloit être l’héritage.*”

During the sixteenth century, and the first half of the seventeenth, while the actual duties of librarian were performed by the *Garde de la librairie*, the supreme charge of the library was generally entrusted to a high official styled *Maître de la librairie*, and among those who held these offices we find the greatest names in the literary history of France. In 1500 the most distinguished Greek scholar on this side the Alps, in whose veins flowed the blood of three emperors—the celebrated Jean Lascaris—was appointed to the office of *Garde de la librairie*. In 1530 the more distinguished post of *Maître* was constituted, and no less a person than Guillaume Budé (Budæus) appointed to fill it. Le Fèvre d’Étaples and Mellin de Saint-Gelais successively served under him as *Gardes*. The successors of Budæus were Pierre du Châtel, Pierre de Mondoré, Jacques Amyot, J. A. de Thou, and François de Thou. It was during the mastership of J. A. de Thou that Casaubon held the office of *Garde de la librairie*, and had the actual charge of the books. In 1642 François de Thou perished on the scaffold, and was succeeded by Jérôme Bignon, the founder of the dynasty, and one of the most remarkable men of his time. His first work was published at the age of ten, and we find him shortly afterwards engaged in friendly correspondence with all the most learned men of the day, among others Scaliger, Casaubon, Grotius, Pithou, de Thou, and Cardinal du Perron. Before he was twenty

he was the author of numerous works, and according to one of his biographers he had then read everything and remembered everything that he had read! Devoting himself to jurisprudence, he achieved great success at the bar, and attained the position of King's Advocate in the Parliament of Paris. His learning acquired for him the title of the French Varro, but none of his books have lived, or seem in any way adequate to his great reputation. He died in 1656 leaving, as Voltaire remarks, "rather a great name than great works." His epitaph (which will be found in *Chaufepié*) describes him as "*sui seculi amor, decus, exemplum, miraculum.*" His appointment as *Maître de la librairie*, according to Nicéron, was owing to his reputation as a lover of literature, so that Richelieu who was not personally well affected towards him, felt bound to nominate him to an office for which the public had already designated him in advance. The number of the volumes of the *Bibliothèque du Roi* at his accession amounted to no more than 6,000 volumes. In 1651 Jérôme I resigned his office in favour of his son Jérôme II, whom Louis XIV appointed as his successor, and who reigned until his death in 1672, when he was succeeded in his turn by his son, Jérôme III. Jérôme III seems to have been somewhat of a *Roi fainéant*, and during his reign, as well as during the latter part of that of his father, the affairs of the library were administered by members of the family of the great minister Colbert, and under his supervision. Upon Colbert's death, in 1683, the Marquis de Louvois assumed the direction of the library and induced Jérôme III to resign the office of *Maître*, and Louis Colbert that of *Garde*, both of which were conferred at the instance of the minister, with the title of *Bibliothécaire du Roi*, on his son Camille, then a boy of only nine years of age. Camille Le Tellier, known as the Abbé de Louvois, who, according to the well-known *Chanson*, expected to become a Cardinal, but died only "Curé de Châville," proved an excellent administrator, and retained the office until his death in 1718. When this event occurred the sceptre returned to the Bignon dynasty, as to its rightful holders, in the person of the Abbé Jean Paul Bignon, sometimes referred to as "Bignon IV," younger son of Jérôme II and the inheritor of his magnificent private library. The patent of 15th September, 1719, by which the office of *Bibliothécaire du Roi* was conferred on the Abbé Bignon, recognises, as it were, his hereditary right to the office, for, after enumerating his own personal qualifications, it proceeds to speak of "la satisfaction que nous trouvons à rendre en cette occasion un honneur dû à la mémoire de ses pères, en confiant à un de leurs descendants, le soin d'une bibliothèque qui a si longtemps

été entre leurs mains, pendant le siècle passé, et qu'ils ont enrichie du fruit de leurs veilles." *

The Abbé showed himself a most efficient librarian, and the library was completely remodelled under his direction. His first step was to prepare a complete inventory of the library and of all its possessions—a task which occupied fifteen months, and he then proceeded to its reorganisation, dividing it into departments. I. Manuscripts. II. Printed Books. III. Charters and Genealogies. IV. Prints. V. Medals. Each had its own special keeper and assistants.

But the Abbé Bignon was not content with reorganising the library; he devoted himself, with the greatest energy, to increasing its contents. The MSS. of Baluze—a thousand in number—the eight hundred Chinese books brought by the French missionaries, the sixty thousand pamphlets given by Morel de Thoisy, and the MSS. of the President de Mesmes, were but a portion of the acquisitions of the library during his reign, and most of them were due to his personal exertions. And it was to him that the mission to Constantinople of the Abbés Sevin and Fourmont, from which so much was expected, but which had so singular a result,† was due. But perhaps the most signal facts of his administration were the removal of the library to its present *locale* in the Rue de Richelieu, and the opening of it for the first time to the public.

The readers of Mr. Pattison's Essay on Scaliger, and his life of Casaubon, will remember how jealously, a century and a quarter earlier, Gosselin, then *Garde de la librairie*, watched over the treasures committed to his charge, and how unwilling he was to allow access to them, even to men of learning like the two great scholars. It was not until 1720 that the doors of the library were opened as matter of right, even to men of letters. In that year the Abbé Bignon obtained a decree from the Council of State, declaring the library open to "les scavans de toutes les Nations" at such times as the librarian should appoint, and to the public once a week, from eleven to one o'clock. But this decree was not carried out; the library was closed to the public for fifteen years longer, and it was not until 1735 that the exertions of the Abbé were successful, and that the library was opened to the public from eleven to one o'clock on Wednesdays and Fridays. This continued to be the rule during the remainder of the eighteenth century.

* *Precis de l'Histoire de la Bibliothèque du Roi*, par Alfred Franklin, p. 212.

† See Quarterly Review, October, 1885, pp. 503-530.

Nor was the Abbé less an enlightened bibliophile than an energetic librarian. He had inherited the magnificent library—sixty thousand volumes—of his father and grandfather. It occupied the upper part of his house in the Rue des Bernardins and, unlike the libraries of some collectors, was easy of access to all students and men of learning. But, on being appointed to the office of librarian, he presented to the Royal Library all his Oriental books and sold the rest, in order that he might give his whole mind to his public duties, and that care for his private library might not interfere with his attention to the great national collection entrusted to him.*

In 1741, being eighty years of age, the Abbé Bignon resigned his office, and was succeeded by his nephew Bignon de Blanzy. He had held the office of *Bibliothécaire du Roi* for two years only when he died, and his brother, Armand Jérôme Bignon, was appointed in his place. Of these two brothers but little is recorded in connection with the library. Though Armand Jérôme, like his uncle, was a Member of the Academy, neither he nor his predecessor left his mark on the great institution which they successively administered, but, as they faithfully carried out the rules and principles which their predecessors had laid down, the contents of the library greatly increased under their rule.

A sinister reputation, however, has attached itself to the name of Armand Jérôme Bignon. He had the misfortune to hold the office of *Prévôt des Marchands* at the time of the marriage of the Dauphin (Louis XVI) with Marie Antoinette, and the terrible accidents in connection with the display of fireworks on that occasion, which cost the lives of more than three hundred persons, were attributed to his negligence. As he was visited with no punishment for his carelessness, Paris avenged itself by *bons-mots*. An (imperfect) anagram was formed out of his name—Armand Jérôme Bignon, *Ibi non rem sed damna gero*.

In 1772 Armand Jérôme died, and was succeeded by his son Jean Frédéric, the last of the dynasty, who held office until the eve of the Revolution. His administration was marked by a reorganisation of the arrangements for the delivery to the library of a copy of each book printed in France, by the acquisition of the large collection of medals (32,000) of Joseph Pellerin, of the MSS. of Capperonier, and of the eight thousand charters and deeds of Jault. Jean Frédéric resigned in 1782 (or 1783), and died soon after. With

* Most collectors possess volumes from this library with the somewhat ugly stamp impressed on the sides—a shield bearing the words *Bibliothec Bignon*.

his resignation the sceptre departed from the house of Bignon, and the reign of this family over the *Bibliothèque* came to an end. Their 140 years of power had seen the growth of the library, from the 6,000 volumes of which it consisted on the accession of Jérôme I in 1642, to the 152,868 volumes which we are told it possessed shortly after the resignation of the last librarian of this distinguished family.

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