



Library Newsletter

Living Faith - Living Community - Living History

Summer 2013

Dear Friends of Carlisle Cathedral

In keeping with the late arrival of this year's summer, the summer edition of the Library Newsletter is finally here. This edition concentrates on an apparently little known yet extremely important literary discovery made among the Dean and Chapter's Archives back in 1994. An enquiry from a writer working on a project for Ely Cathedral first brought our attention to the discovery. Using as a starting point Canon Weston's book *Carlisle Cathedral History* and copies of correspondence he found, we did some research of our own which we would like to share with you here. In order to keep costs down, this newsletter will only be posted out on request. Please contact the Library or the Office if you wish to receive a copy by post or by email, otherwise it will be available to read on the Friends' section of the Cathedral's website.

Donations

The following books have recently been donated to Carlisle Cathedral Library.

Crispian Athorpe

- **Bible.** N.T. Greek. London : Jacobi Tonson, & Johannis Watts, 1714.
- **Book of common prayer.** Latin. London : Rogerus Nortonus, 1670.
- **Gauden,** John. Eikon basilike. The pourtraicture of His sacred Maiestie in his solitudes and sufferings. London, 1649.
- **Grotius,** Hugo. De veritate religionis christianae. Glasgow : Roberti Urie, 1745.
- **The pious country parishioner** instructed how to spend every day. London : C. and J. Rivington ...[et al.], 1819.
- **Jenkin,** Robert. The reasonableness and certainty of the Christian religion. London : Richard Sare, 1708.

Mrs Grace Williamson

- **Book of Psalms.** With 24 coloured plates by F. C. Papé. London : Hutchinson 1913.
- **Brown's self-interpreting family Bible.** Newcastle-on Tyne : Adam & Co., ca.1872.

Revd. Geoffrey Smith

- **Booke of Psalmes** collected into English meeter, by Sternhold & Hopkins. London: Company of Stationers, 1636.
- **Bible.** English. Authorised version. Cambridge : Printed by Tho. Buck & Roger Daniel for the University of Cambridge, 1635.
- **Book of common prayer.** Cambridge : Printed by John Legat for the Universitie of Cambridge, 1635.

The Story of the Carlisle Fragment

Back in April of this year, the Library received an enquiry from professional story teller Mark Steinhardt about the discovery of part of the 12th century poem *Tristan and Iseult*, written by Thomas of Britain. Thomas' poem is accepted as the earliest courtly version of the story and is considered one of the most important works of literature from this period. Whilst most of Thomas' poem remains lost, two pages consisting of 154 lines were discovered in 1994 in Carlisle Archives, which is where the Cathedral houses many of its manuscripts and registers. The discovery became known as the 'Carlisle Fragment', one of only five surviving fragments (from four different manuscripts) of Thomas' original poem, and was described at the time as one of the most significant finds in Romantic literature for 50 years.

As is often the case the story around a work of art can be almost as fascinating as the work itself. I say 'almost' because while the story of the Carlisle Fragment involves a mysterious 13th century manuscript, medieval vandalism (or an early example of recycling, depending upon your point of view), a local abbey, a chance discovery, critical dissent and even a literary contribution by Carlisle Cathedral's very own Bishop William Nicolson, there are no dragons, magical love potions nor a somewhat questionable case of 'mistaken' identity.

The discovery of the Carlisle Fragment was made by Michael Benskin, a literature professor at Oslo University, who immediately contacted his colleagues Ian Short and Tony Hunt to arrange authentication. The fragment had been used as binding endpapers for the Register of Holm Cultram Abbey. (See Figure 1.) The register itself consists of legal documents relating to the Abbey from the period 1150 to 1300.

The fragment has been confirmed as a 13th century copy of Thomas' original poem but as it is not known whether the register was bound locally or sent outside the county, no one can say where the fragment came from.

Unfortunately the binder cut the papers down in size resulting in the first two words of each line on the facing sides and the last two words of each line on the reverse sides being lost. The parchment shows evidence of deterioration and the text is written in Anglo-Norman so whilst legible, there will always be some ambiguity around any translation.



Figure 1: The Register of Holm Cultram Abbey

The register, along with its precious endpapers, then had quite a journey around the North Cumbrian countryside. After the dissolution of the Abbey it belonged to the Blennerhassett family of Flimby and around 1670 it was passed on to Thomas Denton of Carlisle. By 1707 William Nicolson, Bishop of Carlisle between 1702 and 1718, came into possession of the register and felt obliged to write all of this as an inscription on the endpapers. Fortunately he did not write over the text itself! (See Figure 2 below.) In 1777 his nephew Thomas Nicolson bequeathed the register to Carlisle Cathedral Library. It is currently housed at Carlisle Archives Centre where it remains the property of Carlisle Cathedral.

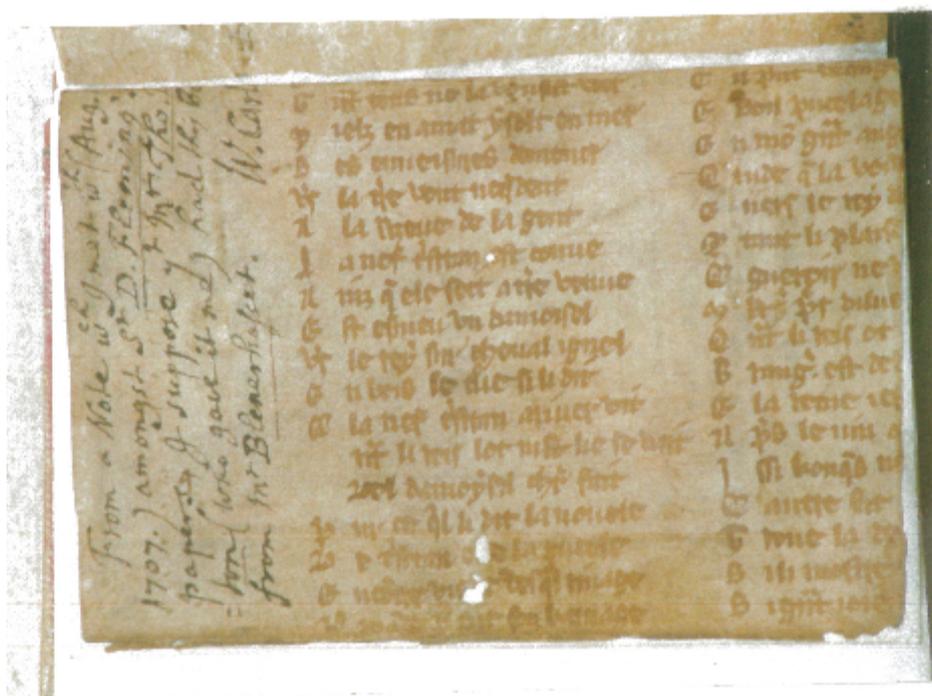


Figure 2: Bishop William Nicolson's inscription on the reverse side of page 1 of the 'Carlisle Fragment'

Carlisle Archive Centre

Archives belonging to the Dean and Chapter of Carlisle Cathedral are stored at Carlisle Archive Centre, Lady Gillford's House.

There is an online catalogue available which you can find by following the relevant links at: www.cumbria.gov.uk/archives/

Cathedral Library Catalogue

A reminder that Carlisle Cathedral's pre-1801 library (book) catalogue is searchable online.

Please follow the links provided at: www.carlislecathedral.org.uk/cathedral_library/

In order to understand the significance of the Carlisle Fragment and the reason why its discovery is so important, you need to know at least some of the main elements of the courtly version of Tristan and Iseult. If you do not want a reminder then skip the next four paragraphs:

A very brief version of Tristan and Iseult

Tristan falls in love with the Irish Princess Iseult (or Isolde as she is sometimes called) and legally wins her hand in marriage by killing a dragon which has been threatening the countryside. Unfortunately the reason Tristan is in Ireland is to ask for Iseult's hand in marriage on behalf of King Mark of Cornwall, who is Tristan's newly discovered uncle, and so Tristan declines to marry her. On the journey back to Cornwall, Tristan and Iseult somehow end up drinking a love potion that had originally been brewed by Iseult's mother for her daughter and King Mark so that they would have a happy marriage. As a consequence Tristan and Iseult fall irretrievably and intoxicatingly in love for the rest of their lives or for three years, depending on the version of the story you are reading.

On Iseult and Mark's wedding night, fearing that the King will realise she is not as innocent as he would expect of his new bride, Iseult persuades her servant Brangain to take her place. Surprisingly Mark does not pick up on the deception, even when Iseult and Brangain swap back places later in the night.

Eventually Tristan decides that the only way he and Iseult can escape their irresistible attraction is for him to return to his own kingdom where he marries someone rather confusingly called Isolde. It does not take Isolde long to realise that Tristan loves another and she becomes very bitter.

Dying from a battle wound, Tristan sends for Iseult to come and cure him with one of her mother's magical potions. Unable to rise up from his deathbed, he asks his new wife – Isolde – to check if there is a white flag flying on the ship that should be carrying Iseult. She lies, saying it is black, and so Tristan dies believing Iseult no longer loves him. When Iseult arrives, she lies down next to Tristan and she too dies.



The Carlisle Fragment starts with Tristan and Iseult declaring their undying love for each other on their journey back to Cornwall, presumably after having just drunk the love potion. It goes on to describe their arrival, Iseult and Mark's wedding and finally the wedding night itself, which is one of the central elements of the story and the reason why the fragment's discovery was of such interest at the time to scholars of medieval literature.

There are many adaptations of the poem in existence today, in literature, music, art and film. Most versions are only loosely based on the story and certainly do not claim to be completely faithful to the original. There are, however, two very early courtly retellings of the story which did claim this - an incomplete version by Gottfried von Strassburg written around 1200-10 and another by Brother Robert in 1226. A further version printed in 1900 was by a French critic called Joseph Bédier who claimed to have written the true version of the tale based on a detailed study of the remaining fragments and translations. Bédier also wrote a two volume criticism in 1902-05 which was not totally complementary about Thomas' literary technique and where he maintained that Thomas' poem was not in fact the original courtly version of Tristan and Iseult as is usually accepted.

As you might expect, there are contradictions between Gottfried, Robert and Bédier's interpretations of Tristan and Iseult, some of which should theoretically be resolved by the Carlisle Fragment – although given its less than perfect condition there will probably always be room for debate. One contradiction revolves around the timing of Iseult's request that Brangain take her place on the wedding night. Bédier maintained it was too crass a literary device to leave the request to the last moment and insisted that Iseult would have approached Brangain before they arrived in Cornwall as in Gottfried's version. In fact the Carlisle Fragment shows that Iseult did wait until her wedding night to approach Brangain which is what Brother Robert wrote.

A second difference between the versions is whether Mark also drank the love potion. If you read Bédier's version of Tristan and Iseult he does not state that Mark took the potion, however, in his subsequent critical work he does claim that Thomas made Mark its third victim. Bédier also went on to heavily criticise Thomas for this 'unfortunate invention'. The Carlisle fragment shows that while Mark does drink wine on his wedding night, unless the two missing words from that particular line were 'love potion', it seems unlikely it was anything other than ordinary wine. Michael Benskin, the scholar who discovered the fragment, makes the point in an article he wrote for the journal *Romania* that Bédier's criticism was not only unfounded, it altered Thomas' story. These points may not seem that important to us but are issues that have been hotly debated by experts in medieval literature over the years.

The register and fragment are still housed in Carlisle Archives where, if you want, you can request to view it. Quite by chance, as we were researching the story, Canon Weston discovered some photographs which are included here. Unfortunately, we do not know whose permission to ask to reproduce the images. If anyone does know, please can you get in touch so we can immediately rectify the omission. There is a more detailed bibliography and list of references to go with this short article, available on request.

The Cathedral Library also now has a new version of Tristan and Iseult, written and donated by Mark Steinhardt, the story teller who contacted the Library back in April. Canon Weston and I were able to send him some images and information about the discovery to help him with his research. You are more than welcome to borrow it. Finally, if you have some medieval bound volumes at home, it might just be worth checking the endpapers...

C. Daniel

Bibliography

Benskin, Michael, Hunt, Tony and Short, Ian, 1995. *Un nouveau fragment du Tristan de Thomas*. *Romania*. 113 (3-4), pp. 289-319.

Bedier, Joseph, 1900. The romance of Tristan and Iseult. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/14244/pg14244.txt> Accessed 28/07/2013.

Bedier, Joseph, 1902. Le romain de Tristan (Volume 1). <http://archive.org/details/leromandetrista02bdqooq> Accessed 28/07/2013.

News

Sponsor a Book Initiative

Carlisle Cathedral is launching a new scheme to help raise money for the Fraternity Project Appeal. Full details will be made available shortly.

New Publication: The Bishops of Rose Castle by Dr David Weston

Canon Weston's new book will be published in September 2013 by the CWAAS. It is the result of exhaustive research and has a foreword written by Marion McClintock, Honorary Archivist at Lancaster University.

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