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Some English Almanack Bindings
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THIS ARTICLE has two main purposes - firstly to describe a group of eighteenth-century English almanack bindings now far from home in Alberta, Canada¹, and secondly to attribute one of these bindings to [Sarah Messing](#), stationer in Ordinary to His Majesty, George III - a tradeswoman whose name has not, I believe, been previously associated with a specific gold-tooled binding by any historian of the binding trade.

In May 1971, through the good offices of H. Campbell of Toronto, Calgary University Library acquired by purchase a miscellaneous collection of mss, broadsides, books and bindings mostly from within the period 1660 to 1800, which had formerly belonged to Mr. [Edgar Osborne](#), the Canadian bibliophile, whose noted collection of early children's books is now housed at the Toronto Public Library. Included in the purchase was a group of eighteenth-century volumes containing one or more almanacks, all bound in red morocco, all gold-tooled to varying degrees of profusion, and all with decorative marbled end-papers. These are 'almanacks' in the eighteenth-century sense: i.e. they combine, in most cases, a true almanack - a table of the astronomical and astrological events of the year - with a social and historical register. As Capp² says in his book on astrological almanacks:

Rider's British Merlin, however, which was small and often interleaved to make it suitable for a pocket-diary, continued well into the nineteenth century. In the 1730s there appeared *The Court Kalendar*, setting out the birthdays of English and foreign royalty, a list of the privy council, and the names of English and foreign ambassadors. It was designed to be bound with a list of members of parliament and with *Rider's* at a price of two shillings. The composite work resembled a modern Whitaker in miniature.

This description, allowing for some additional elements introduced later in the century³, accurately describes the ten London almanacks in the collection. The Calgary collection also contains eight bindings of Irish design and manufacture covering, either in pairs or singly, copies of two Dublin annuals: *The Gentlemen's & Citizen's Almanack*, compiled by Samuel Watson and published by him and Thomas Stewart, and the *English Register* published by John Exshaw⁴. In a previous [article](#)⁵, describing the three most ornate of these Irish almanack bindings, I speculated, following a suggestion by Craig⁶, that these were bindings created on order for individual members of the Anglo-Irish community in Dublin, and that the two bindings carrying Royal Arms as part of their design had possibly been commissioned for government functionaries at Dublin Castle⁷. It is possible, however, that the ornate bindings in the group without Royal Arms were available as 'stock' or 'trade' bindings on demand to any customer who could afford to buy his or her almanacks in this rather elaborate form. This is also true of the English bindings described here. If it could be decisively proved that the morocco-bound almanacks were available directly out of booksellers' stock in the last two months of the year preceding the date of the annual, that would be strong evidence of the precision with which almanack bindings can be dated, as opposed to other fine bindings of the eighteenth century which may be substantially later in date than the books they cover. Craig⁸ notes that 'almanacks have a double advantage to the students of binding, for there is always a strong presumption that they were bound in the place of publication, and in the year before that to which they refer'. A later paragraph touches briefly, therefore, on the fragmentary evidence that almanacks, along

with certain other classes of popular publications, were for sale ornately bound on a 'stock' as opposed to a 'special order' basis.

The English almanack bindings under discussion cover copies of four different publications. Four of them cover copies of *The Court and City Register* for the years 1753, 1756, 1767 and 1770. In all four items the binding also covers, printed on stamped paper, the *Rider's British Merlin* for the current year. *The Court and City Register* was issued by a group of booksellers headed by John Rivington of St. Paul's Churchyard from 1748. In November 1764 Rivington got a Royal Patent⁹ confirming his rights (and presumably those of his partners) for another fourteen years to 1778. Standing on its own is a copy of *The Court and City Kalendar* for 1769, the binding also covering a *Rider's British Merlin* for 1768. This is an example of the series begun in the 1730s mentioned by Capp and sold by another group of London booksellers. The remaining five bindings cover copies of *The Royal Kalendar, or Complete and Correct Annual Register for England, Scotland, Ireland and America* for the years 1773, 1776, 1782, 1787 and 1788. The 1782 binding does not contain a copy of *Rider's* of any year; the other four carry the almanack for the current year. The title-pages of all these almanacks give the information that the publication was available bound with the *Rider's* included or, at 9d less, without it. *The Royal Kalendar*, which presumably called itself 'Royal' on the basis of some kind of licence or patent, was published by a large conger, headed first by John Almon of Piccadilly, and later by John Debrett, also a stationer and bookseller in Piccadilly, who was Almon's successor. Debrett also published from 1782 the fashionable and highly successful *European Magazine*.

Study of the advertisements for all these almanacks in contemporary newspapers makes it quite clear that, as well as being available ready bound, with or without *Rider's*, they were also offered for sale 'stitched', to allow for the creation of individual bindings. Copies were also available with other inserts - for example, a 36-page insert carrying engravings of the armorial bearings of the baronets of England. The Calgary copy of *The Court and City Kalendar* for 1769 contains this variant (Binding IV below). The product was clearly directed at the ; more fashionable end of the market. What the contemporary advertisements do not make clear, unfortunately, is the nature and degree of elaboration of the bindings supplied for prices ranging from 2s. to 3s.6d. W.H.J. Veale seems to assume in his short description of this class of binding, based on his examination of copies in the Victoria and Albert Museum and elsewhere, that all such almanacks were issued in red morocco bindings. He says: 'The annuals issued in London, such as Watson's Court Kalendar, Rider's British Merlin and the Court and City Register were, during the greater part of the eighteenth century, bound in red Morocco, elaborately tooled with a constant variation of design; some of them remarkably good¹⁰. This is not true of all copies of eighteenth-century almanacks which I have seen, although it is true of a relatively large number, which may be explained by the fact that the more elaborately bound copies are the more likely to be treasured, retained and collected. But almanacks of this kind can also be found bound, usually in groups, in plain calf bindings. My own small collection of eighteenth-century almanacks - admittedly all Scottish - are cheaply and soberly half bound in calf, with red labels. Dorothy Miner speaks in her catalogue of 'shops specialising in the Bible Trade, which produced Bibles, prayer books, hymn books and other devotional works ready bound for sale in elaborate looking bindings¹¹, and Gaskell's extremely compressed account of eighteenth-century binding practices in his *New Introduction to Bibliography* speaks, presumably generically, of 'prayerbooks' being available in 'stock' or 'trade' bindings, and there is supporting evidence in newspaper advertisements¹². As far as almanacks are concerned, the evidence from advertisements seems to me to be ambiguous because of lack of detail. Material similar to almanacks - of the pocket book variety - does seem to have been sold from stock in fancy bindings. For example, the firm of G. G. & J. Robinson, advertising their large stock of annuals in the *Whitehall Evening Post* during November 1787, offers a choice of ladies' pocket books bound in red, blue or green gilt, with tucks or clasps, at 1s.8d. each. This would seem to indicate that the advertised bound copies of almanacks, retailing from 2s. to 3s.6d. each, might well have been bound in stock 'fancy morocco' bindings. I find it easier to believe that Morocco bindings of the simpler and plainer sort as exemplified in Nos. I-III of the following list were available from stock, and that profusely decorated ones as exemplified *inter alia* by Nos. VIII-X were only created

when specifically ordered. It would also be interesting to know whether style or sample books were kept. The evidence for 'stock' fancy bindings, based on prices and advertisements only, is inconclusive.

Attributing bindings to the same workshop, on the basis of general similarities in design, or even on the continued use of the same group of tools, is a hazardous business to be undertaken with great caution. As the reader will see from the following descriptions, I have not completely avoided this temptation in comparing examples from the Calgary group with each other and with the comparatively scarce published examples. It is this scarcity which encourages me to publish illustrations of three of the ten bindings, along with concise descriptions of all of them.

DESCRIPTIONS

In order to keep the descriptions as short as possible, I have not listed within each description the following characteristics which all ten bindings have in common:

A. The bindings are in grained leather, probably goatskin dyed red, usually called 'morocco'. B. The bindings feature gilding on all paper-edges. The edges of the bindings themselves are also gilt-tooled. C. The spines have raised bands and the number of bands and compartments on the spine are given in each entry. D. The bindings have marbled endpapers. In the entries I have described the marbling as either '[conglomerate](#)' or '[combed](#)'. E. The pattern of decoration of the lower cover of each binding is the same as that on the upper cover

The bindings are listed in chronological order of the date of publication of the chief item within the binding. The measurements given are those for the length and breadth of the front cover. (Click on the thumbnails to go to the full-size image)

Binding I.

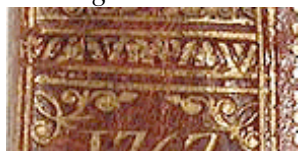
On *The Court and City Register for the year 1753*, the seventeenth edition. (Also contains *Rider's British Merlin*, 1753) 135 x 78 mm. The spine has four gold-tooled bands and five compartments. All five compartments contain the same squared design made up of small stylised floral tools. The front and rear covers have a border consisting of two fillets and a stylised fleuron roll and brass clasps. No corner or centre ornaments. Combed marbled endpapers.

Binding II.



On *The Court and City Register for the year 1756*. (Also contains *Rider's British Merlin*, 1756) 134 x 80 mm. The spine has four gold-tooled bands and five compartments. The second compartment from the top contains the date. The other compartments have a stylised cross design. The front and rear covers have a border of two fillets and a single 'large crown, spear and leaf' roll. No corner or centre ornaments. Combed marbled endpapers.

Binding III.



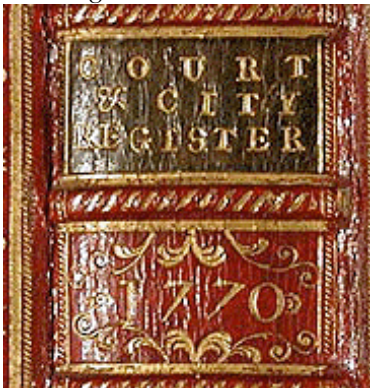
On *The Court and City Register for the year 1767*. Compiled by John Rivington. (Also contains a copy of Rivington's fourteen-year patent for the publication and *Rider's British Merlin*, 1767) 138 x 80 mm. The spine has four gold-tooled bands and five compartments. The second compartment from the top contains the



Binding IV



Binding V.



Binding VI.



Binding VII.

date. The other compartments feature a stylised gold-tooled design with acorns. The front and rear covers have a single 'fleurion and circle' stylised roll within a serrated fillet. No corner or centre ornaments. Combed marbled endpapers. This is the most austere of all the bindings in the group. .

On *The Court and City Kalendar, or Gentleman's Register for England, Scotland, Ireland and America for the year 1769*. (Also *Rider's British Merlin*, 1768 and a 36p. insert of engravings of the armorial devices of the baronets of England) 138 x 78 mm. The spine has four gold-tooled bands and five compartments. The second compartment from the top contains the date 1769. Stylised floral design in the other four compartments. The front and rear covers are tooled in gold to a cottage-roof design with an extensive use of spray bird, insect and snake tools. This binding uses many of the tools, arranged in a strikingly similar pattern, found in the binding of the same period covering a *Book of Psalms* printed by C. Rivington for the Stationers Company¹³. I am fairly confident that it is from the same bindery. There are signs of two missing clasps. Conglomerate marbled endpapers. (See [Fig. I.](#))

On *The Court and City Register, or, Gentleman's Complete Annual Kalendar for the year 1770 ...with many improvements*. (Also contains *Rider's British Merlin*, 1770) 140 x 78 mm. The spine has five gold-tooled bands and six decorated compartments. The second compartment from the top has a blue title-label. The other five compartments feature a central flower-tool with smaller leaf-tools and rosettes in the corners. The front and rear covers have a frame of two fillets, one banded and one solid, enclosing a massed design made up of individual sunflower, star, spear and rosette tools. Each corner contains a 'vase and lily' tool. No central ornament. Conglomerate marbled endpapers. In my opinion this binding is by the same workman as Binding VI.

On *The Royal Kalendar, or Complete and Correct Annual Register for England, Scotland, Ireland and America*, 1773. (Also contains *Rider's British Merlin*, 1773) 138 x 80 mm. The spine has four gold-tooled bands and five compartments. The second compartment from the top carried a title and date label (missing). The other four compartments feature a large flower tool in the centre and four corner leaf and bud tools. The front and rear covers feature exactly the same design and tools as Binding V, and this binding is presumably from the same shop, if indeed not by the same tradesman. Conglomerate marbled endpapers. (See [Fig. II.](#))

On *The Roval Kalendar. or Complete and Correct Annul Register*



... the Royal Household, or Compton Street, 1776.
for England, Scotland, Ireland and America, 1776. (Also contains *Rider's British Merlin*, 1776) 140 x 80 mm. The spine has four gold-tooled bands and five compartments. The second compartment from the top contained the date label (missing). The other four compartments contain a central large flower-spray with stylised leaf sprays in each corner. The front and rear boards, within a frame made up of a banded and a solid fillet, a Greek key roll and a dotted fillet, are decorated with massed flower, acorn and leaf tools. There is no centre ornament. Conglomerate marbled endpapers. (See [Fig. III](#).)

This handsome binding can be attributed with some confidence to [Sarah Messing](#), Stationer in Ordinary to the King, whose engraved binder's ticket is pasted on the inside of the front cover¹⁴. Neither Howe¹⁵ or Ramsden¹⁶ list Sarah Messing as a binder. Maxted's dictionary entry, which treats her as stationer, is the fullest to date¹⁷. Maxted points out that Sarah Messing succeeded Frederick Messing as Stationer in Ordinary to the King and held that office from 1770 to 1779, and gives her the same business address as the binder's ticket - Compton St., St. Anne's, Soho. Frederick Messing was presumably Sarah's father, or husband. He is, I think, a different man from the Frederick James Messing, bachelor, who married Penelope Clark, spinster, on March 10, 1781¹⁸. There are two Sarah Messings in published marriage registers. A Sarah Messing, spinster, married Thomas Smallman, bachelor, on August 23, 1770¹⁹. As Sarah Messing was trading as a stationer and bookbinder under the name Messing later than that date, it seems unlikely that this is the same woman. More likely she is the Sarah Messing who married John Dixon on January 13, 1801²⁰, who may be the John Dixon, copperplate printer, Goodge Street, Tottenham Court Road, listed in Maxted²¹. What information there is about the book tradesmen associated with the Royal Household is derived mostly from the kind of almanacks discussed in this article, although there may be extant accounts in the Royal Archives. The official bookseller and stationer by patent in 1776 was Mrs. K. Castle, who succeeded William Castle for the period 1773 to 1795. The royal bookseller in that year was John Nourse and the royal bookbinder was W. Shropshire (Bookbinder to the King, 1762-1788). This is presumably Walter Shropshire, son to William Shropshire, bookseller, who died in 1785. Frederick Messing appears as Stationer in Ordinary in the almanacks up to 1770. In those at Calgary, Sarah Messing's name appears as the holder of this office in the 1773 and 1776 volumes. She was replaced by Francis Knight, stationer in St. James's Street in 1780, who held the office until 1807. The Compton Street business address²² placed Sarah Messing in an environment where she was surrounded by predominantly French and artistic neighbours including artists, tapestry makers, engravers and modellers. She was also close enough to the aristocratic neighbourhood of Soho Square to have the type of customer who would buy royal almanacks in fancy morocco bindings. The name Messing is probably German, and presumably Sarah should be added to that formidable list of bookbinders of German origin who catered to the London carriage trade in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Binding VIII.



On *Royal Kalendar*, 1782. 142 X 80 mm. The spine has four gold-tooled bands and five compartments. The compartment second from the top carried a title-label (missing). The other four compartments feature a cornucopia with flowers. The front and rear covers have an overall cottage-roof design within a double serrated fillet, featuring dotted and curved lines, leaf and casket tools. Conglomerate marbled endpapers. [The binding bears a general, stylistic resemblance to an almanack binding in the British Library's Henry Davis Collection²³, but, in my opinion, does not come from the same shop. On the other hand, although the treatment of the spine is noticeably different in each case, I think it highly likely that bindings VIII, IX and X in this

collection come from the same shop.]

Binding IX.

On *Royal Kalendar*, 1787. (Also contains *Rider's British Merlin*, 1787) 141 x 80 mm. The spine has four gold-tooled bands and five compartments. The second compartment from the top contained the title-label (missing). The front and rear covers are within a serrated fillet and Greek key roll border with an overall cottage-roof style design with vase, leaf, star and floral tools. The elaborate centrepiece features two casket tools. There are also four large bird and leaf tools, one in each quadrant. The overall design is strongly similar to Bindings VIII and X. Conglomerate marbled endpapers.

Binding X.



On *Royal Kalendar*, 1788. (Also contains *Rider's British Merlin*, 1788) 142 x 80 mm. The spine has four gold-tooled bands and five compartments. The second compartment from the top contained the title-label (missing). The other four compartments feature leaf and 'cameo box' tools with small stars. The front and rear covers carry a variant of the basic cottage-roof design in VIII and IX, using many of the same tools. The main difference is the development of the centre which does not use casket tools but features four large curved and stylised sprays. The tools in the vertical space between the cottage-roof overhangs are exactly the same in all three bindings. Conglomerate marbled endpapers.

In her admirable Introduction to v.2 of *The Henry Davis Gift*, M.M. Foot says: 'Volumes II and III are meant to be reference books, to be used by binding historians, librarians, booksellers, collectors, and other book lovers to check their own and other holdings, and to help identify undetermined bindings²⁴. It is in the spirit of this scholarly exhortation that I offer these illustrations and descriptions, and in the hope that scholars, from institutions outside the United Kingdom especially, will look closely again at the eighteenth-century bindings in their own libraries and, where necessary, make further illustrations available.

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NOTES

1. I am grateful to A. MacDonald, the Director of Libraries, University of Calgary and [Mrs. Apollonia Steele](#), Rare Books Librarian, for their co-operation and permission to study and illustrate the bindings.
2. B. Capp, *English Almanacks 1500-1800. Astrology and the Popular Press*, (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979), p.245. See also Cyprian Blagden, *The Stationers Company. A History* (London, 1960).
3. Both descriptions of the officers of the Royal Household, including the bookbinders and stationers, and of the establishments of the royal princess can be found in late eighteenth-century calendars.
4. Details of the careers of these tradesmen can be found in H.R. Plomer, G.H. Bushnell and E.R. McC. Dix, *Dictionary of the printers and booksellers who were at work in England Scotland and Ireland from 1726 to 1775* (Oxford, 1932 (for 1930)), pp.383, 402-03 and 405.
5. R.H. Carnie, '[Irish decorative bookbindings at Calgary](#)', *Amphora* 28 (1977) 2-5.
6. M. Craig, *Irish Bookbindings 1600-1800* (London, 1954).
7. Craig, note to Plate 49.
8. p.2.
9. A copy of this patent is bound into the 1767 *Court and City Register*.
10. W.H.J. Veale, *Bookbindings and Rubbings of Bindings in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London, 1898; repr. London, 1962), Introduction, p.50. I
11. Dorothy Miner, *The History of Bookbinding 525-1950* (Baltimore, 1957), p.204.

12. Philip Gaskell, *New Introduction to Bibliography* (Oxford, 1972), p.152.
13. Described and illustrated by Mirjam M. Foot as No.175 in *The Henry Davis Gift. A Collection of Bookbindings*, v.2: *A Catalogue of North-European Bindings* (London, 1983).
14. This binder's ticket is not in J.R. Abbey's useful list 'British signed bindings in my library', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 2 (1951) 271-9. See Fig. IV.
15. Ellic Howe, *A List of London Bookbinders 1648-1815* (London, 1950).
16. Charles Ramsden, *London Bookbinders 1780-1840* (London, 1956).
17. I. Maxted, *The London Book Trades 1775-1800* (Folkestone, 1977), p.153.
18. *The Registers of Marriage of St Mary le Bone, Middlesex, 1775-1783*, ed. W.B. and R.B.B. Bannerman, Publications of the Harleian Society, v.51 (London, 1921), p.83.
19. *The Registers of Marriage of St Mary le Bone, Middlesex, 1754-1775*, ed. W.B. and R.B.B. Bannerman, Publications of the Harleian Society, v.48 (London, 1918), p.105.
20. *The Register Book of Marriages belonging to the Parish of St George, Hanover Square, in the County of Middlesex*, ed. J.H. Chapman, v.2: 1788-1809, Publications of the Harleian Society, v.14 (London, 1888), p.231.
21. p.67.
22. See *Survey of London*, Vol.23. Chapter VII of the account of *Soho* deals in some detail with Compton Street and its inhabitants.
23. Foot, v.2, No.188.
24. Foot, v.2,p.7.

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