

# The Private Library

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## A MAGICAL LIBRARY: II

*Trevor H. Hall*

EARLY American conjuring items are very scarce. The collector who, like myself, pines in vain for the first book on magic published in the United States will probably continue to do so, for only two copies are known. This is a reprint (styled the eleventh edition and with the predominant title changed to *Hocus Pocus*) of Dean's *The Whole Art of Legerdemain*, published in Philadelphia in 1795. I do, however, possess the second, Pinchbeck's *The Expositor; or, Many Mysteries Unravelled* (Boston, 1805) and a representative American section including Nickerson's *The Whole Art of Legerdemain* (Baltimore, 1830)<sup>1</sup>, *Ventriloquism Explained; and Juggler's Tricks, or Legerdemain Exposed* (Amherst, 1834) and Engstrom's *The Humourous Magician Unmasked* (Philadelphia, 1836).

A few conjuring books published after 1850 are difficult to find because of limited editions, and are in consequence highly regarded. Examples are the Brinsley Nicholson *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, to which reference has been made, *Second Sight Simplified* (1883) and *Second Sight for Amateurs* (1888), of which respectively fifty and twenty-five copies were printed. One of the most desirable items in my collection is *The Annals of Conjuring* (1929), by Sidney W. Clarke, a barrister and a Vice-President of the Magic Circle. It was published as a serial in the late George Johnson's quarterly *The Magic Wand* during the years 1924-28. Only four copies of this lavishly illustrated and monumental history of the conjurer's art were, however, printed in book form.

Six years ago I accidentally created a modern rarity of my own, and as an American bookseller has since alluded to its existence<sup>2</sup> the story should perhaps be recorded. The circumstances which led to the printing of a few copies of my conjuring bibliography prior to 1957, the year of publication, are not without interest. The late Carl W. Jones of Minneapolis<sup>3</sup> and I were old friends and had discussed such a project for many years, but it was not until Carl's last illness that he asked me to make it possible for his name as publisher to appear on the title-page of a bibliography of the older conjuring books which had such a compelling interest for both of us. He knew that his life was drawing to its close, and he was especially anxious that this, his final contribution to the literature of magic, should be completed before his death. He invited me to take responsibility for the prepara-

tion of the MS., and the printing and illustrating of the book in England.

I was sadly aware that time was short. However, much of the material was already assembled in my library, and I enjoyed, moreover, the inestimable advantage of having friends whose expert help was available to me.<sup>4</sup> The page-proofs were completed in December 1956, but it was clear that publication would be inevitably delayed until 1957. The news from Minneapolis was not good, but through the kindness of the Shenval Press I was able partly to implement my promise to Carl. Six special copies of the book were illustrated, sewn and wrapped and one of these was sent by air mail to Carl Jones in time for Christmas Day. These copies were dated 1956 on the title-page. Carl Jones died on January 5th, 1957, serene and courageous to the end, and before his death was able to see and handle the book he had so much wished to publish.

Some post-1850 books of which large editions are printed are now of considerable rarity for reasons difficult to comprehend. Douglas Blackburn's *Thought-Reading; or, Modern Mysteries Explained* [1884], for example, exists in the libraries of Cambridge and London Universities and the Magic Circle, and in the British Museum and in my own collection, but I have not been able to trace its presence elsewhere. Bibliographers are curiously silent about it. So far as I am aware, it has not been offered for sale since 1924.<sup>5</sup> Blackburn and G. A. Smith were the two Brighton 'telepathists' who were the subjects of early experiments in thought-transference, conducted by Edmund Gurney and Frederic W. H. Myers in 1882-83, and described as genuine in the first volume of the *Proceedings* of the Society for Psychical Research. Blackburn subsequently confessed that the whole affair had been a gigantic hoax. Why virtually all copies of his little book should have disappeared is a matter of conjecture, particularly when another book by the same publishers, *Christmas Entertainments* (1883), of similar format and price, is of fairly common occurrence.

During the last twenty years old conjuring books have become increasingly hard to find, and prices have tended steadily to rise. I have had occasion to observe elsewhere<sup>6</sup> that in my view the late Leo Rullman's catalogue No. 42, issued in April 1940, marked a climacteric in the antiquarian book market. Never again was a lover of conjuring books to have the opportunity of buying from the same list a dozen scarce and desirable items, or as Rullman put it, 'a nice assortment of rare books and pamphlets to delight the heart of the collector'. It was, from the purchaser's point of view, the last illuminated window display

before the lights went out.

The reasons for this state of affairs is, I fancy, twofold. First, in recent years the number of collectors of conjuring books has rapidly increased, especially in the United States. The bookseller who in September 1958 offered me an immaculate copy of *Hocus Pocus: or Sleight of Hand Explained* (1826) had no anxiety as to its saleability nor any noticeable inhibitions regarding price. He merely had to decide upon whom amongst the clamouring multitude he was to bestow the privilege of possessing this rare pamphlet, and I happened to be first in the field. The second reason, as I have said in another place, is the very curious absence in the case of conjuring books of the normal cyclic redistribution from one generation of bibliophiles to the next.<sup>7</sup> It would seem that, in the main, earlier collectors of conjuring literature have been unable to bring themselves to arrange for the piecemeal disposal of their beloved books. The important libraries assembled by Dr Milton Bridges, C. H. Charlton, Harry Houdini, Carl W. Jones and Harry Price, to name but five, have all passed into institutional ownership or have been bought intact by other book-lovers.

The collector of an unusual subject is invariably asked how his interest was first aroused. I have been a Sherlock Holmes enthusiast since my schooldays and it was as a schoolboy that my father, who was acquainted with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, introduced me to the creator of my hero. The meeting took place in Sir Arthur's psychic bookshop in Westminster, and we were invited to inspect the curious exhibits in the basement museum. The impression made upon a small boy by the greatest exponent and champion of spiritualism in its history was clearly formidable, and my father, who was a wise man, decided that an immediate antidote was necessary. We went to Maskelynes, where I saw that greater miracles than those described by Sir Arthur could be accomplished in full light by normal means. An enthusiasm for amateur conjuring was a natural development, leading in its turn as the years went by to an interest in the history and bibliography of the subject. That afternoon in London so long ago probably accounts also for my occasional critical contributions to the literature of psychical research.

<sup>1</sup> A rarity brought back across the Atlantic for me, under the noses of American collectors, by the late Peter Murray Hill.

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Heyl, Catalogue no. 28 (Baltimore, July 1958).

<sup>3</sup> Carl Jones's library of early conjuring books, containing what was the only free copy of the first edition of *Hocus Pocus Junior* (1634), passed to Princeton University on his death. He was, of course, the son of Herschel V. Jones, who assembled one of the most complete collections of Americana in private hands.

<sup>4</sup> Especially Dr E. J. Dingwall, the honorary assistant keeper of printed books at the British Museum and Mr J. H. P. Pafford, the Goldsmiths' Librarian of the University of London.

<sup>5</sup> By the late Arthur Margery of Brompton. Mr H. E. Pratt, the Magic Circle Librarian, thinks it probable that this is the copy now in his care, its having passed through the libraries of Dr Milton Bridges and C. H. Charlton. The latter's collection was purchased *en bloc* by the Magic Circle some years ago.

<sup>6</sup> *The Magic Circular*, June 1951, p. 197.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198-200. The essay in which this theme was developed included a short history of magical libraries.