

The Private Library

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A MAGICAL LIBRARY: I

by Trevor H. Hall

(Note. The place of publication of the books cited in this essay may be assumed to be London unless otherwise indicated in the text.)

THE scope of my small collection is principally limited to the period from 1580 to 1850, upon which the search by the lover of old conjuring books in English is mainly concentrated. The second date is arbitrary although, as I hope to show, appropriate, whilst the first is of precise significance. The earliest edition of Thomas Hill's *A briefe and pleasaunt treatise, entituled, naturall and artificiall conclusions* which we know actually to exist was published in 1581¹, and the original edition of Reginald Scot's *The discoverie of witchcraft* followed in 1584². Hill described crude (and largely unworkable) tricks such as 'How to make a hollow Ring to daunce by itself' and 'How to make a loafe of bread newe set upon the Table to leape off', but Scot devoted part of his book to the instruction of the reader in practical conjuring feats as we know them today. In his illustrated chapter, 'The art of juggling discovered, and in what points it dooth principallie consist', the author described tricks with coins, playing cards and other apparatus which were copied by later compilers of conjuring books for nearly three hundred years.

I own the third, fourth and sixth editions of Hill, of 1650, 1670 and circa 1710. In the latter issue the title was changed to *Legerdemain: or, Natural and Artificial Conclusions and Hocus Pocus Improved*. The first edition of Scot is probably my most valuable item, although by no

¹ Only one copy is known. It was sold for £460 at the Britwell sale in 1925 to Dr A. S. W. Rosenbach, and is now in the Henry E. Huntington Library at San Marino. It seems possible that earlier editions or versions of the book were issued. Thus in E. Arber's *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London*, vol. i (1875), p. 339, we read, 'Recevyd of Wylliam Coplande for his lycense for pryntinge of a naturall conclusion', and on p. 440 'Recevyd of henry Denham for his lycense for pryntinge of a book a brefe pleasaunt Treates Called naturall and artificiall conclusions which was Cowplande[s]'. Cf. the *Short Title Catalogue*, 13481, which notes the entry to Cowplande (1566-67) and to Denham (1570-71). I am not aware that any actual copies of these books have so far been recorded. Hill himself states in his *The Contemplation of Mankind* (1571) that the book was 'imprinted twise' by William Copland in 1567 and 1568.

² An excellent biography of Scot, with reproductions of the title-pages of earlier editions and bibliographical notes of great value to the student, is contained in the introduction to *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. . . . Being a Reprint of the First Edition published in 1584. Edited with Explanatory Notes, Glossary and Introduction (1886), by Dr Brinsley Nicholson. This edition was limited to 250 copies.

means the rarest,³ for I am aware of the existence of about a dozen other copies. There were three issues of the second edition, of which I possess one, dated 1651, and I have the folio third edition of 1655.

So far as I am aware 336⁴ books on conjuring in English were published during the period in which my interest lies. Of these my collection contains rather over 200, including a number of the pleasant antiquities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Ady's *A Candle in the Dark* (1655), Astley's *Natural Magic: or Physical Amusements Revealed* (1785), Bate's *The Mysteryes of Nature and Art* (fourth edition, 1654), six editions of Breslaw's *Last Legacy* (first published in 1784), *The Conjuror's Repository* (1795), *The Conjuror Unmasked, or the Magical Mirror* (1795 and circa 1810), twelve editions of Dean's *The Whole Art of Legerdemain* (first published in 1722), Denton's *The Conjuror Unmasked* (1785 and 1788), Gale's *Cabinet of Knowledge* (1796 and 1808), *Hocus Pocus, or, The Art of Conjuration* (1795), Hooper's *Rational Recreations* (1774 and 1787), Ozanam's *Recreations Mathematical and Physical* (1708), Pinetti's *Physical Amusements and Diverting Experiments* (1784), Porta's *Natural Magick* (1658 and 1669), *Round About Our Coal Fire: or, Christmas Entertainments* (circa 1700), Snow's *Arts Improvement: or, Choice Experiments* (1703), Van Etten's *Mathematicall Recreations* (1633, 1653 and 1674), White's *Hocus Pocus: or, A Rich Cabinet of Legerdemain Curiosities* (circa 1700) and the same author's *Art's Treasury of Rareties and Curious Inventions* (circa 1710).

Traditionally, the most desirable items in the collection are, I suppose, the 1658 and 1697 issues of *Hocus Pocus Junior. The Anatomie of Legerdemain*,⁵ described by the late Leo Rullman of New York, a bookseller specialising in this kind of material, as 'both the hope and the

³ In his *Some Rare Old Books on Conjuring and Magic* (Kenton, Ohio, 1943) the late Dr H. Ridgely Evans said that the rarity of the *editio princeps* is due to the destruction of all available copies by the executioner under James I. Dr Evans added that an ingredient in the value of the book lies in the knowledge that Shakespeare consulted the copy of the *Discoverie* in the library at Yatton Court. I am not aware on what evidence these two assertions are based.

⁴ In *A Bibliography of Books on Conjuring in English from 1580 to 1850* (henceforward referred to as BCB) published in 1957, I described 323 items. Although the reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* was indulgent enough to say that no omissions could be traced, in fact 13 titles have since come to light which should have been included.

⁵ The name of the author of this, the first illustrated book wholly devoted to practical conjuring tricks as we know them today, has never been determined. Some material for a preliminary approach to the problem of his identity was assembled by me in two articles in *The Magic Circular* of May 1950 (pp. 171 ff.) and June 1952 (pp. 246 ff.). Cf. also L. B. Wright, 'Juggling Tricks and Conjuring on the English Stage before 1642' (*Modern Philology*, February 1927, pp. 269 ff.) and J. T. Murray, *English Dramatic Companies, 1558-1642* (1910), vol. i, p. 253.

despair of the seeker after rare magic books'.⁶ Mine are the only two free copies of this title in any edition in the British Isles, and there are three in private libraries in America. Almost as difficult to find are *The Old Hocus Pocus* (circa 1710) and Richard Neve's two little books, both published in 1721, *The Merry Companion, or Delights for the Ingenious*, and *Hocus Pocus: or, The Cabinet of Legerdemain Curiosities Broke Open*, all three of which I own in good condition.

I have chosen a cut-off date as late as 1850 because during the preceding five decades a considerable number of ephemeral and attractive little wrapped conjuring books, usually embellished with a gay and somewhat imaginative hand-coloured frontispiece, were published. Most of them are now of the greatest rarity. This is, of course, due to their small size (usually not more than 36 pages), cheap format and consequent high mortality rate, which is not generally true of more important conjuring titles appearing during and after the middle years of the nineteenth century. The 36 pages and paper wrappers of *The London Conjurer* (1812), for example, were giving place to the 188 pages and publishers' cloth of *Fireside Amusements* (Edinburgh, 1850). These little books have an irresistible attraction for me, and over the years I have managed to accumulate about forty of them. Their brief contents belie their delightfully grandiloquent titles, exemplified by *Hocus Pocus, or, the New and Complete Art of Conjuring* (circa 1820), *The Juggler's Oracle, or, the Whole Art of Legerdemain Laid Open* (circa 1830), *The Modern Conjurer, or, Complete Guide to Sleight of Hand* (1822), *The New Art of Hocus Pocus Revived* (1808), *The Petit Sorcerer, or, The Conjurer Unmasked* (1808) and *The Universal Conjurer, or, The Whole Art of Legerdemain* (1829). The rarity of these items is perhaps indicated by the coincidence that the four books in my collection which I believe to be unique all fall into this class of early nineteenth century ephemera. A curious mystery connected with two of them, *The Modern Conjurer* and *The Art of Conjuring Made Easy*, is worth recording.

I acquired *The Modern Conjurer*⁷ about twelve years ago. In my serialised 'Magic Book Collecting' I ventured diffidently to discuss the

⁶ *Greater Magic* (Minneapolis, 1942), p. 928. Rullman's many catalogues, with their simple title *Leo Rullman. Conjuring Books* are of considerable interest and value to the student and collector. In his article "The Rosenbach of the Magic World" (*The Tops*, Colon, Michigan, June 1937) H. Adrian Smith gave an account of Rullman's career as a dealer in scarce conjuring books.

⁷ The title-page was reproduced as Plate 10 of BCB, and described as No. 202. For a reason now explained, *The Art of Conjuring Made Easy* was regrettably omitted.

reasons why certain old conjuring books were more difficult to find than others and added:—

‘These general conclusions are probably sound enough so far as they go, but they leave much unexplained. It is difficult to understand, for example, why the 1658 English edition of Porta’s *Natural Magick* is offered for sale about twice a year (albeit usually in imperfect condition) when the edition of 1669, a similar substantial folio, is apparently so rare that we only know of two copies, and was unrecorded by magical bibliographers until I published its title-page in this series. It is not easy to comprehend why *Magical Recreations, or The Whole Art of Legerdemain; Explained and Made Easy for all Capacities* (Bristol, circa 1850) and *The Modern Conjuror* (London, 1822), respectively in George Johnson’s collection and my own, should so far as we know at the moment exist uniquely in these single copies. . . . The multiplication of such mysteries and the cataloguing of one’s own lack of knowledge is too mortifying to pursue further.’⁸

On the premise that it is reasonable to suppose that the possibly foolhardy expression of one’s view in print will usually precipitate the production of the evidence to the contrary, if it exists, it is of interest to point out that during the ten years which have elapsed since I published my opinion no collector or librarian has offered a correction.

Four years ago that formidable book-collector and owner of the great library at Bagden Hall, near Huddersfield, George H. Brook, presented me with *The Art of Conjuring Made Easy* (1822) which, like *The Modern Conjuror*, I had never seen or heard of before it was placed in my hands. Like *The Modern Conjuror*, it consisted of twenty-four pages. It had probably survived because it was bound up with half a dozen other pamphlets of similar format, dealing with subjects as far removed from conjuring as fishing, swimming and the breeding of pigeons.

The Modern Conjuror and *The Art of Conjuring Made Easy* were both published by Dean & Munday of Threadneedle Street, on 1 January 1822. Both are graced by identical hand-coloured frontispieces, each depicting two charming conjuring scenes, ‘The Learned Little Swan’ and ‘Making a Card Jump out of a Pack’. The traditional hypothesis, beloved of bibliographers, of the warehouse destroyed by fire on pub-

⁸ *The Magic Circular* (April 1952), pp. 186-7. The title-page of *The Modern Conjuror*, with others, illustrated the essay, so that informed critics had no reason to withhold their fire.

lication day whilst the proprietor, with a single copy in his pocket, is enjoying a drink at a public house on his way home, is too attractive in its simplicity to be accepted without reserve. In this instance, however, the evidence of *two* books possessed of rarity in the highest degree, published by the same firm on the same day, cannot be lightly set aside.

I know of no special circumstances which throw light upon the apparent non-existence or record outside my own library of two other items of this kind: *An Evening's Amusement, The Merry Thought; An Excellent and Right-Merry Collection of Capital Tricks* (circa 1800) and *Magical Recreations, or The Whole Art of Legerdemain; Explained and Made Easy for all capacities* (Bristol, circa 1850). Both were acquired by me from the widow of the late George Johnson of Okehampton, who devoted his life to publishing and selling conjuring books, and who over the years set on one side for his own shelves a number of especially desirable items.⁹

⁹ Obituaries of George Johnson by P. Naldrett and myself, with references to his library, were published on p. 2 of *The Magic Circular* of October 1962.

(To be concluded in "The Private Library": No. 27)