

SCIENTIST, SCHOLAR
& SCOUNDREL



Portrait of Libri around the age of 50. The original drawing, from the collection of Arthur and Janet Ing Freeman, measures 29 x 28 cm. It was reproduced as a lithograph by A. N. Noël. (Courtesy of Arthur and Janet Ing Freeman.)

SCIENTIST, SCHOLAR & SCOUNDREL

A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INVESTIGATION
OF THE LIFE AND EXPLOITS OF
COUNT GUGLIELMO LIBRI
*Mathematician, Journalist, Patriot, Historian of Science,
Paleographer, Book Collector, Bibliographer,
Antiquarian Bookseller, Forger
and Book Thief*

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INTRODUCTION

VILLAINS play prominent roles in literature, drama, and film. How many times have we seen or read about Al Capone, Lucky Luciano, Jack the Ripper, or Sherlock Holmes's ultimate adversary, Professor Moriarty? Without great villains we would not have great heroes. Yet few of us collect works by or about villains; we prefer to collect the works of heroes. I will not say that Guglielmo Libri is a hero of mine, nor is he a conventional villain, but he is one of the most fascinating personalities in the history of book collecting, bibliography, and bookselling. In addition to his criminal escapades as a book thief and forger, he was a mathematician, historian of science, paleographer, bibliographer, book collector, bookseller, journalist, patriot, and academic politician.

Libri's criminal side, and the way he concealed it, and managed to convince at least half the world of his innocence even though he was convicted, adds dimensions to his life not found in heroes. To avoid prosecution in Paris in 1848 he fled from France to England using a false passport. In 1849, while a criminal case was being prepared against him in Paris, Libri testified about continental libraries before the Select Committee on Public Libraries of the British House of Commons. Furthermore, even though in 1850 Libri was tried *in absentia*, convicted, and sentenced in Paris to ten years solitary confinement with hard labor for book and manuscript thefts, and his trial and conviction were internationally publicized, he never served any prison time, and neither he nor his supporters ever accepted the verdict. Instead, through a remarkable series of pamphlets for the defense, Libri and others were able to convince most interested people in England and Italy, and some in France, that he was a victim of political persecution and innocent of all charges. Even after he failed in 1861 to get his conviction overturned Libri continued to sell, under his own name, books and manuscripts of great historical and commercial value—many of which were undoubtedly stolen—at high-profile auctions at Sotheby's in London, the catalogue descriptions

for which only he could have written. That this was possible is a reflection of Libri's outstanding connoisseurship, and his "consummate adroitness," to use Léopold Delisle's characterization¹. It is also a reflection of the differences between Libri's era and ours.

In 1848, just before he could be arrested for book thefts, Libri escaped to England with about half of his inventory of printed books and manuscripts, probably about 20,000 items. He could never return to France. Later, after marrying and putting his library in his wife's name, Libri sent his wife back to France to recover and ship to England roughly half of what the French government had impounded—over 10,000 additional items. For a convicted thief, Libri's reputation remained extraordinarily high in England, and the quality of the material he sold at auction was often remarkable and path-breaking. Over his lifetime the gross receipts from his many auction sales were large, probably over a million francs, or about £40,000, when a loaf of bread cost between one and eight cents, and in hard times some people had to work a full day to pay for a loaf of bread. Still that figure in no way relates to the inherent cultural value of the treasures that passed through Libri's hands, some of which would be considered priceless today.

How a professor of mathematics, dependent on academic salaries for income, could own so many unique or exceptionally rare treasures in so many fields of knowledge, including so many ancient codices, seems never to have been seriously questioned by the buyers of his books, or by the auction houses that sold them. Nor did many buyers question the quality of books that had been aggressively washed, restored or sophisticated.

How did Libri get away with it? This bibliographical and historical investigation represents my attempt to answer that question through the description of my collection on Libri's life and work. It has been through the collection and study of this material that I have developed further appreciation of the complex manner in which Libri accomplished so much. Because Libri operated as a scientist, scholar, historian, bibliographer, bookseller and journalist within the rapidly changing socio-political environments of three countries—Italy, France, and England—and because the controversy over his thefts was tried in the press and in a pamphlet war as much as in the French courts, the

1. Delisle, *The Manuscripts of the Earl of Ashburnham. Observations on the Very Ancient Manuscripts of the Libri Collection*. Translated from the French by Harrison Wright (1884), p. 6.

history of his life and crimes has to be understood within the context of his time. I have provided context for this exhibition by the timeline presented before the catalogue, by an essay on Libri's contributions to book and manuscript collecting and cataloguing, and by commentary running through the catalogue text. To write this book I read many of the original documents, and either translated or had translations made of several. Some of the more interesting translations and newspaper articles are published as appendices. Others are quoted within the catalogue text. Though I have tried to be selective in my reporting this is an unavoidably long and complex story, spanning three countries and five decades, but one that I hope you will enjoy.

As a political insurrectionist in Italy who fled to France, and later as a revolutionary in France who fled to England, Libri exploited politics to gain the highest academic and social position in France, and to gain access to institutional collections in both Italy and France. Combative by nature, and an outspoken atheist when most people were observant, Libri gained the support of fellow non-believers by attacking the Jesuits in print; he also gained powerful and lasting enemies who believed in the Catholic faith. When he was accused Libri often claimed political persecution, usually with justification. In his writings he often described the disorganized state of many institutional libraries, and the necessity of their re-organization—a topic about which there was little argument. At the same time he exploited the disorder, inadequate or incomplete cataloguing, and lack of security in these institutions for nefarious gain. When accused of thefts Libri sometimes showed that numerous other items stolen from the same institutions were, or had been, offered for sale on the open market, and claimed that he had purchased the items in good faith. He spoke accurately when he implied that the antiquarian book and manuscript market of his time was rife with material of questionable or confused provenance. But his overriding defense, even after conviction, was political—to claim in print over and over again that the prosecution misunderstood the intricate bibliographical details, and to flood the antiquarian book world in France and England with technical information in a flurry of books and pamphlets written for the defense, giving the appearance that he was falsely accused, and falsely convicted. To the French government Libri's case was, of course, one of untold numbers prosecuted each year; to the very small antiquarian book world

the Libri Affair was major news for more than a decade. Libri's pamphlets were often reprinted or summarized in the news media, allowing Libri to influence the way his story was reported, while the French government for the most part remained silent on the case.

During his career Libri probably bought, stole, catalogued, and sold around 50,000 books and manuscripts, many of which were of the highest historical and bibliophilic importance covering an incredible diversity of subjects. Even in the mid-nineteenth century many of the most valuable treasures which Libri handled, especially the most ancient codices, would have been exceptionally difficult or impossible to acquire legally, yet they passed through his hands, often to the greatest collectors of his day. Only decades after his death did the full scope of Libri's crimes become known. The consequences of so much thieving are still being felt. In 2010 Haverford College Library found among its holdings an autograph letter from Descartes to Marin Mersenne dated May 27, 1641 concerning the publication of *Meditations on First Philosophy*. This turned out to be one of many things—some priceless—that Libri had stolen from the library of the Institut de France in the 1840s. On June 8, 2010 Stephen G. Emerson, president of Haverford College, returned the letter to its rightful owner. Even more recently, in June 2011, Jean Bonna returned to the Institut de France another letter of Descartes, this one to Thomas Hobbes dated January 21, 1641. After Bonna acquired this letter at auction in July 1998, it was determined that Libri had stolen it from the Institut.²

I first became aware of Guglielmo Libri about 35 years ago when I came across a priced copy of the catalogue of the 1861 auction of his library of over 7,000 items on the history of mathematics and science. From this catalogue I learned that Libri was one of the first historians of science, and the first collector / dealer to promote collecting the history of science as distinct from medicine. In perusing Libri's auction catalogue I was struck by the exceptional quality of the books and manuscripts offered and by the modernity of the catalogue descriptions, many of which read as if they had been written today. At the time I knew nothing about Libri's means of acquisi-

2. Institut de France. "En 2010 et 2011, deux lettres de René Descartes au Père Marin Mersenne (21 janvier et 27 mai 1641) ont été remises spontanément à l'Institut . . ." *Archives Des Expositions*. N.p., n.d. Web accessed 17 Aug. 2012.

tion, and I assumed that the incredible range of important items offered in the auction was simply a reflection of the wider availability of material in the mid-nineteenth century. For years the 1861 catalogue gathered dust on my reference shelves. Around the same time I acquired my first Libri catalogue, Nicolas Barker had collected and edited some of A. N. L. Munby's writings for *Essays and Papers* (1977). This I purchased, and duly shelved, perhaps after a cursory examination. Years later I reopened Munby's book and came across his two essays on Libri, "The Earl and the Thief," and "The Triumph of Delisle: A Sequel to 'The Earl and the Thief.'" These wonderful essays, which mainly concern Libri's transactions with the Earl of Ashburnham and the posthumous unraveling of some of Libri's crimes by Léopold Delisle, first aroused my interest in Libri's extraordinary life and career, both legitimate and criminal.

My next connection to Libri came from the acquisition of a volume of pamphlets on the Libri Affair, which I ordered from Quaritch. The number of pamphlets published regarding Libri's guilt or innocence concerning the theft of books from libraries impressed me. Why were so many published? To understand these pamphlets I returned to Munby's essays, but Munby did not address the Libri Affair in detail, focusing primarily on Libri's sale to Ashburnham and the role that Léopold Delisle played in its aftermath. Little did I know that the ten or so items in my Libri Affair volume were only the tip of the iceberg!

What truly stimulated my interest in Libri was the masterful biography by P. Alessandra Maccioni Ruju and Marco Mostert, *The Life and Times of Guglielmo Libri (1802–1869)* published in 1995, and referred to throughout this book as Maccioni Ruju & Mostert. This comprehensive, thoroughly documented technical study includes a detailed listing of Libri's publications and those of the Libri Affair. In the Spring 1997 issue of *The Book Collector* Nicolas Barker published an essay review of Maccioni Ruju and Mostert's biography. Barker's discussion of Libri's achievements as well as his crimes provided a more readily accessible summary of the exhaustive detail presented by Maccioni Ruju and Mostert, and further provoked my curiosity.

Once curiosity is aroused, what is the fairly predictable response of a life-long collector? Buying! As a collector and dealer I find that I learn best by buying and handling the physical objects. Thankfully from the book-

collecting standpoint, because Libri's story took place before the development of electronic media, it was recorded in newspapers, and especially in an extraordinary series of pamphlets, many of which were published in small editions. How many of these could I acquire and in what condition? The collection described here was mainly assembled over the past ten years in order to understand the complex aspects of Libri's fascinating—and sometimes verging on incredible—life story. It contains first editions of nearly all of his most significant publications and most of the roughly forty publications that appeared in book or pamphlet form during the Libri Affair. The collection also contains most of Léopold Delisle's published investigations and proofs of Libri's thefts of medieval codices from libraries, which led to the re-acquisition by purchase of many national treasures by the governments of France and Italy decades after Libri's death. To supplement the account, I have appended a translation of the original report by the prosecutor Boucly (1848), an obituary of Libri from *The Times* of London, plus a translation of a humorous short piece by Delisle. As I studied the Libri Affair, and learned how Libri was seen in England as a victim of political persecution, one of the questions I often asked myself was how much collectors and librarians in England knew—apart from Libri's side of the story—about the accusation of thefts (1848), Libri's conviction for theft (1850), and his denied appeal (1861). Inclusion of briefer news accounts from *The Times* within the text show reasonably well, I think, that Libri's defenders in England, and buyers at his auctions in London, were quite well informed of these details, filtered somewhat through *The Times's* sometimes biased support of Libri.

The major gap in my collection is a portrait of Libri; two different images were published, both of which have escaped me so far. Several years ago I missed the original drawing for the portrait of Libri in middle age, reproduced in the lithograph by A. N. Noël. That was acquired by my colleagues Arthur and Janet Ing Freeman of London who kindly allowed me to reproduce it in this catalogue.

This collection could not have been made, nor could this study have been written without the guidance of Maccioni Rujū and Mostert's work. I read it several times; once I even read all the footnotes at the back from beginning to end, picking up additional valuable information. Those who want to

research Libri's exploits in more detail should start there. As an antiquarian bookseller, bibliographer and collector my perspective on Libri's work and crimes sometimes differs from scholars who come from other disciplines. Other studies I consulted are included in the bibliography of references at the end of this book, and occasionally in footnotes. My long-time associate and collaborator Diana Hook translated, edited and read proofs. My daughter Alexandra helped with translations. My son Max made many useful edits. Patricia Gilbert, my fiancée, read and revised the text. George Ong, chair of the Committee on Publications of The Grolier Club, made substantive improvements to the book, read proofs, and provided invaluable advice. This book was greatly enhanced through the masterful design of Jerry Kelly. Though Libri died nearly 150 years ago, his path-breaking historical and bibliographical work continues to fascinate, as does his law-breaking career. To the growing body of scholarship on Guglielmo Libri it is my pleasure to add this bibliographical investigation.