



A History of the Library of the English Presbyterian College in London, 1844-1899



Revd. Peter Lorimer, by John Pettie

The need for a library for students and ministers was seen as vital when the English Presbyterian College was founded in London in 1844. Its parent organisation, the Presbyterian Church in England, was also newly formed, and an educated ministry for the new denomination was seen as crucial to its mission.

Peter Lorimer, who was one of the two Professors at the College, wrote a circular letter to the Church in September 1844, two months before the College opened. In it, he asked all ministers to make it known from the pulpit that the Church's new College would need support, candidates for ministry, and – very specifically – books for the library.ⁱ

Ten months later, in May 1845, Lorimer wrote to the fledgling Presbyterian Church again – this time in the *Presbyterian Messenger*, the Church magazine. He announced that he had received 656 books for the library, five hundred of them being the gifts of ministers and members of the church; and reiterated his appeal, asking members of the church to make ‘an energetic effort [...] not only to improve the funds of the College, but also to enrich its library. We look for many more donations of books.’



Lorimer's appeal in the *Presbyterian Messenger*, May 1845

The response to Lorimer's appeal was generous: the annual reports show the College was both heavily dependent on, and extremely grateful for, gifts in two key areas: donations of money and donations of books. (However, as a theological college, it's noteworthy that the November 1846 issue of the *Presbyterian Messenger* reminds the Church that whilst ‘contributions [to the College] are essential, prayers are essential also!’ⁱⁱ)

An example of early generosity towards developing the library collection is to be found in a story about Revd James Hamilton (1814-1867), minister at the renowned Regent Square Church, London, who gave a series of lectures at the College in the 1840s. Hamilton was to be paid £60 for the lectures, but he refused to take the money, and asked that it be returned to College funds. When he did this, the College Committee decided ‘the best way of recording their gratitude [was] to lay out the sum in the purchase of books for the library; the works to be selected by Mr Hamilton himself’.ⁱⁱⁱ



Revd. James Hamilton, by John J Napier

This was, in fact, a quite staggeringly generous gift: £60 was nearly three months' wages for one of the Professors. Lorimer, the first Principal, was paid £300 a year.

When we think about Lorimer's emphasis on creating a library for an educated ministry, it's interesting to note that the College was receiving books not just in English, but in Latin, Greek, French and German – all of which were seen as essential for ministers to be able to engage intelligently in conversation with educated congregations and to converse

reasonably about the issues of the day. This was in addition to books on the study of Hebrew, Syriac, and Aramaic, for ministers' Biblical studies. We even know specific titles, because in September 1845, Lorimer took out a full-page in the *Presbyterian Messenger* to list donations received for the library (p76). Maybe he intended it as a gesture of gratitude, or a spur to encourage further donations, or even as a preventative from acquiring duplicates – or maybe all of them!



Queen Square House in 1812

By 1854, when the College had been open ten years, the library had grown from 650 titles to approximately 1,500, thanks to these donations of money and books.

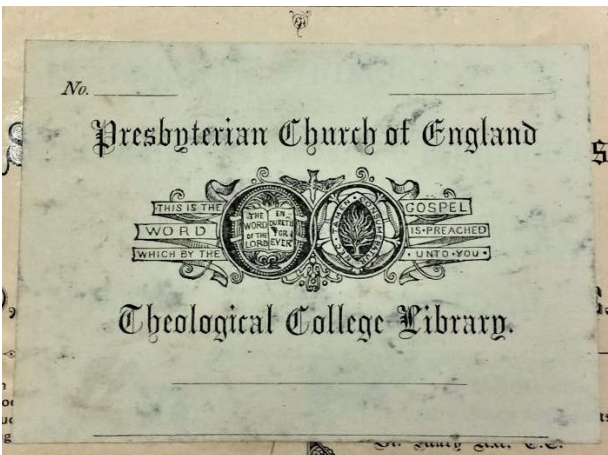
Ten years on again, in 1864, the College moved to Queen Square House, in Bloomsbury, to gain more space, and was based there until 1899. The 1877 Report of the College Committee noted that the building was on a 30 year lease, at a cost of £250 per year, and included 15 student bedrooms (students were offered residential rooms from 1859), lecture rooms, and room for a library space. This contemporary photograph shows what is probably the 'library space': a room with a work-table and bookcases, rather than anything on the scale of the Westminster library today.



WQ1/7/2 Interior of Queen Square House, with library bookcases

It's around this time that we see the first gift of an entire library collection, as well as donations of individual books: Daniel Robertson, Presbyterian and wealthy London banker,^{iv} left his library^v of 1,118 books in his will to the College in 1866. Interestingly, the library was listed with totals of books by subject, so we know that only 20% of Robertson's books were 'theological'; roughly another 20% were historical and biographical, 20% were poetry and fiction; and the rest were travel, classics, scientific, and 'miscellaneous' books.^{vi}

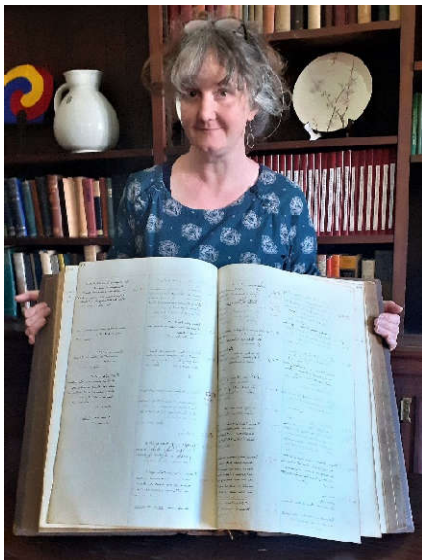
The Robertson bequest was followed in 1870 by the purchase of 2,950 volumes from the estate of the same Revd James Hamilton who had given the lectures in the 1840s, together with his portrait. The Committee Report to Synod 1870 described the College as being 'enriched with the books which were so long his loved companions' and which formed 'a pleasing and precious memorial'.^{vii}



The College bookplate, c.1870s

These personal libraries acquired by the College were proportionally enormous: in 1870, the main library comprised 2,700 volumes, but it stood alongside the 1,160 books in the Robertson Collection, and another 2,950 in the Hamilton Collection.

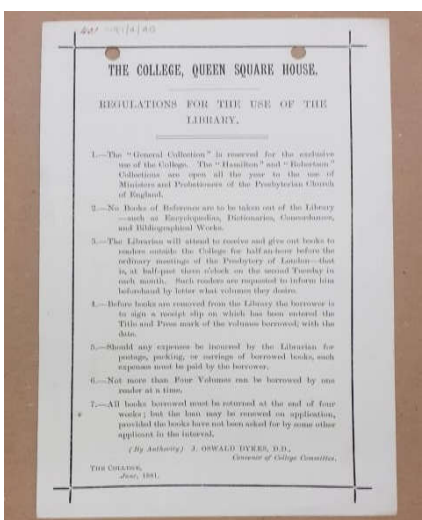
These new books acquired at this time show a bookplate with the College's crest – an open book, on the left, reading 'the Word of the Lord' – and the crest of the Presbyterian Church of England, showing, on the right, the burning bush of Exodus 3. It must have been seen as fitting both that a book is the symbol of the College, and that all library collections are marked with it.



The library catalogue of 1877

But no matter how generous the gifts, libraries need structured funding. Incredibly, it's not until the 1870s that the College Committee is recorded as requesting dedicated library funding for the first time, saying '...some moderate sum ought to be annually devoted to the preservation and increase of the College Library'.^{viii} They adopted a very practical suggestion – endorsed both by donors and the Committee! – that 'trifling and useless books' and 'unnecessary duplicates' be sold. This policy had the double reward of firstly, making more room – as the library became fuller – and secondly, allowing the money from the sales to be spent on 'necessary books of theology'.

In 1877, the first catalogue of the library was produced. It was hand-written, and, quite fittingly, is the largest book in the entire library and archive collections today – and probably the heaviest, too!



WQ1/4/40 Library Rules, 1881

In the 1880s, the Committee records the need to preserve denominational publications. Copies of all the Synod Records from 1836 onwards, plus the *Presbyterian Messenger* – the monthly magazine of the Church – were deposited with the College, and are still in the Rare Books collections today. And, with wider awareness, the Church also sent copies to the British Museum Library.

It was also made explicit in the library rules that the main collection was solely for the use of students, but that the Hamilton and Robertson Collections were also for the use of ministers and probationers of the church.

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, collections continued to be received from ministers and benefactors: Revd Charles Moir, Revd AJ Huie, Alexander Gillespie, Revd W Fraser, Revd Dr Thomas Robinson, Revd John Black, Revd Willis of Toronto, and Revd. Elmslie.



WA4/8 Smieton, the Librarian, 1900

But there is another significant development at this time. The College library begins with generous gifts of books, and equally generous gifts of money; but in the 1880s, we can add a third donation: the gift of time, given by the librarian.

In 1881, the first honorary librarian was appointed: 'Mr J G Smieton, who has kindly consented to undertake the duty as a labour of love to the Church'.^{ix} In addition to his main role as Bursar (1874-1901) and Secretary to the College Committee (until 1901), Smieton acted as Honorary Librarian during the 1880s and 1890s, and through the College's move to Cambridge in 1899, until his retirement in 1905, after 24 years of service.

There were 7,500 books in the library in 1886 - just five years later, in 1891, thanks to Smieton's work, the collection had increased to 9,500.^x

In 1894, the College celebrated its jubilee, and the number of books in the library had risen to 12,000.^{xi} And after fifty years, the need for a library – the need for an educated ministry – was still a point of key importance. The Jubilee Supplement of the College, in *The Presbyterian* of Nov 29th 1894, includes a speech given by Dr Dykes, then Principal, in which Dykes points out that 'the fathers of Puritan Presbyterianism, the divines of



WA4/5 Staff and students at the College at Queen Square, in the jubilee year of 1894



The library at Westminster College, Cambridge, in 1899 – before the books arrived! By William Butcher in the *Presbyterian Messenger*, 1899

the Westminster Assembly, were all of them University men' and asks if 'now [...] are we fallen on days that bid us care less than our fathers did for a learned ministry? Can we better afford than they to starve or neglect our College?'^{xii}

But by then, the library was so full that more accommodation was needed for the books. A building extension was proposed; but in that same year, the Committee was informed that Mrs Lewis and Mrs Gibson, two sisters in Cambridge, 'have offered to purchase a piece of ground in that city and present it to this Church as a site for College buildings' – and those new buildings in Cambridge would be able to contain the expanding library collections.

And so, after 55 years in London, and having trained 326 students,^{xiii} the College moved to Cambridge.

When, in October 1899, Westminster College opened its doors, the next chapter in the history of the library began. But in those 55 years in London, thanks to the generosity of the ministers, members, and Synods of the Church, and thanks to the academic staff, alumni, and supporters of the College, ten and a half thousand volumes^{xiv} had been acquired to form the heart of the new Cambridge library – for the training and education of the candidates for ministry in what was by then the Presbyterian Church of England.

Helen Weller, Archivist
2023

ⁱ A circular signed by Lorimer as Convenor of College Committee, informing readers of Synod's recommendation that a College be opened 'this winter', 5 Sep 1844 (WQ1/4/7); the College opened on November 5th 1844.

ⁱⁱ The *Presbyterian Messenger*, November 1846, p.97

ⁱⁱⁱ The *Presbyterian Messenger*, 1845, p10

^{iv} For more on Daniel Robertson, see <https://www.natwestgroup.com/heritage/people/daniel-robertson.html>

^v Report of the College Committee to the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1866, p33

^{vi} Report of the College Committee to the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1866, p33.

^{vii} Report of the College Committee to the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1870, p41.

^{viii} Report of the College Committee to the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1875, p79

^{ix} Report of the College Committee to the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1881, p423.

Smieton was also Secretary to the College Committee until 1900, and Honorary College Bursar until 1901.

^x Report of the College Committee to the General Synod of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1892, p156, gives Smieton's figures for numbers of books; see also p464

^{xi} Revd Alexander Jeffrey, in The Jubilee Supplement of the College, in *The Presbyterian*, Nov 29th 1894

^{xii} The Jubilee Supplement of the College, in *The Presbyterian*, Nov 29th 1894, p.6

^{xiii} *Westminster College Cambridge*, by Halliday Douglas (1900) gives the number of students who had trained at the College since it opened in 1844, 50 years earlier, as 326 (p37).

^{xiv} *Westminster College Cambridge*, by Halliday Douglas (1900) gives 10,600 volumes (p18).

This paper is based on a talk given to the United Reformed Church History Society and the Congregational Historical Society, 2023.