

A Forger and Thief plus The American West

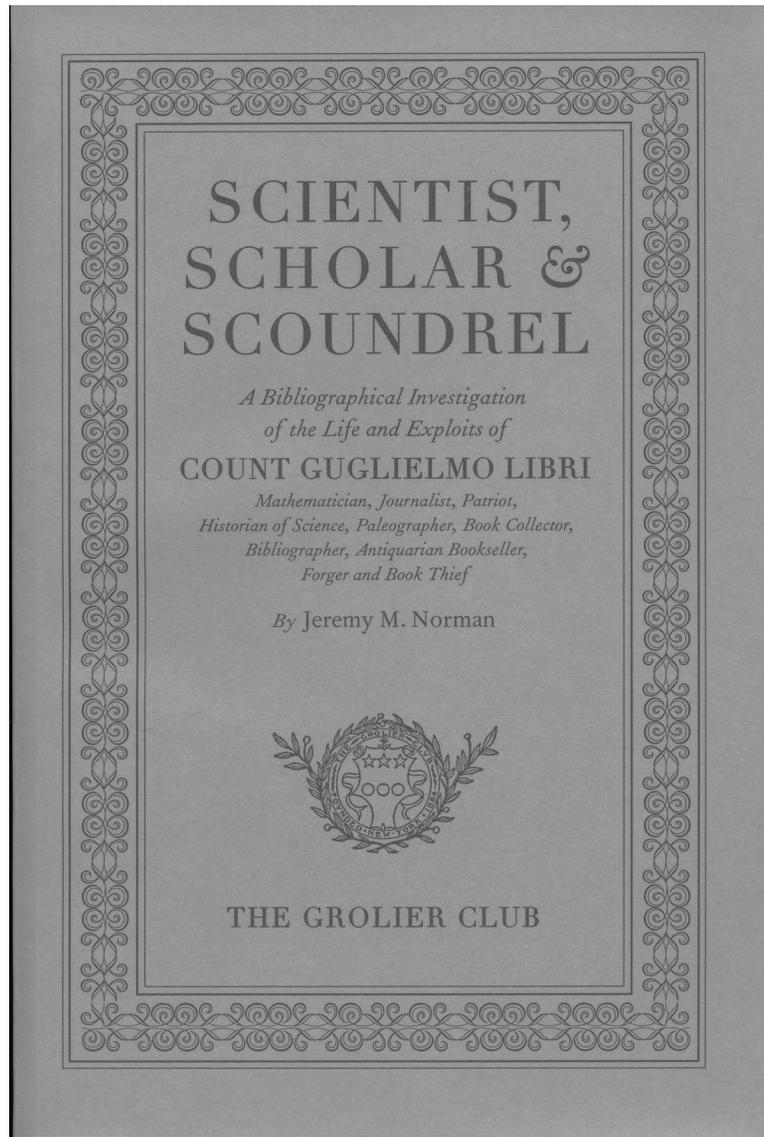
WILLIAM BUTTS

NORMAN, Jeremy M. *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.* New York: The Grolier Club, 2013. 8vo. Softbound. xxii, 176pp. Illustrations. \$35.00.

RENDELL, Kenneth W. *The Great American West: Pursuing the American Dream.* Atlanta: Whitman Publishing, 2013. Wide small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. v, 218pp. Extensive illustrations. \$29.95.

If the antics of the ne'er-do-wells explored in the past couple of issues left you wanting a shower, you might want to hold off. Jeremy Norman's impressive *Scientist, Scholar & Scoundrel* chronicles a book thief who stole on a scale so massive he makes all other thieves covered in this column look like Girl Scouts.

The crimes of Guglielmo Libri (that's right, Italian for *books*) are largely forgotten today, due in large part to Libri's crafty and prolific pamphleteering in his own defense against the many public accusations brought against him, an ongoing public debate in print known as the "Libri Affair." Libri knew if he and his



supporters could deluge his accusers with a barrage of countercharges and claims of political persecution he could muddy the waters and drown out the issue. “Villains play prominent roles in

literature, drama, and film,” notes Norman, a noted antiquarian bookseller and occasional publisher by profession. “...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.”

What differentiates Libri from Daniel Spiegelman and other book and document thieves who have inspired books is that Libri had a legitimate and brilliant career in mathematics and science. Born in Florence in 1802, Libri got his doctorate when most teens are graduating high school, was named professor at the University of Pisa when most are graduating from college and before long was publishing articles in leading scholarly journals and circulating among the leading minds in his field. Most important to his career as thief, he befriended important French political figures of his day (he fled Italy as a young man after taking part in political unrest there in 1831) and held influential positions in the library world. In the world of antiquarian books and manuscripts to which he felt helplessly drawn, Libri made valuable contributions—an irony that Norman relishes bringing out. “Libri made several very significant legitimate contributions to the development of rare book and manuscript collecting in the mid-nineteenth century,” he remarks.

In 1859 he became the first to write a long explanatory introduction to an auction catalogue of manuscripts in England... and this catalogue was also the first English auction catalogue of books or manuscripts to be extensively illustrated. As evidenced in his auction catalogue of 1861... Libri was the first great pioneer in promoting and selling rare books and manuscripts in the history of science, a field that did not develop as a bookseller's specialty until the twentieth century.... Libri also pioneered in promoting early bookbindings as objects of art at a time when rebinding of early books was in fashion.... Libri may have been the first, or one of the first, to discuss the possibilities and problems of writing a history of the book as a physical object.

How ironic, too, that Libri “was a pioneering dealer in autographs and manuscripts”—his 1835 autograph auctions being among the earliest. This at a time when Pierre Jules Fontaine’s *Manuel de l'amateur d'autographes* (“the first comprehensive guide

to collecting autographs”) was hot off the press and autograph collecting was just coming into its own. Unfortunately, “Later... investigators for the prosecution, proved that many, perhaps thousands, of the autographs that Libri sold were stolen.”

Libri contributed to “the first government-sponsored union catalogue of manuscripts for a country,” compiling the Seminary of Autun catalogue in 1846. But once again Libri managed to mix legitimacy with larceny: He used this privileged access as an opportunity to steal large numbers of uncatalogued manuscripts, knowing that once their existence and whereabouts were recorded it would be far easier to trace stolen documents.

Readers of *Scientist, Scholar & Scoundrel* will also be treated to Norman’s informative, thorough survey of the history of union catalogues and of manuscript cataloguing practices—ground-breaking works such as Bernard de Montfaucon’s 1739 *Bibliotheca bibliothecarum manuscriptorum nova*, “A catalogue of manuscripts collections in France and Italy... this 1,669-page work was the first attempt at a continent-wide catalogue of manuscripts. It remained useful and was cited by scholars and bibliographers of early manuscripts for more than 100 years.” We also learn of the next union catalogue a century later, Gustav Haenel’s 1830 *Catalogi librorum manuscriptorum*—which miscreants such as Libri used as a road map of what to steal from whom.

Norman’s survey also notes the rise of the antiquarian book trade in early 19th century France and the literature that arose to help dealers, collectors and librarians. In 1810 came bibliopole Jacques-Charles Brunet’s holy triple decker *Manuel du libraire et de l’amateur de livres*, which he reissued and expanded for the next half century. “Sales of the work were so profitable that Brunet spent most of his career compiling the reference work instead of selling books himself... it provided bibliographical, scholarly, and price information in one convenient, authoritative reference that was, and often remains, invaluable for antiquarian booksellers, collectors, bibliographers, and librarians”—though I confess my treasured leatherbound set gets little use.

Library science hadn’t been born yet at this time. Cataloguing procedures were idiosyncratic at best and security non-existent, both factors making thefts on the scale of Libri relatively easy. It wasn’t until 1839 that Leopold Auguste Constantin’s *Bibliothecon-*

omie made a preliminary stab at standardizing the cataloguing of new and old books, a complex subject continued by the British Museum’s Antonio Panizzi in his slim 1841 *Rules for the Compilation of the Catalogue*. The great irony is that “no other book thief ever made so many constructive and valuable contributions to book collecting, bookselling, and bibliography,” writes Norman, “and, after the Libri Affair... no individual would ever again steal so many rare books and manuscripts of the highest possible value, from so many institutions, and over so many years, with virtual impunity.”

Scientist, Scholar & Scoundrel differs from most exhibition catalogues from the first of its 108 items. Your garden variety catalogue lists and describes each item chronologically or occasionally alphabetically, often beginning with a timetable of the subject’s life. Norman does this too, but interjects often-lengthy commentary placing the item in the context of the subject’s life—effectively exploiting the exhibit format to create a biography of Libri built around the artifacts. For me this lends great *immediacy* to Libri’s complex and confusing life. We all know how autographs and manuscripts bring history to life and make the distant past seem present. Norman takes full advantage of this, and the result brings this obscure academic whose public brouhaha took place mostly in French to life for an American audience.

Documents allow Norman to demonstrate Libri’s truly meteoric career in science and mathematics at a tender age. They also allow him to demonstrate his equally meteoric career in rare books and manuscripts—how at a young age “He was recognized as the leading authority in France on manuscripts concerning the history of science, and a leading supplier of autographs on many subjects.” By the time Libri published his “monumental” 4-volume *Histoire des sciences mathématiques en Italie* (Paris, 1838-41)—“one of the pioneering histories of science”—he was buying and stealing autographs and books in Italy and France in earnest—and in bulk. A great many illustrations in *Scientist, Scholar & Scoundrel* depict Libri’s auction catalogues. In studying their contents Norman is able to unravel and show the vast network of libraries from which Libri liberated many a priceless rarity—important letters and manuscripts from figures of the

stature of Galileo, Michelangelo, da Vinci, to cite but a few. It seems unthinkable today that such a steady stream of this caliber of material from a young professor of average means should go unquestioned. Libri's first auction catalogue of 1847 contained 3,025 lots and was conducted over 30 evenings. Norman brings out the fraudulent nature of some of his offerings—rare books that had been “perfected” by adding missing leaves, even texts tampered with to make them desirable rare “variants” and other deceptive “sophistications.”

In the context of this detective work Norman is also able to show the many deceptions Libri perpetrated to “improve” his wares and mask their library origin. When he commandeered a shockingly pristine 1496 edition of Theocritus printed by Aldus Manutius from a sleepy rural French library, for instance, he actually located and purchased a cheap inferior copy and substituted it—not his usual procedure of outright theft. Other times he would separate manuscripts and repackage them under different titles to make tracing more difficult. He would have bookbinders rebind ancient volumes using old materials in order to pass them off as far more valuable medieval bindings. He employed many a bookbinder to wash and rebind rare books to remove library markings. “One of Libri's favorite ploys was to provide manuscripts stolen from French libraries with false Italian provenances,” Norman also notes, “as he knew all too well how little French experts knew about the holdings of Italian libraries. Libri regularly hired forgers to erase, alter, add or forge *ex libris*.”

Eventually some of the rumors circulating about Libri turned into formal charges brought against him. Libri fled to England, but was forced to leave behind thousands of items, many of which would be proven to be stolen. He was found guilty and convicted in absentia. Plenty of museum-quality material came with him, though, so he continued merrily, his conviction surprisingly unnoticed—as if it didn't cross the English Channel. Numerous illustrations depict pamphlets, usually in French, attacking Libri for thievery and Libri's masterful pamphlet replies persuasively claiming political persecution and accusing French librarians (often justifiably) of mismanagement and incompetence. This flurry continued for years—as did Libri's London auctions of rare books and manuscripts. Libri returned

to Italy with his still-large holdings of stolen material in 1869, confident Italy would not extradite him to France, but he died there a few months later, having never admitted any guilt nor served one day in prison. It's estimated he stole approximately 30,000 rare books and 2,000 rare manuscripts.

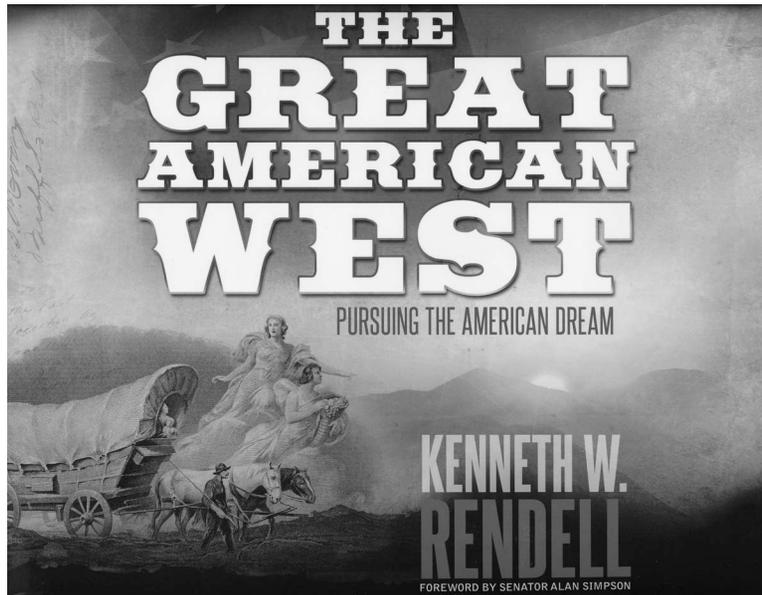
Scientist, Scholar & Scoundrel is one of the most unusual and illuminating exhibition-based exposés of recent years. It's well written and, like all Grolier Club publications, well made and well illustrated. Jeremy Norman should be commended for bringing this fascinating if neglected book and autograph crime to light and to life.

The American West

Ken Rendell's *The Great American West: Pursuing the American Dream* reminds me of his *World War II: Saving the Reality—A Collector's Vault*, reviewed in this column in the Fall 2009 issue. That stunning coffee table book was chock full of sublime color illustrations and numerous high-quality facsimiles of actual documents and paper items—not a pop-up book, but the equivalent of a pop-up book for adults. *The Great American West* doesn't feature these unusual facsimiles, but in sheer beauty, quality and extent of illustrations it rivals that earlier title. As different as is the subject matter, I would almost consider these companion volumes.

The Great American West: Pursuing the American Dream is very much a collector's book, using not only autographs and other paper but all manner of three-dimensional artifacts (coins, clothing, maps, weapons, prints, pamphlets, you name it) to illustrate the great American West in its broadest sense. Some may assume “Wild West” or “Old West” by the title. That specific era—with Pat Garrett, Jesse James, “Wild Bill” Hickok and that whole crew—is incredibly well represented here, to be sure, but Rendell uses the phrase “American West” in its true and proper sense. He opens in the 16th century and Hernando Cortez, the Aztecs and the earliest explorers of the East coast before moving on to the early Virginia and Florida settlements, then on to the late 18th century and such figures as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett.

Each of *The Great American West's* 21 chapters are relatively brief, ranging in length from a half dozen pages to the upper



teens—bite size chunks that make for good piecemeal reading. Every chapter opens with a several-sentence synopsis, which the accompanying text then elaborates in Rendell's tight, informative prose. Every chapter also includes a small, boxed "For the Collector and Historian" sidebar—a few sentences from Rendell (the autograph dealer) commenting on the scarcity of autograph material in that particular chapter, in general terms rather than dollars and cents. Thus the "Texas" chapter notes:

The history of Texas has always been of great interest to both private and institutional collectors. Documents signed by Stephen Austin and Sam Houston can be found without difficulty, but William Barret Travis, who commanded the forces at the Alamo, is very rare. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna is frequently available. Anything concerning the Alamo is very rare and in great demand. The many books published during the early years of Texas's history are relatively inexpensive.

In "The Mormons" chapter, Rendell remarks:

The history and personalities of the Mormon church have always been avidly collected, beginning with the church itself. Letters by pioneers on the Mormon Trail are rarely seen on the market. Anything signed by Joseph Smith is very rare and in great demand. Letters and documents signed by Brigham Young, because of his long life span and the positions he held, are much more commonly available. Coins and currency are both very rare but occasionally available. First editions of The Book of Mormon are both rare and expensive, other books much less so.

Collectors in particular will find these concise offhand observations useful.

I'd like to maintain that the documents are the stars of *The Great American West*, but that would be a "stretcher," to quote Mark Twain. Such a breadth of autograph exemplars in one work, ranging from Hernando Cortez to Annie Oakley, is a rare commodity indeed, and any serious collector in this broad field will want to add this to the too-little shelf of reference works focused on this area. Yet it's difficult to ignore some of the most breathtaking Native American attire you've ever seen, outstanding firearms and tomahawks, glorious Indian Peace Medals, rare books and pamphlets, delicately hand-colored maps.... Though autograph-centered, *The Great American West* is a visual feast no matter where your artifact interests lie.

Rendell's *The Great American West: Pursuing the American Dream* is both an inspiring read to anyone enamored with the truth and legend of our ever-moving Western border and a useful reference for autograph collectors. Sure, handwriting samples of some of the figures pictured here appear in many an autograph reference work—Sam Houston, Geronimo, George A. Custer, Buffalo Bill Cody, Frederic Remington, etc.—while you'd be hard pressed to find reliable exemplars of a great many others, especially of the less-than-household name variety—Ben Holladay, Thomas Bullock, Jim Bridger, George Donner, Alexander Mackenzie, Jedediah Smith, countless others.

Here's a first: I would normally never comment on an author's photograph in a book—until now. The portrait of Rendell in the "About the Author" page at the rear of this book shows him standing alongside an Old West stagecoach—in what I'm told is

his *house*. (True, Ken?) Given a full-page illustration elsewhere in this book, this “Classic Concord Western” stagecoach is one of “approximately 15 Western Concord stagecoaches surviving, [and] one of the few that has not been restored.” *I like it*. It shows an author who’s hardcore about his subject—precisely what you want in a book like this wonderfully enjoyable and informative survey.

Contributions Sought For *Manuscripts*

Members of The Manuscript Society are invited to contribute to the Society’s quarterly journal, *Manuscripts*. Articles about unusual documents, collections, or personal experiences in acquiring manuscripts would be appropriate topics. Or you could choose to write on a more general issue such as manuscript preservation, security, insurance, or some particular aspect of collecting. Articles with good possibilities for illustration are given preference. The editor suggests that you write a brief letter outlining your ideas before submitting an article.

Correspondence should be sent to: David R. Chesnutt, Manuscripts Editor, 941 Leycester Drive, Baton Rouge, LA 70808. Email: dchesnutt@earthlink.net