

New Twist on the Book That Changed Everything

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DAVIS, Margaret Leslie. *The Lost Gutenberg: The Astounding Story of One Book's Five-Hundred-Year Odyssey.* New York: TarcherPerigee, 2019. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 294pp. Illustrations. \$27.00.

You can't apply any adjective to the book that changed manuscript-making more than any other – the Gutenberg Bible, the first book printed with moveable type, circa 1450 – that hasn't been used to exhaustion already: pioneering, groundbreaking, world-altering, game-changing. . . . But I never expected to pick up so much about the garish uselessness of uber-wealthy 19th century British landed gentry, the Teapot Dome scandal, how to make Worcestershire Sauce and other random avenues in a book about the Gutenberg Bible, so Margaret Leslie Davis' *The Lost Gutenberg: The Astounding Story of One Book's Fine-Hundred-Year Odyssey* took me by surprise. It's an oddity in a field populated largely by intensely in-depth typographical and publishing studies.

The Lost Gutenberg is a pleasant popular account on a topic normally the domain of serious scholarly journals of tiny circulation. It has a split personality, too, the second half leading off in a direction that this reviewer never expected. Fewer than fifty copies of this most legendary of all books survive, and Davis takes

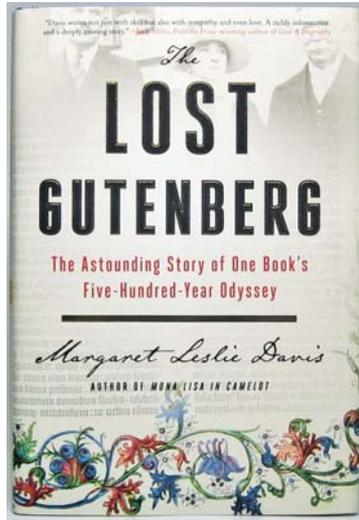
the unorthodox approach of unraveling the ownership history of one specific and especially pristine copy known simply as Number 45.

Davis wisely opens *The Lost Gutenberg* in media res with a poignant page turner: The remarkable, touching scene when aging society matron Estelle Doheny opens a wooden crate at her posh L.A. mansion in 1950 to reveal the treasure she's been chasing for several decades. Those few gathered for the occasion are horrified that "The precious book has been enclosed without padding, wrapped in thin cardboard and then in dark corrugated paper," though it survived the trip from London unscathed. Doheny enjoys it more by touch than sight, as "A hemorrhage in one eye and glaucoma in the other have left Estelle almost completely blind at the age of seventy-five." She has bought one of the world's great treasures for the bargain price of \$72,000, a paltry \$695,000 in today's dollars adjusted for inflation.

While I find *The Lost Gutenberg* enjoyable and entertaining, it's with reservations. The title, for instance, is sensationalistic marketing claptrap. Number 45 is no more *lost* than most Gutenberg Bibles – most 550-plus year-old volumes have hazy, sketchy histories. I feel cheated that (to cite its subtitle) "One Book's Five-Hundred-Year Odyssey" is actually 183 years – Davis is able to trace its ownership back four owners, the first in 1836. (Which reminds me that the first home my wife and I bought in our small historic town was built in 1848 and in 1993 we became only its fourth owner.) One can't fault Davis that the ownership of Number 45 is untraceable prior to 1836, but the subtitle suggests that this copy is traced back to its printing. That's nowhere near the case – its first 350-plus years in existence remain a mystery.

Davis takes us through the four ownerships ably, though. First comes Archibald Acheson, 3rd Earl of Gosford, a Northern Irish aristocrat "whose acquisitions fill shelves that reach a fifty-foot ceiling" but who "has a curious lack of regard for the Gutenberg Bible." Her depiction of the fads and foibles of

England's dissipated upper crust is memorable: "Britain's men of means are buying rare books for sport, going after them with the unhinged intensity that the Dutch once aimed at tulip bulbs. They measure themselves by the size of their libraries, spawning a fashion for ever-bigger, ever-more-beautiful collections and rooms to house them.... They regard books as trophies. Status symbols. Decor." Eventually Gosford embarks on an "all-consuming, fortune-guzzling"



folly of a castle of epic proportions. Davis chronicles his sad life of "crippling debt" and out of control spending, ending in his death at age 57. His teenage son becomes the 4th Earl, who lives solely for "gambling, heavy drinking, and mingling with London's Royals" and in 1884 is forced to auction off his father's library. Gosford's price Shakespeare First Folio fetches £470 while to everyone's surprise his neglected Gutenberg Bible realizes £500.

Number 45's second owner is another ludicrously wealthy aristocrat, Lord William Tysson-Amherst. Here the portrayal of German-born dealer Bernard Quaritch is far from flattering. He plays his blueblood client like a cheap fiddle, humbling himself shamelessly to keep the cash flowing. Writes Davis, "he jockeys for Amherst's attention and urges him to think about the importance of the books he seeks, favoring significance over cost as he builds his collection. The dealer himself is paying the highest prices for the finest volumes as major libraries come to market, and he needs clients who can support his high-rolling business strategy...." At least Number 45's new owner "revels in it" as much as Gosford "forgot it." He too suffers financial ruin that forces the sale of Number 45 in 1908 – now at £2,050.

With the 20th century Number 45 departs the aristocracy forever. Third owner Charles William Dyson Perrins was heir to the Lea & Perrins Worcestershire Sauce empire as well as a famed if money-sucking porcelain business. His chemist grandfather accidentally discovered when attempting to recreate an Indian sauce that the “revolting” concoction transformed into “something delectable” if ignored for a few months. By 1947, though, after many years of reversals and struggling nobly to keep his Chinese porcelain factory afloat, Perrins auctioned off his collection of early printed books.

The name Estelle Doheny is well known to any serious bibliophile, if only because of the well-publicized auction of her book collection in 1987-89 – the elaborate multi-volume Christie’s auction catalogues rest on a shelf behind me as I write this. But I knew nothing of her rags-to-riches story. Marrying older oil magnate Edward L. Doheny at age 25 in 1900 brought this telephone operator into a world of privilege, with homes from coast to coast. The Teapot Dome scandal brought this crashing down in the early 1920s and left Edward a broken man, though you wouldn’t know it during the tough Depression years as Estelle spent on average \$1000 per week on books from her Hollywood mansion. After Edward’s death in 1935 her spending only increased, for “She wants to preserve the best of the past, volumes that represent the first appearances in print of great contributions to history and literature.” When she died in 1958 her books went by bequest to the Doheny Memorial Library at St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo, a library she founded (and funded) in 1940 to honor Edward’s deceased son.

End of story? Far from it. Fate has two surprises in store for the much-traveled Gutenberg Bible seemingly safely ensconced for eternity in an educational institution. Not one but two O. Henry surprise endings await Number 45, but rather than give spoiler alerts I’ll keep my comments annoyingly, cryptically brief.

Enter the Cyclotron – how’s that for a cheesy 1950s sci-fi film title. State-of-the-art nuclear physics is the last direction I thought

the Gutenberg bible would take, but now “Number 45, of all the Gutenbergs in the world, comes to be the first significant subject of pioneering research that draws a physicist, a historian, a librarian, and the great book itself to the proton beam of a cyclotron.” On July 26, 1982, Biblical research truly enters the nuclear age when permission is given for Number 45 to undergo cyclotron testing. Shockingly, “A team of scientist/engineers and a book scholar used the same machine that first isolated plutonium for the atomic bomb to solve the fine-hundred-year-old mysteries surrounding the Gutenberg Bible and the origins of modern printing.” Among other findings, the nuclear accelerator reveals the high copper and lead content of Gutenberg’s ink, which explains why it has remained jet black after five centuries instead of fading to brown. Variations on each page show that “Gutenberg must have mixed up a new batch [of ink] nearly every day... the team can spot which pages have chemically matching ink, and surmise that they were printed at the same time. That gives them an unexpectedly detailed sense of the Bible’s production process.” It’s extraordinary the number of discoveries this scientific analysis made about Gutenberg’s printing methods – including the bombshell that “A previously undetected leaf of Estelle’s Bible, 134, had been cut out and replaced, likely in the print shop.”

The Lost Gutenberg closes out with the Roman Catholic Los Angeles archdiocese’s shocking betrayal of the stipulations of Estelle Doheny’s will. They auctioned off her treasured library over the course of two years and made a breathtaking windfall of \$37.8 million, double what they expected. A company in Tokyo acquired it for a record-setting \$5.4 million – “seventy-five times what Estelle had paid for it in 1950.”

Davis writes a brisk, breezy style that typifies many of the journalistic accounts reviewed in this column over the years – histories on topics usually the domain of the academic presented in a fashion to appeal to the lay person. This is all fine and well – a good thing, to be sure – but sometimes it becomes apparent

the writer is not a historian in the field and the level of research is thin. Errors creep in. Davis mentions, for example, that in 1926 the Library of Congress purchases Otto Vollbehrr's Gutenberg Bible and that "President William Howard Taft makes the purchase official, signing the authorization into law." Pretty good trick, that, since Taft had left office 13 years earlier and Calvin Coolidge was president at the time. Elsewhere Davis notes that in 1987 "John Fleming, a well-known New York dealer who had appraised Estelle Doheny's collection in the 1970s with his mentor, A.S.W. Rosenbach, declares that the auction will be 'the greatest book and manuscript sale of the last half century.'" Rosenbach couldn't have appraised the collection with his nephew in the 1970s – he'd been dead for 35 years. She also remarks that "There on the upper left corner of the front pastedown page are the distinctive signatures of Number 45's owners, the last one written in ballpoint pen." An examination of the digitized online version clearly shows Doheny's bold signature in fountain pen ink, not ballpoint. Sometimes Gutenberg is referred to as "Johann," sometimes as "Johannes." All of these discrepancies should have been caught and corrected in any careful line editing process, something that *The Lost Gutenberg* apparently never underwent.

Despite these issues, despite some reservations, *The Lost Gutenberg* is nevertheless a fascinating foray into the oldest and most venerated of printed books and a fun exploration of one copy's colorful journey.