

British Columbia's First Medieval Manuscript

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NONE OF THE standard authorities record any medieval western manuscripts in libraries in British Columbia. It is therefore both interesting and significant to be able to record the acquisition of the first such manuscript, a copy of Bartholomeus Anglicus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, by the University of Victoria.

The *De Proprietatibus Rerum* was probably the most influential of the medieval encyclopedias. Compiled by an English Franciscan resident in France, it was probably completed *circa* 1240. The work systematized and reduced to a logical and accessible order a vast body of medieval knowledge and lore, organized into nineteen books. Each book dealt with a distinct aspect of the universe, ranging from God and his angels (Books One and Two), to the physical aspects of man's being (Books Four to Seven), to various physical aspects of the earth itself (explored in Books Fourteen to Nineteen). Each book is in its turn subdivided into chapters, each one dealing with a distinct element in each category.

The influence of this comprehensive and systematic work was pervasive and wide ranging. The number of surviving manuscripts is well in excess of a hundred and the work was widely translated into European vernaculars: Italian, French, Provençal, Spanish, Dutch and English. The popularity of the work in medieval England is particularly striking. It was translated into English by John Trevisa in 1398-9. And there are indications that many contemporaries owned copies, as well as considerable evidence of the literary influence of the work.

This popularity continued into the Renaissance. There are numerous printed editions. And there is much evidence to suggest the work's influence upon Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

The University of Victoria has clearly acquired a copy of a significant medieval work. The manuscript is apparently of French

provenance, of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, written on vellum in a small, but very clear and well formed book hand. It is a small copy (145 x 205 cm.), and originally consisted of eighty-one leaves bound together in eight gatherings (1¹⁰, 2-6¹², 7¹⁶, 8³). Unfortunately, the first two gatherings are now imperfect: the first has lost its first nine leaves, and the second its middle four leaves (i.e. there is a gap following f. 14 of the present text). There is very little decoration. Rubrics and headings are in red; and the initial letter of each chapter is either red or blue. This is the extent of the adornment. The copy was clearly created to be read, not to be the medieval equivalent of an expensive decorative coffee-table book.

The content of the manuscript is of particular interest. It does not present a complete text of Bartholomeus. Rather, it contains selections from particular books. In its present, somewhat imperfect state, the manuscript includes selections from Books Three to Six inclusive, Books Eight to Fourteen inclusive, and Books Sixteen to Eighteen inclusive. And within particular books the material is usually rigorously selective. Such a selected text, whilst not unique, is not particularly common among surviving manuscripts of the *De Proprietatibus Rerum*. Clearly the intention of the scribe was to produce a compact, "concise" version of Bartholomeus, upon principles which are no longer clear.

The University of Victoria has clearly acquired a distinctive manuscript of an highly influential medieval text. It was obtained in the summer of 1974 from a private library in England for \$2000. It is at present housed in the Special Collections Division of McPherson Library, University of Victoria, where it is available for examination by all accredited scholars and librarians.