

# Why Join the Friends of Edinburgh University Library?

By Joyce Caplan and Peter Freshwater

*Lady Caplan is the President, and Mr Freshwater the Honorary Secretary, of the Friends of Edinburgh University Library*

Edinburgh University Library is, quite simply, unique. It is older than the University which it now serves, and whose name it bears, and has been in continuous use for nearly 440 years. It is the oldest post-Reformation university library in Scotland and the UK. It is also the oldest civic university library in Scotland and the UK. It was founded by a two-stage benefaction: the bequest in 1580 by the Edinburgh lawyer Clement Litill of 280 books to the City of Edinburgh, who transferred it in 1584 to the newly established College of King James, which was to become the Tounis College and later still the University of Edinburgh. The Library was soon augmented by more donated collections, many from early graduates, and notably by William Drummond of Hawthornden, 'the greatest Scots poet of his time', who presented some 1,400 books from his own library between 1624 and 1636, and the Reverend James Nairn, minister at Holyrood and later of Wemyss, Fife who bequeathed his collection of 1,838 books in 1678.

The Library began, and was established, by benefactions. For its first 130 years, it continued to depend on benefactions – donations and bequests in kind and in coin, matriculation and graduation fees, and occasional deposits – for the acquisition of more books for its collections. These sources were augmented by the new *Copyright Act 1710* which allowed the University to claim one copy of any book printed in the UK and Ireland, and continued until the *Copyright Act 1836*, when this facility was replaced by, and subsumed in, an annual government grant to the University.

However, the Library continued to enjoy benefactions for many of its major acquisitions. Most magnificent of all is the David Laing Collection (1878), the depths and extent of which are still being plumbed. The network of Library benefactors was eventually brought together by the inauguration in 1962 of the Friends of Edinburgh University Library, and the later introduction of an online Gallery of Benefactors (<http://www.docs.is.ed.ac.uk/docs/lib-archive/bgallery/Gallery/index.html>), now complemented by the publication of Joseph Marshall's comprehensive *Directory of Collections* (2016).

The importance of the Friends of EUL is that they are here, are active, and are dedicated to putting the Library first. They are able to channel funds, including specific bequests, towards the purchase of important and identified books, manuscripts and, occasionally, equipment such as display cases that enhance and help to publicise the Library and its collections. They work independently of the Library Committee and are therefore able, on the advice of the Head of Library Collections, to acquire important items for collections that are not currently used for research and teaching, but which need to be maintained as and when the opportunities arise. Important acquisitions over the years have included such diverse subjects as diaries and letters of Edinburgh-trained missionaries abroad; 17<sup>th</sup> century correspondence on the manufacture of

soap from herrings; the first publication, in a very limited (1986) edition, of Andrew Jackson Grayson's *Birds of the Pacific Slope* (1853-1869); a complete set of the 75 volumes of *Picture Post*, a major photographic archive of British society from 1938 to 1957; a rare treatise on bullsperm for the Veterinary Library; the only surviving copy of the plans and photographs compiled to illustrate the *Edinburgh Boundaries Extension and Tramways Bill 1920*; and 20 pictorial boards by Erno Goldfinger and Ursula Blackwell on *Planning your Neighbourhood for Home, for Work, for Play* (1944). Details of the Friends' most recent acquisitions can be found on their website at <https://friendsofeul.wordpress.com>

That the Friends are able and prepared to do this provides the basis for major partnership funding for the purchase of major Library research resources and collections. These have included the second Halliwell-Phillipps Collection of Elizabethan, Jacobean and Restoration drama in 1964; literary papers of 20<sup>th</sup> century Scottish writers such as Hugh MacDiarmid, Norman MacCaig and George Mackay Brown; and most recently, important early editions of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, the one on which Shakespeare is known to have drawn, and of *The Works of Ben Jonson* (1640) contemporarily and extensively annotated with manuscript stage directions. The acquisition of these last two items has confirmed Edinburgh's position in the premier league of libraries on 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century literature. The significance of the Friends' contributions to this purchase was lauded in the national press.

FEUL is always glad to welcome new members to help continue its work. In return for modest subscriptions (currently £20 p.a. for adults, £35 for two people at the same address, £10 p.a. for students; life memberships are also available), members are made aware that they are supporting the Library and its collections; they can use all sections of the Library for reference and apply for borrowers' cards; they are encouraged to attend Friends' events, including talks by local and visiting scholars on aspects of the Library and its collections, visits to other local libraries and collections of interest, and private views of Library exhibitions. They receive discounts on Library publications, and receive the Friends' full-colour magazine *The Piper* twice a year ('The Library' includes the Main Library in George Square, and the Edinburgh College of Art, Law, Moray House, New College, Murray (at King's Buildings), Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, School of Scottish Studies, Lady Smith of Kelvin (at The Bush), and Western General Hospital Libraries).

Having read this, do come and join us. Email us at [friendsofeul@ed.ac.uk](mailto:friendsofeul@ed.ac.uk) or write to:  
Ms Alason Roberts (Administrator), Friends of Edinburgh University Library, Edinburgh University Library, George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LJ.

We look forward very much to meeting you.