

Archbishop Piers's Polyglots: Two Unrecorded Elizabethan Book Labels in Oxford Libraries

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SUMMARY

Two previously unrecorded printed book labels reveal that Oxford-born John Piers (d. 1594) gave copies of Christophe Plantin's Polyglot Bible to the libraries of Christ Church and Balliol shortly after his elevation to the archbishopric of York in 1589. The labels are interesting in their own right from a purely bibliographical point of view. They also provide firm evidence of the common provenance of the Christ Church and Balliol copies of the Polyglot, and cast new light on the history of both institutions, and the nature of book donations to Oxford libraries in the 16th century.

At least thirteen different bookplates have been used at Christ Church since the foundation of the library in about 1562.¹ There are also many early book labels. Book labels fulfil much the same function as bookplates, but unlike bookplates they are not produced in a rolling press from an engraved plate, but printed in an ordinary letterpress with type, and sometimes decorated with type ornaments. Typically book labels record either the name of an individual owner, or more frequently with early examples, the gift of a book to a library. Like bookplates they have a two-fold interest: the first purely bibliographical and the second as a source of information on the provenance of individual books.

Most of the book labels at Christ Church have been produced since the 18th century, but in the course of recent re-cataloguing of 16th- and 17th-century books a previously unknown 16th-century book label has come to light. It is particularly interesting because it records the donation by a powerful and influential Oxford man of one of the most famous products of the 16th-century press. The donor was Archbishop John Piers of York (d.1594), and his gift was a copy of Christophe Plantin's Polyglot Bible, which he presented to Christ Church in 1589.²

The label is not listed in the lengthy entry for bookplates in the standard *Short Title Catalogue* of English books printed from 1475 to 1640, and is not included in Brian North Lee's 1976 bibliography of dated early English book labels.³ It is of considerable bibliographical interest, since only about half a dozen earlier dated labels have yet been recorded in England, and only one in Oxford, which is in the library at Brasenose.⁴ It also provides significant information about the history of the Christ Church library; and since the

¹ E.R.J. Gambier Howe, *Franks Bequest: Catalogue of British and American book plates bequeathed to the Trustees of the British Museum by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks* (1903-4).

² Oxf., Christ Church Library, MC.1-1-MC.1.6: *Biblia sacra Hebraice, Chaldaice, Graece, & Latine* (Christoph. Plantinus excud. Antuerpiae, [1568-1572]).

³ A.W. Pollard and G.R. Redgrave, revised by W.A. Jackson, F.S. Ferguson and K.F. Panzer, *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland, and of the English books printed abroad 1475-1640* (1976-91); B. North Lee, *Early Printed Book Labels: a Catalogue of Dated Personal Labels and Gift Labels printed in Britain to the Year 1760* (1976).

⁴ North Lee, *Early Printed Book Labels*, 1-6. The Brasenose label (catalogue no. 6) is dated 1588, and records the gift of another copy of the Plantin Polyglot Bible by Richard Warren, admitted as a commoner of the college in 1554. North Lee's bibliography makes no claim to be completely comprehensive, but is certainly the most extensive survey of the subject yet published.



Fig. 1. John Piers, Archbishop of York: an anonymous 16th-century portrait (Christ Church Picture Gallery LP 36; by kind permission of the Governing Body of Christ Church, Oxford).

library Benefactors' Book starts only in 1614, and detailed accounts of expenditure begin as late as 1712, physical evidence surviving in the books often provides the only evidence of the early history of the collections. The early inscriptions were studied by N.R. Ker, who published a magisterial account of books at Christ Church in the reign of Elizabeth I, based to some extent on the extensive, though sometimes wayward, researches of W.G. Hiscock, successively Assistant and Deputy Librarian at Christ Church from 1928 to 1962.⁵ But surprisingly, both Hiscock and Ker seem to have missed John Piers's gift label. There are a variety of reasons why it has escaped attention, but the main one is undoubtedly that the book has been shelved with the library's extensive collection of oriental books since the present building opened in the middle of the 18th century. These books have always been poorly catalogued and have been little studied; indeed the Christ Church Plantin Polyglot is omitted entirely from the current library catalogue, and for that reason was not included in the collaborative Oxford Intercollegiate Catalogue launched in 1929.

John Piers had close connections with Oxford. He was a local man, born just over the river at South Hinksey, according to Anthony Wood of 'plebeian but sufficient parents'.⁶ He spent much of his life in the university, first at Magdalen, where he became a Demy in 1542, and a Fellow in 1546, then a Senior Student at Christ Church from 1547-8 before returning to Magdalen as a Fellow, where he remained until 1567. After three years away from Oxford, he was elected master of Balliol (1570), only to relinquish this after less than a year to become dean of Christ Church (1571), which he held *in commendam* with the deaneries of Chester (1567) and Salisbury (1571). This impressive progress up the ladder of preferment eventually led him to the episcopal bench, and saw him appointed first to the see of Rochester (1576), then to Salisbury (1577), and finally to York (1589). His worldly success was plainly due to his loyal support of the Elizabethan settlement: he showed himself an enemy of the old religion at Salisbury in the 1570s, and an opponent of would-be innovators at Oxford a decade or so later. As the Queen's Lord Almoner, he preached at the service of thanksgiving for the defeat of the Armada at St. Paul's in 1588, and was described by Wood (apparently paraphrasing William Camden) as 'a great and modest Theologist'.⁷

Piers gave the Polyglot Bible during the first year of his short tenure of the archbishopric of York. He was not the first former dean to remember Christ Church library later in life: the deprived Puritan dean Thomas Sampson (1561-4) gave a newly-published volume of the general councils of the Church in 1567,⁸ and Thomas Godwyn (1565-7), bishop of Bath and Wells, a volume of the historian Guicciardini at some unspecified date between 1567 and his death in 1590.⁹ The book-loving Dean Tobie Matthew (1576-84), who was also to end his career as archbishop of York and to bequeath his library to the minster library, gave at least

⁵ N.R. Ker, 'Books at Christ Church, 1562-1602', in T.H. Aston (ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford* (1984-), iii, 498-519.

⁶ A. Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691), i, cols. 611-12.

⁷ *D.N.B.* xlv, 269-70; J. Strype, *Annals of the Reformation* (1728), iii, 526; Wood, *Athenae*, i, col. 612.

⁸ Oxf., Christ Church Library, G.1.3.3: *Tomus quarta Conciliorum Omnium, tum Generalium, tum Provincialium sui Temporis libri viginti*, ... (Coloniae Agrippinae: Apud Geruinium Calenium, & Haeredes Iohannis Quentelij, anno Domini M. D. LXVII. fol.). The Christ Church title page is inscribed: 'Liber Ecclesiae Christi ex dono M[agist]ri Thomae Sampson ibide[m] olim Decani 1567.'

⁹ Oxf., Christ Church Library, d.4.2: Francesco Guicciardini, *Francisci Guicciardini patricii Florentini Historiarum sui Temporis libri viginti*, ... (Basileae: Excudebat Petrus Perna suis & Heinrichi Petri impensis, Anno Salutis M. D. LXVI. mense Martio. fol., Adams G1572). The title page of the volume is inscribed 'Liber Eccl[esi]ae Christj Oxon[iensi] ex dono Thomae Godwyn Theologiae Profess. et eiusdem eccl[esi]ae quondam Decanj.'

twelve books during his time at Christ Church.¹⁰ Though many of the earliest gifts in the library's history were given by wealthy outsiders with no obvious connections with Christ Church, most of the books given from the mid-1560s were from canons and ordinary alumni. Typically these were single volumes, usually folios, of patristica, theology, philosophy and law. Almost all were printed abroad, most frequently in Cologne, Paris or Protestant Switzerland, and were in many cases very recent publications. Several alumni presented books 'in gratiam studiosorum'; others bequeathed books, and the poorer or more parsimonious clubbed together to present books jointly. It is difficult to say whether the books were actually chosen by the donors, or whether they simply gave money which the library spent as it saw fit; in all probability a mixture of the two.¹¹ All of these books were housed in the former refectory of St. Frideswide's, where they were chained to the second-hand book lecterns which Christ Church had purchased from the derelict Duke Humfrey's library in 1562.¹² Shelves were a much later development, and were not installed at Christ Church until the second decade of the 17th century.

Seen in this context, Piers's gift was a particularly impressive one, and it is not difficult to see why it was thought worthwhile to commemorate it by printing a special gift label. The eight great volumes of Christophe Plantin's Polyglot Bible unquestionably form one of the monumental achievements of 16th-century scholarly printing. Plantin himself was a Frenchman by birth, but settled in the great trading metropolis of Antwerp, and rapidly established his *Officina Plantiniana* as one of the principal centres of the international booktrade. The workshops and great patrician house built by Plantin and his successors still exist, together with much of the original type and equipment and a large business archive, and form the extraordinary Plantin-Moretus Museum. Plantin's *magnum opus* was directly inspired by the so-called Complutensian Bible, printed in four languages in Spain at Alcalá de Henares (in Latin *Complutensium*) between 1514 and 1517, but it deliberately set out to surpass its model. It presents the complete text of the Bible in five languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Greek and Latin (Fig. 2). The project was overseen by the Spanish theologian Benedictus Arius Montanus (Benito Arias), a chaplain to Philip II, who subsidised

¹⁰ C.B.L. Barr, 'The Minster Library', in G.E. Aylmer and R. Cant (eds.), *A History of York Minster* (1977), 500-3. Twelve books are mentioned in the Christ Church Disbursement Books as gifts of Tobie Matthew, but only six of them have so far been found on the shelves. Matthew's first known gift (1579) is now Christ Church Library e.3.7: John Foxe, *The first [-second] volume of the Ecclesiasticall History, Contayning the Actes and Monumentes of Things Passed in every Kinges time ...* (At London: Printed by Iohn Daye, [1576]. fol., STC F11224). In 1583 he gave Arch. Inf. C.2.4: Ptolemy, *Claudii Ptolemaei ... Opus Geographic[ae] ...* ([Strasbourg]: Ioannes Grieninger ... opera et expensis, Anno M.D.XXII. fol.); d.3.6: Paulus Constantinus, *Chronicum Regum Regnorumque Omnium Catalogum ...* (Basileae: Apud Iohan. Hervag[en], Anno, M. D. XXXIII. fol., Adams C2553); d.2.21: Johan Funck, *Chronologia hoc est. Omnium Temporum et Annorum ab Initio Mundi usque ad Resurrectionem Domini Iesu Christi, computatio ...* (Impressum Norimbergae: Apud Georgium VVachterum, expensis Ciriaci Iacobi ..., M. D. XLV. fol., Adams F1172); Hyp.P41: Ottomar Eppelinus, *Selectiora Vetustissimorum ac Probatissimorum Patrum Iudicia; ...* (Regiomonti Borussiae: Excudebat Ioannes Daubmannus, Anno M.D. LX. fol.); and Hyp.I.3: Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *Clavis Scripturae S. seu de Sermonibus Sacrarum Literarum, ...* (Basileae: Per Ioannem Oporinum, & Eusebium Episcopium, Anno Salutis humanae M.D.LXVII. fol.) It is perfectly possible that the other books are no longer in the library, or that some remain but have not yet come to light.

¹¹ Ker, op. cit. note 5. Many of the books listed by Ker have now been catalogued in detail on OLIS by the author of this article, including, in many cases, detailed physical descriptions, and transcriptions of the *ex dono* inscriptions.

¹² N.R. Ker, 'Oxford College Libraries in the Sixteenth Century', in N.R. Ker, *Books, Collectors and Libraries: Studies in the Medieval Heritage* (1985); the original evidence is a note by Archbishop Matthew Parker in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS. 423.

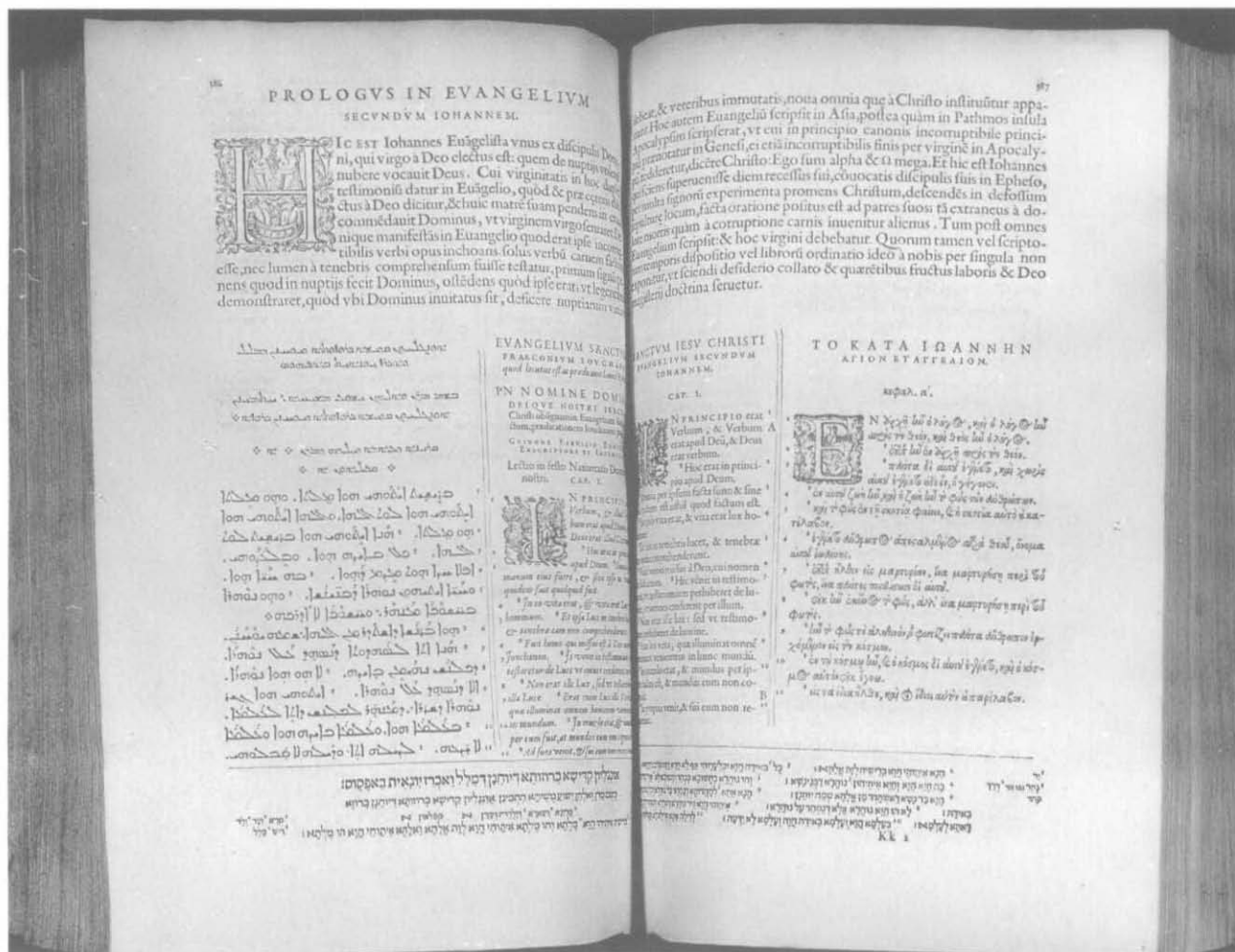


Fig. 2. The opening of St. John's Gospel from the Christ Church copy of Plantin's Polyglot Bible, presented by Archbishop John Piers in 1589 (Christ Church Library, MC.1.1-1.6; by kind permission of the Governing Body of Christ Church, Oxford).

the work, which was completed between 1568 and 1572.¹³ The completed Bible brought fame to Plantin and Arius Montanus, and reflected well on its royal sponsor. A Polyglot Bible was a spectacular *tour de force* of humanist scholarship. In collecting and collating different versions of the sacred texts in obscure and difficult languages it aspired to attain the uttermost limits of human understanding, and to bring mankind ever closer to the perfect and God-given original. A Polyglot Bible thus aimed to express the divine truth which was the ultimate root of all knowledge, and was therefore a completely appropriate gift for a Protestant prince of the church to present to a learned library. It was moreover an extremely expensive gift which only a very wealthy man could have afforded to give. The usual retail price of the Polyglot Bible, unbound and in loose sheets, was 70 Flemish florins. At contemporary rates of exchange this was about £10 sterling, at a time when Christ Church was able to get the Oxford craftsman Roger Barnes to make a fine calf binding for a folio of Alexander Aphrodisaeus for only 2s.¹⁴

The Piers gift labels (Fig. 3) measure 55 x 96 mm. One label is pasted in the middle of the front pastedown of each volume. They are elegantly printed in italic type, though the quality of the typography is unremarkable in comparison to Plantin's. The labels read:

*Liber Ecclesiae Christi, ex dono Reue- | rendissimi in Christo patris, Ioannis | Piers, Archiepiscopi
Eboracensis, | eiusdem Ecclesiae, olim et alumni, & | Decani. Anno Dom. 1589. & An- | no Regni
Reginae Elizabethae 31.*¹⁵

The use of regnal years is highly unusual in a gift label: there are no other examples in Brian North Lee's standard bibliography. In this case it is clearly meant to express the archbishop's twin role as a bishop of the Church and the servant of God's anointed on earth. But more than this, the form of the wording itself shows that the labels were printed at the time of Piers's gift, and not produced retrospectively, a practice which was not unusual.¹⁶ Christ Church *ex dono* inscriptions are remarkably uniform: it is obvious simply by looking at the books that they were usually written by the library keeper rather than by the donor. In the 16th century the inscriptions usually start with the words 'Liber Ecclesiae Christi ex dono ...'; after 1601 the preferred form was 'Liber Aedis Christi' though this form was sometimes used earlier. But in any event Christ Church is usually 'Aedes Christi' rather than 'Ecclesia Christi' in later inscriptions: Christ's House as opposed to Christ Church.

In late 16th-century Oxford there was only one man who could have produced this sort of book label. He was Joseph Barnes, the city's only printer. Though the first Oxford printed book was produced as early as 1478, and there was a short-lived press active between 1517 and 1520, for most of the 16th century there was no press in Oxford. Barnes was a vintner and bookseller (the combination of the two was not unusual) who came from Long Wittenham and was originally apprenticed to the Dutch-born Oxford bookseller Garbrand Harkes. Barnes was lent £100 by the university in 1584 to set up a printing press.¹⁷ Strictly speaking printing was restricted to members of the London Company of Stationers, which

¹³ L. Voet, *The Golden Compasses: A History and Evaluation of the Printing and Publishing Activities of the Officina Plantiniana at Antwerp* (1969-72), i, 61-4.

¹⁴ C. Clair, 'Christopher Plantin's Trade-Connexions with England and Scotland', *The Library*, 5th ser. xiv (1959), 41-2; Oxf., Christ Church Archives, xii. b. 31, f. 9 (Disbursement Book, 1601).

¹⁵ 'The book of Christ Church, the gift of John Piers, archbishop of York, formerly both alumnus and dean of the said church. In the year of our Lord 1589, and in the 31st year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth.'

¹⁶ Lee, *Early Printed Book Labels*, 1.

¹⁷ C.I. Hammer, 'Oxford Town and Oxford University', in T.H. Aston (ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford*, (1984-), iii, 77.

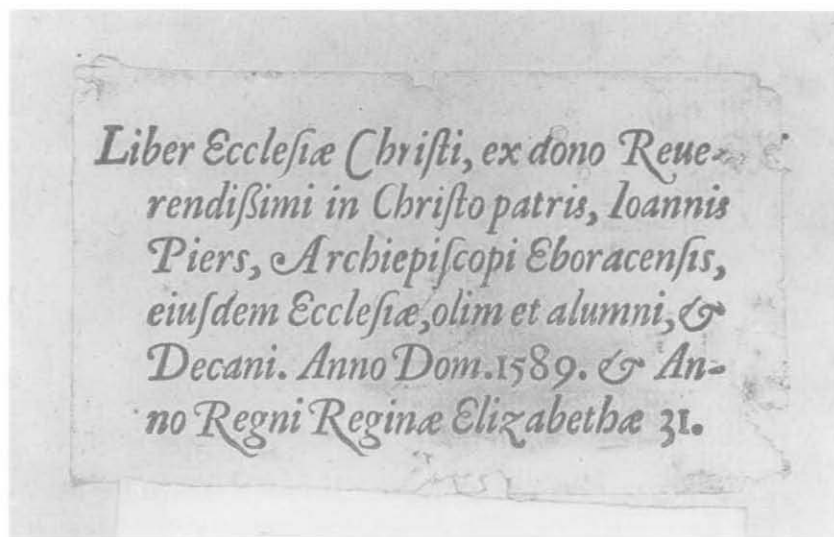


Fig. 3. The printed gift label attached to the Christ Church Polyglot Bible (by kind permission of the Governing Body of Christ Church, Oxford).

enjoyed powerful privileges from the Crown in return for stringent supervision of its own members to prevent the publication of anything likely to offend the authorities. But Barnes took advantage of the university's dubious claim to a special privilege to supervise its own press independently of the Stationers; the university helped set him up in business and he printed under its authority, though still very much at his own risk. His first books were printed in the following year, and it is from this date that Oxford publishing really begins.¹⁸ Barnes was plainly known at Christ Church. His premises were a matter of yards away in the High Street, and he was certainly supplying paper to the dean and chapter in 1588; his brother Roger was still binding books for the library in the early 17th century.¹⁹ If Christ Church had required the services of a jobbing printer to produce book labels, then Barnes, the Oxford printer, would plainly have been the man. However, none of his surviving books employ the large italic type used to print the labels; what is more, there is good evidence to suggest that the labels were not printed especially for Christ Church, because a similar gift label can be found in the library at Balliol.

The Balliol book labels are also pasted into a set of Plantin's Polyglot Bible.²⁰ They have been partially obliterated by later bookplates, and much of their text is now concealed; but enough remains to show that the type is the same as that of the Christ Church labels. Piers's name is also visible, as is the same curious use of regnal years for the date: in this case Elizabeth 32, i.e. 1590, a year later than the Christ Church examples. Piers's gift is confirmed by an entry in Balliol library's splendid 17th-century Benefactors' Book, which records

¹⁸ N. Barker, *The Oxford University Press and the Spread of Learning, 1478-1978* (1978), 2-6.

¹⁹ H.R. Plomer et al., *Dictionaries of the Printers and Booksellers who were at work in England, Scotland and Ireland, 1557-1775* (1977), i, 22-3; Oxf., Christ Church Archives, xii. b. 31, f. 9 (Disbursement Book, 1601); xii. 46, f. 6v. (Disbursement Book, 1588).

²⁰ Oxf., Balliol College Library, 595 e 1- 595 e 7.

retrospectively many earlier donations of books. These include a copy of the Plantin Polyglot Bible said to have been given in 1560 by John Piers, archbishop of York and sometime master of Balliol.²¹ This is plainly a mistake, since the Bible itself was printed between 1569 and 1572, and Piers did not become archbishop until 1589. The correct date should have been 1590, and this is confirmed by the chance survival of the book labels.

The similarities of wording suggest that both sets of book labels were commissioned by John Piers, and printed to his specification. The types do not match any of those used in extant books printed by Joseph Barnes, and since Barnes was the only printer in Oxford at the time, they cannot have been produced by anyone else in the city. All the evidence points to the fact that the labels were printed in London – further evidence if any were needed that they were produced for the archbishop, and not for the two Oxford libraries. The episode shows that giving books was often a two-way process: the libraries got the books, but the donor expected due acknowledgement, even if this meant that he had to pay to print labels to commemorate his own generosity. In both cases, the labels have succeeded in their objective: at Balliol the Benefactors' Book is badly garbled, and the 1560 entry for John Piers might easily have been discounted as an error on the part of its 17th-century compiler; at Christ Church, the labels provide the only evidence of Piers's interest in the library, and the provenance of the *Biblia Polyglotta* would certainly have been forgotten without them.

The two book labels are in themselves a relatively minor phenomenon. But they illustrate an important point about the mindset which underpinned the functioning of early modern libraries. Late 20th-century librarians take it for granted that libraries collect books so that people can borrow and read them, and since most library history is written by practising librarians, it tends to rest on similar assumptions. No doubt John Piers too hoped that members of Christ Church and Balliol would read his Polyglot Bibles, and that they would be a useful tool of godly learning in Elizabethan Oxford. But the circumstances of the two gifts shows that institutional piety and corporate memory could be at least as important in a 16th-century Oxford college library when it came to giving and receiving books. This is confirmed by the care which was taken to record the name of donors in the library Benefactors' Book at Balliol, and on the title-pages of the books at Christ Church. Today, the pages of the Christ Church Polyglot are crisp and clean, and it is plain that it has hardly ever been read. This could be interpreted as a sign of lethargy, but in reality it is perfectly likely that it was always meant to be a symbol as much as a book for everyday use. Where a medieval churchman might have endowed a chantry, or given a potent relic, an Elizabethan prelate gave a valuable multi-lingual Bible. In their own way, Archbishop Piers's Polyglots are just as much an expression of mutual regard between donor and beneficiary as the great portrait of Piers which still hangs at Christ Church (Fig. 1). The presentation and acceptance of the word of God in its most monumental printed form affirm mutual confidence in the divinely-constituted order of Church and State, in a common voice which still resonates across 400 years to anyone who takes the books down from the shelves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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²¹ Ibid., Benefactors' Book, 16.