
Sidney F. Huttner
Though cited as the first American manual on bookbinding, A Manual of the Art of Bookbinding was not written in quite way one might expect James Bartram Nicholson assembled it, with modest additions, from English sources.

When Nicholson says in his preface, “Throughout this work, the opinions and remarks of other writers have been adopted without alteration,” and again, “every thing given in that work [Hannett’s Bibliopegia] that has any approach to utility will be found in these pages,” he but states the fact. Large parts of his “Sketch of the Progress of Bookbinding” are taken word for word from Joseph Cundall, On Ornamental Art, Applied to Ancient and Modern Bookbinding (London, 1848), a work which also supplies Nicholson’s fourth and seventh plates. The technical description of bookbinding procedures is transferred, differently arranged but largely without textual change, from “John Andrews Arnett (i.e., John Hannett), Bibliopegia, or the Art of Bookbinding in all its Branches. (London, Edinburgh, Dublin and New York, 1836; first edition, 1835). The section on marbling comes directly from Charles W. Woolnough, The Whole Art of Marbling (London, 1853).

Little (one is tempted to say, if any) of Nicholson’s text came first from his own pen. Although nineteenth-century standards of plagiarism varied significantly from our own, Nicholson’s handling of others’ prose seems cavalier when one appreciates the candor of his preface. The author of the description of John Hayday’s binding for John Brickdale Blakeway’s Sherrifs of Shropshire quoted by Nicholson on pages 28-30, for example, is Joseph Cundall – who has already provided pages of silent transcription including most of the paragraph in which the quotation occurs. The initial phrases of Cundall’s text are even modified to permit the quotation marks! The following paragraph, however, attributing the finishing of Hayday’s design to Thomas Hussey, “now employed in Philadelphia,” is Nicholson’s.

Nicholson’s borrowing is, thus, selective and discriminating. He does not reprint whole works; he omits words or phrases from time to time, edits judiciously, and eliminates mention of specific English practice in favor of a general phrase or an American practice. Where Hannett reports, for example, that the colors most used to stain edges are “blue, yellow, and brown, and with old books, red,” Nicholson (p. 74) says “brown and red.” He occasionally substitutes one technical term for another (p. 43, for example, “rolling-machine” for Hannett’s “rolling press”) or introduces American usage (p. 63, for example, where undesirable “pig-back” rounding is described). He sometimes adds clauses, sentences, or more rarely, paragraphs. On page 76, for example, the “cleanest method” for sprinkling edges is Nicholson’s to the last sentence, which is transcribed from Hannett. Or again, the section on gilding (pp. 130-134), ascribed to his business
partner James Pawson, follows Hannett only loosely. Nicholson also, of course, organizes his fragments of borrowed text. He is perhaps the first to merge the developing literature of technical manuals, intended for the craftsman, with that of commentaries on bookbinding design, intended for the art historian or the gentleman collector. He is also more aware than Hannett of machine processes, of handling many volumes simultaneously, and of cloth-case design and binding. While the small text figures illustrating hand procedures are redrawn directly from Hannett, the illustrations of an hydraulic press (p. 46), the back saw (p. 171), the backing machine (p. 174), the table shears (p. 175), the lettering and gilding press (p. 283), the embossing press (p. 284), and the guillotine (p. 288) are American and new. The section on stamping (pp. 279-288), central to the mass production of cloth-cased books, appears to be Nicholson’s most sustained contribution to bookbinding literature.

The Manual was first published in 1856, early in Nicholson’s career. Reprints were issued in 1871, 1878, 1887, and 1902. The latter editions differ in title page imprints, are printed on lower quality paper, and omit the text that appears on the full page plates in the first edition. The plates themselves remain unchanged. All editions included seven samples of marbled paper (here reproduced in black and white) executed for the first edition, and perhaps for the others, by Charles Williams of Philadelphia.

James Bartram Nicholson was born on January 28, 1820, while his parents, both native Philadelphians, were residing in St. Louis. In 1822 the family returned to Philadelphia. His father died in 1833, leaving little support for the family. James left school, began a series of jobs and was then indentured in 1836 to the firm of Weaver & Warnock, bookbinders. He married in 1841 and fathered three sons, of whom the two youngest, Howard Bartram and Clarence Geary, seem to have followed him into bookbinding; the eldest, John Page Nicholson, became an officer during the Civil War and later a military historian.

Nicholson’s apprenticeship at Weaver & Warnock ended in 1848, and soon thereafter he joined with James Pawson, an English binder, to found the firm of Pawson & Nicholson. The firm prospered and grew to become one of the larger binderies in the United States. While Nicholson retired from active business in 1890, the firm continued under the direction of members of the Pawson and Nicholson families until is dissolution in 1911.

A contemporary biographer, contributing a note on Nicholson for The Official History of Odd Fellowship (Boston: The Fraternity Publishing Company, 1898) prefaced his pages with the remark, “The mere details of his life as a citizen seems to have been so dwarfed by the record of the service he has rendered to Odd Fellowship, as to have escaped the notice of all who have written about him, and with his characteristic indifference to all but his beloved Order, he has never cared himself to detail aught of his life and parentage for publication, unless connected with his work for fraternity.” A modern biographer could, without difficulty, reconstruct the outlines of that service to Odd Fellowship and could surely document, with application to its archives, Nicholson’s work on behalf of it.
He entered the Order in 1846 and, as he left the Chosen Friends Lodge No. 100 the evening of his initiation, he is said to have remarked, “I have found my life’s work.” He quickly rose through local offices and entered vigorously in the Order’s national activities. In 1862 he was selected its chief executive (the seventeenth Grand Sire of the Sovereign Grand Lodge) and played a major role in keeping the organization unified during and after the Civil War. Heading the Pennsylvania Order from 1869 until his death, he helped it grow from 549 to 1100 lodges and from 80,000 to 110,000 members. A noted orator and organizer, he was “continually in demand by Lodges in nearby and distant places, and upon every important occasion when addresses were delivered in the Sovereign Grand Lodge or at public demonstrations, held under its auspices, the name of Nicholson appears as one of the principal speakers.”

On the evening of December 31, 1892, as he rose to address the members of Berwyn Lodge No. 998, Nicholson suffered a stroke which left his right side paralyzed. A partial recovery permitted him to continue his Odd Fellow activities until a few months before his death on March 4, 1901. The Order erected a large bronze statue of him in Mount Peace Cemetery, Philadelphia, in 1917.

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1. The Dictionary of American Biography (vol. 13, p.503) says, for example, “… the first practical manual of the subject by an American. Although founded on John Hannett’s Bibliopedia (1835) it went farther than that popular work and came to be regarded as the ost nearly complete treatise yet published in America.” The National Cyclopedia of American Biography (vol. 25, p. 199) makes a similar statement.

2. The fourth, a “Grolier” design (facing p. 212) is Cundall’s plate II; the seventh, a “Holbein” design (facing p. 213) is Cundall’s plate IV.

3. The other works Nicholson cites in his prefaces, and from which he draws, verbatim, are G. Cowie, The Bookbinder’s Manual (London, 1829; other editions to a seventh in 1840); The Book-Finisher’s Friendly Circular (London: Finishers’ Friendly Association, 1845-1851) from which the “translation of dates” (p. 289) is taken; “John Andrews Arnett” (i.e., John Hannett) The Bookbinders’ School of Design, as Applied to the Combination of Tools in the Art of Finishing (London, 1837); John Leighton, Suggestions in Design (London,1853); and William Bell Scott, The Ornamentist, or Artisan’s Manual … With an Introductory Essay on Ornamental Art (London, Dublin, and Edinburgh, 1845). “Gibb’s Handbook of Ornament” has proved elusive; the most likely candidate would seem to be William Gibbs, Handbook of Architectural Ornament (1851) as listed in the English Catalogue of Books from January 1835 to January 1863.
Although Nicolson does not cite a source for his “Hints to Book-Collectors (pp. 292-296), they bear a remarkable similarity to John Leighton’s “Notes on Books and Bindings (A Card to Hand in the Library)” in *Notes and Queries* 6 (31 July 1852): 94-95). Leighton’s rule 23, for example, reads: “Never permit foreign substances, as crumbs, snuff, &c., to intrude into your books; or make them a receptacle for botanical specimens, cards, or a spectacle case, as it is likely to injure them.” His rule 29 is: “Never pull books out of the shelves by the headbands, or toast them over the fire, or sit upon them; for ‘Books are kind friends, we benefit from their advice, and they exact no confessions.’”

[Nicolson divides 23 as “Do not read a book at table. Crumbs are apt to penetrate into the backfold of the leaves” and “Books are not intended for card-racks or for receptacles of botanical specimens.” 29 becomes “Never pull books out of the shelves by the headbands, or suffer them to stand long upon the fore-edge,” “Books should not be toasted before a fire or be converted into cushions to sit upon,” and “Treat books gently; for ‘books are kind friends. We benefit by their advice, and they exact no confessions.’”]


5. Hannett did, however, intend his *Bookbinders’ School of Design* to be a companion volume, in the same format, to his *Biblopegia*.

6. Readers familiar with marbled papers will readily recognize the more traditional patterns. See also the frontispieces of either [any] of Middleton’s *History of English Craft Bookbinding Technique*, which illustrate twelve traditional designs in color. [Richard J. Wolfe’s *Marbled Paper: Its History, Techniques, and Patterns* (1990) shows dozens of others.]


Image from Library Company collections, Nicholson is likely bearded man, fifth from right of photo.
Thanks to Jeff Peachy for bringing photo to my attention.