

WITH HIS TRUSTY GLASS, ZOLTAN HARASZTI EXAMINES A RARE BOOK IN THE BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

A VERY PROPER SWINDLE

Expert uncovers century-old masterpiece of thievery

by three Bostonians of three of world's rarest books

by ROBERT WALLACE

A FINE old crime has a charm and an aroma that no raw new product can imitate. Here is a delicate little masterpiece without a hint of violence or a whisper of bad taste, in which all that happened was that three Bostonians stole three books. So skillful was the job that it was 25 years before the victims even realized that they had been superlatively diddled. Today, a century afterward, the rich bouquet of it all is just beginning to develop. It seems that the book involved in the most famous sale of recent times is—as the term is applied to stolen goods—a hot item.

The story of the crime has never before been told in all its succulent detail. In fact it was only a few moments ago, as the life of this deplorable but immortal accomplishment is measured, that the last fragments of it were pieced together by Mr. Zoltán Haraszti, Keeper of Rare Books at the Boston Public Library. A few cloistered bibliophiles have known of it, but even their knowledge has been incomplete until now.

Recently Mr. Haraszti, a scholar and an authority on John Adams (*John Adams & the Prophets of Progress*), sent into the library's vaults for a valuable volume he wished to examine. Mr. Haraszti has been delving into the old mystery for some time and had concluded that he might possibly find something of interest in that particular rare book.

The book that Mr. Haraszti wished to look at was encased in a little box of leather. He opened it, removed the book and opened the book to its flyleaf. He stared with great curiosity at the

flyleaf, turned the book to and fro to catch the light. When he held it just so, he saw a very dim, faded—and very cryptic—note in pencil. Mr. Haraszti read the note. His were the first eyes to read it, very likely, in a century. It irritated him; indeed, it made him angry, because he had the knowledge to understand it in all its peculiar significance.

Time is like an onion with layers that can be peeled off. To understand Mr. Haraszti's anger one must begin by peeling off nearly eight years.

ON the evening of Jan. 28, 1947, at the Parke-Bernet Galleries in New York City, there occurred an exceedingly dramatic auction. The object for sale was a little book, about the size and shape of a

25¢ drugstore paperback, which was 307 years old. Most of the people who had gathered to make offers, or simply to watch, were in evening clothes, as a gesture of respect not for each other or the galleries but for the book. The connoisseurs in the audience were scarcely surprised when the auctioneer announced an opening bid of \$30,000, although a few sightseers gasped.

For several minutes the crowd sat murmuring, but no other offer was made. Then the Scribner Book Store and a representative of Bibliophile A.S.W. Rosenbach edged into the deep water. Scribner's was represented by David Randall, who was prepared to bid up to a startling figure—\$90,000. Rosenbach was represented by John Fleming, who also was prepared to go very high, although he thought he might



"HOT" PRAYER BOOK, one of the three that were swiped, found its way to Brown University where it is now in glass case.



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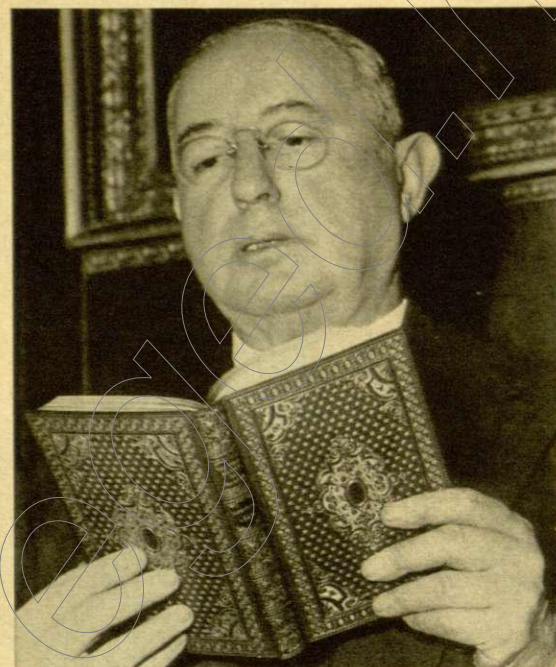
Sardines and Crackers



Tomato Salad



Sandwiches



HIGH BIDDER A.S.W. Rosenbach studies his prize *Bay Psalm Book* after agent has bought it for him at auction.

VERY PROPER SWINDLE CONTINUED

get the book for about \$85,000. But unlike Randall, Fleming had no established ceiling. His employer, Dr. Abraham Simon Wolf Rosenbach, was then—he died two years ago—the world's foremost rare book dealer, and a wealthy man.

Fleming and Randall kept up a slow, steady battle for perhaps half an hour. When the bidding reached \$72,000 the most knowledgeable of the spectators were in a state of great tension and excitement, realizing that that sum was a major landmark in the history of book collecting. In 1933 John Fleming, representing Dr. Rosenbach, had bought a First Folio of Shakespeare for \$72,000, which had stood until this evening as the largest price ever paid for a book in the English language sold at public auction.

The two rare-book men, wrapped in struggle, gave no sign that \$72,000 meant any more to them than 72¢. Presently the bidding reached \$80,000.

The little volume on display in the glass case was called the *Bay Psalm Book*: its correct title was *The Whole Booke of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre*. This particular copy was described in the auction catalog as the "Crowninshield-Stevens-Brinley-Vanderbilt-Whitney" copy, the names denoting its previous owners. Its most recent owner had been the late Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.

Fleming and Randall kept on. Randall, who had thought his \$90,000 would be ample, could see defeat ahead. Nevertheless he made his final bid boldly, as though he were well prepared to continue. When Fleming topped it, Randall dropped out. For a moment it appeared that Fleming would get the book at that point, but then suddenly a new bidder appeared. Up rose Mr. Cornelius Vanderbilt ("Sonny") Whitney, son of the book's late owner, saying in a firm voice, "One hundred thousand dollars."

Fleming felt as though he had been stabbed but gave no outward sign. He glanced briefly at Sonny and topped his bid by \$1,000.

When Whitney made it \$105,000, Fleming again raised him \$1,000, and here the true bibliophiles in the audience flirted with thrombosis. The highest price paid at a public sale for any book anywhere at any time had been \$106,000, given in 1926 by Dr. Rosenbach for a Gutenberg Bible.

"One hundred ten thousand dollars," said Sonny.

Fleming quietly raised another \$1,000.

"One hundred fifteen thousand dollars," said Sonny.

Fleming bid \$116,000.

"One hundred twenty thousand dollars," said Sonny.

Fleming had maneuvered himself into a small strategic advantage. He could raise \$1,000 at a time while Whitney, already committed to the steamroller technique, had to raise by \$4,000 or appear to be quibbling. The bidding continued in this way until it reached \$150,000. At that point, Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney was through.

"One hundred fifty one thousand dollars," bid Fleming grimly,

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VERY PROPER SWINDLE CONTINUED

and the book was his. More accurately, the book was Rosenbach's, and more accurately still it was the Yale library's, the Rosenbach Company having acted as agent for a group of people who wanted to present it to the university as a gift.

Although it is a very tidy, in fact immaculate, sum, \$151,000 is not the highest price ever paid for any written or printed book but merely the highest price an individual has ever paid. Governments and institutions have topped it on two occasions. The all-time record, as far as anyone knows, is \$511,250 paid by the government of Great Britain for a manuscript Bible called the *Codex Sinaiticus*. The second highest price on record is \$165,000 for the *Bedford Psalter and Hours* and the \$151,000 for the *Bay Psalm Book* is third. However, there are some things about this particular \$151,000 book more interesting than its price. It is one of three expertly filched a century ago by three very proper thieves.

Now one must peel a great many more layers off the onion.

IN September 1638, 18 years after the landing of the Pilgrims, the ship *John* arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony from London, carrying the first printing press ever to be set up in what is now the U.S. The press was established in Cambridge and operated by a locksmith named Stephen Daye. The first thing Daye printed was the *Freeman's Oath*, a broadside; the second was an almanac, a pamphlet. The third was the *Bay Psalm Book*, the first book and in point of survival the earliest printed matter, no copy of the *Oath* or the almanac having endured.

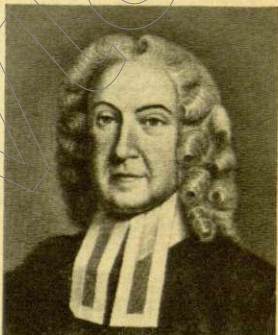
The Pilgrims brought with them from England various established translations of the Psalms but disliked them all. So the ministers of the colony (in that day, any man educated for the ministry could read Greek, Latin and Hebrew) took a portion each to be translated, and produced their own, Puritan versions. "Thirty pious ministers" in all worked on the translations, the chief being Richard Mather, Cotton's grandfather. The poetry was terrible; what they did to the 23rd Psalm will stand forever as a warning that Puritans should keep their bony fingers out of literature.

The Lord to me a shepherd is,
want therefore shall not I.
Hee in the folds of tender-grasse,
doth cause mee down to lie:
To waters calme me gently leads
Restore my soule doth hee:
He doth in paths of righteousness:
for his names sake leade mee. . . .

The book is printed in octavo and has 147 leaves, or 294 pages. The title page has a crude ornamental border, with the date 1640 at the bottom. The edition consisted of 1,700 copies, enough for each family in the colony to have one. Of all of these, only 11 are known to have survived. Four are perfect (though one of these is "made up" with alien leaves and another is badly soiled); three slightly flawed; and five incomplete, lacking a varying number of leaves. The book is therefore valued because of its physical rarity, not its beauty, and because as an expression of the American spirit it must be put on the same shelf with the original copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

In 1703, when the book was still relatively common in New England, the Reverend Thomas Prince of Boston began to collect the great "New England library" which he bequeathed in 1758 to the Old South Church, of which he was pastor for 40 years. In his 55 years as book collector, Prince managed to lay his hands on no fewer than five copies of the *Bay Psalm Book*. He was very well aware of their worth. In his will he was explicit beyond question. He stipulated that his library "be kept entire." His books were to remain together in the library not for a decent interval, or a century, but unequivocally "forever." When the Reverend Thomas Prince said "forever," he meant forever.

Around 1820 a portion of the Prince library was sent to the Massachusetts Historical Society, upon which the Rev. Mr. Prince's shade must have ground its ethereal teeth. In 1866 the whole collection was reunited and deposited in the Boston Public Library, where it has remained ever since. But by that time only two of the five copies of the *Bay Psalm Book* remained: the other three had been "given" away.



ORIGINAL OWNER of books was Thomas Prince, pastor of Old South Church.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

A Message... to the Homeowner,
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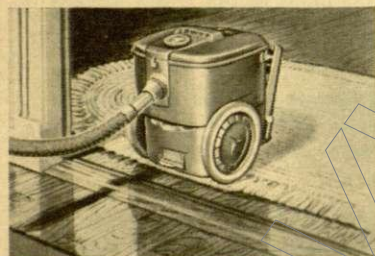
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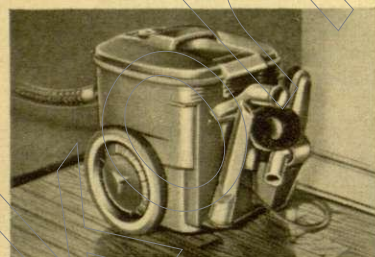
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VERY PROPER SWINDLE CONTINUED

EDWARD A. CROWNINSHIELD, whose name is listed as "first" owner (after Prince) of the \$151,000 copy which was sold at the auction, was a wealthy adornment to Boston society. He is memorialized in the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* for 1879-80. To save one the trouble of having to go down-stairs to consult one's copy of the work, parts of the memoir are here quoted: "He was a man of very prepossessing manners and appearance. . . . Born to a competent estate . . . he had a love of literature and a love of books which supplied him with object and purpose. . . . In his acquisitions he was guided by knowledge, sagacity and, above all, exquisite taste. He wanted the best editions of the best books, and not only that, but that they should be bound in the nicest and most appropriate manner. His library was not very extensive, but it was very choice. . . . His mind, his manners, his speech exhaled the fine perfume of scholarship and cultivation. . . ."



EDWARD CROWNINSHIELD

In contrast to the elegant Mr. Crowninshield, Samuel T. Armstrong was something of a bourgeois. It is true that Samuel T. Armstrong served as lieutenant governor of Massachusetts from 1833 to 1835, serving briefly in the latter year as acting governor. But he was, alas, an ordinary sort of fellow. Daniel Webster knew him, and scorned him as "one of the common people." However, Samuel T. Armstrong, in the latter years of his life, occupied a position of considerable interest to Mr. Crowninshield. Mr. Armstrong was a deacon of the Old South Church.

On the flyleaf of one of the two copies of the *Bay Psalm Book* which still remain in the Prince Library (i.e., in the Boston Public Library) there is the dim, cryptic note in pencil which Mr. Zoltán Haraszti recently discovered. It says: "This book was bound at the cost of Mr. Ed Crowninshield and given in exchange for No. 259 in the catalog. Jan. 1850. STA." The reference is to the first catalog of the Prince Library printed in 1846; Entry No. 259 consists of a single line: "The Whole Book of Psalms, translated into English metre. 1640. (Perfect copy)." The "STA" of course stands for Samuel T. Armstrong.

AMBIGUOUS, isn't it?" says Mr. Haraszti. "If the grammar is right, the note means that Crowninshield gave a copy—the one with the penciled note—in exchange for the perfect copy, No. 259, which he obtained. It also means that he had that copy—again, the one with the note—freshly bound. But this was not the case. Crowninshield gave only the binding and not the book. The title page still has the shelf number it once had in the parsonage of the Old South Church."

The binding provided by Crowninshield is cardboard covered with imitation black leather. Today it would cost about three dollars; in 1850 it could scarcely have been worth more than a dollar. "It would have been better," continues Mr. Haraszti, "if Mr. Crowninshield had spared himself this expense. The margins of the book would not then have been cut by the binder."

Mr. Haraszti guesses that what happened, 104 years ago in the church parsonage, was this: Mr. Ed Crowninshield (exhaling the fine perfume of scholarship and cultivation) called on Samuel T. Armstrong and suggested a deal. The bindings on those five old books must have been getting pretty shabby, after 210 years, and Mr. Ed Crowninshield would be kind enough to have a new binding put on one of them, if Mr. Armstrong would be kind enough to let Mr. Crowninshield have one of the extras.

What motivated Mr. Crowninshield is obvious—even in 1850 a *Bay Psalm Book* was a rare and valuable object, and everyone who knew anything about books was aware of it. What motivated Mr. Armstrong to make the deal can only be guessed at; perhaps Daniel Webster's calling him "one of the common people" stuck in Mr. Armstrong's craw. He may have wanted to do a big, secret favor for one of the uncommon people, thus hoisting himself onto the uncommon man's level. In any case he did it, and left a guilty sort of note to record it.

After Crowninshield's death his copy of the book was bought by a famous London book dealer named Henry Stevens, who sold it to George Brinley of Hartford, Conn. for \$750. When Brinley died in 1879 the book was bought by Cornelius Vanderbilt for

VERY PROPER SWINDLE CONTINUED

\$1,200, and it remained in the Vanderbilt-Whitney family until the auction in 1947.

Very soon after Mr. Ed Crowninshield wangled his copy from Armstrong, Mr. George Livermore of Boston got another. No written record of this transaction remains, but the pattern is clear. Mr. Livermore and Mr. Crowninshield were not merely friends but very close friends indeed. Crowninshield must have told Livermore of his accomplishment, because Livermore promptly got a second copy of the *Bay Psalm Book* from the church library, being probably responsible for the new, cheap binding on one of the leftovers.

Mr. Livermore was even more prominent in Boston than Mr. Crowninshield. In the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* his memoir runs to 54 pages; to his memory men such as Oliver Wendell Holmes and Edward Everett Hale paid affectionate tributes. Robert C. Winthrop, president of the society, said: "Ardent, intelligent, laborious, liberal, philanthropic, he was untiring in his exertions. . . . His beautiful library—with its remarkable collection of rare editions of the Sacred Scriptures, including not a few Bibles which had the special charm of having belonged to illustrious persons of other ages and other lands. . . . Nor can anyone forget that exquisite bibliographical taste of his. . . ."

During his life Livermore traded away several of the leaves of his copy of the *Bay Psalm Book* (which was incomplete when he got it), thus greatly reducing its value. In 1894 it was sold by his estate to Alfred T. White of Brooklyn, N.Y. for \$425, and is now in the private collection of White's son-in-law, Adrian Van Sinderen, also of Brooklyn.

The disappearance of the third copy of the *Bay Psalm Book* from the library in which it was to remain forever was arranged in a manner even more startling than the carrying off of the first two.

The Hon. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, M.D., was a learned man and a formidable book collector. He has made all students of American history his debtors by printing in 11 volumes the records of the Bay and Plymouth colonies.

At the time Dr. Shurtleff obtained his copy, a gentleman named Loring Lothrop was one of the deacons of the Old South. Deacon

Lothrop was a former master of the Girls' High School, a position in which he may not have been fully exposed to the *Sturm und Drang* of Bostonian life. On Dec. 30, 1859, Dr. Shurtleff, who doubtless had seen Crowninshield's and Livermore's prizes, wrote Deacon Lothrop a letter, or rather threw him a wonderful curve:

"My Dear Sir: I am very desirous of obtaining one of the duplicate copies of the old *Bay Psalm Book* belonging to the Old South Church Library, having a strong veneration for the old volume. I think I have books in my library, such as would be not only appropriate for the Library of the Old South Church but also valuable for reference and for the use of those who may rely upon the library for works suitable to be consulted. Among the books which I happen to think of are

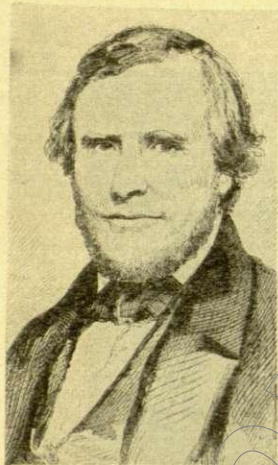
the original editions of Winthrop's *New England*, and Belknap's *New England Biography* . . . which I would gladly give in exchange (for) one of the duplicates. . . .

Nath. B. Shurtleff"

Deacon Lothrop—one can imagine him all atwitter with excitement—promptly let Nath. B. Shurtleff have the best copy of the *Bay Psalm Book*. It was an author's copy, having been owned and autographed by Translator Richard Mather himself. The two books given in exchange by Shurtleff are now in the Prince Library, each bearing the inscription "Given to the Prince Library of the 'Old South Society' of Boston, Mass., by Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, M.D., in exchange for the 'Bay State Psalms.' Boston, Jan. 11, 1860."



GEORGE LIVERMORE



NATHANIEL SHURTLEFF

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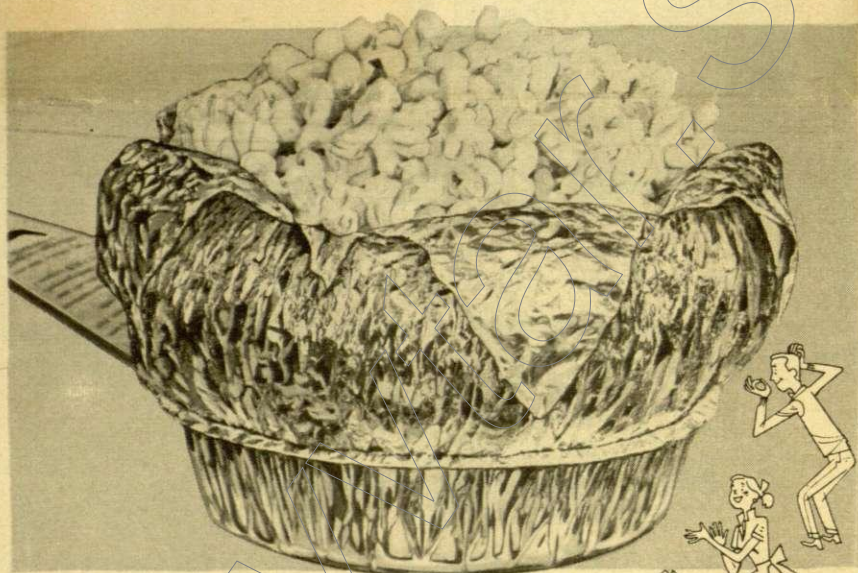
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WEST COAST: Mfd. by Frontier Foods Corp., Los Angeles 58

VERY PROPER SWINDLE CONTINUED

Dr. Shurtleff's letter skillfully avoided any reference to the relative worth of the books. He spoke of the "original editions" of the books he wished to trade, and twice referred to the "duplicate" copies of the *Bay Psalm Book*. One may readily believe that he had "a strong veneration" for the latter. At the time he made his fortunate exchange, Winthrop's *New England* was worth about \$5 on the market, and Belknap's *Biography*, \$3. Today, of course, the price is higher. One might have to pay \$15 for the two.

In 1867 Dr. Shurtleff was elected mayor of Boston. He served three terms in succession and died in 1874.

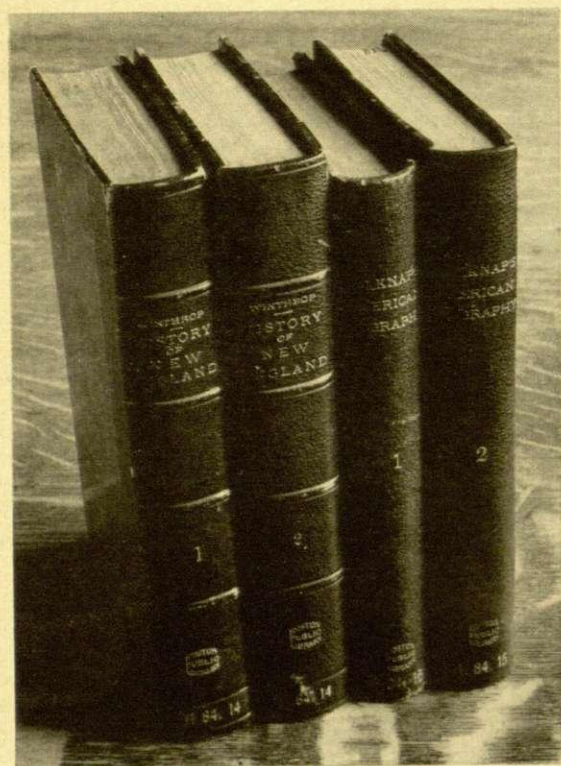
A year after Dr. Shurtleff's death and about 25 years after Crowninshield and Livermore extracted their copies, the Old South Church finally got sore. Two deacons sued Shurtleff's estate, demanding that his copy of the *Bay Psalm Book* be put back.

A short time ago Mr. Haraszti, in the fond hope that something might be discovered that might somehow right the ancient wrong, consulted the legal archives. "After a considerable search," he says, "the clerk located the old file and handed it to me. It contained about a dozen documents, summonses, briefs, affidavits—and that amazing letter of Shurtleff's to Lothrop. I don't believe anyone else has looked at the file since it was put away 79 years ago. Of course I should have known how the case turned out even before I looked at it. The deacons were too late—the statute of limitations had run."

After the failure of the suit, Shurtleff's copy was sold by his estate, has since passed through various hands, and is now in the John Carter Brown Library at Providence, R.I. As the finest of all existing copies, this one could be worth as much as \$250,000.

The two deacons who finally summoned the guts to bring legal action on behalf of the Old South Church were named Avery Plumer and Frederick D. Allen. Plumer was a flour merchant and Allen the owner of a dry-goods store. Neither of them ever got elected mayor of anywhere; they did not belong to the élite of Boston society; they were not members of the learned societies they were not even Harvard graduates. Neither, of course, is mentioned in the *Proceedings*.

Time, as it usually does, has largely mended the effects of the "exchanges" of a century ago. Mr. Zoltán Haraszti will never forget Crowninshield's "love of books" or Livermore's "exquisite bibliographical taste" or Shurtleff's "strong veneration for the old volume," since the result has been that Mr. Haraszti has three fewer rare books in his vaults. However, more people may see the Rev. Mr. Prince's *Bay Psalm Books* now than if all of them were still cheek to cheek on one shelf in Boston. This may have been the line that Messrs. Crowninshield, Livermore and Shurtleff took if they attempted posthumously to placate the Rev. Mr. Prince. It would have been exceedingly interesting to hear what the Rev. Mr. Prince had to say in reply.



WHAT THE LIBRARY GOT in return for one copy of *Bay Psalm Book* was book collection then worth about \$8.