Anthony Wood’s *Athenae Oxonienses* and the Subscription Publication in Seventeenth-Century England

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Abstract

The subscription publication is a publishing method which is thought to have developed in seventeenth-century England, and it enabled authors and publishers to publish more specialized and expensive academic books. This study attempts to look at how Anthony Wood’s *Athenae Oxonienses* was produced by the subscription method, including such aspects as its advertisements, the subscribers, and the readership. *Athenae Oxonienses* was written by the antiquary, Anthony Wood, and published by the London bookseller, Thomas Bennet, by subscription in 1690–1691. There is a list of subscribers at the end of the volume II of *Athenae Oxonienses*. It contains information on the subscribers’ names and titles. This paper examines the list and studies its influence and significance. At the same time this study attempts to reveal the involvement of the author and the publisher in the selling of the book.

Introduction

Anthony Wood is one of the most important antiquaries of the seventeenth century. He was born in 1632 in Oxford, and he graduated from Merton College in 1652. Encouraged by Dr. John Fell, the Dean of Christ Church, Wood started to compile his studies on the history of Oxford University. In 1674 he published *Historia et Antiquitates Univ. Oxon.* through the university press. With this work his name began to be renowned. After the publication of *Historia* he proceeded to write *Athenae Oxonienses*, again at the suggestions of Dr. Fell, who wanted him to write biographies of the writers and bishops who were associated with the university. *Athenae* is one of the most important biographical works in the history of English literature, and it continues to have much value to this day. The first edition of *Athenae* was published by subscription in 1691–1692 and it contains a list of the subscribers, which pro-
vides us with an idea of its contemporary readership, without it we might never have so precisely identified the audience of this important work.

The subscription publication was a publishing method which supposedly developed in seventeenth-century England, and it enabled authors and publishers to publish more specialised, and expensive academic books. This study attempts to look at how Athenae Oxonienses was produced by the subscription method, including such aspects as its advertisements, the subscribers, and the readership. Therefore, it is not the text this study will be looking at, but what is called the "paratext". There is a list of subscribers at the end of the volume II of Athenae Oxonienses. It contains information on the subscribers’ names and titles. This paper will examine the list and study its influence and significance.

I

The practice of subscription publication emerged in seventeenth-century England. The subscribers helped the publication of books by giving money to the author/publisher in advance of printing. Before Athenae Oxonienses was published by subscription in 1691, several famous scholarly books had been printed using the same publication method. One example is John Minsheu’s Ductor in Linguis: the Guide into the Tongues. Minsheu was an active linguist in the English Renaissance. The book, composed of 726 pages in folio, contains Greek, Anglo-Saxon, and Hebrew letters. It came out at a time when England was experiencing an influx of literature from Europe. People wanted a good dictionary to be able to read all those new books, and Ductor in Linguis was undoubtedly something which would have filled that category. On the other hand, because of the complexity of the type set, a great deal of cost was certainly anticipated. Publishers would have hesitated to deal with this sort of costly book since it would have been a kind of venture to do so. So finally it was the author himself who advertised his book, showing a sample to his prospective customers. Minsheu successfully attracted a good number of patrons and, as a result, this dictionary was in print in 1617. The subscribers counted more than 300, and the names were listed up and printed in 2 folio pages, at the end of the book. The list included the members of the royal family, archbishops, aristocrats, politicians, and other individuals. Minsheu actually updated the list of his subscribers several times.

Another early example of subscription publication in England is Brian Walton’s Biblia Sacra Polyglotta (1657). This bible is a set of 6 volumes in folio, and the subscription was
10 pounds, which was an extremely high price at that time. Unlike Minsheu's case, it was not the author/editor who advertised this book. A person named John Pearson undertook advertising, and collected enough money to pay for the printing. Pearson himself was a writer, but for this book he only functioned as an advertising agent. Other examples of subscription publication include Edmund Castell's *Lexicon Heptaglotton* (1669), which was a dictionary in 7 languages.

All these cases above were for highly learned and apparently very costly books. Even though these sorts of books had tremendous academic value, they would not sell well. Therefore, the publishers were naturally not keen on dealing with them. In these circumstances the author would have had to raise money himself. Minsheu was a successful example. He would visit people trying to collect subscriptions, and he kept his subscribers' list updated. What were his intentions? Was it his way of showing his gratitude immediately to his new customers by adding their names to his original list? Or was it his tactics to attract more subscribers by making the list longer with many famous names? Some may give support to the latter view, but it seems unwise to deny the former. It is only proper that an author wishes to express his thanks to his patrons who have helped his dream come true.

The subscription publication was effected with subscribers' aid, and subscribers' names were revealed in the published book in different ways. Their names are often listed in the book, and sometimes we see their names and coat of arms in illustrations. A good example is Sir William Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum* (1655), which was not favoured by publishers because monasteries were an unwelcome subject in the 1650s. Dugdale invited subscriptions for the engravings at 5 pounds each, and he promised that the subscribers would have their name, coat of arms, and motto on the illustration. Dugdale's other book *The History of St. Paul's Cathedral* (1658) was also published after many patrons subscribed to the engravings. In addition, there is a mixed approach to subscriptions as well. We can see both two ways of revealing subscribers' names in John Dryden's *The Works of Virgil* (1697). Those who paid 5 guineas had their name, title, and coat of arms in the illustration, whereas those who paid 2 guineas had their name listed up in the preface. These are valuable pieces of information for the modern readers as they provide us with clues to the readership of the books which we might not otherwise get to know.
Anthony Wood was an unusual antiquary: he was not interested in ancient buildings or prehistoric stones, but he was an antiquary who preserved the history of literary men. He wrote *Athenae Oxonienses* for the glory of Oxford University. No one had written a book like this to show the literary heritage of a university. There are no such books for Paris University (The Sorbonne), or for Padua or Bologna or Uppsala. Wood saw Oxford as the place that has produced the greatest number of writers in history. It is better than ancient Rome, and it is as good as Athens, which had produced the greatest writings the world had known: Plato, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Herodotus, Thucydides, Euclid, etc. That is why Wood titles his book *Athenae Oxoniensis*, the Athens of Oxford. He explored every kind of record in order to compile his catalogue of writers. He reconstructed their biographies, and has identified their books, and he also knew what existed in manuscript. He read church records for their births, deaths and burials, and legal manuscripts. He knew the documents of the university intimately. He gives the reader personal memories of many of the writers, or he communicates stories about authors from people whom Wood knows. There are many personal anecdotes, often amusing or strange. The work is an astonishing record of a university that has always encouraged writers. Wood tells us about mathematicians and philosophers, composers of music and collectors of manuscripts. This is why *Athenae Oxonienses* has been of such importance since its publication.

The original title of *Athenae* reads *An Exact History of All the Writers and Bishops Who have had their Education in the Most Ancient and Famous University of Oxford, from the Fifteenth Year of King Henry the Seventh, Dom 1500, to the End of the Year 1690. Representing the Birth, Fortune, Preferment, and Death of all those Authors and Prelates, the great Accidents of their Lives, and the Fate and Character of their Writings. To which are added, The Fasti or Annals, of the said University, For the same time*. As this long title suggests, the book contains biographies of the writers and bishops who had a connection with Oxford University. The first volume (1691) covers the years from 1500 to 1640, and it consists of 904 double-column pages in folio. The second volume which covers the years from 1641 to 1690, 906 double-column folio pages long, was published in the following year. This in a sense is an enlarged version of *Historia et Antiquitatis Universitatis Oxoniensis*. For this earlier work of his, Wood had studied much about the university. He had been much inspired by William Dugdale whose *Antiquities of Warwickshire* impressed Wood when he read it as a young man.
It was during the 20 years of writing *Historia* when Wood established a valuable relationship with John Fell, who was a powerful figure at Oxford University, and John Aubrey, who also was a famous antiquary of the seventeenth century. *Historia et Antiquitates* was published in 1674, in Latin. Fell then wanted Wood to write more about the glory of the university, which would become a huge-scale project. Wood kept collecting information for *Athenae* and eventually decided to put an appendix to it, *Fasti Oxonienses*, which recorded the status and degrees of the Oxford alumni with exact dates. He also included Cambridge graduates who were awarded a degree at Oxford.

Wood finally completed this tremendous work, but when it was ready for printing there was a financial problem. The financial aids he received from his patron were not sufficient. At this juncture, a London bookseller called Thomas Bennet planned to deal with the book by subscription. He had a bookshop called Half Moon in St. Paul’s Churchyard where major bookshops stood side by side in the seventeenth century. Not much is known about Bennet, but according to *Dictionary of Printers and Booksellers*, he was active between 1686 and 1706, and his father may have been the London agent for Oxford printers. This might explain why he dealt with *Athenae*. On the other hand, there is a comment denying this suggestion, for some part of his business records have been studied by Norma Hodgson and Cyprian Blagden. Their study is more concerned with Bennet’s apprentice and successor Henry Clements rather than our bookseller, but it does offer very important pieces of information about Bennet. He is said to have no connection with the Oxford bookseller Thomas Bennet who was once regarded as his father. He supported Toryism, and he had a close association with Christ Church people. As for his publications, he specialised in religious books and his most important author was Francis Atterbury, whose name is found among the subscribers to *Athenae Oxonienses*.

Bennet’s name first appeared in the Term Catalogues in Easter 1687, and thereafter he published many books. To illustrate this, there are two of Bennet’s advertisements or booklists in *Athenae Oxonienses*, and they include the works of William Shakespeare and John Milton, and his other books are mostly sermons and religious writings, many of which are quite expensive. It is reasonable to suppose that Bennet wanted the subscribers or readers of *Athenae* to buy his other books as well. Therefore, Bennet must have had a certain group of customers in mind when he decided what to advertise in the *Athenae*. It is only natural that the bookseller would fully advertise his wares wherever possible. Of course, his target clients would have included people associated with Oxford, but there probably was a more specific
group of people Bennet had in mind.

"The proposals for Athenae Oxonienses" was first issued in 1690, because this highly specialised, quite bulky piece of work needed to be advertised in order to raise money for its printing. In the proposals of 1690, the regular folio was priced 20 shillings, and the large folio was 30 shillings. Subscribers were expected to pay their subscription by installment. A couple of sample pages attached to the "proposals" were pages from the articles about Henry Savile and William Camden, and it can be assumed that they were not randomly chosen. Because the proposals were made for prospective customers, the samples would have been chosen very carefully, and they would have been of much interest to them.

Sir Henry Savile (1549–1622) was a learned man, who specialised in mathematics and had profound scholarship in classics. He matriculated at Brasenose College in 1561, and after that he became a fellow at Merton College. He held several college offices, and he was also a tutor in Greek to Elizabeth I. He became warden of Merton and later provost of Eton, which he received with royal support and with the backing of powerful courtiers. Above all, his achievement to found 2 professorships at Oxford in 1592 would arouse the admiration of people associated with the university. Savile himself delivered lectures on mathematics and science, and the professorships were in geometry and astronomy. He was undoubtedly one of the most notable examples of an Oxford academic.

The other person in the sample was William Camden (1551–1623), who also had a teaching profession. Camden went to Christ's Hospital, and then to St Paul's School. After that he studied at Oxford, first at Magdalen College and later at Christ Church. Camden left Oxford at the age of 20, and he began to teach at Westminster School. While he was there, Camden launched his famous Britannia. It was first printed in 1586, and after that it was reprinted several times. Moreover, in 1695, more than a century after the first edition, a new English version was published. Britannia enjoyed an enormous popularity in the seventeenth century. Camden also created a professorship in history at Oxford. Therefore, the reason these two people were chosen for the sample would naturally be that they represented the academic preeminence of the university. They both were at Oxford in the Elizabethan period, the intellectual era of the English Renaissance. It was a time when new ideas and new learning were flourishing, and both men contributed to this flowering of the English golden age.

In addition to the proposals, there were a couple of advertisements in the Term Catalogues before and after the publication of Athenae in 1691. The first example was in the 1690 Michaelmas Term edition (November 1690), which reads:
The Undertaker, Thomas Bennet, at the Half Moon in St. Paul’s Churchyard, publishes his Proposals as follows: 1. That the Book shall be printed on the same Paper and Character as the Specimen. 2. That the Book shall consist of Two Volumes in Folio, of above 100 sheets each, in double Columns. Every Subscriber to pay 20 s. in sheets for both; (viz.) 5 s. at hand, 10 s. at the delivery of the first, and 5 s. at the delivery of the last: and for the large Paper 30 s., at proportional payments as before. 3. That the price to any other than a Subscriber shall be 25 s. the small; and 40 s. large. 4. That the Book is already in the Press; and the first Volume shall be delivered at Easter Term next, the second at Trinity. 5. All Gentlemen who subscribe, will have their Names, Titles, and places of abode, printed in a sheet annexed to the Second Volume. The Specimens are delivered Gratis, and Subscriptions taken, by the Undertaker, and most Booksellers in London and the Country.⁴

This advertisement provides us with an idea of how a subscription publication was managed. It indicates the format, the prices, the payment, etc., as well as the special treatment of the subscribers. The subscribers were expected to be men—“All Gentlemen”—and their names, titles, and address were to be printed and inserted in the book. All of these items would probably have tickled some gentlemen’s pride. Besides, this advertisement above mentions that the first volume was going to be published in the next Easter term; the second volume in the Trinity term, 7 weeks after Easter.

The next advertisement appeared in January 1691, in the Hilary Term. This time we learn that the deadline for the subscription was set for March 16th. The third advertisement was seen in the next Term Catalogue, in the Easter Term edition (May 1691). By that time the first volume had been printed, and was going to be delivered to its subscribers by June 15th.⁵ The second volume was still in the press. Also, there is a notice saying that those who had not paid their subscription should make their payments immediately. Moreover, for the convenience of prospective subscribers in remote areas, the subscription deadline was postponed to June 15th, the date when the first volume was due to be delivered. Namely, the subscription deadline was delayed for 3 months.

The Trinity Term 1691 advertisement tells us that the first volume had been published, and the second was to be issued in Michaelmas, November 1691. However, the announcement of the publication of the second volume was made in the Trinity Term 1692 edition. There it says that the subscribers were to receive their copy on June 27th. After that, in the Michael-
mas Term catalogue, there is a further advertisement about the Athenae saying that there were still 50 copies to be sold, each priced at 25 shillings, and payment to be made in a lump sum. There were still 20 unsold copies left in 1695, according to a notice in the Hilary Term, February, edition.

The publisher’s proposals and the advertisements in the Term Catalogues offer a great deal of information. First of all, the prices are made clear. A set of 2 folio volumes for 20 or 30 shillings would seem reasonable, compared to other academic books of the same period. Athenae is bulky, but it does not contain maps or illustrations which would be very expensive to print. That made it possible to keep the price low. For example, William Camden’s Britannia (1695), a one-volume folio, was 32 shillings, or 50 shillings in larger paper. Britannia contains many fine maps and so it was naturally much more costly to print. Next, we learn from the advertisements that the subscribers’ list would be printed and inserted in the book. A list including many famous names such as the king, aristocrats, gentry, etc. would add a prestige value to a book. Therefore, it is most likely that the publisher made the notice to attract more subscribers.

In addition to the subscribers’ list of Minsheu’s mentioned earlier, there are other interesting examples. For example, Richard Blome earned over 800 subscriptions for his Britannia (1673). He made a 24-page list which contains the subscriber’s name, title, residence, and coat of arms. Moreover, Blome was also a publisher and he published Guilium’s Heraldry in 1674 (/1675) by subscription as well. Subscribers could have their name and coat of arms listed for 26 shillings, and the coat of arms with an engraving for 46 shillings. This is similar to Dryden’s book. As for Athenae, subscribers could only have their name listed, but those who paid more for the larger folio had their name displayed with a dagger mark although it was not mentioned in the advertisement.

III

Now let us turn to look at the subscribers’ list. Thomas Bennet attached a list of the subscribers as he promised to do so in his advertisement of the book. The list titled “A Catalogue of Part of the Subscribers to this Book” is 3 pages long, and 329 people’s names are listed in alphabetical order. Also there is a notice saying “Above one third are omitted for want of Returning their Names by the Booksellers that subscribed for them.” This would mean that the list lacks well over 100 subscribers’ names. Another notice reads “Those that have this
mark (†) are Large paper.” As seen before, the folios were of 2 different sizes. Those who subscribed to the larger, more expensive one were featured with a dagger mark, and their names often appear at the beginning of their alphabetical group. Below is an example of the group of names appearing under “E”:

E.

† JONATHAN Lord Bishop of Exeter.

Mr. John Edwards.

Ellaker, Scrivener.

Mr. Edgley Minister of Wandsworth.

John Everingham Bookseller.

Five people are listed in this group of the names which begin with E. The first one is the Bishop of Exeter and he subscribed to the larger paper, which is explicitly displayed with a dagger mark. The second person is a fairly famous clergyman John Edwards whose name appears individually, without any title. The rest are grouped together. This was typically done for more obscure people including college students and booksellers.

Among the over 300 subscribers in the list, 25 have their names featured with a dagger mark. They tend to be more famous figures, compared to the other names. Quite a few of the subscribers who received the regular copy have been forgotten and their names do not make entries in the Dictionary of National Biography, for example. In addition, the subscribers were mostly men, and their average age was around 50, that is, many of them were born before or during the early Stuart period. These subscribers can be divided into several groups according to their social background. The first group includes royals and aristocrats. For example, there is the name of Her Royal Highness the Princess Anne of Denmark. Anne (1665–1714) was a daughter of James II, and at that time her elder sister Mary was Queen of England. She also became Queen in 1702. Princess Anne is one of the very few woman subscribers in the list. Her preceptor Henry Compton (1631/2–1713), Bishop of London, is also among the subscribers; he went to Queen’s College, Oxford. Another example from this group is Viscount Weymouth, Sir Thomas Thynne (1640–1714) who was a graduate of Christ Church. He was a politician and had a part in the Glorious Revolution. His name appears in *Athenae Oxonienses* in the article for William Burton, the antiquary. There Thynne is mentioned as the one who succeeded to the antiquarian materials, manuscripts, coins, etc., when Burton passed away. Thynne himself was much interested in coins and manuscripts, and in 1664 he
was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. We also find the name of Henry, Duke of Beaufort, Henry Somerset (1629–1707) who was a member of a powerful aristocratic family.

Next, there is a group of Church of England bishops who also had important roles at the university. The utmost example is Nicholas, Lord Bishop of Chester (1633–1707) who ordered 10 copies. There are some people who ordered multiple copies, but nobody else ordered as many as he did. He went to Trinity College, and later he served as the king’s chaplain. He must have been affluent at that time, but it is not clear why he wanted 10 copies. Thomas Lord Bishop of Rochester, Thomas Sprat was also a king’s chaplain. Dr. Ralph Bathurst (1620–1704) who ordered 3 copies was Dean of Trinity. He was very active after the Restoration and became King’s chaplain and Fellow of the Royal Society. He was also vice-president of Oxford University from 1673 for 3 years. Wood was not always on good terms with him since he was banned from Trinity by him. Besides, Leopold Finch who was Dean of All Souls College ordered 2 copies as well. We also find several deans and graduates of Christ Church. First of all, we see 3 Atterburys on the list. They were most probably Lewis Atterbury the father, Lewis his first son, and Francis the younger son. All went to Christ Church and both sons went to Westminster School\(^7\). William Camden was a graduate of Christ Church, and became a teacher, eventually headmaster, of Westminster. In fact, the two institutions had an agreement which enabled several Westminster students to go to Christ Church every year. Now we might assume that when Thomas Bennet the publisher made the sample the target clients included people like the Atterburys. Christ Church was the most influential college of all, and was at that time the centre of conservative Toryism.

From the subscribers’ list, we can also discern another group of people who were concerned with book selling and book collecting. Richard Chiswell was one of the major London booksellers of the seventeenth century and dealt in books covering a variety of subjects. We cannot know for sure if he subscribed to *Athenae* for himself or for one of his clients. There are about 20 booksellers in the list, and it is hard to imagine that all of them wanted a copy personally for themselves. One of Chiswell’s important clients, Sir William Boothby, is also in the subscribers’ list. Boothby was a Derbyshire man, and he collected thousands of books. It is possible that Boothby ordered his copy via Chiswell. Other famous booksellers include Robert Clavell and John Churchill. Clavell began his career by publishing the 6th edition of Camden’s *Remains Concerning Britain* in 1657. He was a very successful bookseller and had an important position in the Stationers’ Company. He was also an editor of the Term Catalogues. John Churchill was also a major bookseller of the period. His most important writer
was John Locke, and his other publications include Camden’s *Britannia* (1722) and Strype’s *Survey of London* (1720). Remotely related to Duke of Marlborough, Churchill was also a politician. Yet his publications were of diverse interests.

**Conclusion**

The subscription publication worked when the publisher or the author received support from patrons who paid the subscription. In the list of the subscribers for *Athenae*, there are the names of the author’s and the publisher’s friends. It is apparent from the list that there is a certain group of people who were associated with Christ Church. Christ Church was not the college where Wood was matriculated, but he had friends there. Wood mentions many names of the university including several Christ Church people in his diary, such as Arthur Charlet who subscribed to *Athenae*. Because of his peculiar character Wood was never a popular person at Oxford, and this did not help him to secure subscriptions. However, he had unequaled talent as an antiquary, and it must have been recognised by all who subscribed to his work. In contrast, Thomas Bennet the publisher had a strong connection with the scholars of the university and with Christ Church in particular. As mentioned above, there are Bennet’s book adverts in both volumes of *Athenae*. Among the religious publications in his adverts, we see the names of some subscribers who also had associations with Christ Church. For example, the books by Jonathan Lord Bishop of Exeter and Francis Atterbury are listed. Especially, Francis Atterbury was his important author, and Atterbury preached a sermon at Bennet’s funeral in 1706. In addition, Christ Church was in the late seventeenth century the centre of Toryism which Bennet supported. Bennet had made a will before his untimely death at the age of 41. One of his wishes was to have a sermon delivered 3 times a year by a preacher chosen from students of Christ Church who had been educated at Westminster School. Although this part of the will was never administered, it further indicates Bennet’s faith in and attachment to these institutions. In addition, there are Bennet’s authors, mostly “future” authors, among the subscribers.

The subscribers’ list proves that the publication of *Athenae* was finally realized by the efforts of both the author and the publisher. Although the relationship between Wood and Bennet is not very clear, at least the list tells us that each of them succeeded in securing subscribers from their friends and patrons in order to bring the book to the world.
Notes


2 See, for example, John Feather, *A Dictionary of Book History* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).


4 All the references to the Term Catalogues are from *The Term Catalogues*, edited by Edward Arber, 3 vols. (Privately printed in London, 1903–1906).

5 In his diary of 1691 Wood says “June 18, Thursday, Athenae et Fasti Oxon were published at London ... June 22, M., I presented one to the vicechancellor to whome it is partly dedicated and at the same time I gave him one for the Library.” Anthony Wood, *The Life and Times of Anthony a Wood*, edited by Llewlyn Powys, (London: Wishart, 1932).

6 Only two other subscribers were women. They were Lady Elizabeth Corbet of Acton Reynolds in Salop and a woman called “Lady Lloyd.”

7 Besides the Atterburys, among the subscribers who had associations with Christ Church, Robert South (1634–1716), for example, had the same educational background.