



Pearson, David. *Book Owners Online*.

Pearson, David. *Book Owners Online*. Last Modified 11 May 2021. UCL Centre for Editing Lives and Letters, 2021. <https://bookowners.online/>

Book Owners Online (BOO) is the work of the distinguished book historian David Pearson and a technical team that have helped translate his long-respected bibliography *English Book Owners in the Seventeenth Century* into a digital platform. The growing database contains entries for just over 1,800 17th and 18th century British book owners.

By building the database around known collectors, rather than works or institutions, BOO contributes key data in an easily searchable form to provenance studies. Its great achievement is permitting the book historian, rare book cataloger, or bookseller a comparative glimpse into the collecting habits of a large sample of individuals. There is plenty to discover in BOO, and much of the content is available under CC BY-NC 4.0.

BOO's homepage includes a brief introduction to the site, though to date it sadly lacks the prefatory paragraphs from *English Book Owners*, which provide a succinct and persuasive primer on the goals, methodology, and resources of book ownership studies. Luckily, the original bibliography remains accessible in the [BIBSITE](#) section of the Bibliographical Society of America's (BSA) website.

Seasoned provenance researchers should find the new iteration of Pearson's bibliographic project relatively easy to navigate. Scholars emerging during the present proliferation of digital platforms will find the database behaves like many others in the category. Each book owner's entry includes elements for biographical information, books owned, characteristic markings, sources consulted, and the database-assigned categories associated with an entry. The completeness of these elements varies greatly, but contributions are welcome and updates are ongoing. Additional filters allow searches across known professions and more. The Wiki-based platform permits keyword, index, image, and enhanced semantic searches. Visitors may, therefore, treat BOO as reference site, applying search filters to peruse by an owner's profession, armorial stamps, marginalia, or other characteristics. Alternatively, the site may be treated as a dataset, useful for identifying patterns across these early modern collections.

For all its unique perspective affords, BOO has its limitations. Little to no granular data accompanies the title lists of the works held in the various private collections, so a deeper understanding of their

owners' tastes, collecting habits, etc., elude us without further research. In many cases, how these owners bound their works, for example, remains unclear. Just how titles were acquired also often remains understandably unknown. While enriched metadata of this sort is undoubtedly a lot to ask of a single database, the information BOO does afford only whets one's appetite to know more. To be fair, BOO clearly acknowledges it is a starting point for deeper research. Unfortunately, BOO's interface would benefit from a careful editing, as it still bears signs of construction: at least one link leads nowhere, while alternative text is occasionally missing from images, leaving some scholars with only limited accessibility to these resources.

Through no fault of its own, BOO also points to a constant challenge in provenance studies: the limited presence of women and literate commoners in the historical record. To its credit, BOO tags the 53 women in the directory, though they represent a mere 3% of the site's dataset.

A full accounting of early book ownership will, of course, never be possible, but the researcher will do well to remember BOO represents the libraries, or the records of libraries, that were privileged to survive, built by those with the privilege to do so in the first place. Individual scholars can help address this gap by accepting BOO's invitation and contributing their own research on book owners obscured by history. With an eye toward further development, BOO invites supplemental information for incomplete entries as well as full-length entries for owners not yet listed.

For all the wonderful answers it provides, BOO is also the site of many mysteries, featuring riddles and dead ends. Following the link for Anne Bayning, for example, we learn she was Viscountess Bayning 1619-1678, but subsequently little more: "Three books are recorded in the armorials database with one of two monogram stamps identified with Anne Bayning but this attribution cannot be right as one dates from 1678 and the others from the 1680s." Meanwhile, "Her will . . . has no mention of books . . . She is, clearly, someone who is likely to have owned books, but we do not have any evidence of the size or contents of her book closet." At moments like this, the reviewer hoped to see more granular data, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of the project.

It is easy to visit BOO and come away wanting more, but then that is not such a bad way to inspire the next generation of provenance scholars. Such inspiration might also be found by following BOO's *Facebook* page, where Pearson and others post a steady stream of rich images. The page tends to feature volumes whose ownership is undetermined, inviting visitors to follow the clues as crowdsourced detectives. The appeal of ownership studies is, of course, the pursuit of elusive answers, and BOO provides the book detective a powerful new tool in solving such stubborn mysteries.

Ron McColl

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