

Obituary in the *Scotsman*,
Monday 21 February 1938:
Late Mr G. P. Johnston,
Noted Scottish Bibliographer

W.B. [WILLIAM BEATTIE]

A LIBRARY EXPERT

Bibliographers and collectors of books both in this country and America will learn with regret of the death at Colinton of Mr George P. Johnston, one of the founders of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society, and for 42 years its honorary secretary. He is survived by two sons and four daughters. Despite his 88 years, Mr Johnston retained excellent health to the end of his life, and indeed it is only five years or so since he retired from his business of antiquarian bookseller and library expert.

Few can remember him in his early days when he was in charge of the book department of Dowell's auction rooms or when he engaged in the trade of bookseller first in Hanover Street and then at the junction of that street with George Street. But a number even of younger men must have pleasant recollections of his later premises at No. 37 George Street. Johnston, always a neat and remarkably erect figure, would receive one with almost ceremonial courtesy and stand in front of his fire talking with vigour of a variety of subjects, but principally of bibliography, changes in Edinburgh life, and, above all, of the Society which meant so much to him and to which he gave unsparingly of his best.

WORK FOR SCOTTISH NATIONAL LIBRARY

His business experience ranged far beyond the bounds of antiquarian bookselling as the term is understood today. There can be few of the larger private libraries in Scotland that he was not asked to inspect at some time or other, and of many of them he compiled a catalogue. His own trade catalogues (often embellished with borders or devices of early Scottish printers) were not only exceedingly well produced but full of extraordinarily accurate descriptions of really rare books; and among the more important Scottish books that have changed hands within the last fifty years one meets few that are without the short but comprehensive bibliographical note which he usually pencilled on the front board or end-paper. The idea of a Scottish National Library had always interested him, and when such a library was

finally established [in 1925], he derived peculiar pleasure from the happy chance that one of the first donations received should be the books and pamphlets from Lord Rosebery's collection at Barnbougle Castle, of which he had some time before produced an admirable catalogue. From the establishment of the National Library of Scotland to the year of his retirement he was indefatigable in his search for obscure Scottish pamphlets that did not appear in the Library catalogue, and, thanks to his energy, countless lacunae were filled.

WIDE KNOWLEDGE OF SCOTTISH BOOKS

The result of all this varied experience was that Johnson acquired a wide and deep knowledge of Scottish books and printers which sometimes outran that of even the most learned of his predecessors, George Chalmers and David Laing. Something of this knowledge emerged in his own contributions to the *Publications of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, but at least as much in his editorial supervision of that series, for there were few contributors to it who were not indebted to his encouragement and instruction; and it is well known that, but for his modest refusal to allow his name to appear on the title-page, the Society's *List of books printed in Scotland before 1700* would now be known not as 'Aldis' but as 'Aldis and Johnston'. He received a double recognition of his services to the Society in 1935 when he was made its first honorary president and was offered with an affectionate dedication from his fellow members Mr M. R. Dobie's general index to the 15 volumes of the *Publications*, whose utility was thereby greatly enhanced.

But Johnston's influence on bibliographical studies was not confined to the rather narrow limits of the Edinburgh Society. In carrying on its work he was fortunate in having the friendly help of strict bibliographers like E. Gordon Duff, Francis Jenkinson, H. G. Aldis, J. P. Edmond, William Cowan, John Scott and Mr A. W. Pollard. But he was additionally fortunate in counting as his fellow-members men like Thomas Graves Law, David Hay Fleming, Walter Blaikie, and Mr J. D. Ogilvie, who were more than bibliographers and who both in the Society and outside were able to give Johnston's highly specialised field a wider application and a more general usefulness than it would otherwise have possessed.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

William Beattie (d.1986) succeeded George P. Johnston as secretary of the EBS. He was Keeper of Printed Books in the National Library of Scotland 1931 to 1933 and Librarian 1953 to 1970.

