

## BOUND FOR LEATHER by James Dawson

The protective cover of a book is its binding. This is usually a thin pasteboard type of material covered with paper, cloth or leather and nowadays, imitation leather (which is made from the skins of imaginary animals?). Quality books have had leather bindings for hundreds of years. Books can be collected just for their bindings either because of the decorative value or because of who bound it.

Up until the early 1800's, books didn't always come already bound from the printer. Often they came in "boards" which would be plain board covers with no covering on them. Your book binder would bind the book to your requirements, even stamping your coat of arms on the fancy cover or your choice. Books became much more affordable in the 19th century and usually were bought already bound. Books could be offered in a choice of bindings limited only on the size of your purse.

Books were bound in many different types of leather even before the first printed books of the mid 1400's. Not many people could read then, let alone afford the expense of a hand copied and illuminated book. Rich owners wanted their books bound in the best materials and even had them decorated with precious and semi-precious stones. Libraries often chained each book to the shelf to prevent theft. Plainer, more utilitarian leather covers were used by the early 1800's and inexpensive leather bindings appeared around 1900.

Elbert Hubbard founded Roycrofters in East Aurora, N.Y., before he had the misfortune to go down with the Lusitania. Besides making furniture and metal ware, he designed and published a line of books which are collected today. They are easy to spot as they are usually bound in a rough suede binding with gilt lettering. Most are of smaller size (maybe 5 x 7) but expensive ones were larger and came autographed by Hubbard. Hubbard had a small factory going to produce them and probably did not personally sign all the ones that sport his autograph.

These books were in the medieval arts and crafts style popular then, but aren't as handmade as they might look. True medieval books might have been bound in vellum, but not in suede. Roycroft books are becoming harder to find, especially in good condition, and prices range from \$25 up to several hundred dollars for rare items. Be warned that the suede binding often becomes powdery as it disintegrates and there is nothing that can be done to save it. If you put a leather binding preservative on their rough unfinished leather covers, you will end up with a gloppy mess.

Even cheaper leather books were produced in the teens and twenties by the Little Leather Library which issued copyright free classics on acidic paper. They are small in size (3 1/2 x 4 inches) and have a stiff, thin leather cover usually green, brown or red embossed with the book's title. Individual books are worth only a very few dollars today, but if you find sets of them in their original boxes, the value goes up to a few hundred dollars.

Today, some publishers are mass marketing inexpensive leather books by sending out fliers and advertising in Sunday supplements. Their books are slightly gaudy, but might tone down nicely in a hundred years, if they last that long. They are made using a bonded leather (sort of reconstituted leather scraps) which a knowledgeable restorer described as a "chipboard-like material". They provide instant

leather for the less discriminating collector, but aren't a good investment, usually selling for \$25-\$35 in the second hand market, which is half or less their new cost.

Book binding can be an art form just like printing. Gifted binders even use multicolor dyes to decorate the bindings with designs; tree calf is leather with a streaky, tree-like design. Quality leather books of any era could come in a variety of colors and styles and with gold-tooled decoration. Brown is most common, blue is uncommon. Book spines might have raised bands on them, which is called a hubbed spine. Famous binders usually signed their efforts with their name printed in tiny letters on the inside corner of the cover or the end paper. A signed binding like that can add hundreds of dollars to the value of a book.

Value can depend on how big the book is and what kind of binding it is in. Quarter leather is the least expensive and has leather only the spine of the book, the rest of the cover would be either a cloth or decorated paper covered boards; half leather is when the book has a leather spine and leather covers on the corners; three quarter leather is when the leather from the spine extends across the cover almost touching the leather corners; full leather means just that. The more leather, the higher the price. And no, a book bound in full leather with one of the covers missing does not then become a half leather binding.

Nice looking leather bindings are in demand by collectors and decorators, who sometimes don't care what is inside, as long as it is pretty. One customer asked me for three feet of leather books of a certain shade of blue to match the decor of her room. She said she needed them to make a statement. I shudder to think what that statement was (Hey, look at me! My books match my drapes!). Collectors want leather in attractive condition.

Leather bindings can be quite durable, but do require some care as improper storage can destroy them. They should be stored upright on shelves away from direct sunlight and sources of heat or air conditioning. If you are comfortable, then the book is, too. Avoid extremes of temperature and humidity. I have seen book spines that literally were charred and disintegrating. Not from a fire, but from years of sunshine. These books were ruined and worthless. Modern central heating can also dry out and cause the leather to become so brittle that when you open the cover, the leather hinge cracks and the front cover falls off. Even one damaged leather volume from a set can ruin the set, as it would be almost impossible to have that one book rebound to match the others. Glass fronted book cases provide extra protection and help keep the books clean. Condition is everything with leather.

As an art and craft, book binding and repair has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years. Check the yellow pages for a binder near you. It is sometimes prohibitively expensive to rebind a large set, unless it has historical or sentimental value. Imagine attempting to rebind a 25 volume set of Dicken's works at \$ 75+ per volume! Buying another set would be much cheaper. Family bibles may be the most common leather books to be rebound.

Treating leather bindings with a leather preservative can help save them, if they aren't too far gone. This is usually a mixture of lanolin and neats foot oil. Put a little on with a cloth and gently rub the leather, let it sit for an hour or so and carefully buff off any excess. Don't get it on any paper as it will stain. Don't use just neats foot oil alone which can make a mess, or saddle soap which can leave a white deposit. A colored

shoe cream or shoe polish can restore faded color and give a shine to worn bindings (after all, leather is leather).

Old leather books aren't that hard to find today, even ones two hundred years old, but usually they are in poor condition and with missing or detached covers. They may be worth only a few dollars in that condition, and may or may not be worth repairing depending on a number of factors: what the book is, who wrote it, when it was printed, who printed it, where it was printed, who bound it, who owned it all have to be taken into consideration. Sometimes the age alone isn't enough to make a book collectible.

It may be better and cheaper to restore and repair an original binding than it is to have it completely rebound in a new binding. Rare books should be kept as original as possible. If the book has no covers, then a good binder can rebind it and make it look much like it did originally. For some reason, most binders stamp the book's printing date onto the base of the spine which was almost never done originally. This is a quick test to see if a book has been rebound.

Nice leather is hard to find and easy to sell! And they sure look pretty on your shelves.

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