

Owen Gingerich's detailed census of the first and second editions of Copernicus's *De revolutionibus*, the book that suggested that the earth revolved around the sun, includes descriptions of the notations found in the margins of each copy of the book.

## BOOK CENSUSES

*Making every copy count*

Tracking down the surviving copies of a rare book is seldom an easy task, unless there is just one known copy, like the 1594 quarto of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* or the 1493 Spanish folio edition of Columbus's letter describing his discovery of America. For most books, the task is difficult. There are for example, several dozen copies, in varying states of preservation and completeness, of the Gutenberg Bible and well over two hundred copies of the First Folio, the first collected edition of William Shakespeare's plays, published in 1623. The more important (and expensive) a book is, the more likely it is that collectors and booksellers have tried to track down the locations of the surviving copies to establish its rarity and to assess the likelihood of future appearances on the market. Depending on the thoroughness of the survey and the amount of detail recorded, this kind of detective work can take days or decades. When the results of these surveys are published, they become reference works for anyone interested in the books themselves, and they provide troves of information for those fascinated by the history of book collecting.

Bibliographers, book historians, and collectors have published a considerable volume of information about particular copies

of books, but compiling a complete list of all known copies of a book is much more difficult and far less usual. Joseph van Praet included the locations of the copies of the books he listed in the *Catalogue des livres imprimés sur vélin* (Catalog of Books Printed on Vellum), which was published between 1822 and 1828, but few other bibliographers followed suit. One of the first attempts at a complete census of a book was Sidney Lee's tabulation of the First Folio, which was appended to Oxford University Press's 1902 facsimile. In this pioneering census, Lee identified and provided details about 158 copies. Four years later, in his *Notes and Additions to the Census*, he was able to add fourteen more to his total.

Lee, who is thought to be the first bibliographer to apply the term census to a listing of all of the known copies of a book, organized his work based on the condition of the books, rather than arranging the listings in groups according to the countries and towns in which they were located. Collectors of modern literature need to adjust their usual standards of condition considerably when looking at First Folios. Nearly all copies have been rebound,

with many of the bindings dating from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Famous books also tend to receive much more repair work than lower-priced volumes, and most First Folios have indeed been heavily repaired, with title-pages and other significant leaves remargined or restored. First Folios have often been sophisticated, or made up from leaves taken

from more than one copy. Some copies have had missing leaves replaced by facsimiles, too. First Folios sometimes have manuscript notes or other distinctive markings, and a bibliographer doing a census can potentially record all of this information.

The importance of details such as these, and the potential use of a book census as a tool against

crime, is illustrated by the current case of the University of Durham's missing First Folio. This Shakespeare Folio was stolen from the university library in December 1998. In the most recent census of Shakespeare First Folios, which was compiled by Anthony James West and published in 2003, the Durham copy "is given its rightful position in the census in the hope that it will be returned." West also provided whatever information he could

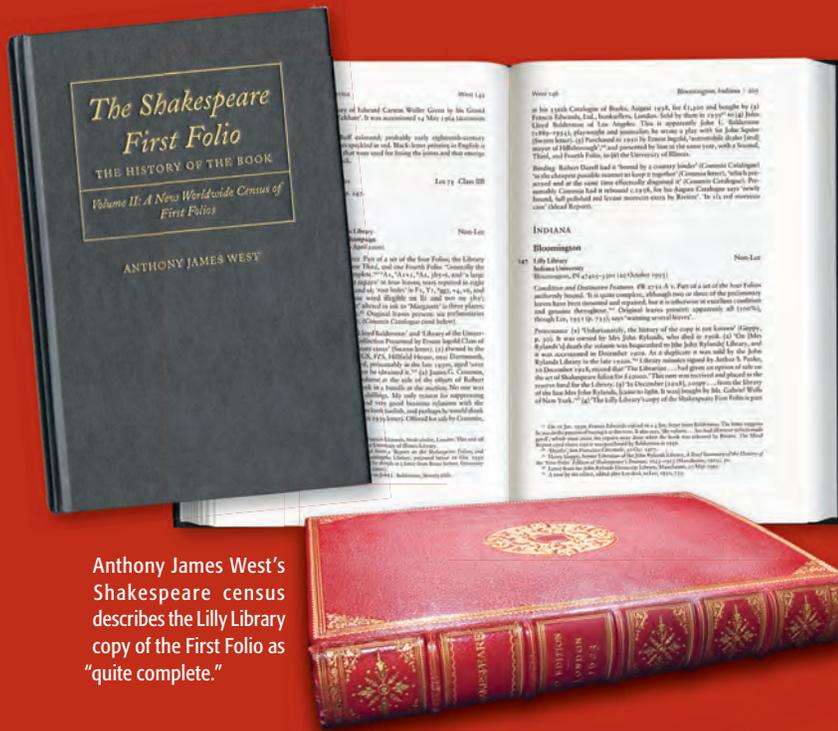


**Joel Silver**  
is Curator of  
Rare Books at  
the Lilly Library.  
Contact him at  
[joel@finebooks.com](mailto:joel@finebooks.com).

## FURTHER READING

**T**he *Book Nobody Read* is a good place to start to learn about the effort and knowledge required to make a book census. For those who want additional reading about travels in search of copies of books, Don Cleveland Norman's lavishly produced tale of his travel adventures in search of copies of the Gutenberg Bible, *The 500TH Anniversary Pictorial Census of the Gutenberg Bible* (Chicago: Coverdale Press, 1961), is a well-illustrated, though far from scholarly, account. Anthony James West's census is *The Shakespeare First Folio: The History of the Book. Volume II: A New Worldwide Census of First Folios* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). This forms a part of a planned four-volume set on the First Folio which, when completed, will be a major resource for scholars and bibliographers.

The future possibilities of book censuses are laid out in "De Revolutionibus in Bibliography: Analysing the Copernican Census," Neil Harris's review of Owen Gingerich's census efforts (*The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*, Seventh Series, Volume 3, September 2006, pages 320 to 329). In addition to covering the strengths and weaknesses of Gingerich's work, Harris also discusses the ways that collectors have treated some treasured rarities of English literature, such as the Shakespeare Folios and Quartos. He also explains how a focus on books such as these has affected our perceptions of European books from the handpress period.



Anthony James West's Shakespeare census describes the Lilly Library copy of the First Folio as "quite complete."

obtain on the condition, distinctive features, and provenance of the Durham Folio.

What would previously have appeared to non-bibliophiles as a mass of arcane and superfluous information took on new importance this past June, when a First Folio was brought to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., for evaluation. Upon examination, the librarians and a consultant matched the book to West's description of the Durham copy. Although it's too early to tell how things will finally be settled, it's clear that whatever the result, West's extremely detailed census of the 230-odd surviving copies of Shakespeare's First Folio has already played an important role.

The current case of the Durham Folio isn't the only time that a census has been useful in the identification of a stolen book. The Harvard astrophysicist Owen Gingerich spent several decades pursuing every copy of the first (1543) and second (1566) editions of *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres) by Nicolaus Copernicus. Gingerich's travels have taken him around the world, and he has personally examined hundreds of copies of these books and made notes on their characteristics and peculiarities. Gingerich has been consulted whenever a copy of

*De revolutionibus* is in question, and he has served as an expert witness and a consultant in cases involving thefts of the book. In *An Annotated Census of Copernicus' "De revolutionibus,"* Gingerich revealed the results of his examinations and the extent to which each of the copies had been annotated by its various owners. Though the census is intended for specialists, Gingerich went on to describe his pursuit of Copernicus for a more general audience in *The Book Nobody Read: Chasing the Revolutions of Nicolaus Copernicus* (New York: Walker, 2004), which described the original production and dissemination of *De revolutionibus*, and also provided an engaging account of Gingerich's travels.

Few people devote their lives to studying unimportant books, and as a result, the subjects of censuses have tended to be books that are considered landmarks and that are also highly valued in the rare-book market. There have been a number of censuses devoted to the Gutenberg Bible, as well as a series of censuses of the surviving copies of the Shakespeare Quartos (as the individual plays published in the smaller quarto format are called). The remarkable bibliographer Seymour de Ricci compiled several detailed censuses, including listings of medieval manuscripts in American libraries, the pro-

ductions of William Caxton (the first printer in England), and the earliest books printed in Mainz, Germany, where Johann Gutenberg worked. There also have been several published censuses of incunabula in American libraries, and for those interested in more modern books, there are censuses of the suppressed 1865 edition of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as well as of the first edition (1922) of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Censuses are currently underway for the 1859 first edition of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and the 1896 edition of Chaucer printed by William Morris at the Kelmscott Press.

In *The Wanderings and Homes of Manuscripts*, M. R. James wrote about the circuitous journeys taken by medieval manuscripts. Censuses of printed books—particularly those that provide information on the succession of owners of the books described—can be read like bibliophilic novels and travelogues, with the books themselves as the main characters and with readers, booksellers, collectors, and librarians taking the supporting roles. Reading a book census (and the best of them can indeed be read straight through) will teach you a great deal about books and the history of collecting. 📖