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## The Lost Gutenberg: how the Holy Grail of rare books drove obsessed collectors to ruin



Book collector Estelle Doheny examining the Gutenberg Bible

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By **Peter Stanford**

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### Peter Stanford reviews *The Lost Gutenberg* by Margaret Leslie Davis

Despite all predictions to the contrary, our love affair with books continues unabated. Some, though, have taken that obsession to extremes. One of these was Estelle Doheny. She started her career as a humble telephonist, but following her marriage in 1900 to multi-millionaire American oilman Ned Doheny (who liked the sound of her voice at the other end of the line and wanted to meet her), Doheny became one of the wealthiest women in the world.

Completely self-taught in the matter of rare and ancient books, over four decades she assembled one of the 20th century’s greatest private libraries. To crown that remarkable achievement, she wanted, like many before her, her own copy of the world’s first printed book. In *The Lost Gutenberg*, Margaret Leslie Davis tells the story of how Estelle finally achieved it, in 1950.

Quite why possessing one of the 48 – some say 49 – surviving copies of the Bibles printed with movable metal type by Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz around 1456 (previously, each new copy of the Bible had to be handwritten, usually by monks) came to mean so much to Estelle is what really intrigues Davis. She could, after all, have spent her fortune on good works, or big houses and supercars. But, instead, she opted for old books.

In a fluently told, well-executed history, Davis takes us back through the line of owners who previously possessed what is known in the rare books trade as Gutenberg Number 45. In identifying the motivations of these wealthy “bibliomaniacs”, she not only shines a light on the stories of several fascinating custodianships, but also reveals something about those who are driven to collect books, whether they search out first editions of a favoured novelist or pursue a [Gutenberg Bible](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/the-most-valuable-rare-books-in-existence/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/the-most-valuable-rare-books-in-existence/>).



A digitised copy of pages of the Book of Judges from the Gutenberg Bible CREDIT: AP PHOTO/UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

Most of Gutenberg’s run of around 180 Bibles were originally sold to the great abbeys and monasteries of Europe, and then ended up in the private libraries of leading church figures

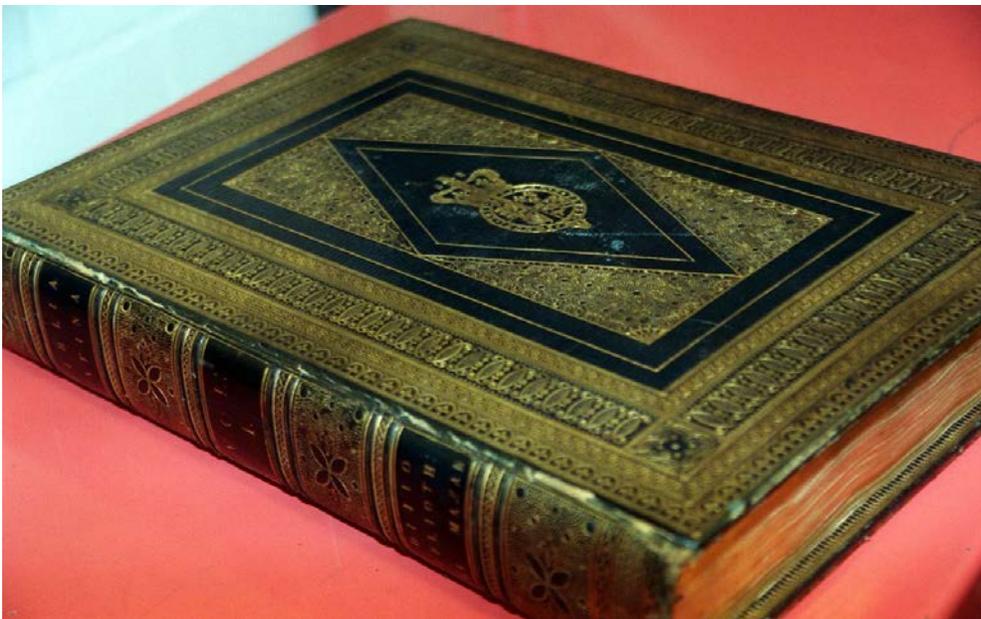
such as Cardinal Mazarin, chief minister of France under first Louis XIII and then Louis XIV. They had, Davis writes, been all but forgotten before the French book expert Guillaume-Francois de Bure stumbled across the cardinal's copy in 1763. It was his investigation into the book's origins that revealed the Gutenberg Bibles' true significance, and kickstarted the trade in them.

Napoleon gave the whole business a new impetus at the start of the 19th century: he was determined that these Bibles would bejewel the Bibliotheque Nationale de France in Paris, whether they had been obtained for a fair price, or simply looted as part of his conquest of Europe. By the mid-19th century, however, the action had moved to Britain, where collectors like Archibald Acheson, the third Earl of Gosford, were seeking the coveted editions.

He purchased Number 45 in 1836 as the centrepiece for the cathedral-like library at the heart of the Norman revival castle he was building in the north of Ireland. He had prospered as the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of Empire had made Britain the world's greatest power, and he was hungry for trophies to flaunt his wealth.

In aristocratic circles at the time – as exemplified by the Roxburghe Club, a circle of high-born collectors – ancient books were highly desirable objects, possession of which served to massage their owners' egos. The 2nd Earl Spencer had purchased a Gutenberg for his library at the family seat, Althorp in Northamptonshire, and Acheson was determined not to be outdone.

His ambitions, though, proved bigger than his bank account, and by the time he died at the age of 57, he was crippled with debt on his still-to-be-completed house. His 19-year-old son and heir then frittered away what was left on the gambling tables, and so was forced in 1884, as a final symbol of defeat, to sell off his father's most prized possession.



Gutenberg's Bible at the British Library CREDIT: ARIELE GOLDMAN/PA

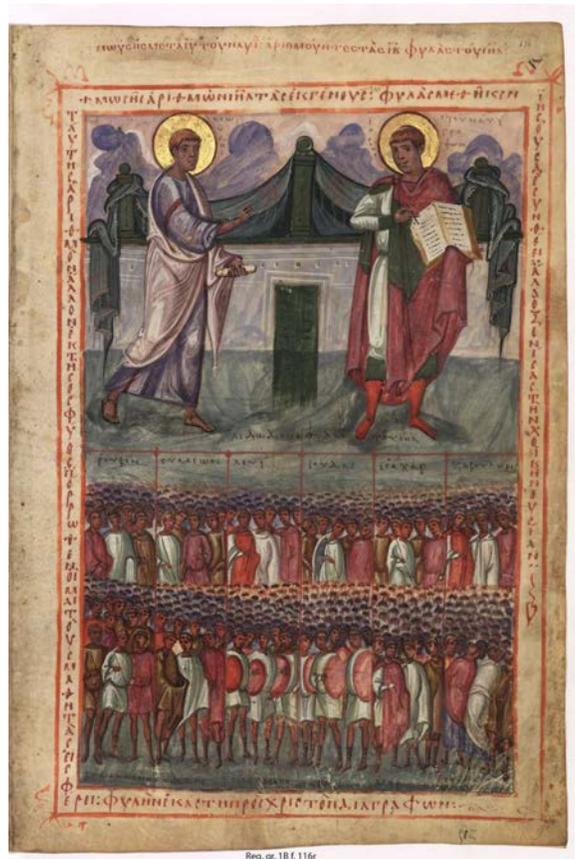
If Acheson had simply wanted the Gutenberg Bible as a status symbol – there is no evidence that he ever took it off the shelf and leafed through its pages – its next owner loved it for the

door it opened on to the past. Eton and Oxford-educated William Tyssen-Amherst, first an MP, later Lord Amherst of Hackney, and possessor of a bottomless trust-fund, collected antiquities of all varieties and from all corners of the world at his Norfolk home, Diddington Hall.

Despite his genuine bibliophile passion, his custodianship, too, ended in ruin, when his lawyer embezzled the unworldly Amherst's fortune, and the whole collection had to be auctioned in 1908 to meet his debts. For £2,050 – a princely sum at the time – Charles Dyson obtained Number 45. His money came, in the parlance of the time, from “trade”. He was the son of one of the creators of Lea and Perrins sauce, and owner, too, of the china manufacturers, Royal Worcester.

Like Amherst, he bought for love – albeit in his case more specifically for books, as well as for status – but ultimately it served him no better. Dyson spent the first half of the 20th century in a long struggle to keep his china factory afloat against cut-price competitors, selling first his sauce factory to HP, and then slowly but steadily parting with every single one of his assets until, in 1948, even the Gutenberg had to be sacrificed for a nobler cause.

Which is where Estelle Doheny comes in. The 20th century had seen the rise of American collectors like JP Morgan and Henry Huntington, who were anxious to build libraries – “flexing their New World muscle” as Davis puts it – and prices had been spiralling. Doheny had the \$25,000 (£19,650) required in loose change, but once again her bookishness carried with it tragedy.



Her husband Ned had been disgraced in a 1924 bribery and political corruption case known as the “Teapot Dome”. Ned was acquitted in court, but the couple lived under a cloud until his death in 1935. “Ma Dee”, as she was known to some, wanted to use the millions he had made to create and then bequeath a library that would be a lasting monument to all that was best about her late husband.

At the same time, and arguably more deeply than any of the previous owners of Number 45, she also wanted her books for themselves. But there is a final sting in the tail of this story. Estelle Doheny, who in business had a reputation as a tough cookie, entrusted her books to the Catholic archdiocese of Los Angeles, building a library to house her collection at their seminary. The drafting of the legal agreement around the gift was loose, however, and 25 years after she died the Church betrayed her, cashing in her collection for \$37.8 million at auction on the basis that old books were worse than useless in the training of priests. Davis alleges that some of the money raised went on refurbishing the archbishop’s home.

There is, you sense, a book to be written about that scandal, and another, perhaps, about how Gutenberg 45 has now joined other ancient European texts in Japan, where a new generation of bibliophiles is leading the market – and opening up access to them online, where you can see but not touch. But none of that is Davis’s intention here. This is, at heart, and with heart, an entertaining and insightful human story of obsession about books, and a telling examination of what inspires those who catch the collecting bug

(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/goodlife/living/alan-titchmarsh-i-cant-stop-collecting-books/>).

**The Lost Gutenberg: The Astounding Story of One Book’s Five-Hundred-Year Odyssey is published by Atlantic at £18.99. To order your copy for £16.99, call 0844 871 1514 or visit the Telegraph Bookshop ([https://books.telegraph.co.uk/Product/Margaret-Leslie-Davis/The-Lost-Gutenberg--The-Astounding-Story-of-One-Books-Fiv/23442537?icid=com\\_tmgbooks\\_inarticlelink\\_generic](https://books.telegraph.co.uk/Product/Margaret-Leslie-Davis/The-Lost-Gutenberg--The-Astounding-Story-of-One-Books-Fiv/23442537?icid=com_tmgbooks_inarticlelink_generic))**

