Francis John Stainforth: A Biographical Sketch

“[Archives] are set up according to the categories that are important to the body that established them.”
- Natalie Zemon Davis

Preface
Knowledge of Francis John Stainforth’s life enables a more thorough understanding of the important private library of women’s writing that he collected. A larger project is underway in which we strive to answer more questions about Stainforth’s collections, personal life, and education, for instance, what he studied at Cambridge, how his sermons and studies relate to his various collections, when he started the book collection, how and why he began that enterprise, who his principle sources were for obtaining volumes, and why he preferred poetry and plays over novels. We will augment and revise this sketch of Stainforth’s life as we learn more. If you have research to contribute or feedback please email it to both Kirstyn.j.leuner@dartmouth.edu and Spc@colorado.edu. Thank you.

Overview
Francis John Stainforth (1797-1866) was a British Anglican clergyman who also left his mark as a consummate collector of books, stamps, and shells. He owned what was perhaps the largest private library of books by women writers in the nineteenth century, and he was an early and influential philatelist who helped establish the Royal Philatelic Society London.

Early Life, Family, Education, and Military Service
Francis Stainforth was baptized on December 14, 1797 at St. Peter Le Poor, in London, and raised in Middlesex, a small county in southeast England known for its agriculture. While details on Francis’s father, Richard B., are scant, his mother, Maria, was the second of five daughters of Sir Francis Baring (1740-1810) (Venn 5). The middle child, Francis had a brother, George (1796-1820), who was his elder by one year, as well as a much younger sister, Emillia (1811-1884).¹

It is possible that Francis Stainforth was named after his grandfather Baring: a powerful and successful English merchant banker in London and founder of the John and Francis Baring Company. At the apex of his career, he made his fortune as one of the first bankers to offer Britain’s allies foreign bonds as well as subsidies. He was also director of the East India
Company from 1779 until his death in 1810. The marriages of several of the 10 Baring children—Francis Stainforth’s mother and her siblings—were politically and financially advantageous allegiances. For example, two of Baring’s sons married the daughters of American Senator William Bingham, a wealthy landowner, and Baring’s third daughter, Dorothy, married Pierre César Labouchère of Hope & Co., the most powerful merchant bank in Amsterdam. Therefore, Francis Stainforth’s family belonged to a transatlantic network of political and commercial influence. (Orbell)

Stainforth’s education matched his family’s status, but he appears to have been more intellectually and spiritually driven than motivated by success in politics or business. He was admitted as a pensioner to St. John’s College in Cambridge University in 1816. He left Cambridge in 1817 for India, where he spent the next decade in the Bengal Cavalry. He was promoted to the rank of Comet in 1818 and Lieutenant in 1819 (Dodwell 246-7). Stainforth married Elizabeth Fraser, youngest daughter of Dr. Fraser of London, on January 23, 1823 in Banares, India, a holy city on the banks of the Ganges (“Marriages” 1823, 403). He resigned from the Army in 1827, with the rank of Captain, and moved back to England to settle with his wife and return to his studies at Cambridge (Dodwell 246-7). (Venn 5)

Queens’ College readmitted Stainforth on May 23, 1828, and he earned his B.A. from Cambridge in 1830, the same year he was ordained as a deacon in Lincoln (Venn 5; CCEd). While working on his B.A., he served as curate at Longstow, a village west of Cambridge, where he remained until December of 1830, at which time he transferred to the curacy at Buckden, about ten miles north of Longstow, while he worked toward his master’s degree (CCEd). Shortly thereafter, in 1831, his first wife died; Elizabeth was only 27 at the time. Nevertheless, he completed his M.A. from St. John’s in 1833 and was ordained a priest on February 16, 1834 (CCEd). In October 1838, he married his second wife, also named Elizabeth, an Irishwoman and daughter of E. S. Ruthven, M.P. for the city of Dublin (Venn 5; “Marriages” 1839, 89). In 1841, Rev. Stainforth became the curate of Camden Chapel in Surrey, where he remained until 1846, at which time he transferred to St Pancras, in London (CCEd). In 1852 he left St Pancras to become Perpetual Curate of All Hallows Staining, in southeastern London on the Thames, a position he held until his death in 1866 (Venn 5).

Non-Clerical Pursuits: Shells, Stamps, Music, and Books by Women
During his curacy, Stainforth devoted considerable spare time to non-clerical pursuits, including music, conchology, philately, and bibliography. His shell collection received special praise for its mitre shells. He sold his collection to conchologist Lovell Reeve in 1850, and Reeve named the specimen *Mitra Stainforthi* after the curate to credit his “important collection of Mitres accumulated after many years’ labour and expensive zeal” (Reeve Plate III). As early as 1851 Stainforth organized religious musical events around greater London as vice president of the London Sacred Harmonic Society, and in 1855 he acted as its president (“Harmonic Union,” 457).² At the same time, his stamp collection helped shape the development of philately practices at the birth of this field. Stainforth’s collection formed the basis of Mount Brown’s 1862 stamp
catalog, one of the earliest published in English (Hahn; Sloane). At his home, Stainforth also held Saturday meetings for a group of stamp collectors who, in 1869, created the Royal Philatelic Society London (Castle 282).

One could argue that his library was his largest and most historically significant collection. Stainforth acquired every title and edition of poetry and plays by women authors that he was able to find in print and manuscript form. He also gathered clippings of shorter pieces by women that appeared in periodicals. CU-Boulder owns the original manuscript catalog for Stainforth’s library, which contains shelfmarks and publication information for each work as well as a substantial wish list of books he hoped to add to his shelves. All tallied, the catalog lists over six thousand works by women writers as well as an additional 870 entries in his “Wants” list, about half of which are crossed off to indicate that he added them to his library (Burmester; Stainforth). This was the largest private collection of books by women writers in the nineteenth century, and it held a wide range of authors of various nationalities who published in five different centuries (Burmeister; Sotheby; Forman xv; Wadsworth 27-29). Authors include fifteenth-century writer Juliana Berners, eighteenth-century African-American poet Phillis Wheatley; Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning; as well as perhaps thousands of writers who are understudied, un-anthologized, working class women who contributed to literary history and print culture.

Death and Legacy
Extrapolating broadly from his military service, education, clerical career, and hobbies, we can speculate that Stainforth strove for excellence and to be regarded as an authority in each discipline he devoted himself to. For example, he gathered desirable and valuable niche collections of shells and stamps that he eventually sold to fortify well-respected archives. It appears that Stainforth also wanted his shells, stamps, and staggering collection of books to have a place in print in important catalogs that served as major references in their fields. Through strategic acquisitions, sales, and contributions to printed matter, his collections can still be traced to this day.

Stainforth died on September 3, 1866, at 9 Mark Lane in London, near St. Olave’s Church. His short obituary in the Gentleman’s Magazine reports few personal details except that he died after a “long and painful illness” (560)—the effects of which might explain the poor handwriting for 1865 and 1866 entries in his manuscript catalog. The author of Stainforth’s obituary in Stamp-Collector’s Magazine writes more extensively about the collector’s character in a way that suggests he knew him personally. He describes him as having an encyclopedic memory and amiable temperament. Furthermore, he paints Stainforth as sensitive, too trusting, even sheepish, and therefore vulnerable to more aggressive personalities in the collectors’ market, so much so that “he frequently became the prey of much younger but more worldly wise heads” (159). The author closes by remarking that when Stainforth added his stamp collection to Mount Brown’s, it helped create “what has now become the most valuable collection of postage
stamps in the world”—presumably that of the Royal Philatelic Society London’s collection (159).

His book collection and manuscript catalog, however, display a different archival methodology from that of his shells and stamp collections. I hypothesize that instead of acting as a donor to another book collector, Stainforth strove to be the preeminent authority and to compile the exhaustive record of circulating works by women poets and dramatists. In other words, I posit that he wanted to attract others to contribute to his master archive. Women writers certainly did, as they occasionally delivered their writing directly to him. Sadly, another bibliographer did not inherit the collection after Stainforth’s passing. His death precipitated his library to the auction block and scattered the painstakingly gathered volumes.5

The Auction and Library Catalogs
On July 1, 1867, ten months after his death, auctioneers Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge sold Stainforth’s impressive collection of books by women poets and dramatists. The auction lasted six days and comprised 3,076 lots, including books, manuscripts, and engravings. Though it dispersed the collection, the auction also advertised its existence and quantified its holdings in a detailed catalog, which was available two days before the July 1 auction and printed by J. Davy and Sons. The preface to the auction catalog describes its contents hyperbolically as exhaustive:

This celebrated and unrivalled series of the Poetical Compositions of British and American Female Writers, exhibiting in a complete form the growth and progress of the genius of Woman in the department of Poetry, has been selected, with great zeal, industry, and toil, with a view to rescue our fair Poetesses from oblivion. [...][It contains] the completest collection that could possibly be formed of the Works of Female Dramatic Writers, and of the Single Plays, and many other Compositions of writers in a superior grade of life, the whole forming AN ASSEMBLAGE WITHOUT PRECEDENT. [...] [N]o other of similar pretensions is known, nor would it be possible to get together another assemblage of works of a kindred nature, even with the most anxious and laborious research. (Sotheby iii-iv, my italics)

Sotheby’s preface codifies the collection as one that “rescue[s]” forgotten poetesses, conveys a “complete” archive of women’s poetry and, even more superlatively, offers “the completest collection that could possibly be formed” of women’s plays (iii).6 To call his library “complete” implies that he collected everything written by women poets and dramatists that circulated in the book market, which was not true. The “Wants” list in the back of Stainforth’s manuscript catalog, which the auctioneers knew about, demonstrates that works existed on the market that Stainforth desired and did not manage to acquire. However, he at least knew what he was missing and perhaps, by listing the “Wants” in his catalog, completed the collection in this manuscript if not in his bookcases.

Private library owners in the nineteenth century often printed and published catalogs of their holdings in order to generate a circulating trace of the library, usually part of a family’s
estate, which constructs an image of one’s fortune, heritage, and learning. For unknown reasons, Stainforth did not publish such a catalog. Instead, he grew the collection until his bitter end, which left the auctioneers with the tasks of printing and distributing his library catalog along with the library’s contents. These are tasks that Sotheby’s was invested in, as catalog distribution advertised the auction and would help turn profits during the sale.

Stainforth’s manuscript library catalog is vastly different from the auctioneers’ print catalog. The manuscript records and transmits a fuller view of Stainforth’s bibliographical project: his process of learning about titles and authors, shelving them in his library, and listing them alphabetically as acquisitions with a particular shelf mark. If he was unable to acquire a volume, the manuscript shows how he first listed it in his “Wants” in the back of the catalog, perhaps to be acquired later, crossed off of the “Wants” list, and added to the shelved book list with a shelf mark. When the library was set for sale, the auction house generated its catalog with new descriptions for each book that look more like advertisements, replaced the manuscript’s organization with lot numbers listed by day of the sale, and omitted the Wants list and shelf marks that make the manuscript so informative.

A print version of Stainforth’s manuscript catalog does not exist, but bibliographers in the nineteenth century did use the published auction catalog as a reference and a historical record of the library. For example, Stainforth’s library makes front-page news, or history, in an 1883 issue of *The Woman's Journal*. The author, who goes by the initials T. W. H., treats the 16-year-old auction catalog as a recently discovered source of data that will provide a new appreciation for the scope of women writers’ contributions to literary history. T. W. H. explains that she sits with Sotheby’s catalogue before her, and by using its numbered list and organization to grasp the extent of the library, marvels at the collection as a “vast and singular monument of the literary industry of English and American women” (297). Her language describes it not as a large yet finite archive of poets and dramatists, but instead, as a broader measure of the abundant intellectual products of women writers across all genres and eras of literary production.

Furthermore, bibliographer and biographer Harry Buxton Forman writes about Sotheby’s auction catalog of Stainforth’s library not as a relic or monument, but as a finding aid for researching women writers he wanted to learn more about. In his introduction to the revised biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1913), he recounts how he used the Sotheby’s catalog to discover works by Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley:

> It occurred to me to consult the auction catalogue of the Stainforth collection of poetry by women, a collection reputed to have contained everything and anything in verse published by English or American women up to 1866. It is a thoroughly useful work of reference, like many other sale catalogues issued by those eminent auctioneers Sotheby, Wilkinson, and Hodge. *I always have it at hand.* (xv, my emphasis)

In the early twentieth century, Forman uses the auctioneers’ Stainforth library catalog in much the same way that the editors of the Stainforth Library of Women Writers project do: as a reference to recover poetry and drama by women writers who are not well known. His assertion
that it is always “at hand” emphasizes how useful the auction catalog became such that it sounds more like an oft-consulted handbook than a list of lot numbers and book titles. Editors of the Stainforth Library of Women Writers digital archive are working to make Stainforth’s library as well as his manuscript catalog publicly available in electronic formats so that this resource can be yet again “at hand” for scholars, teachers, librarians, and bibliographers, including information from Stainforth’s manuscript catalog that has never been published.
Works Cited


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1 For more on George Stainforth see Venn 5, two entries below Francis Stainforth’s entry.
2 The Sacred Harmonic Society of London was founded in 1832 to “encourage the practice and performance of Psalmody, Chanting, Services, Anthems, Oratorios, &c., and to afford the Religious Public as an opportunity of hearing the best Sacred Music of every description.” Members of the public formed the society’s choral group. Performances were not free; attendees paid at the door or subscribed to the society annually and received two tickets to each show as well as a present, from the conductor, a cloth-bound folio edition of Handel’s “Messiah,” “Judas Maceabeus,” or Haydn’s “Creation,” arranged for the organ or pianoforte and vocals (“London Sacred,” 31). The society dissolved in 1888, and the Royal College of Music holds its archive (Samson 684).
3 In 1893, a slightly larger collection of books by women writers formed an exhibit within the Women’s Building at the Chicago World’s Fair. The exhibit contained roughly eight thousand books by women authors—just two thousand more than Stainforth owned (Wadsworth 1). The scope of the collection in the Woman’s Building was radically different than that of Stainforth’s library. The Woman’s Building focused on titles published after 1800, just a small slice of Stainforth’s broader range, and it was not a working library, but rather, simply a display (Wadsworth 104).
4 Neither Stainforth’s obituary in the Stamp-Collector’s Magazine nor that in the Gentleman’s Magazine provide a specific diagnosis for the decline of his health.
5 It is unclear at this time why his collection did not pass to another family member or was not maintained by a colleague or friend.
6 We do not yet know if Stainforth collected books by women writers as a recovery project. It could be the case that Sotheby’s is wrong in assuming this.