

Introduction

Sir Alfred Chester Beatty (1875–1968) is best remembered today as a distinguished book-collector. His career as a mining engineer and as an entrepreneur who opened up many areas to mining enterprises in America, Africa and Europe was equally illustrious. A friend of statesmen such as President Hoover and Sir Winston Churchill, he was quietly influential in many ways, especially during the Second World War, when he made an important contribution to the Allied war effort. He was a great benefactor of hospitals and medical research and an enlightened employer.

Chester Beatty was born in New York in 1875 of Irish, Scots, English and New England descent. He was educated at Princeton and Columbia universities. He graduated in mining engineering from Columbia in 1898 and began his career working as a labourer in mines in the south-western United States. A millionaire by the age of thirty, he had always been a collector—of minerals and stamps, and later of Chinese snuff bottles, often carved from gemstones. In time, he began to buy books and manuscripts, and by the time he left America for Britain in 1911 he was already a serious and discerning collector, although—unlike some of his contemporaries— not a flamboyant one. He bought Baroda House in Kensington Palace Gardens, and it soon became filled with his library, which consisted of important printed books, European and Persian manuscripts and Old Master prints. A widower with two young children when he left America, he remarried in 1912, and he and his new wife, Edith Dunn, honeymooned in Egypt. He eventually bought a house in Cairo, where he frequently spent the winters and where his interest in Islamic culture was intensified. A voyage to Asia in 1917 stimulated his interest in Chinese and Japanese painting, and a number of fine painted scrolls and albums were added to his collection. His wife collected decorative art objects and Impressionist paintings.

Taking professional advice, he began to develop his collections, acquiring very important Islamic material—especially a brilliant collection of illuminated copies of the Qur'an, and Mughal, Turkish and Persian manuscripts, all of the highest quality. His Christian holdings were enhanced by acquisitions of Coptic, Syriac and Greek manuscripts. Almost by chance in the late 1920s he acquired a group of papyrus texts which, on conservation, proved to contain exceptionally important biblical, especially New Testament, material. Chester Beatty bought mostly in the salerooms and through dealers—he was reluctant to compete in public for material, preferring to obtain high-quality manuscripts at keenly competitive prices. He did buy at auctions sometimes in partnership with public museums, sharing the purchases with them by prior arrangement. Throughout the 1930s he added to his Islamic collections—not only fine illuminated manuscripts but also plainer texts of scholarship, law and religious commentary. These, some 2,700 manuscripts, are exceptionally important for the study of the history of Islam.

Chester Beatty continued to collect well into the 1960s, and conscientiously arranged for publication of his holdings. By the time of his death, his collection included not just exceptional Islamic, East Asian and biblical manuscripts but also outstanding Western printed books, Old Master prints, and South-east Asian, Tibetan, Ethiopian and Armenian holdings of great importance. His

collecting was based on purchasing only the finest-quality works; his discernment, and the helpful connoisseurship of his advisers, ensured that he built up perhaps the finest manuscript collection assembled by a single individual within the twentieth century.

Chester Beatty became a naturalised British subject in 1933 and served on important production and raw materials advisory bodies during the Second World War. He was shocked when the General Election of 1945 returned a Labour government by a landslide—he could not believe that the people had turned their backs on Churchill, for whom he had unbounded admiration. Post-war austerity did not suit Chester Beatty, who found rising taxes and currency restrictions irksome. He instinctively disliked socialism. These views, plus a growing sense of disillusionment with his place in cultural life in London, led him to consider moving with his Library, especially as his active role in business was coming to an end. In 1949 he visited Ireland, where, as a great collector and leading businessman, senior officials encouraged him to consider setting up his Library in Dublin. He moved his collection in 1950 and in the same year bought a site in Shrewsbury Road to build a new home for his Library. It opened to researchers in 1953 and later, in a limited way, to the public. In 1954 he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth for his wartime services to Britain. Irish honours were conferred on him also. In 1957 he became the first honorary citizen of Ireland. A new gallery to display his collection opened in 1957. In discussions with the government of Ireland, Chester Beatty explored the possibility of leaving his Library in trust for the benefit of the public, and an agreement was reached that, if he did so, the costs of maintaining the institution would be borne by the state.

Sir Alfred Chester Beatty died in 1968, and was the first private citizen to be accorded a state funeral in Ireland. His will provided for the continuance of his Library as a public charitable trust supported by the state. Now counted as one of Ireland's national cultural institutions, it is unusual in having a constitution more like one of the great American philanthropic foundations. It is owned by its Board of Trustees. In 1997, the terms of service of the Trustees were modernised and, with the consent of the High Court in Dublin, provision was made for the appointment of three trustees by the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands.

The Chester Beatty Library was initially established in a garden setting in the Ballsbridge area of Dublin. The original buildings were constructed to designs closely monitored by the founder's advisers. It was clear to Chester Beatty by the mid-sixties that they had outgrown their usefulness, and in his will he stipulated that a new exhibition gallery should be built on the site within four years of his death. The new gallery was opened in 1973, but in time it too was overtaken by the need for modern display and conservation measures. The location of the Library was not convenient for visitors, and numbers were low. In 1993, following a long period of research and planning, the opportunity arose to obtain as a home for the collection the Clock Tower Building in the garden of Dublin Castle. This building, originally constructed c. 1752, served variously as military and revenue offices well into the 1980s. A somewhat austere structure, it was partly remodelled in the early nineteenth century, almost certainly by the distinguished architect Francis Johnson. It was completely restored and extended by a modern exhibition block during the 1990s by the Office of Public Works. The old building now houses the offices, reference library, temporary exhibition gallery and other services, while the new block is devoted to exhibition galleries, public services and a roof garden. The

Government of Ireland, the European Union Regional Development Fund and the Trustees of the Library jointly funded the redevelopment and relocation of the Library.

Chester Beatty was made a Freeman of Dublin in 1954. The new Library stands on the site of the *Dubh Linn* (the Black Pool) which gave the city its name.