

The Sussex Qur'an: The Holy Book of Islam in the Libraries of Non-Muslim Collectors

By Michael J. Ernst

At the Free Library of Philadelphia can be found several Qur'ans that were acquired by avid bibliophile John Frederick Lewis. These *masahif* (sing. *mus'haf*; an Arabic term referring to hand-written copies of the Qur'an) are part of his extensive eponymous collection now housed there. How these Qur'ans from different reaches of the Islamic world, ranging from North Africa to South Asia, came into an American collection necessitates an examination of what could be thought of as the "life" of a book, i.e., its provenance and the historical context in which each owner came to own the manuscript. In this essay, I will be examining one manuscript in particular—what I will refer to as "The Sussex Qur'an," after one of its many owners, in this instance, the Duke of Sussex, whose extensive library was well-known in Georgian England and in whose possession this manuscript remained for the longest period of time.

This Qur'an manuscript, today bearing the call number Lewis O165, was not originally acquired by John Frederick Lewis, but was later added to the Lewis Collection from the estate of Clarence Sweet Bement, a prominent industrialist and collector of rare books, coins, and minerals. The Qur'an from Bement's collection dates to mid-18th century India and was transcribed by Istirabadi Muḥammad Ja'far ibn Muḥammad Ṣādiq in 1738-39 (A.H. 1151) for [Muhammad Ali Khan Wallajah](#) (1717-1795), the Nawab of Arcot, who commissioned it for his son Ja'far Ali Khan. This is one of the most elaborate *masahif* in the Free Library's collection. The covers are Morocco leather with gold in-lay [Fig. 1]. The first four pages of text are elaborately illuminated with floral patterns and a variety of colors [Figs. 2-3]. The panels containing the sura headings alternate colors among green, blue, pink, violet, and gold [Fig. 4]. Last, the text of the Qur'an itself is penned in a tight *naskh* style set inside gold borders, while gold ink is used for the marginalia, i.e., text in the margins.



Figure 1: Cover of the Sussex Qur'an (Lewis O 165) made of leather with gold inlays.



Figure 2: Frontispiece of Lewis O 165 showing Chapter 1 (the *Fatiha*) and the beginning of chapter 2 of the Qur'an.



Figure 3: The continuation of Chapter 2 of the Qur'an in Lewis O 165.



Figure 4: An example of the different colors used for the chapter headings in Lewis O 165.

All of this detail seems fitting for a manuscript produced for the son of the great Nawab Muhammad Ali Khan [Fig. 5]. The title [nawab](#) refers to the sovereigns or kings who ruled over the different states in India. The Nawabs of Arcot ruled over the Carnatic, a region in southeast India, from 1690 until 1855 and were generally allied with the British East India Company. The neighboring Sultan of Mysore was an enemy of the British and rival of the Nawabs, despite maintaining correspondence with the latter. Hyder Ali Khan (1720-1782), the Sultan of Mysore, captured the city of Arcot in 1780 in an epic battle during the Carnatic Wars, and it was at this time that this particular *mus'haf* came into the possession of the Sultan's son Tipu Sultan (1751-1799). Almost two decades later, during the Storming of Seringapatam in May of 1799 by the British East India Company, the manuscript passed from the Sultan of Mysore into the hands of the British.



Figure 5: Portrait of Muhammad Ali Khan Wallajah by George Wilson (1775).

Major-General Samuel William Ogg (d. 1828) of the 7th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry (later the 19th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry), a decorated officer who had fought at Seringapatam, acquired it at a “public sale of effects of the capture of the fort” and, upon his return to England, gave it as a gift to Prince Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex (1773-1843), a notable bibliophile of his time [Fig. 6].¹ The Duke of Sussex [Fig. 7] was the sixth son and ninth child of King George III. Major-General Ogg was a [Groom of the Bedchamber](#) in the service of the Duke. Another connection between Ogg and the Duke of Sussex is that they were both Freemasons, along with Thomas Joseph Pettigrew, who catalogued the Duke's library and mentions Ogg as a “dear friend” in his *Bibliotheca Sussexiana*. A member of the royal family typically holds the position of Grand Master of England, which is the chief position among the

¹ Samuel William Ogg was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in 1816 and would have held a lower rank at the Battle of Seringapatam. Ogg was made a Major-General in 1919.

Freemasons in the country. The Duke of Sussex was elected Grand Master on April 7, 1813 and would have overseen the end of the famous Masonic schism and the reconciliation between the Premier Grand Lodge of England and the Ancient Grand Lodge of England in December of that year. The result was that the Duke of Sussex then became the first Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England. It might be speculated that it was perhaps at the festivities surrounding this event that Ogg donated the manuscript to the Duke's private library.

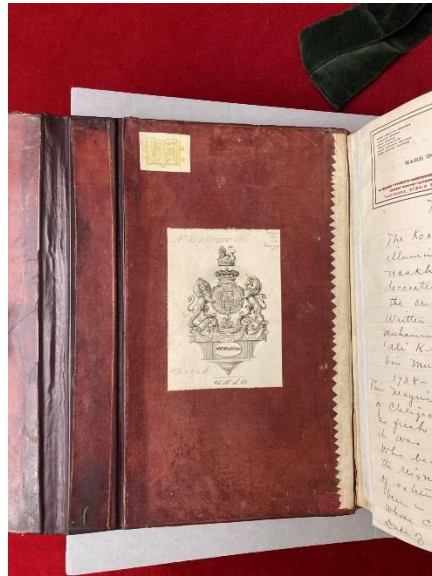


Figure 6: Bookplate for the Duke of Sussex's library on the inside cover of Lewis O 165.



Figure 7: Portrait of Prince Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex by Guy Head (1798).

Following the death of the Duke of Sussex, his library was sold at auction. From this auction the *mus'haf* made its way to the library of Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmid (1778-1859), a prominent London financier and a leading figure in the [Jewish Emancipation Movement](#), which advocated to allow Jews full rights as citizens in the United Kingdom. Prior to 1858, members of the Jewish community could not vote, hold political office, nor study at Oxford or Cambridge Universities, which were affiliated with the Church of England. Because of this, Goldsmid was one of the founders of the secular [University College, London](#). He was also the first Jewish citizen to be granted a title (that of baronet). Goldsmid was known to have been a collector of books and avid reader, and it makes sense that he would want a copy of the Qur'an in his library.

Following Goldsmid's death in 1859, it is unclear how the Sussex Qur'an made its way to the United States, leaving an unaccounted time gap of a few decades in the life of this book. However, it can be determined that the manuscript eventually came into the possession of the New York-based bookseller George D. Smith (1870-1920), who styled himself as a "Dealer of Rare Books and Pamphlets Relating to America, Publisher, Bookseller and Importer." The Philadelphia manufacturer and noted collector of minerals, coins, and books Clarence Sweet Bement purchased this copy of the Qur'an from Smith in 1902. Smith seems to have been familiar with the aforementioned Bibliotheca Sussexiana as much of the information contained in his note about the manuscript's provenance located in the Free Library's archive is taken directly from Thomas Joseph Pettigrew's catalogue of the Duke of Sussex's collection. Despite positing himself as a trader of Americana, a perusal of one of his catalogues from 1902 shows that he offered for sale several books acquired in England. Whether George D. Smith purchased the Sussex Qur'an in England or from an intermediary is unknown. The person who bought the Qur'an manuscript from Smith, Clarence Sweet Bement (1843-1923), was born in Mishewaka, Indiana, though he lived most of his life in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania [Fig. 8]. Bement had inherited his father's machine tool business—Bement, Miles & Co.—which was at 20th & Callowhill Streets (not too far from the Free Library) and located next to the famous Baldwin Locomotive Works [Fig. 9]. Bement's house was just a few blocks away at 1804 Spring Garden Street (oddly, the site of this author's current residence).

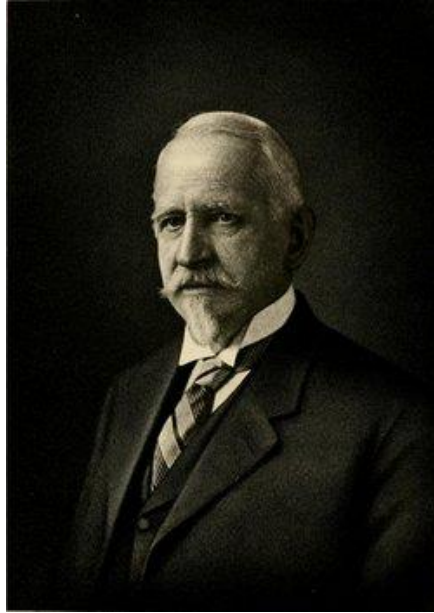


Figure 8: Photograph of Clarence Sweet Bement. Date unknown.

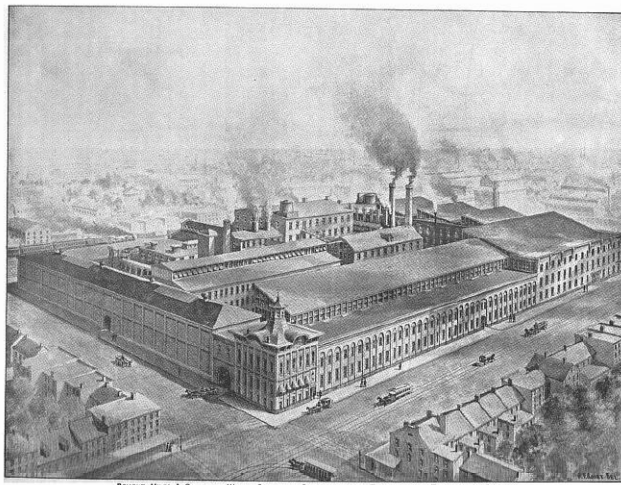


Figure 9: Print depicting Bement, Miles, & Co. at 20th & Callowhill Streets.

Clarence S. Bement was not only well-known as an important numismatic and mineral collector, but was also a collector of rare books [Fig. 10]. These interests are reflected in the fact that he was a founder and silent partner in [The Rosenbach Company](#), which traded in rare books, furniture, and *objets d'art*, and was a primary rival of George D. Smith in the book trade. The Rosenbach Company was named after [Abraham Simon Wolf Rosenbach](#) and his eldest brother Philip, who lived in Philadelphia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when their company would have been as well-known as Sotheby's or Christie's auction houses are today. A.S.W. Rosenbach (1876-1952) first became interested in rare books during his undergraduate studies at the [University of Pennsylvania](#). Despite earning a Ph.D. from Penn, he shunned academia and

entered the book trade business with his brother. Despite being a small business, the Rosenbach Company wielded influence far beyond its size, helping to build most of [The Widener Library](#) at Harvard University, [The Folger Shakespeare Library](#) in Washington, D.C., and [The Huntington Library](#) in Southern California. About a decade before Clarence S. Bement's death, he consigned the Sussex Qur'an, along with many other books, to the Rosenbach Company to be sold. The Rosenbach Museum & Library, the successor to the company, has correspondence and a list of books mentioning this particular Qur'an [Figs. 11 & 12]. However, it is still as yet unclear how this book made its way from the Rosenbach Company to the Free Library of Philadelphia where it was then ultimately added to the John Frederick Lewis Collection.

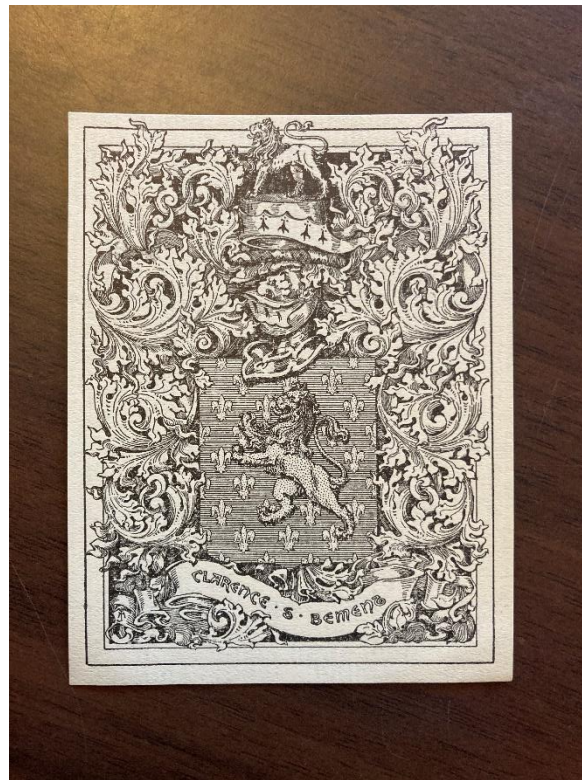


Figure 10: Bookplate used by Clarence Sweet Bement for his personal library.

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