

## ANNA WELCH

# A fragment of the medieval past

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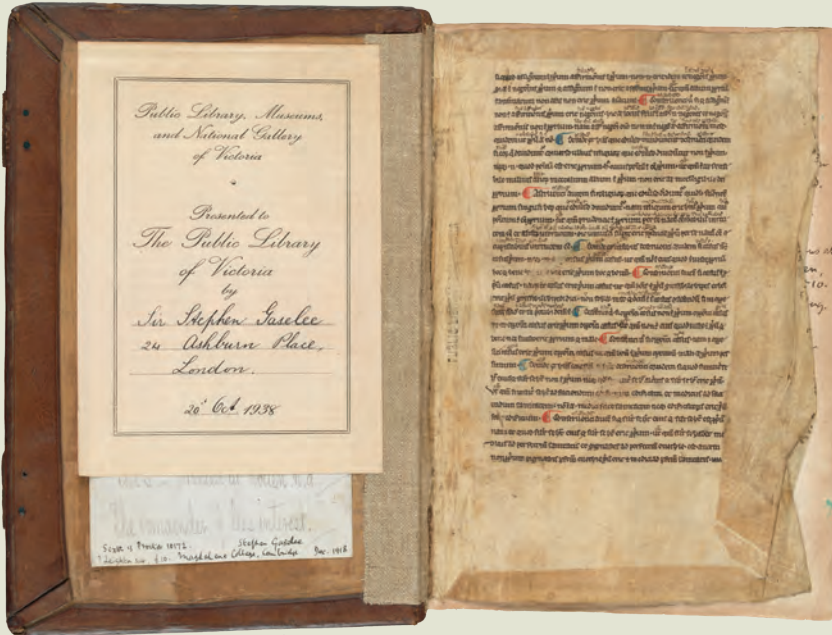
Book publishing has always been a pragmatic profession. From the beginning of this industry, in the 15th century, publishers and bookbinders often reused the expensive materials from older or out-of-date books to subsidise the cost of producing new ones. This practice of cutting up medieval vellum (animal skin) manuscripts and using fragments of the durable material to line and strengthen the bindings of printed books has generated a dedicated field of modern academic study, known as ‘fragmentology’, in which researchers identify the pieces of ‘waste’ manuscripts reused in this way, which are sometimes of more significance and rarity than the printed books in which they are found. Usually there is no obvious connection between the text on a piece of manuscript waste and the printed book in which it was reused, but occasionally an interesting juxtaposition occurs.

Inside an early printed book in the State Library Victoria collection is one such intriguing example of reuse: within the binding of a 16th-century volume (see page 52) is a 13th-century fragment of the translation by the Roman philosopher Boethius (c. 475–477 – c. 526) of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–22 BCE). The discovery of this single manuscript leaf (see page 53) opened up two equally interesting parallel stories: the history of the leaf, and the story of how the leaf and the volume in which it sits – formerly owned by English librarian, scholar and book collector Sir Stephen Gaselee – arrived in Melbourne.

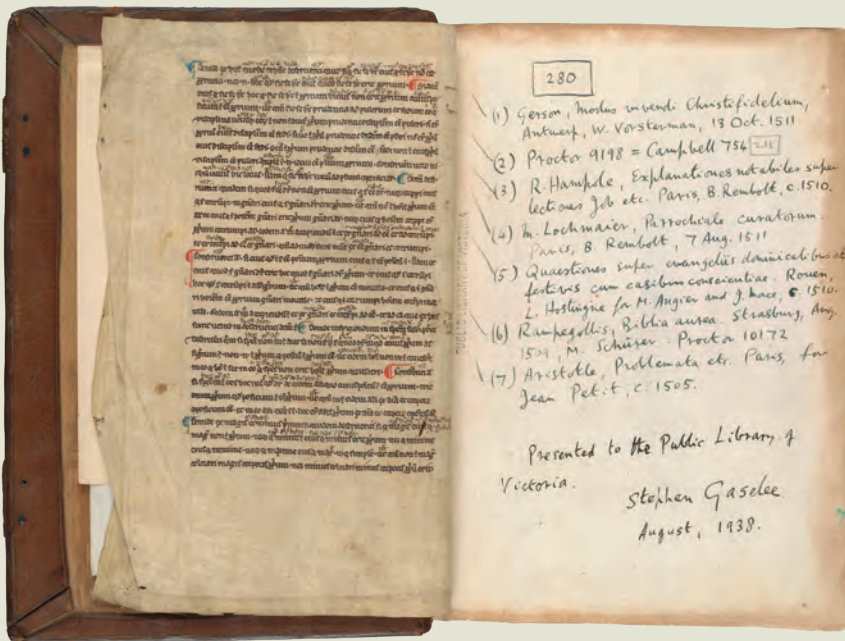


A volume containing seven printed treatises from the late 15th and early 16th centuries, each catalogued individually at RARES 094.1 D11V, Rare Books Collection. This volume contains the medieval leaf discussed in this article. All images in this article are from this volume.

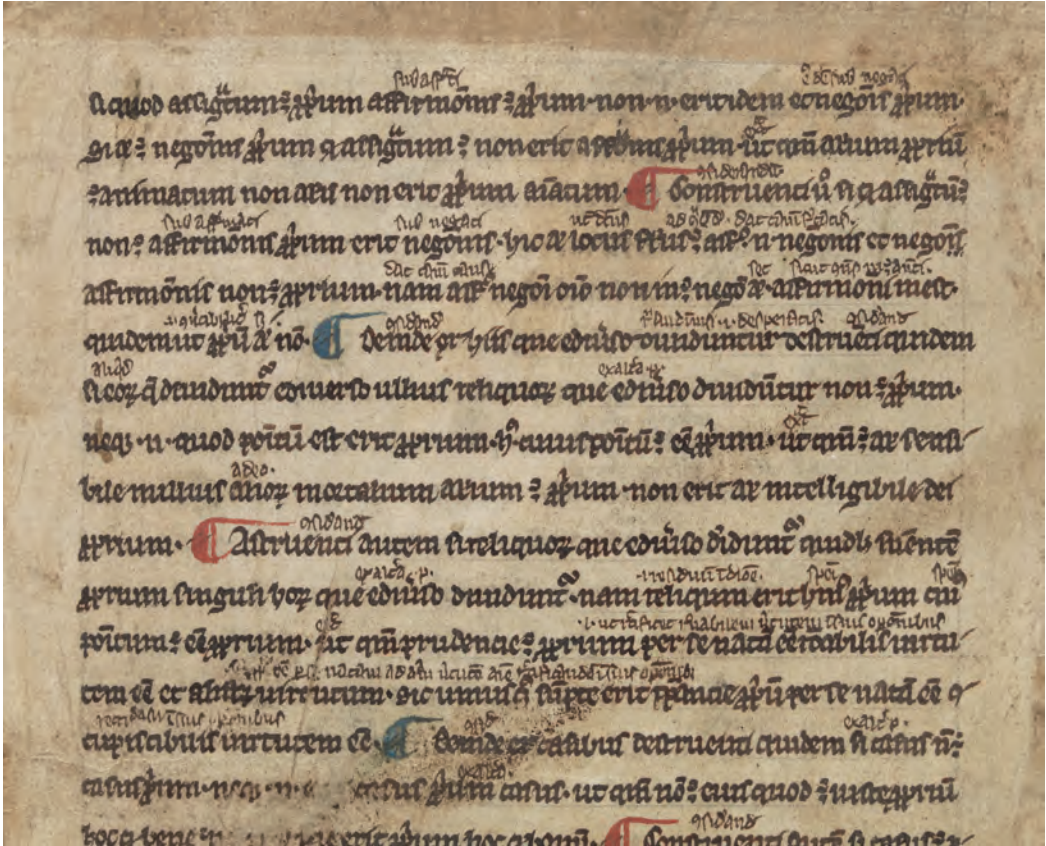
The volume in question is a collection of seven printed treatises (one incunabulum and six early-16th-century works) on theological and pastoral topics.<sup>1</sup> These works are encased in a binding that dates to the first half of the 16th century, indicating they were compiled not long after the last was printed (1511), probably for use by an educated cleric. The medieval leaf was used as a pastedown: a piece of paper or vellum pasted to the inside of the board of a binding, to hide the leather flaps turned in from the binding's outer covering. This is evident from the glue stains, which are a match for the leather turndowns on the inside front board. It has been 'released' in a subsequent rebinding – that is, unstuck so that it now turns freely like a flyleaf. The presence of modern leather on the spine (known as 'rebacking') suggests this rebinding took place in the early 20th century. Fortunately, at that time the binder kept as many of the original materials in use as possible: the original boards and the tooled leather that covers them were retained.



Inside the front board, showing the bookplate recording Sir Stephen Gaselee's gift (left) and the medieval leaf (right): vellum, 196 mm height x 130 mm width (irreg.), faint ruling lines, 30 lines per leaf, single column, text: 2 mm height, small compressed gothic textura, dark brown ink; alternating text dividers in red and blue; gloss in even smaller hand, light brown ink



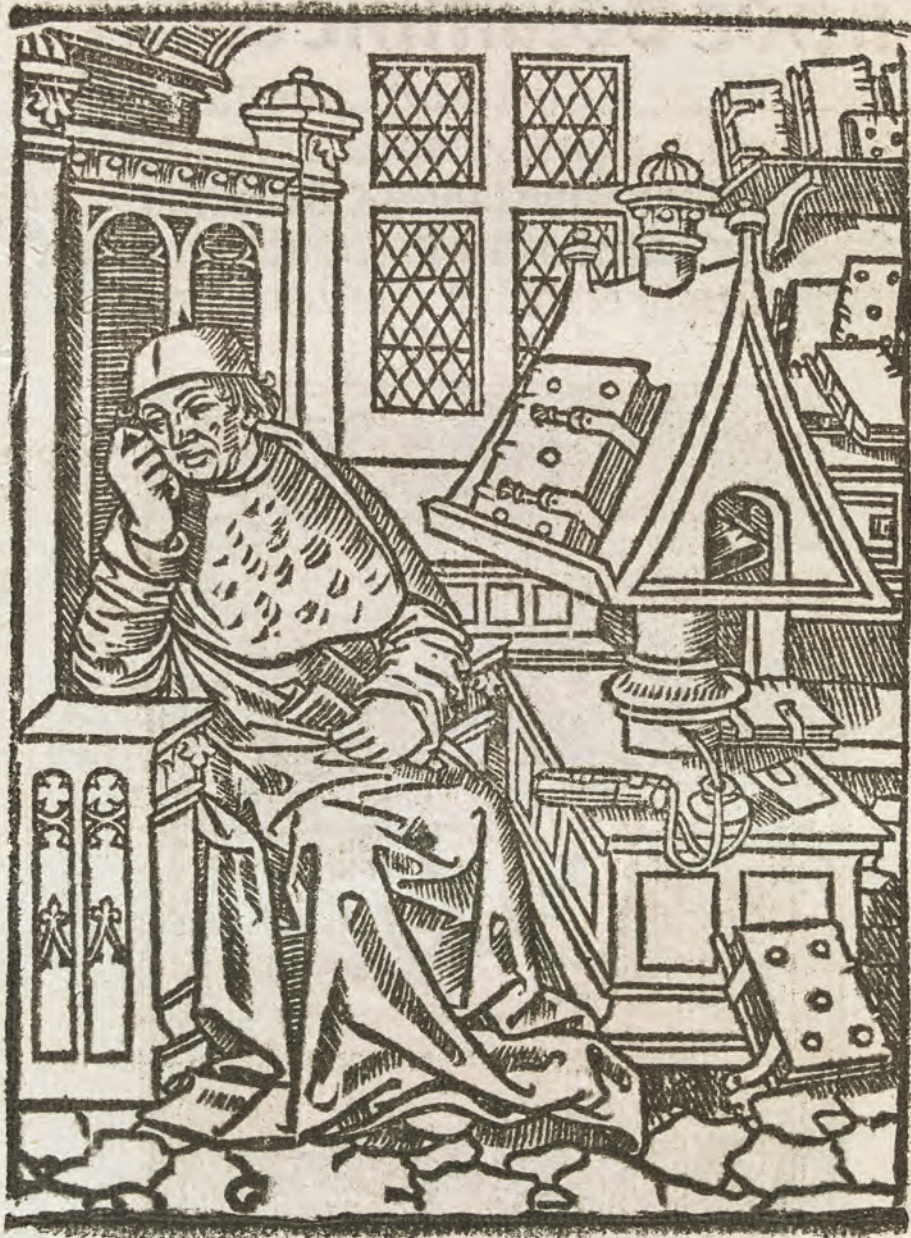
The medieval leaf (left) and Sir Stephen Gaselee's index and record of donation (right)



A detail of the medieval leaf showing both the original text and the minute gloss in another hand

The leaf is a fragment from a 13th-century copy of Boethius’s translation of Aristotle’s *Topics*, the fifth text of the *Organon*, a collection of Aristotle’s six major treatises on logic. Translating Aristotle into Latin was a major element of Boethius’s intellectual project, as a Roman scholar trained in the Greek tradition. His translations came to have a defining influence on the study of logic in western Europe in the medieval period, centuries after his death. The fragment comes from the fifth book of the *Topics*. It begins in the section titled ‘De proprio loci alii’ midway through chapter 4, at ‘*si quod assignatum est proprium*’, and ends after the first sentences of chapter 5, in a section with the same title, at ‘*neque minus colorari minus corporis proprium erit*’.

While Boethius’s translations of *Categories* and *On Interpretation* were circulating before the 12th century, other Aristotelian works (including the *Topics*) were widely known in the Latin West only from the mid-13th century



Woodcut of a scholar intended to represent Aristotle, in the last item in the volume, *In hoc volumine contine[n]t[ur] Problemata Aristotelis*, [Paris]: lehan Petit, [c. 1505]

onwards, in what was known as the 'recovery' of Aristotle.<sup>2</sup> It is likely that the book from which this leaf comes was made in exactly this period (the mid- to late 13th century) for use by a university student in Paris, Oxford or Cambridge, where the study of Aristotle formed an important part of the curriculum.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the printed works in the volume were all published in French-speaking areas strongly suggests the leaf came from Paris originally and was part of a French binder's stock of useful vellum waste sheets. The text has been glossed in an even tinier script, in lighter brown ink (see page 54), suggesting its use by a student reader.

The next chapter in this book's 500-year history reveals how it came to Melbourne. There is a modern bookplate on the inside front board (pasted onto bare wood, since the medieval fragment had already been released from its glued position; see page 53), which records the donation of the volume to the Melbourne Public Library (now State Library Victoria) on 20 October 1938 by Sir Stephen Gaselee (1882–1943), Pepys librarian at Magdalene College, Cambridge, and president of the Bibliographical Society of London 1932–34.<sup>4</sup> He donated the majority (299 books) of his incunabula collection to Cambridge libraries in 1934 and yet kept the volume now in Melbourne with him until 1938, when he met fellow scholarly librarian Albert Broadbent Foxcroft (1884–1938) of the Melbourne Public Library.<sup>5</sup>

Foxcroft holds a pre-eminent place in the history of this Library, where he began work in 1902 as a messenger, aged 17. A rigorous and dedicated scholar with a passion for the history of printing, he joined the professional Library staff in 1906 and from 1910 onwards published a series of seminal bibliographic studies of material in Australian collections. His talents were recognised by his superiors, and in 1932 he was formally appointed as assistant librarian, deputy to chief librarian Ernest Pitt. The strength of this Library's Rare Books Collection, one of the finest in the southern hemisphere, is in no small part due to Foxcroft's energetic scholarship and leadership in the early 20th century.<sup>6</sup>

In May 1938, Foxcroft was in London with the help of a fellowship from the Carnegie Foundation, to investigate best practice in librarianship. Along the way, he also pursued his abiding passion: incunabula. As Shane Carmody has noted, during this trip Foxcroft met Gaselee, who (encouraged by Sir Sidney Cockerell, director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, 1908–37) donated this volume to him for the Melbourne Library.<sup>7</sup> A note in Gaselee's own hand on the flyleaf records the donation date as August 1938. It was an act of exceptional generosity: State Library Victoria is the sole holder of a Gaselee incunabulum outside Cambridge, and the volume in question would

seem to have had special significance for Gaselee, as the only incunabulum that he kept back from his Cambridge donation.

On 17 September 1938, Foxcroft left London by sea for Quebec, and then from Vancouver set sail for Melbourne via Auckland. He must have posted Gaselee's gift ahead of himself to Melbourne, because tragically Foxcroft died en route to Melbourne on 10 December and was buried at sea. While he never made it home, this book completed the journey on his behalf and stands as a testament to both Gaselee's generosity and the significance of Foxcroft's legacy at State Library Victoria.

The medieval fragment that sparked this enquiry is notable in part because it is unusual (although not unique) to find a leaf from a scholarly text reused in this fashion; more often, liturgical manuscripts were repurposed in this way, because they became outdated through the revisions to religious practice that took place regularly in the medieval church. Intriguingly, the last item in the volume is a printed edition of Aristotle's *Problems*, published by Jean Petit in around 1505 (see page 55). Presumably, Gaselee's awareness of the Aristotelian connection is the reason this leaf was salvaged from its original function as a pastedown and specially included as an additional flyleaf in the rebinding that likely took place during his ownership of the volume. It may also have been the reason the 16th-century binder chose the leaf rather than liturgical waste for the purpose; but then again, he may simply have reached for the top sheet on his pile of manuscript waste, and this lovely juxtaposition may be merely serendipity.