

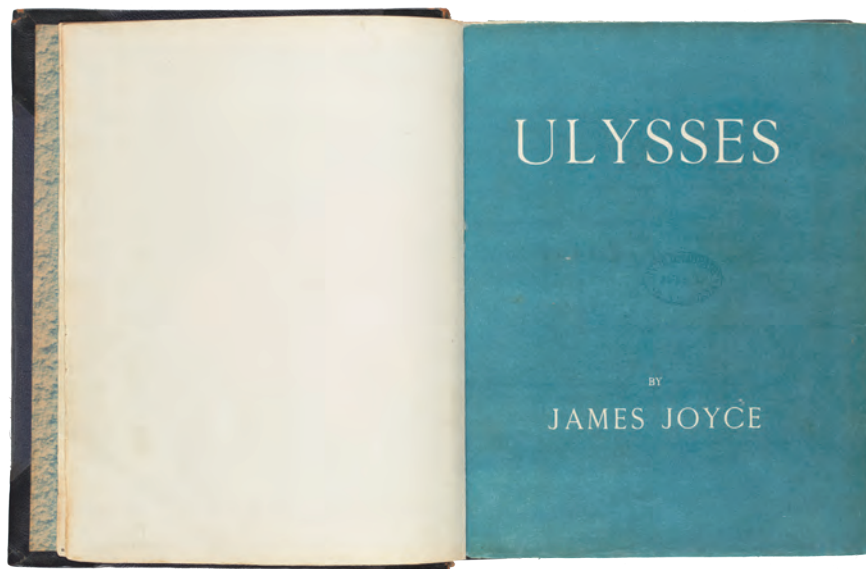
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A note on State Library Victoria's first edition copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*

The February 1922 publication of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* arrived with considerable notoriety. Extracts from the work had been previously published in an American journal, *The Little Review*, leading to an obscenity trial over the Nausicaa episode, while in England publication was formally banned by the director of public prosecutions, who described the final Penelope episode as 'unmitigated filth'.¹ As a consequence, the task of getting the novel published in full was undertaken by Paris-based bookseller Sylvia Beach and her publishing imprint, Shakespeare and Company.² Critical reception of *Ulysses* in the Australian press over 1922–23 was often uncomprehending, as the fate of the novel appeared to both readers and critics, like psychiatrist and occasional reviewer for the Melbourne *Herald* Reginald Ellery, to be heading in an undesirable direction. While acknowledging that Joyce had undertaken a 'complete psychological dissection of the motives of desire', a first for the novel in English, Ellery was bewildered by the 'abundant detail'. As he went on to note, 'If it had been half the size it might have been twice as interesting ... abundant detail yet remains ungarnered in the gutter'.³ It was therefore with some surprise that on 24 August 1922 the Melbourne Public Library (now State Library Victoria) acquired a copy of the first edition: 'no. 25' of the first 100 copies, printed on Dutch handmade paper in Dijon by the noted master

James Joyce and Sylvia Beach in the doorway of Shakespeare and Company, 1921. Image courtesy of the Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo, State University of New York



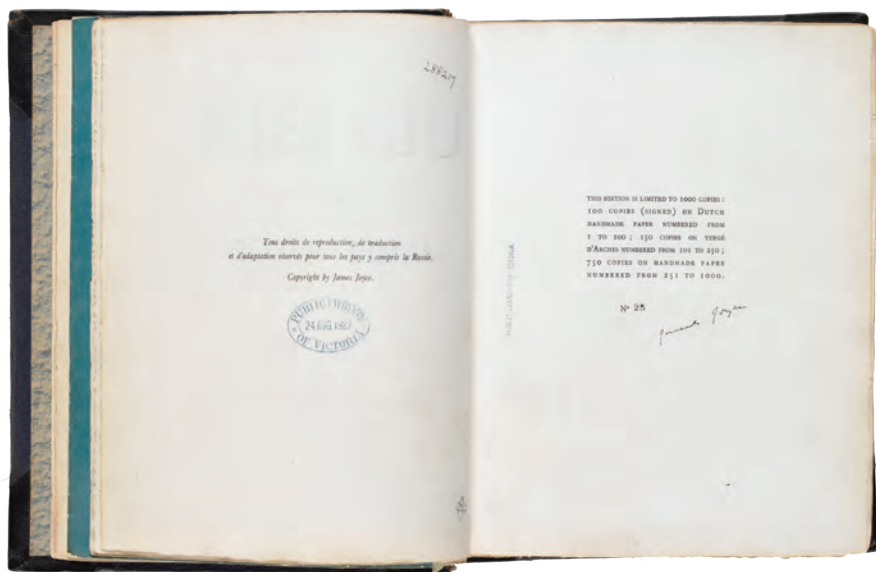


The cover (above), and page v (opposite) showing the volume number and author's signature, of State Library Victoria's first edition copy of James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 1922

printer Maurice Darantiere, and signed by the author, James Joyce.⁴ It was thought to be the only copy of *Ulysses* in Australia. The donor was a Melbourne resident, Frederick Joseph Brient, of 12 Tintern Avenue, Toorak.⁵ The work was accessioned in two halves. Either the copy of *Ulysses* arrived in this state, or, as was Library practice at the time, it was rebound in two halves to make the soft-covered work more robust and manageable in handling. There is also the possibility it was split to minimise the chance of theft of the whole volume.

To date, very little has been known concerning the acquisition of *Ulysses* by the Library. For example, who was Frederick Brient, why had he been in Paris, how did he come to purchase from the very first print run of *Ulysses*, and why did he gift the volume to the Library? Few details on Brient's life have surfaced, although some contextual information can be gleaned in relation to his family. His grandfather was Michael Joseph O'Brien, transported to Hobart in 1843 for the theft of a handkerchief and freed after serving two final years on Norfolk Island in the early 1850s. O'Brien's wife was a Scot, Margaret McLean, also transported to Van Diemen's Land. According to research on the Brients, the family name was changed from O'Brien to Brient.⁶ Fred's father, Lachlan Brient, was a reporter who worked in Hobart, then on *The Age* in Melbourne, before moving to *The Sydney Morning Herald*. He later became news editor of the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*. Lachlan Brient was at one time a trustee of the Public Library of New South Wales (now the State Library of New South Wales) and in 1901 moved to London to join the editorial staff of *The Morning Post*.

His son, Fred Brient, attended Sydney Grammar School before returning



to the family home in Jolimont Square, Melbourne, maintained by his mother. In 1909 he was listed on electoral roles as a reporter, as was his only other sibling, a brother, Albert, who later worked as editor on *The Argus* and *The Australasian*. In 1917 Fred Brient became engaged to Irene Maude Kiddle, a member of the pastoralist Louis Kiddle's family, Irene's grand-niece being historian Margaret Kiddle. Irene was an independently wealthy woman.⁷

After their marriage, Fred and Irene Brient travelled extensively and were noted in the various social pages of Melbourne journals and magazines over the next several decades. When travelling to England in 1925, Fred was listed as a manager at the Royal Bank of Australia⁸; nonetheless, he often styled himself as a 'gent', with no listed occupation. He did mix in artistic circles and was friends with artist and writer Lionel Lindsay, and on occasion he commented on appointments at the National Gallery of Victoria.⁹ He gifted other volumes to the Library – for example, works by authors like John Masefield and James Branch Cabell.¹⁰ And while he did purchase and deposit the first edition copy of *Ulysses* with the Library, he was in Melbourne in 1922, so he did not acquire the work while travelling.

Instead, the source of the volume appears to have been Melbourne's largest booksellers, Robertson and Mullen, on Elizabeth Street. On Saturday 29 July 1922 the company placed a single advertisement in the Melbourne *Argus* informing the public that it had secured 'a number of copies' of the first edition of *Ulysses*, including one signed by Joyce. The company noted that these were the only copies in Australia, and their price was available 'on application'.¹¹ It is presumed that it is this signed first edition copy that Brient

purchased in early August and then gave to the Library several weeks later. In the December 1922 review in the Melbourne *Herald*, Ellery noted that there were still copies of *Ulysses* on sale at Robertson and Mullens for £7 7 s.¹² It is remarkable that, in its year of publication, 1922, there were numbers of copies of the first edition of *Ulysses* available for purchase by the public in Melbourne!

Provenance for the Library's volume, however, takes several more twists and turns. Sylvia Beach, the owner of Shakespeare and Company, kept her own 'Ulysses notebook', recording who purchased what in the first print run. She wrote that number 25, the eventual Library copy, was purchased by a London bookseller and dealer, John Clark, on 29 May 1922.¹³ London Post Office street directories of the time listed Clark as an export bookseller, one of a number of such export agents and wholesalers, who purchased multiple copies of the first edition of *Ulysses* directly from Shakespeare and Company after it discounted the price by 20 per cent.¹⁴ Beach and her imprint were having difficulty, after publication, in moving both the more expensive signed copies of the work and those in the unsigned range, numbered 101 to 250, particularly in England. After consultation with Harriet Weaver, magazine editor and patron for Joyce, it was agreed a discount was warranted, to make bulk purchases attractive to the trade. As the Horowitz census drawn from Beach's 'Ulysses notebook' shows, this was an astute move, and several English, Irish, American and European booksellers and book exporters made bulk purchases. For example, in addition to the single signed copy, Clark also purchased 11 copies from the print run numbered 101 to 250.¹⁵

Detailed business records for Robertson and Mullens have unfortunately not survived. We have the chairman's annual reports for the 1920s, but no detail on individual works is recorded in these documents.¹⁶ The firm had premises in London in the 1920s, in the Strand, run by Australian staff with a local London manager, a Mr Maurice, possibly working on contract to the firm. Maurice was noted on a number of occasions in the chairman's reports as being the company's selector and buyer of non-Australian books. A Mr A Maurice of Maurice & Co., booksellers, was listed in the 1925 *London Post Office directory* and is possibly the same man.¹⁷ In all likelihood it was Maurice who dealt directly with Clark, purchasing for Robertson and Mullens 'a number of copies' from the first edition numbers 101 to 250 and number 25 from the first 100, signed, copies. It was this work that eventually found its way to Melbourne, was purchased by Brient and was then gifted to the Library.

The mystery, of course, remains as to why Fred Brient purchased a copy of *Ulysses*. He occasionally acquired rare editions and gifted them to the Library.



James Joyce and Sylvia Beach outside Shakespeare and Company, 1921. Image courtesy of the Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo, State University of New York

And while the readership of Joyce became quickly widespread through the 1920s among both readers of experimental writing and general literary circles, scholars Lawrence Rainey and Edward Bishop have stressed there is some evidence to support the view that the first 100, signed, copies of *Ulysses* were envisaged as collectors' editions.¹⁸ However, nothing is recorded in the minutes of Melbourne's Library, Gallery and Museum trustees' meetings concerning the acquisition of this work, a text that in 1933 again became the centre of a major obscenity and censorship trial in the United States. In Australia, the Commonwealth censor banned *Ulysses* in 1929, a ban that, with a brief intermission in 1938, was not formally lifted until 1953.¹⁹

Did Brient purchase another reading copy for himself? He and his wife kept a personal library, though we have no further details of its contents. And who, in Melbourne, acquired the other first edition volumes of *Ulysses*, and what of their whereabouts, if they are still extant? These and other questions keep alive the fascinating story of the acquisition, by the Library, of one of the major first edition texts of 20th-century literary modernism and of the generosity of the donor who made it possible.