

reale, vecchia e nuova, e le collezioni di Grenville e Cracherode contenevano già da sé moltissime rarità e curiosità («rarities and curiosities»), ma Panizzi e il suo successore Winter Jones non avevano mai perso l'occasione di accrescerne la raccolta. Le ballate Roxburghe, Bibbie e manuali della prima età moderna, le prime edizioni di Shakespeare: qualsiasi opportunità era stata colta dai bibliotecari per assicurarsi ciò che di raro e curioso appariva sul mercato. Se all'inizio del XIX secolo il nome del British Museum era raramente pronunciato durante le vendite, negli ultimi anni i suoi agenti avevano lavorato incessantemente per offrire a qualsiasi studente libri di legge, storia, topografia, biografie, poesia e novellistica in ogni lingua. In breve – diceva Watts –, tutto ciò che illustrava la tradizione di una nazione era a portata di mano nelle sale di lettura del museo londinese, fosse comune, raro o curioso.

ABSTRACT

Vast numbers of early modern Italian books were dispersed from Italy mainly from the 1760s onwards as a consequence of the decline of the local aristocracy, the French Revolution and the suppressions of religious libraries. Increasing interest in the Italian Renaissance and its historical importance was a determining factor in the routes these books took towards becoming part of UK collections. So-called 'popular' books – read, listened to and shared by people from all social classes in the early modern period – were now regarded as rare items and also purchased as reflections of Italian social life. They turned from being books printed for consumption into objects worth collecting and preserving. Owing to changes in the scope of its policies of acquisition and preservation, mainly led by Antonio Panizzi during his Keepership in the Department of Printed Books (1837-1856), the British Museum became a leading purchaser of this kind of material. Official reports, invoices, registers, letters and minutes confirm that many collections of popular early modern Italian books were bought by the British Museum in this period and were subsequently preserved among the most precious items in the library.