Chasing Somervile, New College’s Poet of the Hunt

Our alumnus, poet and country squire William Somervile (1675–1742), in the aftermath of the death on 5 September of his wife Mary (née Bethell), anticipates with most unbecoming eagerness the death of Elizabeth his mother, as is clear from a candid letter he wrote to his rich kinsman James, thirteenth Lord Somervile (1698–1765) on 27 September 1731—a letter we were fortunate enough to acquire for our archives in January of this year. Somervile therein writes:

Your servant Reynolds is gone to Adderbury to my Mother, to take Directions from her own Mouth, about her Funeral. This looks as if She was resolved to dye in good earnest. She is indeed so very old, and so very weak that She can not continue long.¹

But continue the old, weak lady did. Somervile’s finances were a problem for him, and the letter refers to a need for money—‘my Parliamentary Friends are at Such a Distance that I can not apply to them for Franks’—and also to a deed he and his distant cousin were going to draw up in November, a legal arrangement whereby Somervile’s properties in Edstone, Warwickshire and Aston Somerville, Gloucestershire would revert to Lord Somervile in Edinburgh, after the poet’s death, in return for present financial support from his lordship. And Somervile’s financial woes can most definitely be attributed in some degree to his widowed mother, as editor Walter Scott’s conclusion to the Memorie of The Somervilles (1815) makes evident: ‘his estate, nominally 1500l., was reduced to less than two-thirds of that sum, by a jointure of 600l. to his mother.’² Fortunately for the dowager Mrs Somervile, though perhaps unfortunately for her son, Elizabeth would live to the age of ninety-eight; William would live to the age of ninety-eight; William would in fact outlive her by just a month. An expectation, then, of being rid of the burden of the £600 annuity (and of his mother), which Somervile alludes to in his letter, would prove quite premature, because Elizabeth would live on for another eleven years after William seemingly devoid of filial concern had already been anticipating her demise.

In his defence, we should certainly say that William Somervile is reputed to have been convivial, generous, even-handed as a justice of the peace, and good and caring with his servants—if not good with money. A tall, fair, and decidedly handsome man, his financial worries seem to have driven him to drink—his tipple of choice being rum and blackcurrant jelly with a dash of water—and drink possibly precipitated his death.³ The two principal passions of his life appear to have been hunting and poetry, which together combined in his most celebrated work, the four-volume hunting georgic poem The Chace (1735), and its short verse supplement Field Sports (1742). Following schooling in Stratford-upon-Avon, and later Winchester College as founder’s kin from 8 August 1690, he had proceeded to New College, matriculating 24 August 1694, and later becoming a fellow. When his father Robert died in 1705, Somervile then returned to his family seat in Edstone, where he would remain until his death.

Poor Somerville—he is damned with such faint praise by the great, if unkindly, Dr Johnson, who presents him as but a dilettante poet, an interesting specimen of a man of his social standing who can also write a bit, albeit about a subject (Johnson grudgingly concedes) Somervile knew a very great deal—hunting:

¹ Letter from William Somervile, from Edston[e], to James, thirteenth Lord Somervile (27 September 1731), New College Archives, Oxford, NCA JCR/R/Somervile.
[A] writer, who at least must be allowed to have set a good example to men of his own class, by devoting part of his time to elegant knowledge . . . Somervile has tried many modes of poetry; and though perhaps he has not in any reached such excellence as to raise much envy, it may commonly be said at least, that he writes very well for a gentleman . . . His great work is his Chase, which he undertook in his matuer age . . . To this poem praise cannot be totally denied.4

But The Chase would prove very popular well into the nineteenth century, and an 1832 assessment of Somervile by ‘Gilbert Forester’—penname of Fanny White Braddon (1803/4—1868),5 mother of Lady Audley’s Secret (1862) novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835—1915)—is more sympathetic:

If the divine breathings of a Shakespeare, the magnificence of a Byron, or the melody of a Moore be wanting, we have that which will never cloy . . . He was a practical sportsman, and wrote from his own personal knowledge, which is not always the case with those who “make books.”6

Poets whose influence Somervile himself acknowledged, and to whom he might be better compared, include Milton, and the English georgic poets John Philips (1676—1709) who wrote Cider (1708), and also The Seasons (1730) author James Thomson (1700—1748). Forester’s account is useful for the specifics of Somervile’s kennels, which speak to the considerable outlay Somervile must have had to expend to keep up his sport—and which would have certainly proved a financial drain—with his ‘about twelve couple of beagles’, ‘six couple of fox-hounds’, and ‘five couple of otter-hounds’.7 The Chase seeks both to elevate the history and contemporary practice of British hunting as well as to provide illuminating detail on four different types of hunt—hare hunting which takes place in autumn (across 286 lines of verse), fox hunting for the winter (191 lines), and the pursuit of the stag (264 lines) and the otter (124 lines) during the summer.8 Somervile’s verses circulated in manuscript prior to being printed: his earliest major poem seems to have been ‘The Wicker Chair’, written probably around 1708/9 but first published in revised form only in 1740 as Hobbinol, or The Rural Games—a mock-heroic poem on the Cotswold Games.9 The Two Springs, A Fable (1725) was his first published poem, and copies survive in around half a dozen libraries only, including the Bodleian Library. New College Library lacks this book, but has otherwise a very strong holding of Somervile’s printed works (including rarities and one-offs), beginning with what appears to be a fine paper copy of his second book Occasional Poems, Translations, Fables, Tales, &c. (1727), which reproduces ‘The Two Springs’. The library holds copies of several editions of The Chase, including its first, a quarto edition (one of 750 copies produced)—with its superb engraving depicting the poet presenting his lyre to Diana, goddess of the hunt, by Gérard Jean Baptiste Scotin (1698—1755) after Hubert-François Gravelot (1699—1773). Our copy bears the armorial bookplates of the dukes of Gloucester and of John West, first Earl De La Warr (1693—1766).10

7 ibid., p. 268.
An instantly popular book, the library also holds copies of the two octavo editions of *The Chase* which appeared later that same year—in a June print run of 1,000 copies (the second edition), and then, for the octavo that bears ‘third edition’ on its title-page, in an August run of 1,500 copies. Somervile’s next book (which he dedicated to Hogarth), *Hobbinol, or the Rural Games*, first appeared, as a quarto, in 1740: the library holds a copy, along with one of the ‘third edition’ (an octavo) from that same year. Soon it became common for editions of the two poems to be issued and bound together, and the library holds instances of these dual productions.\(^{11}\)

Most notable is our copy of the 1786 edition of *The Chase... by William Somervile [sic]*, one of ‘Wenman’s cheap editions of the most celebrated works in the English language, both poetry and prose’.\(^{12}\) It is an extremely rare edition—ESTC records just one other copy within the British Isles (at the British Library)—it includes a lovely frontispiece, and our copy has a distinguished provenance, having belonged to the foremost collector and bibliographer of hunting, hawking, and shooting books, C. F. G. R. Schwerdt (1862–1939), and to HRH Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester (1900–1974), himself an exceptional horseman and shot.

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A 1931 appreciation in The Illustrated Sporting & Dramatic News of Somervile and his celebrated Chace singles out as the ‘generally agreed . . . best edition’ the 1796 quarto printing by William Bulmer (1757–1830), containing illustrations and engravings by brothers John (1760–1795) and Thomas Bewick (1753–1828)—examples of their best work—which were instrumental to the book’s success. The library holds a copy, along with a Cadell and Davies London octavo printing of the same date, illustrated with plates by Thomas Stothard (1755–1834). Our copy of this 1796 Stothard edition is notable and unique on account of its fore-edge painting of a fox-hunting scene, depicting two horses and riders, and two dogs near a stream.\(^{13}\) Georgics, indeed, lend themselves most readily to the work of fore-edge painters.

We also hold a copy of the second Bulmer edition of 1802, a yet more extraordinary labour of love on account of—in addition to the original Bewick engravings—its having been profusely extra-illustrated. It contains around sixty engraved portraits (including of Somervile, Hogarth, and Dr Johnson), sporting and hunting scenes, and animal illustrations—notably dogs and hounds. Many engravings are from the 1830s, and the extra illustrations enable us to date this specially constructed book’s dark brown morocco, gold-tooled binding to no earlier than 1844.\(^{14}\)

In January 1742, Field-Sports appeared, in a print run of 1,500 copies, six months before Somervile’s death. He was part of a Whig ‘Patriot’ opposition to Sir Robert Walpole and King George II that looked to Frederick, Prince of Wales for promise of future leadership, and Somervile had addressed the prince within the Chace. But with his verse sequel (of a kind—on hawking and angling), Somervile went one further, and the title-page of Field-Sports bears ‘Humbly Address’d to His Royal Highness The Prince’, indicative no doubt of princely approval of Somervile’s earlier poem.\(^{15}\)

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Copies of *Field-Sports* are also rare, with ESTC listing, in addition to New College, just eight holding libraries within the British Isles. We know that *The Chace* and *Hobbinol* would frequently appear, bound together within one volume, but there is also an 1804 Albion Press edition, with fine illustrations by celebrated animal painter John Nost Sartorius (1759–1829), which annexes *Field-Sports* to Somervile’s most famous poem, *The Chace*. A quite superb fore-edge painting depicting an English hunting scene distinguishes our copy.  

New College Library, Oxford, NB.73.5, fore-edge painting [detail]


New College Library, Oxford, NC/SOM

Finally, last year we also acquired a lovely little gem of a duodecimo—a two-volume edition by Thomas Park (1758/9–1834) of *The Poetical Works of William Somervile* (1811–12), with both volumes

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16 William Somervile, *Field-Sports: A Poem. Humbly Address’d to His Royal Highness the Prince* (London: Printed for J. Stagg, 1742), and his *The Chace; to which is annexed Field Sports . . . With a Sketch of the Author’s Life . . .* By Edward Topham (London: Albion Press; Printed by James Cundee . . . for T. Hurst, 1804), New College Library, Oxford, held at respectively NB.33.17 and NB.73.5. (The library also holds an eighteenth-century composite volume containing *The Chace*, arresting illustrated with a frontispiece of a tiger hunt: *Cyngetica; or, Essays on Sporting: Consisting of Observations on Hare Hunting . . . Together with An Account of the Vizier’s Manner of Hunting in the Mogul Empire. By William Blane . . . To which is added, The Chace: A Poem* (London: Printed for John Stockdale, 1788), New College Library, Oxford, NB.73.4.)

bound into one green morocco binding, decorated with a gold-tooled urn device with patterning and floral motifs, and with a splendid fore-edge painting depicting a view of Stafford marketplace.\textsuperscript{18}

The library’s holdings, then, of New College’s poet of the hunt are extensive, varied, and remarkable—and this note highlights only some copies of books we hold that he wrote. William Somervile died, without issue, on 17 July 1742 in Edstone. Hunting was undeniably a passion, yet the gallows humour jars of Edward Topham (1751–1820), in his sketch of the author’s life written for his 1804 edition of \textit{The Chase} and \textit{Field-Sports}: ‘Mr. SOMERVILE had one cause of satisfaction in his death—he was not cut off in the middle of an \textit{hunting season}.\textsuperscript{19}’ Somervile would remember his old college in his will, proved 3 September 1742, leaving to New College fifteen folio volumes of the \textit{Antiquités} of Catholic Benedictine monk Bernard de Montfaucon (1655–1741).\textsuperscript{20} These we have retained in the library to this day. They are a very fine set indeed. And on the front endpaper of the first volume there is this tribute, recording the bequest, written in an unknown hand:

\begin{verbatim}
D[ono]. D[edit].
Gulielmus Somervile
Armiger.
Poeta Eximius.
H[onoris]. C[ausa].
Quondam Socius.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{verbatim}

Christopher Skelton-Foord
Librarian
New College, Oxford


\textsuperscript{19} Somervile, \textit{The Chase . . . With a Sketch of the Author’s Life}, p. vii.

\textsuperscript{20} Will of William Somervile of Edston, Warwickshire (3 September 1742), The National Archives, PROB 11/720/280.