

Thumb Bibles

# Library of the Written Word

VOLUME 108

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# Thumb Bibles

*The History of a Literary Genre*

*By*

Gottfried Adam



BRILL

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*This book is dedicated to my wife  
Renate Rogall-Adam*





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## Preface

I have been interested in children's Bibles since the mid-1960s. While working in Religious Education, I studied their importance and the role of telling Biblical stories for religious socialisation in families and schools. When I began teaching at the University of Vienna in 1992, I made them a focus of my research. It was in the course of this work that I visited the British Library in London in 2006, where I first encountered the phenomenon known as the 'Thumb Bible', as these miniature Bibles are known in English. The little books immediately fascinated me, and the interest has stayed with me ever since. One year later, a visit to the United States gave me the opportunity to engage with the genre in greater depth. The Houghton Library of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, holds over hundred Thumb Bibles that I was graciously allowed to study.

My wife, having noticed my interest in this particular form of tiny Bibles, surprised me on my seventieth birthday with a gift of the *History of the Bible* published in Lansingburgh in 1824. She had purchased the book at an auction with the help of friends in the United States. It was a complete surprise. To own an actual copy of such a book and be able to read it at leisure was instrumental in heightening my fascination with the genre yet again. My interest grew into a concrete research project. Two years later, I was fortunate to receive an Everett Helm Visiting Fellowship for research at the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana. This is the central research library of Indiana State University and holds the world's largest collection of Thumb Bibles. Reading in its collections allowed me to access the sources directly and seriously engage with the topic of Thumb Bibles. Two and a half years later, I was granted another research fellowship, the Katharine F. Pantzer Jr. Visiting Fellowship in Descriptive Bibliography at the Houghton Library of Harvard University. This gave me access to further relevant, original sources. I am grateful to both institutions for these opportunities.

The present publication contains the results of my research into Thumb Bibles. Such an endeavour is never realized without the assistance of third parties. Particular gratitude is due to my wife Renate Rogall-Adam. Without her gift for my seventieth birthday, my private interest in Thumb Bibles would never have grown into such a research project. She was continually at my side during my travels for this project and actively supported me in its completion. As a critical reader of my first drafts, she provided much useful advice and significant improvements. I therefore dedicate this book to her with heartfelt thanks.

During my research in Bloomington, I met Christoph Irmscher, Provost Professor in the English Department, to whom I am grateful for his support and advice on many aspects of my project. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, Professor Emerita at the State University of New York in Stony Brook, has long shared my interest in children's Bibles. In the course of our long and productive exchange on the study of these Bibles, she has generously provided advice on this project. Further thanks are due to my Viennese colleague Professor James Alfred Loader who kindly provided much support on questions of metre and the terminology of English poetics and language. Access to and the use of original sources posed a particular challenge for this study. It could not have been realised without the above-mentioned research fellowships. My particular thanks go to the staff of the Houghton Library in Cambridge and the Lilly Library in Bloomington. There is now a flourishing market in antiquarian Thumb Bibles, a fact that has allowed me to purchase a significant number of these volumes myself.

The present study was originally published in German under the title *Daumen-Bibel. Eine Untersuchung zu Geschichte und Profil einer literarischen Gattung* in the series 'Arbeiten zur Religionspädagogik' (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2021). I am grateful to Professor Andrew Pettegree for including the English edition in the 'Library of the Written Word' series. Quotations, bibliographic references and chapter headings were adapted to British practice and the style of the 'Library of the Written Word' series. For the English edition the original text has been edited and expanded in several parts. A number of newly found editions of Thumb Bibles could also be added.

Further on, I am grateful to Volker Bach who translated the text into English, and to Dr. Jessica M. Dalton for a final review. I am also thankful to Anne Sator for turning photographs and scans into printable illustration formats. The majority of illustrations is not reproduced in the original size but in an enlarged form – in order to make details easier to see. The real size format can be found in the respective specification of the format, which is given in inches and cm. My final thanks go to those institutions that generously gave permission for the images to be reproduced in this publication.

*Gottfried Adam*

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# Abbreviations

A 1ff., B 1ff., C 1 ff.

The Thumb Bible genre is characterised by a small stock of frequently reused, very similar titles that make exact citation in the course of a text challenging. Fortunately, modern technology has made the reference bibliography of Ruth E. Adomeit, *Three Centuries of Thumb Bibles. A Checklist* (1980), freely accessible online. It can be read or downloaded free of charge at <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/books/27>. This allows to use a simplified citation system in this study. Thumb Bibles are identified by their abbreviated titles with the addition in parentheses, where necessary, of the number they are assigned in this bibliography (e.g. A 1, B 2 or C 3). Thus, individual editions are both clearly identifiable and the text remains readable and brief.

AAS

American Antiquarian Society

Adomeit, *Three Centuries*

Ruth.E. Adomeit, *Three Centuries of Thumb Bibles. A Checklist* (New York & Garland Publishing Inc., 1980)

ARP

Series *Arbeiten zur Religionspädagogik*

BL

British Library, London

Bodleian Library

University of Oxford: Main Library

Bondy, *Miniature Books*

Bondy, Louis W., *Miniature Books. Their History from the Beginnings to the Present Day* (London: Sheppard Press, 1981)

Bottigheimer, *Bible for Children*

Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children from Gutenberg to the Present* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996)

Bottigheimer, *Bibliography*

Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Bibliography of British Books for Children & Adolescents, 1470–1770* (Stony Brook, NY, 2008). Online → [www.bottigheimer.com](http://www.bottigheimer.com)

Bromer / Edison, *Miniature Books*

Anne C. Bromer and Julian I. Edison, *Miniature Books. 4,000 Years of Tiny Treasures* (New York: Abrams in association with the Grolier Club, 2007)

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| DNB                                    | Dictionary of National Biography, Cambridge   |
| ECCO                                   | Eighteenth Century Collections Online   |
| HAB Wolfenbüttel                       | Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel  |
| Houghton Library                       | Houghton Library, Harvard University's primary repository for rare books and manuscripts  |
| Hrsg.                                  | Herausgeber = Editor  |
| Library Hub Discover                   | Union Catalogue of British and Irish Libraries  |
| Lilly Library                          | Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN  |
| MBN                                    | <i>Miniature Bible News</i> , ed. by Julian I. Edison, St. Louis, MO  |
| n.d.                                   | no date of publication  |
| n.p.                                   | no place of publication   |
| ODNB                                   | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford   |
| Opie                                   | Opie Collection of Children's Literature, (University of Oxford, Bodleian Library)  |
| Roscoe, <i>Thumb Bibles</i>            | S. Roscoe, 'Early English, Scottish and Irish Thumb Bibles', <i>The Book Collector</i> , Vol. 22, No. 2 (1973), pp. 189–207   |
| Stone, <i>A Snuff-Boxful of Bibles</i> | Wilbur M. Stone, <i>A Snuff-Boxful of Bibles</i> (Newark: Carteret Book Club, 1926)   |
| Supplement Adomeit                     | Complement in R.E. Adomeit's personal copy of <i>Three Centuries</i> (1980)   |
| USTC                                   | Universal Short Title Catalog   |
| Welch                                  | Welch, d'Alte Aldridge, <i>A Bibliography of American Children's Books Printed Prior to 1821</i> (Worcester, MA, American Antiquarian Society and Barre Publishers, 1972) |
| WorldCat                               | The World's largest Bibliographic Database  |
| Württembergische LB                    | Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart  |
| zB Zürich                              | Zentralbibliothek Zürich  |