

The most beautiful book on ferns ever published

James Bolton, *Filices Britannicae: An History of the British Proper Ferns*. Leeds, [1785]–90. 12 3/8 inches x 10 inches (314 x 254 mm). xxii + 93 pages, 46 hand-colored copperplates by the author.

James Bolton (1735–99) was a self-taught provincial artist and botanist, who passed his entire life in the neighborhood of Halifax in Yorkshire. He published three major works: a study of British ferns, *Filices Britannicae* (1785–90), the first British book on fungi, *An History of Funguses Growing about Halifax* (1788–91), and *Harmonia ruralis* (1794–96) on British songbirds. For all three Bolton furnished both text and illustrations. His delineations of birds are decorative but somewhat lacking in vitality. With cryptogams, however, Bolton combines acute observation—he was an excellent field botanist—with an engaging naïveté that is irresistibly enchanting. The delicacy of his etching, the beauty of his composition, and the variety of green on his palette make *Filices Britannicae* perhaps the most charming fern book ever published.

This copy, from the Chicago Botanic Garden Library, is bound in early nineteenth-century half calf with marbled paper boards, a rebacked spine. It was part of the collection of Kenneth Kent MacKenzie (1877–1934), presented in October 1934 to the Horticultural Society of New York, who added their bookplate recording the provenance. In 1979 the Society sold its library to the London firm of antiquarian booksellers Bernard Quaritch, through whose hands this copy had already passed, as testified by the penciled collation note of H. Williams on the back endpaper. A further Quaritch collation note was added (“SMP June 1980”) before the book was sold, along with most of the MacKenzie collection, to the Belgian diamond merchant and arborist Robert de Belder. When de Belder was obliged to sell his entire library (largely formed by Quaritch) back to the firm in the mid-1980s, most of it (minus the most important color-plate books) went to Ladislaus von Hoffmann of Washington, D.C. Hoffmann sold his collection anonymously at Christie’s in New York in June 1997 as *An Important Botanical Library*, at which sale this copy of Bolton’s *Filices* formed part of lot 686.

Nissen 194

Stafleu & Cowan 622

Elizabeth Cornelia Hall: *Printed books 1481–1900 in the Horticultural Society of New York* (New York: Horticultural Society of New York, 1970), p. 24.

Octavo code: bolfil