

The History of Sir Richard Whittington and His Cat. Coventry: M. Luckman, [n.d.]. 8vo, [imperfect: 30 pages only, 10 woodcuts].

In this famous story, which was adapted as a pantomime in the nineteenth century, Dick was a kitchen boy, an orphan whose sole possession was a cat. He left his feline companion on his master's ship as an item for trade. Miraculously, the cat was bought by the king of Morocco, whose realm was riddled with vermin, for a large fortune. The funds allowed Dick to wed the daughter of his master and to become a successful merchant. The story first appeared in the form of a play (licensed in 1605 but no longer extant). This version of the popular Dick Whittington tale was published by Mary Luckman, widow of Thomas Luckman (d. 1784), a Coventry publisher and newspaper owner.

This is a rags-to-riches tale inspired by a historical figure but apocryphal in its details. There was a Richard Whittington (ca. 1350–1423), who was Lord Mayor of London and a member of Parliament. He was believed to be a younger son of Sir William Whittington; his family was affluent, but he was not the heir and so became a textile merchant to support himself. He was apparently successful, providing valuable goods such as silks and velvets to the court of Richard II. Whittington used much of his wealth, both during his lifetime and following his death, for projects of public benefit, including hospitals, libraries, and public conveniences (drinking fountains and a toilet dubbed “Whittington’s longhouse”). There is no documentation that the real Richard Whittington had a cat and he was never impoverished. Some have postulated that the legend regarding the sale of his cat is based on an early engraving of Whittington with his hand resting on a cat. Close examination of the illustration has shown that the cat depicted was originally a skull.

This copy of *The History of Sir Richard Whittington and His Cat* is from the Bodleian Library’s Douce Collection. Francis Douce (1757–1834) was a British antiquary and the Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum from 1807 to 1811. His bequest of more than 19,000 volumes contained printed books from various periods, including nearly 500

incunables, as well as roughly 425 manuscripts. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century children's books numbered among Douce's wide range of collecting specialties. This book is in a binding of plain paper over boards. The frontispiece and title page bear the stamp "EX DONO FR. DOUCE | BIBL. BODL."; the title page is inscribed "M H Haskoll | 1799."

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