



SUPPORTING CAST

Thomas J. Wise

A Historical Figure for *GURPS Fourth Edition*

by Steve Honeywell

Biography

Thomas James Wise is a man with a secret. Rising from humble beginnings, he became one of the most influential men in the world of book collecting and bibliography. For years, Wise's word was enough to verify the most unusual publication, and his guarantee of authenticity for a given work meant more than any scientific method of claiming a book or manuscript was genuine. What Wise didn't want anyone to know was that many of the works he sold were fabrications. For decades, Wise preyed on the book collecting world and duped hundreds into spending thousands of dollars on erroneous publications.

Wise was born in Gravesend, Kent on October 7, 1859 to Thomas Wise and Julia Victoria Dauncey. As a young man, Wise was employed as a clerk by Messrs. Ruback and Co., a purveyor of "essential oils." Wise worked for the company for thirty-odd years, working his way up to the position of chief clerk and cashier before his retirement in 1912.

Wise was active both in the Shelley and Browning societies. From 1886 to 1892, he produced or oversaw 33 publications for the Shelley Society, bankrupting it. It was here that Wise learned quite a bit about both publishing and bibliography. In 1886, Wise hatched a plan to both pirate works and create spurious works. Wise continued to obtain rare books for his private collection, amassing a collection that was impressive both for the sheer number of volumes and for its completeness.

It is the fraudulent works that Wise is particularly noted for. He started with mere piracy, extracting previously unpublished poems of Shelley's from Edward Dowden's *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* and publishing them under the title *Poems and Sonnets*. Additionally, this work featured a false publisher imprint, distancing the work from Wise. He expanded the operation in 1888 by taking shorter 19th-century works that were available only in collections and creating specious "first editions." These were extremely difficult to detect by collectors simply because first editions of those works didn't actually exist for comparison. To add legitimacy to the fraudulent works, Wise donated and sold copies to the British Museum, which would then catalog the titles, lending them authenticity. Also, he sold copies of these works at auction, often buying them himself to set artificially high prices.

As Wise's reputation as a collector and bibliographer grew, he was able to produce more and

more valuable fakes, selling them for increasingly high prices. Wise's bibliographies became another vehicle for him to advertise his spurious books since he listed his manufactured publications as legitimate. In 1893, he was given the task of writing the "Notes on Recent Book Sales" section of *The Bookman*, using this position to further drive up the prices of his fakes. Similarly, the published catalogues of his own collection further advertised what he owned, including all of the specious works.

As bad as this was, Wise's greatest crime is the theft of nearly 300 leaves from the collection of the British Museum. Wise would habitually purchase incomplete copies of works and "finish" them by taking the missing leaves from the British Museum's collection.

One of the most interesting parts of Wise's history is his public denunciation of forgers and pirates. In 1904, Walter T. Spencer created a fake first edition of Swinburne's *Dead Love from a Wise* forgery, and Wise himself denounced him publicly. Around this time, Forman and Wise stopped creating fake first editions, having already foisted an estimated 100 spurious publications on the collecting world.

In 1912, Wise retired from business and concentrated solely on the creation of bibliographies and on editing the letters of Swinburne and the unpublished materials of several other authors. He was named President of the Bibliographic Society in 1922 and served until 1924. In 1924, he was named a Fellow of Worcester College and in 1926 was given an honorary M.A. from Oxford.

While there had been some suspicion on some works sold by Wise, it wasn't until 1934 that Wise himself was suspected. Bibliographers John Carter and Graham Pollard published *An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth-Century Pamphlets*, showing that 40 to 50 pieces commanding high prices were fakes, and that many of these were dated earlier than known first editions. On all, the type, paper, and/or imprint were not genuine, and all could be traced back to Wise. Of particular note was a collection of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry dated 1847 in Wise's fake. These poems had not been shown to Robert Browning by his wife until 1849. More damning was evidence that the wood pulp in the paper contained chemicals not in use until 1874. The type in this pamphlet was compared with others ranging in "publication dates" from 1842 to 1893. In all, the type face was identical, and all used the same mismatched question mark. Naturally, this raised suspicion, since these works were listed as being created by publishers on both sides of the Atlantic over a period of 50 years.

Equally suspicious were choices made by Wise. His edition of Ruskin's *The National Gallery*, dated 1852, contains emendations not present in editions before 1880. Further, Ruskin's *The Queen's Garden*, dated 1864 by Wise, includes changes made by Ruskin in 1871. Naturally, Wise protested the inquiry, going so far as to blame the entire thing on Harry Buxton Forman, who he often worked with (and who was also implicated in the production of these publications) but Wise could produce no evidence. Wise died in 1934, leaving behind his Ashley collection. His widow sold the collection to the British Museum for a reported £66,000, which was about half its estimated value. However, 200-odd works listed in the catalog were no longer present, having been sold off to other collectors.

Using Thomas Wise

While Thomas Wise is not much of an adventurer, he makes an excellent contact in a number of situations. A rising star in the bibliography and book collecting world through the last part of the 19th Century, Wise truly comes into his own after 1912. Around this time, he is perhaps the

single greatest authority on books, particularly those of the 19th Century, in the world. His bibliographies are noteworthy because of their attention to detail and completeness, and his reputation is sterling until a few months before his death in 1934.

Wise would be the contact of choice to locate and acquire any rare book or pamphlet. Because his connections are so good, he will likely be aware of the location of multiple copies of any given work, and may also know someone willing to sell a copy. Additionally, because of the relative size of his collection, Wise may possess one or more copies of a given work at any given time, and will generally be willing to part with one for the right price. He makes an excellent contact for anyone or any group who may need access to particular books over the course of a campaign.

Wise could also act as a patron for the right group. His constant desire for rare books could conceivably possess him to hire a group to obtain particular tomes for him. Such groups would be paid little, since Wise's desire is to continue to add to his collection and he'd be hard pressed to spend money elsewhere. Still, for particularly rare tomes available only in other parts of the world, he might be willing to fund an expedition.

Of course, it's much more interesting if Wise's spurious productions somehow enter the mix. The group could be contacted by a buyer of Wise's who wonders if the books he has acquired are truly the genuine article. Or the group itself might be duped by one of Wise's books either at the behest of another collector patron or on their own.

In a *Steampunk* game, Wise will still concentrate on literature, but will also deal in more exotic and technical works. While it is unlikely that he will fabricate such works, it is possible that he will produce "early" versions of particular designs or technical ideas, depending on whether or not there is interest in the book collecting market. He will undoubtedly have many such works in his collection.

A *Horror* or *Cabal* campaign makes Wise even more interesting. His ability to suddenly procure new and unknown "early" editions of works and his collection of rare books may make him a target of creatures who do not wish to have their secrets discovered. It's important to remember that Wise's books were all taken at face value, so his reputation for discovering previously unknown books is near-legendary. Anything with a shadowy or dangerous past would risk a lot to prevent him from inadvertently uncovering some dark secret. Wise may need protection, and may go to the best, closest source for help. Conversely, Wise may be working for the Cabal either as a member or a dupe. His fabricated works could be full of misinformation to lead others astray, further cloaking his masters from prying eyes.

Thomas James Wise ***155 points***

5'7", 170 lbs. (SM 0)

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 13 [60]; **HT** 10 [0]

Dmg 1d-2 thrust, 1d swing; *BL* 20 lbs.

HP 10 [0]; *Will* 13 [0]; *Per* 13[0]; *FP* 10 [0]

Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; *Basic Move* 5 [0]

Dodge 8

Social Background

TL 6 [0]

CF Late 19th, early 20th century Europe [0]

Languages: English (Native) [0]; Latin (Accented) [4]; Ancient Greek (Accented) [4]; French (Accented) [4]

Advantages*

Reputation (Leading expert on rare books) +4, all book collectors, always recognized [10]
 Status 2 [10]
 Charisma 1 [10]
 Wealth (Comfortable) [10]
 Independent Income (Wealthy) [2]
 Contact Group (Book collectors and publishers; 9 or less; effective skill 15; usually reliable) [20]

*After 1922, add another rank of Status [5]

After 1926, add a fourth rank of Status [5]

Disadvantages

Obsession (To amass the greatest book collection in the world) [-10]
 Overconfident [-5]
 Bad Sight (Corrected) [-10]
 Secret (Much of his life's work is a sham) [-10]

Quirks

Hates being called Tom, Tommy, or T.J. (-1 reaction) [-1]
 Spends all disposable income on books [-1]
 Enjoys revealing forgers, even at personal and professional risk [-1]

Skills

Accounting 14 (IQ+1) [8]
 Area Knowledge (London) 13 (IQ+0) [1]
 Artist (Printing)* 15 (IQ+2) [2]
 Connoisseur (Literature)† 16 (IQ+3) [8]
 Diplomacy 12 (IQ-1) [2]
 Expert Skill (Printing) 13 (IQ+0) [4]
 Finance 13 (IQ+0) [4]
 Literature 16 (IQ+3) [16]
 Merchant 14 (IQ+1) [2]
 Propaganda 13 (IQ+0) [2]
 Research 13 (IQ+0) [2]
 Savoir-Faire (High Society) 13 (IQ+0) [1]
 Writing 13 (IQ+0) [2]

* It may seem strange that Wise does not have the Forgery skill. However, he wasn't technically a forger since the works he created were not attempting to duplicate something already in existence. Instead, he created entirely new works but backdated them and included false publishing imprints to give the impression that these works were genuine first editions. Because of this, Artist (Printing) seems to be a better fit for his actual skill.

† Secondary skill based on Literature.

For a modern campaign, add Computer Use 14 (IQ+1) [2]; Teaching 14 (IQ+0) [2]. Wise would

most likely be a college librarian or literature professor. He would also be much more careful in producing his spurious works, using antique inks and paper.

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