Juvenile Rambles through the Paths of Nature. London, 1786. 16mo., 4 1/8 inches x 2
13/16 inches (105 mm x 71 mm), 128 pages, 13 woodcuts (two hand-colored, most likely
by a young owner).

This work, the dedication of which is signed “R.J.” is generally attributed to Richard
Johnson, an author closely associated with the publications of the Newberys and Thomas
Carnan. Sarah Trimmer (1741–1810), a prominent writer of children’s books, apparently
considered Juvenile Rambles a shameless borrowing of her book An Easy Introduction to
the Knowledge of Nature (1780). Johnson is often termed a “hack-writer” because he
would write, abridge, or even “borrow” anything that his publishers would pay for.
Johnson made a decent living from scattered commissions, most of them from John
Newbery’s successors, Thomas Carnan among them. Johnson’s reliance on
pseudonyms—such as “Revd. W. D. Cooper,” “Master Michael Angelo,” and “Master
Tommy Littleton”—adds to the challenge of positively identifying Johnson’s work.

This particular book is narrated by a kindly adult who leads little Charlotte and Billy on a
series of twelve “rambles,” during the course of which he describes the uses of lambs,
trees (the oak in particular), various grains, flax, hemp, and cotton; the characteristics of
different birds such as the peacock, pheasant, owl, and hummingbird; and the varieties
and uses of soils and their suitability for different ornamental plants. The narrator also
engages in a discussion of minerals such as marble, coal, silver, copper, iron, and gold;
describes the useful products derived from cows; offers advice about keeping one’s
clothes and shoes dry; shares tidbits about mice, porcupines, and hedgehogs; deliberates
on the social organization and virtues of bees; praises the utility of different classes of
dogs (guard, herd, sport) and donkeys, as well as the nobility of horses; details the
ingenuity of birds in their nest-building; and comments on the value of chickens and traits
of other domestic fowl. The final “ramble” is a cautionary tour of the graves of children
who have done foolish things.

This book was published by Thomas Carnan who was the stepson of John Newbery
(1713–1767), the Englishman considered by some to be the inventor of children’s
literature and by others to have been the first to recognize its commercial potential. After Newbery’s death in 1767, the publishing business was continued by two separate firms, one headed by Newbery’s son Francis and Thomas Carnan, and the other by Newbery’s nephew Francis and Francis’ wife Elizabeth. Relations between the competing firms were not friendly, and Carnan and Newbery’s partnership dissolved after a time, with Carnan continuing to publish and Francis selling patent medicines, which were part of his father’s business.

This copy of *Juvenile Rambles* is now part of the Douce Collection at Oxford’s Bodleian Library. 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 contemporary binding of boards covered with Dutch floral paper. The inscription “Marg’ H Haskoll | Dec’ 17 1799” appears on the front free endpaper, the title page bears the stamp “EX DONO FR. DOUCE | BIBL. BODL.,” and the signature “Emily Haskoll 1819” is on leaf A4.

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