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# Colby Library Quarterly

Series II

August 1949

No. 11

## MIDSUMMER REVERIE OF A CURATOR OF RARE BOOKS

ON a drowsy summer afternoon like this, one can easily think of places that would give more pleasure than those that even a college library can offer. What appeal can a book have on a hot day in midsummer, compared with that of a refreshing plunge into the cool water of lake or ocean? This is the sort of afternoon that makes it easy to recall, with sympathetic understanding, Arthur Christopher Benson's remarks on books in one of the pages of *From a College Window*. It must have been on just such a listless afternoon as this that he wrote: "The one room in my college which I always enter with a certain sense of desolation and sadness is the college library." Not that Benson did not like books; on the contrary he read widely and wisely. But summer days are apt to be crowded full with alluring invitations to look elsewhere than on the printed page; and pages that were printed a long time ago are, figuratively as well as literally, fading leaves. "The books of the college library are delightful, indeed, to look at," so Benson declares; "rows upon rows of big irregular volumes, with tarnished tooling and faded gilding on the sun-scorched backs. What are they? Old editions of classics, old volumes of controversial divinity, folios of the Fathers, topographical treatises, cumbrous philosophers, pamphlets from which, like dry ashes, the heat of the fire that warmed them once has fled. Take one down: it is an agreeable sight enough; there is a gentle scent of antiquity; the bumpy page crackles faintly; the big irregular print meets the eye with a pleasant and

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leisurely mellowness. But what do they tell one? Very little, alas! that one need know, very much which it would be a positive mistake to believe. That is the worst of erudition—that the next scholar sucks the few drops of honey that you have accumulated, sets right your blunders, and you are superseded. You have handed on the torch, perhaps, and even trimmed it. Your errors, your patient explanations, were a necessary step in the progress of knowledge; but even now the procession has turned the corner, and is out of sight.”

There, there, Mr. Benson! Is it really as bad as all that? *Are* these “old editions of classics” that here surround me all “like dry ashes”? May not one’s interest in them rouse the embers into flame?



Here beside me as I write lies a block of wood, engraved a hundred and thirty years ago by the hand of Thomas Bewick.<sup>1</sup> That Newcastle artist applied his skill to this particular piece of wood, in order to use it in illustrating

<sup>1</sup> The announcement that Mr. T. Raymond Pierce had presented to the Colby College Library half a dozen original wood-blocks engraved by Bewick was made in the May issue of this quarterly.

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an edition of *Fables of Aesop and Others* in 1818. The continued serviceability of this wood-block, after one hundred and thirty years, is shown by the clarity of the details in the reproduction here given. In looking at this oval, one can understand why King George the Third was incredulous and would not believe that Bewick's illustrations were printed from pieces of wood, until he was shown the actual blocks. What delicacy in the handling of the details on so small a surface! This particular illustration from *Aesop* was originally planned to accompany the fable of

### CAESAR AND THE SLAVE

FOR those who may not immediately remember the story, it goes something like this:

Once upon a time, when Tiberius Caesar was staying at his house on Mt. Misenus, one of his domestic slaves put himself into a most alert posture and dress; and whenever Caesar went walking in his gardens, the slave would appear in whichever of the walks the emperor happened to be in, and would sprinkle the ground with water from a watering-pot, in order to settle the dust. This he did so officiously, that he was noticed and laughed at, for he ran through private alleys and turnings, from one walk to another, so that no matter where the emperor went, he always found this fellow busy with his watering-pot. The slave of course hoped that Caesar would be so touched by this diligence that he would free him from bondage. At last, however, the emperor could stand it no longer; he called the slave to him. When the man came running, full of joyful expectation of being set free, "Hark you, friend," said Caesar, "I have observed that you have been very very busy a great while; but you were impertinently busy, officiously meddling where you had nothing to do, when you might have employed your time better elsewhere. Go, and mind your own business hereafter."

This wooden souvenir of Bewick's interest in Aesop's *Fables* recalls to mind that a greater man than Thomas Bewick was once interested in Aesop. Socrates knew some of the fables and, during the days of his imprisonment, he whiled away some of his time by turning these fables into verse. Plato tells us, in the *Phaedo*, that on the day when

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Socrates was to die, he sat on his couch and, after the chains had been removed from his ankles, he began to bend and rub his leg, saying, as he rubbed: "How singular is this thing called pleasure, and how curiously related to pain! I cannot help thinking that if Aesop had noticed it, he would have made a fable about the strife between pain and pleasure. . . . When one comes, the other always follows."

Century after century went by, during which many a book disappeared forever, but the fables of Aesop survived. Early in the Christian era they were known in Latin and were collected by a man named Phaedrus. At the close of the Dark Ages, when the dawn of the Renaissance began to lighten the intellectual skies of Europe, a monk named Planudes made a collection of Aesop's fables, and it is this Latin collection, compiled while Chaucer was alive, that has come down to us. When Gutenberg's printing press made it possible for the first time in the two thousand years since Aesop's death to reproduce the fables cheaply and in quantity, they were among the first things to be printed. Aesop was printed at Milan in 1474 and at Rome in 1476. By this last date the fables had been translated into German, and within a few years a French translation was also available. In 1483 William Caxton translated this French *Aesop* into English, and in 1484 Caxton's edition of Aesop was published at Westminster—the fifty-eighth book "emprynted" by the first English printer.

Some indication of the avidity with which Aesop's *Fables* were read in English, once Caxton had made a translation available, may be found in the fact that practically the entire edition was eventually worn out and is now lost. By 1949 Caxton's *Aesop* of 1484 has become one of the rarest of rare books. There is no copy on record in any American library. There is only one perfect copy in England—in the Royal Library in Windsor Castle. The British Museum and the Bodleian Library at Oxford have the only other copies on record and both these are imperfect specimens.

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Since no trace of any English translation previous to Caxton's has been discovered, he must be given credit for introducing the famous fables to all who speak Caxton's language. His *Aesop* was printed and reprinted in London, with hardly any change, down to the time of the Restoration.

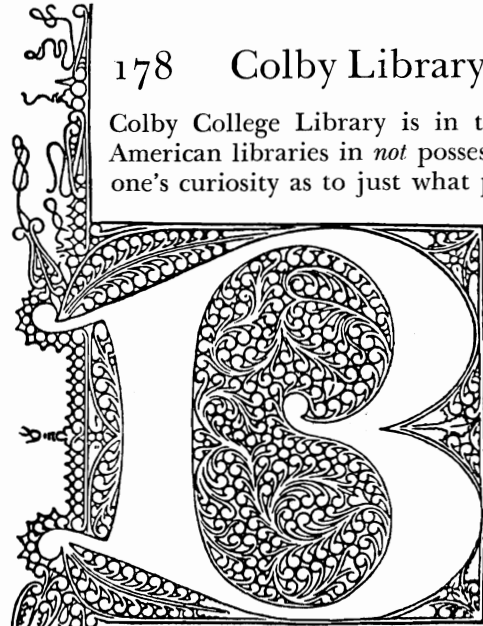
CAXTON did more than introduce Aesop to Englishmen by this publication of 1484. It was in this book that Caxton employed for the first time—hence the first instance in the history of English printing—large wood-cut initials. Caxton's earlier books had followed the example of mediaeval manuscripts and had left a space on the printed page into which a colored and highly ornamental initial letter could be later inserted by hand. In his *Aesop*, however, Caxton *printed* the large initials throughout the book. This innovation may not now seem startling, yet no one in England had ever before been equal to the demands that this branch of the art of engraving makes upon the artist. When Caxton (or his artist) cut the wood-blocks used in the *Aesop*, the first *colored* large initials in the history of printing were not thirty years old. These first colored initials were printed in a beautiful *Psalter* produced in Mainz in 1457 by Gutenberg's successors, Fust and Schoeffer. Their printing of the first Psalm, beginning "Beatus vir qui non abiit," made use of the big "B" which is shown on page 178. In the *Psalter* of 1457 the central part of this big "B" was printed in red and the background in blue. Caxton's large initials were printed, as here, in black.

The popularity of Caxton's edition of Aesop continued into the century in which Shakespeare was born. The Stratford dramatist of course knew the fables, and (in *Henry the Sixth*, Part III) he makes one of the characters say: "Let Aesop fable in a winter's night."

This reminder that Shakespeare knew Caxton's translation of Aesop, coupled with the knowledge that the

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Colby College Library is in the company of all other American libraries in *not* possessing a Caxton *Aesop*, stirs one's curiosity as to just what printed books we do have



LESSED IS THE  
MAN THAT WALK-  
ETH NOT IN THE  
COUNSEL OF THE  
UNGODLY.

that Shakespeare himself might have handled. In *Eight Hundred Years of Fine Printing* (a catalogue dated June 1946) the Colby College Library listed its holdings of incunabula — books printed in the fifteenth century. But no similar list has, we think, been printed, naming the books produced in the century of Shakespeare's birth. Here, then, is such a list, arranged in chronological order, giving nearly thirty titles now in the Colby College Library:

### BOOKS PRINTED IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

*Edward II, Part VII*, printed at Westminster about 1512 by Caxton's foreman and successor, Wynkyn de Worde. We have only one leaf from this book.

Plautus's *Comedies*, printed (in Latin, of course) at Florence by P. de Giunta in 1514. Shakespeare might have used a copy of this book while at work on his *Comedy of Errors*.

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Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, printed in London by Richard Pynson in 1527—again a book that Shakespeare might have recalled when he came to write *Richard II* or other historical plays. Pynson, a successor (with Wynkyn de Worde) to Caxton, was appointed King's Printer to Henry VIII. He introduced Roman type into England.

A Bible *Concordance* (in Latin), printed at Basel, Switzerland, in 1531 by Hieronymus Frobenius, probably the son of John Froben, the German scholar and printer who set up a printing press at Basel in 1491 and there turned out a number of scholarly works in Greek. Luther used Froben's Greek New Testament.

Melanchthon's *Etliche Propositiones*—an eight-page pamphlet printed, possibly at Wittenberg, in 1535. This is our earliest piece of printing in German. The author, Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560) became professor of Greek at Wittenberg at the early age of twenty-one, and there helped to revise Luther's translation of the Bible. During Luther's confinement in the Wartburg, Melanchthon became the leader of the Reformation cause at the university, and in 1530 he drew up the seventeen articles of faith known as the Augsburg Confession. The Colby pamphlet was printed five years later.

Aesop's *Fables* in Greek and Latin, printed at Basel, Switzerland, by John Heruagius (one of Froben's associates) in 1544.

Robert Estienne's *Concordance to the Bible*, printed at Geneva in 1555. The book itself—a large, well-printed folio—states that it was printed by "Stephanus." This was the Latin name of Robert Estienne (1503-1559) who, in 1526, became head of the printing firm established by his father in Paris in 1502. Estienne printed Bibles in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek, and being a scholar as well as a printer he published various religious works which, about 1550,



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got him into disputes over theological matters. In 1551 he left Paris and settled in Geneva, where he spent the remaining eight years of his life. There, in 1555, he published the work one copy of which has found a harbor in the Colby College Library.

The *New Testament* (in Latin), printed at Basel by N. Barbirius and J. Courteau in 1559. This book appeared just five years before Shakespeare's birth.

Eunapius's *De Vitis Philosophorum*, printed at Antwerp by the famous Flemish printer, Christopher Plantin, in 1568. This is Colby's earliest example of printing from the Low Countries.

Cicero's *Rhetoric*, printed in 1569 in Venice at the Aldine Press, made famous by Aldus Manutius, the printer who popularized the handy octavo volume in place of the cumbersome mediaeval folio.

John Calvin's *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, printed in Heidelberg, Germany, by J. Meyer in 1572.

Sallust's *De Conjurazione Catillinae*, printed at Louvain by Jerome Wellaeus in 1572. Shakespeare *might* have studied about the conspiracy of Catiline with this book but he probably didn't. This Colby copy has, however, been in famous hands, for it was once owned by William Wordsworth and bears his autograph.

Plutarch's *Ethics* (in Latin), printed at Basel by Thomas Guarinus in 1573. This book was published six years before Sir Thomas North's famous translation of Plutarch's *Lives*—the book to which Shakespeare turned for all his Roman plays.

Matthew Flacius's *Ecclesiastical History* (in Latin), printed in Basel by John Oporinus in 1574.

Charles Sigonius's *History of the Kingdom of Italy*, printed in Venice by Jordan Zilettus in 1574.

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Arnobius's *Disputationum adversus Gentes*, another of Plantin's publications at Antwerp, printed in 1582.

John Calvin's *Sermons upon the Book of Job*, printed in London by G. Bishop in 1584. This is not only our oldest complete book printed in England—printed when Shakespeare was twenty years old—but it is also our oldest complete book in the English language. It was published in the same year as John Knox's *History of the Reformation within the Realm of Scotland*, just thirty years after Knox's famous meeting with Calvin at Geneva.

Epictetus's *Enchiridion*, printed at Antwerp by Plantin in 1585, printed in both Latin and Greek.

Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, published in London by John Harrison and others. "Finished in January 1587." This is the work made famous by Shakespeare's use of it as a source-book for all his historical dramas. Colby owes its possession of this copy to the kindness and generosity of the Bowdoin College Library.

John Calvin's *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (in Latin), printed at Geneva by E. Vignon in 1588—the year of the Spanish Armada.

Another book, also printed by Eustace Vignon, presumably therefore at Geneva, in 1588, entitled *Panoplia Christiana adversus Varias Tentationes*. Could this work also be by Calvin? The subject, the date, the place, and the printer, all suggest that it is.

Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, printed at Leyden, at the Plantin Press, by Francis Raphelengius, in 1590. This is a reprint of the great book whose praises Chaucer sang, printed in a neat Latin type at the shop made famous by the Flemish printer, Christopher Plantin.

Cyprian's *Works* (in Latin), printed by John le Preux in 1593. But printed where? The book does not say. It is printed in a fine, large, roman type, with a title-page in

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red and black. The paper, now three hundred and fifty years old, is crisp and sound.

Jerome Natale's *Annotations and Meditations* (in Latin), printed by M. Nutius at Antwerp in 1594.

*The Historie of France* "by an unknown Author," printed in London in 1595 by John Windet. The author, who dedicated his work to the Countess of Warwick, is possibly Thomas Danett, who died shortly before Shakespeare. To judge by the *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England . . . 1475-1640* (London 1926), this is an extremely rare book: only two other copies are known to exist in America—one in the Huntington Library in California and the other in the Newberry Library in Chicago. Curiously enough, this book is no new arrival at Colby; it has long been in our library, ever since the days when we were Waterville College. The *Historie of France* of 1595 is a genuine treasure. Even in England it is a rare item, for (as Librarian Humphry has recently ascertained) the copy in the British Museum is the only copy on record in British libraries. The Colby College Library thus appears to own one-quarter of the world's supply of the 1595 edition of *The Historie of France*.

The *Holy Bible*: the Old Testament translated into Latin by Immanuel Tremellius (first published in 1575) and Francis Junius, and the New Testament translated into Latin by Theodore Beza. Our copy of this book unfortunately lacks the title-page. It was printed by William B. Flander in 1596 at "Campis ad Issulam," wherever that is! Can any of our readers inform us?

Arias Montanus's *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, printed at Antwerp in 1599 by John Moretus, Plantin's son-in-law.

John Meursius's *Criticus Arnobobianus Tributus*, printed by Elzevir at Leyden in 1599—our oldest Elzevir volume.

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A Polyglot edition of the *New Testament*: two volumes printed at "Noriberg" (can this be Nuremberg?) in July 1600.

Brief though this list of sixteenth-century books is, how vividly it shows the spread of Gutenberg's invention over the map of Europe, carrying enlightenment with it.

Well, so much for the books which William Shakespeare might have handled. Who knows? Perhaps he *did* handle this very copy of Plautus in the private library of the Earl of Southampton!

THOMAS BEWICK's edition of the *Fables of Aesop and Others* appeared two hundred years after Shakespeare, and it is now one hundred and thirty years since Bewick carved the block of wood that lies before me. "Dry ashes of the past"? No, on the contrary! It has provided wings for my thoughts and I have been flying through time and space in most miraculous fashion, never for one instant thinking of myself as

some poor keeper of a school  
Whose business is to sit through summer months  
And dole out children leave to go and play,  
Himself superior to such lightness—he  
In the arm-chair's state and pedagogic pomp—  
To the life, the laughter, sun and youth outside.

No, these lines from Robert Browning do not describe the curator of rare books who pens these lines. He rather thinks of himself as sharing Socrates's pleasure in versifying Aesop. Or, as Sir Edward Dyer once put it, in lines that every reader can quote with me:

*My mind to me a kingdom is;  
Such present joys therein I find,  
That it excels all other bliss  
That earth affords or grows by kind.*

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The books that I have been handling, and thinking about, and writing about, are far, far from being the useless, desiccated, sad relics of the past that A. C. Benson thought them to be. "A good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life," as a well-known Englishman said a little over three hundred years ago.

Sarah Orne Jewett, whose centenary we propose to celebrate next month, knew the proper attitude toward a book written by a great author: "His work," she once declared, "stands like a great cathedral in which the world may worship and be taught to pray, long after its tired architect goes home to rest."



### RECENT ACQUISITIONS

COLERIDGE'S name was hardly mentioned last fall, when we (and others) were celebrating the sesquicentennial of *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth's achievements were applauded and appraised, but in almost every instance that has come to our attention, mention of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the famous book was made as if it were the sole work of William Wordsworth, ignoring Coleridge's contributions to it completely. Wordsworth himself is, of course, partly responsible for this. In 1800, when the second edition was published, he quietly appropriated the book, as far as the title-page is concerned. It was announced as *Lyrical Ballads with Other Poems by W. Wordsworth*. True, in both cases Wordsworth stated, in his prefatory remarks, that "a friend . . . furnished me with the Poems of the *Ancient Mariner*," etc., but the "friend" was not identified, and the *Ancient Mariner*'s poem was kicked around on the table of contents, from one position to another, in highly undignified and uncomplimentary fashion. In the first edition the poem occupied first place; in