



May 1950

Eighteen-Fifty-- "Annus Mirabilis"

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 2, no.14, May 1950, p.225-237

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Colby Library Quarterly

Series II

May 1950

No. 14

DEDICATION

By HENRY W. LONGFELLOW

NOTHING that is shall perish utterly,
But perish only to revive again
In other forms, as clouds restore in rain
The exhalations of the land and sea.
Men build their houses from the masonry
Of ruined tombs; the passion and the pain
Of hearts, that long have ceased to beat, remain
To throb in hearts that are, or are to be.

So from old chronicles, where sleep in dust
Names that once filled the world with trumpet tones,
I build this verse; and flowers of song have thrust
Their roots among the loose disjointed stones,
Which to this end I fashion as I must.
Quickened are they that touch the Prophet's bones.



EIGHTEEN-FIFTY—"ANNUS MIRABILIS"

JOHN Dryden once wrote a poem entitled "Annus Mirabilis" dealing with the period from August, 1665, to September, 1666, during which the Plague, the naval war with the Dutch, and the Great Fire of London all occurred. From a book-lover's point of view, the year 1850 is much more important than Dryden's "year." During this *annus*

226 Colby Library Quarterly

mirabilis Poet Laureate William Wordsworth died in England, and Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller was lost to American literature by her tragic death at sea. Fate promptly set about making adequate replacements, and the year 1850 saw the births of Robert Louis Stevenson and of Maupassant, of Lafcadio Hearn and Eugene Field, of Augustine Birrell and Arlo Bates. Moreover, a score of authors—poets, essayists, novelists, editors, critics—turned out work during the year 1850—work which we in 1950 still delight to read.

Don Marquis is quoted as having once remarked that “the publishing of a book of poetry is like throwing a rose petal down into the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo.” Fortunately, that isn’t always true. Some books of poetry “fill the world with trumpet tones”—to quote Longfellow’s words on the first page of this issue—and stir men’s blood long after the trumpeter’s lips are silent. Or—to change the metaphor and quote another Maine author, Sarah Orne Jewett—“their work 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.”

In 1850 Wordsworth went to his rest, at the age of eighty. A score of other famous names helped to make that year memorable. In 1850 Leigh Hunt was 66, Thomas Carlyle was 55, Ralph Waldo Emerson was 47, Hawthorne was 46, Mrs. Browning was 44, Longfellow and Whittier were 43, Tennyson was 41, Mrs. Gaskell was 40, Thackeray was 39, Browning and Dickens were 38, Anthony Trollope was 35, Charles Kingsley was 31, Coventry Patmore was 27, Wilkie Collins was 26; and in the Rossetti family Dante Gabriel was 22, William Michael, 21; and their sister Christina, only 20. Every one of these men and women, “names that once filled the world with trumpet tones,” published during the year 1850.

Not all of them were immediately recognized as trumpet tones, however, for then even as now human judgments

Colby Library Quarterly 227

were fallible and shortsighted. Has it not always been so? On one of the pages of Lecomte du Nouy's rare and exceptional book, *Human Destiny*, he comments on the disparity between contemporary judgment and the verdict of the ages. "The Roman patricians of the year 33," says du Nouy, "the philosophers, and the intellectuals would have been highly amused if they had been told that the unknown young Jew, tried by the procurator of a distant colony, who, so as to avoid complications, handed him over against his will to the crowd, would play an infinitely greater rôle than Caesar, would dominate the history of the occident, and become the purest symbol of all humanity."

This is an old story, and we are therefore not likely to be surprised by discovering, in the course of a 1950 centennial retrospect, that the patricians, the philosophers, and the intellectuals of 1850 were not wholly successful in recognizing the relative merits of the writers whose books were to interest men a hundred years later. No one read Trollope; no one bought *The Germ*, organ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; and no one hailed Wilkie Collins as a new star in the literary firmament. On the other hand, William Bell Scott delighted some of his contemporaries extremely, and with their encouragement he ultimately published five volumes of verse. Who reads them now?

At this middle point in the twentieth century, we can look back upon the year 1850 with greater confidence in our ability to appraise its productions. At least the score of men and women already named seem commemorable, and the Colby College Library therefore exhibits, in the show-cases in the Robinson Treasure Room, copies of the following

BOOKS PUBLISHED IN 1850

The descriptive check-list here given will serve as a catalogue for this mid-century Centennial Exhibition of a

228 Colby Library Quarterly

Score of Famous Authors—an exhibition which is open to the general public as well as to all members of the college community, every afternoon, Monday through Friday. The exhibition will continue until after the June Commencement. With each book there is shown a portrait of the author and a sample of his handwriting, this specimen consisting (whenever possible) of an original autograph letter in the Colby files.

1. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770-1850): *The Prelude*. We show both the London edition published by Edward Moxon and the New York edition published by D. Appleton & Company. This autobiographical poem, begun in the seventeen-nineties and completed in 1805-1806, was not published until after the poet's death in 1850. The title was suggested by Mrs. Wordsworth. "In spite of many inferior passages and some that are obscure, in spite of frequent prolixity," says Wordsworth's biographer, George McLean Harper, "*The Prelude* is the greatest long poem in our language after *Paradise Lost*."

2. LEIGH HUNT (1784-1859): *Autobiography*. We exhibit the two-volume edition published by Harpers in New York in 1850. These books are from the library of William O. Fuller (M.Litt., Colby, 1929), editor from 1874 to 1941 of the *Rockland Courier-Gazette*. Leigh Hunt will always be remembered as the man who brought about the meeting of Shelley and Keats, who joined Byron at Pisa in 1822, and who was caricatured as Harold Skimpole by Dickens in *Bleak House* in 1852. Much that Leigh Hunt has to say in these two volumes now falls on deaf ears, but there are passages that still reward the reader. E.g.: "Great disappointment and exceeding viciousness may talk as they please of the badness of human nature. For my part, I am now in my sixty-fifth year, and I have seen a good deal of the world, the dark side as well as the light, and I say that human nature is a very good and kindly thing, and capable

Colby Library Quarterly 229

of all sorts of virtues. . . . To evils I have owed some of my greatest blessings. It was imprisonment that brought me acquainted with my friend of friends, Shelley."

3. THOMAS CARLYLE (1795-1881): *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. We exhibit both the London book-edition published by Chapman & Hall, and three of the Boston editions, published serially in pamphlet form, as the title of the series indicates, by Phillips, Sampson & Co.: Numbers 1 and 2 in March, 1850; No. 6 in June. In these pamphlets Carlyle preached his familiar sermon that salvation was to be sought in a return to mediaeval conditions and to the rule of the strong, just man. His *Heroes and Hero-Worship* had been published in 1841, in time for some of his "heroes" (Shakespeare and Napoleon, for example) to reappear among the "representative men" surveyed in 1850 by Carlyle's American friend, Emerson.

4. RALPH WALDO EMERSON (1803-1882): *Representative Men*. This book, published in Boston by Phillips, Sampson and Company, contains seven lectures: on the "Uses of Great Men," and on Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe. Of all the books in this exhibition—products of the year 1850—this one has been longest on the shelves of the Colby College Library. It was among the first, if not the very first book, by Emerson to be purchased by the Library. Emerson spoke twice here at Colby, once in 1841 and again in 1863. On the second occasion he spoke on "The Man of Letters." The last chapter in his *Representative Men* is on "The Writer."

5. NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE (1804-1864): *The Scarlet Letter*. This famous book was published in Boston by Ticknor, Reed, and Fields. Just before its publication, Hawthorne had some discussion about the title. "If *The Scarlet Letter* is to be the title," he asked James T. Fields, "would it not be well to print it on the title-page in red ink? I am not

230 Colby Library Quarterly

quite sure about the good taste of so doing, but it would certainly be piquant and appropriate." As those who visit this mid-century exhibition can see, "The" was printed in black, "Scarlet Letter," (with a comma) in red ink, and "A Romance." in black. This copy of the book was presented by the Boston Colby Club. It is from the first issue of the first edition, identified by the word "reduplicate" on page 21. This word was later changed to "repudiate," and eventually to "resuscitate." *The Scarlet Letter* is, without any question, the most important American book published in 1850.

6. ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING (1806-1861): *Poems*. New edition. In two volumes. London: Chapman & Hall, 1850. The first edition of Mrs. Browning's collected *Poems* had appeared in 1844, in two volumes; but this, the second edition, is of much greater interest and importance because of the inclusion, for the first time in print, of her famous "Sonnets from the Portuguese." Throughout the first third of the twentieth century, claims were made by T. J. Wise that the "Sonnets" had been "printed at Reading in 1847 for private circulation only"—to quote Wise's *Browning Library*, page 80—but in 1934 it was disclosed that the 1847 Reading *Sonnets* was a forgery manufactured by Wise himself. The 1850 edition of the *Poems* is, therefore, the first printing and the first publication of the "Sonnets from the Portuguese." The Colby College Library is not among the fortunate possessors of a copy of this volume; the one included in our mid-century exhibition has been kindly loaned for this occasion by Harvard College Library.

7. HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW (1807-1882): *The Seaside and the Fireside*. The first poem in this book is the well-known work "The Building of the Ship," with its oft-quoted lines

... Sail on, O Ship of State,
Sail on, O UNION, strong and great!

Colby Library Quarterly 231

lines about which Mr. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana wrote an interesting and informative article published in our February issue. Mr. Dana reminded his readers that President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote out these lines about the "Ship of State" and sent them to Winston Churchill at a dark moment in the early years of World War II.

8. JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER (1807-1892): *Old Portraits and Modern Sketches*. This book was published in Boston by Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, the same publishers who issued Longfellow's *Seaside and Fireside*. Whittier's latest biographer, John A. Pollard, pointed out in 1949 that "in truth, Whittier placed a very modest estimate upon his power as a poet. Repeatedly he said that he did not consider himself truly one." In a letter dated June 28, 1878, Whittier said: "I regard good prose writing as really better than rhyme." In this volume of 1850 Whittier collected some of his own prose writings—ten essays contributed to *The National Era* in Washington and to other periodicals. Two of these essays are worthy of centennial mention: "John Bunyan," the first chapter in the book, has been called "the essence of Whittier," and "Andrew Marvell" shows the strong appeal that this seventeenth-century poet had for Whittier.

9. ALFRED TENNYSON (1809-1892): *In Memoriam*. This famous poem was privately printed in May, 1850, for the use of Tennyson's friends, and it was soon thereafter published. Although the publication was anonymous, Tennyson's authorship was never in doubt. When his publisher promised a small yearly royalty on this book, Tennyson decided that he could at last marry. He and Mrs. Tennyson were married on June 13, in the month that saw the publication of this book. As Professor Chew has recently remarked, "modern readers are still won by its sustained beauty, its deep feeling, its wealth of imagery, now tender and intimate, now gorgeous and elaborate, and its rev-

232 Colby Library Quarterly

elation of the poet's personality." Tennyson succeeded Wordsworth as Poet Laureate in 1850.

10. ELIZABETH CLEGHORN GASKELL (1810-1865): *The Moorland Cottage*. Only two years before the *annus mirabilis* which we are here celebrating, Mrs. Gaskell had published anonymously her first novel, *Mary Barton*. Its success was so great that Dickens invited her to contribute to the first number of his new magazine, *Household Words*; and when he gave his great dinner, in 1850, to celebrate the publication of *David Copperfield*, he invited Mrs. Gaskell to be one of the guests. There she met Carlyle and Thackeray. Soon after this she published *The Moorland Cottage*, "by the author of *Mary Barton*." She made use of Browning's publishers, Chapman & Hall, rather than Dickens's and Thackeray's, Bradbury & Evans. This Christmas story by Mrs. Gaskell is, as her latest biographer, Elizabeth Haldane, observes, "really a beautiful story of an idyllic kind." Two of Mrs. Gaskell's famous contemporaries agreed with this judgment. Swinburne admired it and thought that George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* owed much to Mrs. Gaskell's "beautiful story." And Charlotte Brontë thought it "as sweet, as pure, as fresh as an unopened morning daisy." Charlotte lived only five years beyond the mid-century, but that was long enough for her to return more than once to the delights of *The Moorland Cottage*: "That book opened like a daisy . . . ; it finished like . . . a balsamic herb with healing in its leaves. That small volume has beauty for commencement, gathers power in progress, and closes in pathos." It deserves a re-reading in 1950. Colby has no copy of this book. The one exhibited has been lent for this occasion by Yale University Library.

11. WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY (1811-1863): *Pendennis*. We exhibit both the London edition published by Bradbury & Evans and the New York edition published by Harper & Brothers. Both are in two volumes, and both in-

Colby Library Quarterly 233

clude illustrations done by Thackeray himself. The New York title-page announces "illustrations on wood," whereas the London edition is equipped "with illustrations on steel and wood by the author." The book is dedicated "To Dr. John Elliotson" without whose "great goodness and kindness" Thackeray would never have risen from his sick bed to complete the novel. In September, 1849, he first sprained an ankle and was then stricken with an illness which the doctor diagnosed as cholera. On October 3 Thackeray thought his end was "possibly near at hand," and not until Christmas Day did he report the resumption of *Pendennis*. On November 26, 1850, he was finally able to record "having completed my story this day and wrote finis." This prolonged illness has undoubtedly left its marks on the novel: there are tedious stretches. But after the passage of a century, the portrait of Major Pendennis still commands a respectful attention, and there are readers of *Pendennis* who wax much more enthusiastic over this work than over *The Scarlet Letter*. As for the illustrations, if some of the countenances seem expressionless, the fault may be the wood-engraver's rather than Thackeray's. On April 20, 1849, he wrote to the sculptor John Bell: "The printer's boy who bears this has with him some blocks of mine for . . . *Pendennis*. I . . . wish you would look at them, and see that there is some expression in them . . . which those villains of wood engravers cut out."

12. CHARLES DICKENS (1812-1870): *David Copperfield*. Published in two volumes after appearing serially in monthly numbers in 1849-1850. "Of all my books," Dickens declared, "I like this the best." Thousands of readers have come to agree with him. Thackeray wrote to his friend Mrs. Brookfield: "Have you read Dickens? O it is charming. Bravo Dickens!" And to her husband he wrote: "Get *David Copperfield*! By Jingo it's beautiful."

13. ROBERT BROWNING (1812-1889): *Christmas-Eve and*

234 Colby Library Quarterly

Easter-Day. This book consists of two distinct poems published under one title. The first describes a spiritual experience in which the narrator visits a "dissenting" chapel, and then St. Peter's at Rome, and then a German professor's lecture-room. He ultimately decides that the worship in the dissenting chapel is best. The second poem presents a dispute between a Christian and a skeptic. The poem begins

How very hard it is to be
A Christian! Hard for you and me. . . .

This brief comment on Browning's poems will make clear why his book has never achieved the popularity or the fame of the Sonnets in his wife's book published in the same year.

14. ANTHONY TROLLOPE (1815-1882): *La Vendée*. This historical novel was the third which Trollope wrote. He received twenty pounds for it from the publisher—the smallest amount Trollope ever received for a novel. In his *Autobiography* the novelist made the following frank confession about this work: "I got my twenty pounds, and then heard no more of *La Vendée*, not even receiving any account [from the publisher, H. Colburn]. . . . I have no doubt that the . . . sale of this story was no better than that of the two that had gone before. . . . The story is certainly inferior to those . . . , chiefly because I knew . . . nothing of life in the La Vendée country. . . . But I read the book the other day, and am not ashamed of it." The Colby Library has no copy of this novel; the three-volume set in the exhibition has been kindly loaned for this occasion by the Wesleyan University Library of Middletown, Connecticut.

15. CHARLES KINGSLEY (1819-1875): *Alton Locke*. This novel of 1850 shows Kingsley's sympathy with the sufferings of the working class; but Professor Chew (in *A Literary History of England*) calls it as much a sociological tract as a work of fiction, "with little plot and a great deal of

Colby Library Quarterly 235

discussion." The novel deals with a London tailor who, while emigrating to America, dies on the voyage. Five years after the publication of this novel, expressive of the stirring social conscience of the middle of the century, Kingsley published his bracing tale of Elizabethan adventure, *Westward Ho!*

16. COVENTRY PATMORE (1823-1896): "Macbeth." This essay was published in *The Germ* in March, 1850. In it, Patmore (who was later an assistant in the printed-book department of the British Museum) assumed "that he was the first person" (we quote William Michael Rossetti, the editor-in-chief of *The Germ*) "to put into writing the opinion that Macbeth, before meeting with the witches, had already definitely conceived and imparted the idea of obtaining the crown of Scotland by wrongful means." To No. 1 of *The Germ* Patmore had contributed a "choice little poem" called *The Seasons*. This number is also a part of our mid-century exhibition, but Patmore's poem is not in view, because the covers are closed in order to show W. M. Rossetti's sonnet on the front cover.

17. WILKIE COLLINS (1824-1889): *Antonina, or The Fall of Rome*. This novel preceded *The Moonstone* by sixteen years and *The Woman in White* by ten years. The last-named constitutes Collins's claim to being regarded as the first English novelist to deal with the detection of crime. But in *Antonina* he shows many of the same characteristics that appear in the two better-known later novels. In this mid-century volume, Collins assures his reader that "exact truth in respect to time, place, and circumstance is observed in every historical event introduced in the plot, from the period of the Gothic invaders [under Alaric, A.D. 410] over the Alps to the close of the first barbarian blockade of Rome." The copy on exhibition has been kindly loaned to us by Harvard College Library; our own copy is merely a reprint of the 1850 edition.

236 Colby Library Quarterly

18. DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI (1828-1882): "The Blessed Damosel" and "Hand and Soul," both published in *The Germ*, 1850. Our copy is opened to "The Blessed Damosel," pages 80 and 81. In addition to *The Germ* of 1850, we exhibit "Hand and Soul" as separately printed by William Morris at the Kelmscott Press in 1895. The Colby copy was once owned by Thomas Hardy, a present to him from the actress, Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Two other copies of "Hand and Soul" are also shown: one was printed by Morris at the Kelmscott Press for Way & Williams of Chicago—the only one of the edition bound in mottled brown vellum—and the other was published by T. N. Foulis of Edinburgh, with four watercolor drawings by William Hatherell, R. I. *The Germ* was initiated by Rossetti and his associates who in 1848 had formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The little periodical was intended to serve as a medium for the promulgation of their doctrines about art, including the art of poetry. It died after four numbers; but now, a century later, one can still sense in its pages the devotion of the Brotherhood to religious, mediaeval, and romantic themes.

19. WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI (1829-1919): "Corde-
lia," "Her First Season," and "Truth"—the last-named being the sonnet printed on the cover of *The Germ*. At this date William Michael Rossetti was only twenty-one. Also shown in this mid-century exhibition is his review (on page 187) of Robert Browning's book *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* which is No. 13 in this exhibition. Young though he was, Rossetti was intellectually mature enough to be able to recognize the fact that Browning's poems "are replete with mental and speculative subtlety; with vivid and most diversified conception of character, with dramatic incident and feeling, with that intimate knowledge of outward nature which makes every sentence of description a living truth; replete with a most human tenderness and pathos."

Colby Library Quarterly 237

No wonder the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood elected as editor-in-chief of *The Germ* a young man who could write like that at the age of twenty-one.

20. CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI (1830-1894): "Dream Land," "An End," and "A Pause of Thought." These poems Miss Rossetti, then only twenty, contributed to *The Germ*, in the pages of which she appeared under the pen-name of Ellen Alleyne. Commenting on this name, William Rossetti later explained: "This was my brother's concoction, as Christina did not care to figure under her own name." The poem, "A Pause of Thought," was, according to William, "written when she was but little turned of seventeen. . . . It seems to show that, even at that early age, she aspired ardently after poetic fame." Well—one hundred years later, she has it. In 1850, as William Rossetti sadly confessed, "people would not buy *The Germ*." In 1950 they pay fifty dollars and more for a set of the four issues. Our set is a gift from the Colby Library Associates.



A NEGLECTED TRADITION

THOSE who visit this mid-century exhibition and inspect the books listed on the preceding pages will—if they heed the advice of one of our Averill lecturers of last year—do more than merely glance at these books; they will read and ponder them, particularly the American quartet. In addition to Hawthorne, "There was Emerson, who remains one of the most marvellous stylists in the American canon. There were also . . . Longfellow [and] Whittier . . . who are still . . . worth studying, if we could but persuade ourselves that lucidity is a quality of mind, not evidence of mental stupidity."—Howard Mumford Jones (quoted from his sage article on "The American Malady," in the *Saturday Review of Literature* for August 6, 1949).

