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Fifty Years of the Cuala Press

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OUR other anniversary is the Jubilee of the CUALA PRESS of Dublin, Ireland. Fifty years ago—on July 16, 1903, to be exact—325 copies of a little book entitled *In the Seven Woods* by William Butler Yeats issued from a small press in Dublin operated by Yeats's sister Elizabeth. This was the beginning of the Cuala Press. In the fifty years since then, it has turned out nearly four-score volumes; and thanks to the generous benefaction of Mr. James A. Healy, of Portland and New York, the Colby College Library possesses a complete file of these books, and on this Jubilee occasion is proud to be able to exhibit them.

The books were never produced in great quantity: sometimes 150 copies were printed, sometimes two or three hundred, but never more than 500 copies. By the date of this half-century anniversary, these books have become extremely hard to acquire, and Colby is indeed fortunate in having been able to come into possession of them without expense and without labor. The limited supply accounts for the limited knowledge that even the world of book-lovers has about the Cuala volumes—in many instances even the authors and titles cannot be regarded as commonly known. For this reason we are particularly happy to print some of the instructive remarks made by Dean Ernest C. Marriner at a "Cuala Jubilee" meeting of the Colby Library Associates.



FIFTY YEARS OF THE CUALA PRESS*

By ERNEST C. MARRINER

THANKS to that devoted friend of the Colby College Library, James A. Healy, visitors to the Robinson Treasure Room this month can see one of the finest and most complete collections of the Cuala Press books and

* This is a somewhat abbreviated form of the address read by Dean Marriner at a meeting of the Colby Library Associates on May 1, 1953, on the occasion of the opening of a Jubilee Exhibition of the books and prints of the Cuala Press, 1903-1953.

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prints to be found anywhere in the world. Here on Mayflower Hill is a little bit of Ireland in memorable form. Notice the pronunciation of the name of the Press! When I discovered that, on this side of the Atlantic, there was no agreement on the pronunciation, I wrote an inquiry to the Hon. Sean O'Kelly, President of the Irish Republic, a man of keen literary appreciation and well informed on Irish literary matters. I made bold to write him because, in 1949, he had written me a friendly, holograph letter concerning my little book about James B. Connolly. Promptly I received a reply from Mr. O'Kelly. After a reference to our correspondence in 1949, he said: "I am very happy to hear that you are occupying yourself with the CUALA PRESS founded by the sisters of W. B. Yeats. The word is spelt Cuala, and the C is pronounced hard and the u long. The proper pronunciation would be like 'koo-la.' The middle a, if pronounced at all, and it seldom is, is glided over very, very lightly."

This press was very largely the work of Elizabeth Corbett Yeats, one of the four children of John Butler Yeats and sister of the poet William Butler Yeats, who spoke on "The New Ireland" here at Colby College on Friday, November 4, 1932. How did Elizabeth Yeats happen to become a typographer? In her early twenties, she and her sister Lily both lived in the home of William Morris, founder of the Kelmscott Press. Elizabeth was there less than a month, but Lily stayed on to learn embroidery, especially embroidery design. Lily tells about this activity of hers in a letter which she wrote to Mr. James Healy on December 4, 1938. This letter casts an interesting sidelight on one of our century's most famous authors. Lily wrote: "I started embroidering by working for Mary Morris, William Morris's daughter. I was about twenty. I worked six years for her. The first six months I worked in Morris's house and lunched with them and so met many interesting people—Bernard Shaw was one—then very hard up and doing musical criticism for

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a paper. The house was delightful—in a room where I worked were three fine Rossetti pictures. Mary (May) Morris soon after made her unlucky marriage and the work went on in her house not far from her father's."

We learn more about Elizabeth's activities from an article on "The Cuala Press" by W. G. Blaikie Murdoch, printed in the *Bookman's Journal* (a monthly periodical published in London) in its issue of July, 1922. Murdoch tells us that, in preparation for the establishment of her own press, Elizabeth Corbett Yeats studied daily for a month at the Women's Printing Society, Leicester Square, London, but that she owed much less to her tuition there than to the expert advice she received directly from William Morris's famous typographer at the Kelmscott Press, Emery Walker.¹ It was perhaps this advice that enabled Elizabeth Yeats to avoid, from the very start, the mistakes of William Morris and some of his immediate followers. Murdoch calls attention to this fact in his article in the *Bookman's Journal*:

William Morris erred pathetically in seeking to revive the cryptography of pre-Renaissance years. And when he wrought in his lucid Golden type, he marred his books by prodigality of ornamentation. If Mr. Charles Ricketts, in the various fonts he devised for the Vale Press, showed himself something of a classicist, he too was prone to deal in unduly lavish adornments. Like the eighteenth-century artists in typography, Miss Yeats has marked well that in this, as in architecture, one sure road to merit lies in avoidance of embellishment. She has perceived that, given a beautiful type like Old Face, the printing itself is the proper decoration of the page.

In accordance with these principles, Elizabeth Corbett Yeats chose for her type a font designed about 1725 by the elder Caslon—a simple and almost austere font now known as Caslon type. It was a time when English classicism had come into its own. With the bent toward classical form and

¹ This name serves to recall a delightful little book, *Three Letters*, by Dr. Edward F. Stevens (Colby, '89), published in 1941 by The Southworth-Anthoensen Press, in which Dr. Stevens tells of his interesting call on Emery Walker and of their conversation about type fonts.

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precision which has characterized so many of the world's best printers, Miss Yeats chose that particular form of Caslon known as Old Face, and she used it exclusively in all the Cuala books.

She produced her first book in 1903. Having left London soon after her mother's death in 1900, she and her sister Lily made their home in the Dundrum district of Dublin. Here Miss Evelyn Gleeson had established the Dun Emer Guild for the production of hand-woven carpets and embroideries. It was one of those handicraft groups such as we have seen spring up in New England and in parts of the South during the past twenty years—a plan to give remunerative employment in artistic work to people of a local community. Will Ransom, in his *Private Presses and Their Books*, quotes Elizabeth Yeats as saying: "We simply started the press to give work to Irish girls and to enable us to live in Ireland doing good work." When Miss Yeats set up her press in Miss Gleeson's home, it was first known as the Dun Emer Press and for five years the books were produced under that imprint. In 1908, however, the press was moved to a cottage which Miss Yeats described as "nearer home," and because Miss Gleeson chose to retain the name Dun Emer for her carpet-making, the Dun Emer Press became the Cuala Press.

The first book was made up of selections from the poetry of Elizabeth's brother William. It bore the title *In the Seven Woods: Being Poems Chiefly of the Irish Heroic Age by William Butler Yeats*. The colophon is printed in red ink: "Here ends *In the Seven Woods*, written by William Butler Yeats, printed upon paper made in Ireland, and published by Elizabeth Corbett Yeats at the Dun Emer Press, in the house of Evelyn Gleeson at Dundrum in the county of Dublin, Ireland, finished the sixteenth day of July in the year of the big wind, nineteen hundred and three." This reference to "the big wind" reminds us that Elizabeth Yeats had an unflinching eye for anniversaries. She liked to take note

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of great national events and even of saints' days when she released books from the Cuala Press. Let us note just a few such occasions mentioned in the colophons: "finished on All Hallow's Eve in the year 1904"; "finished on Lady Day in August, in the year 1904"; "finished on the Eve of Lady Day in Harvest in the year 1906"; "finished on All Soul's Eve in the year 1906"; "finished on May Eve, 1910"; "finished on St. John's Eve, 1914"; "finished in Easter, 1915"; "finished on the 20th day of July, in the year of the Sinn Fein Rising, 1916"; "finished in the last week in July, 1923, the second year of the Irish Free State"; "finished the last week of August, 1938, the year of the first Abbey Theatre Dramatic Festival"; "published on September 16, 1945, the hundredth anniversary of the death of Thomas Davis."

Again and again the colophons remind us that the books were printed "on paper made in Ireland." In fact one of the volumes, the tenth to come from the original Dun Emer Press, arouses our curiosity. The colophon says: "Printed upon paper made in Ireland by Elizabeth C. Yeats, Esther Ryan and Beatrice Cassidy." We have been unable to answer the obvious questions. Did Elizabeth and the other girls actually make the paper? Where did they make it? Why apparently has no one ever put the story of that paper-making into print? Or do we somehow misinterpret that colophon? It seems impossible to give any other interpretation to the words "made by" than that Elizabeth, Esther, and Beatrice really made the paper. Yet Ransom, describing the equipment of the Press says (page 92): "An Albion press, Caslon type, and all-rag paper made in Ireland (though not hand-made) is all the equipment."

Once Elizabeth Yeats got her press going, two books a year was the usual rate of production, though occasionally three appeared within twelve months and in one year the number was four. That was in 1940, when probably Miss Ryan and her associates decided to get out the accumulated

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items awaiting production when Elizabeth Yeats died, so that they could continue in 1941 with plans and choices of their own. Worthy of note is the continuous, uninterrupted publication from 1903 to 1946. Not a year of that long period went by without seeing at least one new volume from the Cuala Press. Neither two world wars nor an almost revolutionary depression could stop the steady output of Cuala books. Concerning this accomplishment, unusual for a private press, John Hone, in his biography of William Butler Yeats, says: "Elizabeth presided over the hand press . . . which in forty years established a record unequalled in the history of hand presses, by publishing over sixty books." On this Jubilee occasion, we are happy to be able to exhibit seventy-eight.

Ferrero, in his *Ancient Rome and Modern America*, wisely comments: "The quantity of manufactured goods produced by the ancient world was small; for that very reason and by way of compensation their quality was refined and excellent." Refinement and excellence—those are the contributions which distinguish the Cuala Press in the world of books. As the tempestuous flood from the commercial presses engulfs us, so that we seem to be drowning in a sea of printer's ink, it is well to remember that there are a few quiet waters of peace and beauty, not the least of which is the Cuala Press of Dublin, with its half-century of seventy-eight excellent books.

The one subject of all the Cuala books is Ireland. All but a very few of them deal with Ireland directly—the myths and legends of ancient Gaelic lore, the poetry of old Irish bards and young Irish poets, the plays of the dramatists of the Irish Renaissance, and essays historical, critical, philosophical, bearing on the Irish theme. The spirit of Irish nationalism pervades every page. Every letter of type was set up for the glory of Ireland.

It is at first difficult to see what two of the Cuala books have to do with Ireland. They are Number 21, *The Post*



ELIZABETH CORBETT YEATS
FOUNDER OF THE CUALA PRESS
(from a photograph taken August 6, 1938)

Politics

"In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings
in political terms," Thomas Mann

Beside the under stands a girl;
I cannot fix my mind
On this analysis & thing
That ~~beauty~~ ^{beauty} marked.
Yet one has travelled as may know
What he calls about,
And one's a politician
That has read a thought;
Maybe ~~Allegory~~ ^{Allegory} that the, say, is true
Of ~~under~~ her and her's alarm,
But O the I was young, again
The held her in my arms.
his, cat, May 27 1938
I finish the yesterday of it is
finished

ROUGH DRAFT OF HIS POEM "POLITICS"
WRITTEN BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS
IN JAMES A. HEALY'S COPY OF NEW
POEMS BY W. B. YEATS (CUALA PRESS, 1938).
(slightly reduced)

Since Yeats's autograph is sometimes hard to read, the poem opposite is here put into type:

Politics

"In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms." THOMAS MANN.

Beside the window stands a girl;
I cannot fix my mind
On their analysis of things
That benumb mankind.
Yet one has travelled and may know
What he talks about,
And one's a politician
That has read and thought;
Maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms.

W B Yeats May 24 [1938]

I finished this yesterday if it is finished.

That he came to believe that it was not finished is made clear by comparing the text of the poem as it appeared in The Atlantic Monthly for January 1939:

How *can* I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics?
Yet here's a traveled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has read and thought;
And maybe what they say is true. . . .

—the rest of the poem remained unchanged.

the greater number of these poems have
 been read to me by Lionel Johnson
 himself & some of them through the screen
 of his voice with his ears. He read
 his verses better than any man I have
 ever heard read. He had a very subtle
 & yet very stately way of speaking, of
 a thin quality - this great distinction
 in voice & manner he had not then
 in public speaking. He had the
 imagination of responsibility very strongly
 & all his personal relations with the
 world were studied & skilful beyond
 those of other men. I shall not again meet
 courtesy like his.

Wyeats, May, 1905-

AUTOGRAPH COMMENT BY WILLIAM BUTLER
 YEATS ON THE POEMS OF LIONEL JOHNSON,
 WRITTEN IN JAMES A. HEALY'S COPY OF
 TWENTY-ONE POEMS BY LIONEL JOHNSON
 (CUALA PRESS, 1904).

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Office, a play by Rabindranath Tagore, and Number 24, *Certain Noble Plays of Old Japan*. The first of these books was printed because Yeats had seen and liked Tagore's play on the London stage, where it was done by the Irish Players. In the preface Yeats says: "On the stage this little play shows that it is perfectly constructed, and conveys to the right audience an emotion of gentleness and peace."

For the printing of the Japanese plays we have an even more complete explanation. At the very beginning of Yeats's introduction to the volume he admits to editing most of the Cuala books. He says: "In the series of books which I edit for my sister, I confine myself to those I believe of some special value to Ireland." He then goes on to say that he had asked Ezra Pound for his translations of these Japanese plays because he thought they would help him explain a certain possibility of the Irish dramatic movement. Let us see what that possibility was. Says Yeats: "With the help of these plays I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way—an aristocratic form. I have written a little play that can be produced in a room for so little money that 40 or 50 readers of poetry can pay the price. There will be no scenery, for three musicians will describe place and weather, and at moments action, and accompany it all by drum and gong or flute and dulcimer. Instead of the players working themselves into a violence of passion indecorous in our sitting-room, the music, the beauty of form and voice, all come to climax in a pantomimic dance."

If there is something obscure in that passage, if you sense in it a kind of London fog that does not belong in Ireland, just remember that Yeats is not the only Irishman—or the only Englishman or American, for that matter—whose writing sometimes defies cogent interpretation.

The Cuala Press gave due attention to the literature of Ireland's golden age. The third volume was *The Love Songs*

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of *Connacht*, translated by Douglas Hyde, president of the Gaelic League. Says William Butler Yeats in the preface: "This little book, the fourth chapter of the ancient, unfinished Songs of Connacht, was the first book that made known to readers who had no Irish the poetry of the Irish country people. There had been other translations, but they took what Mr. Hyde would call the 'sap of pleasure' out of the simple thought and emotion. Their horses were always steeds and their cows always kine."

A good example of Hyde's work is his translation of "The Dark Girl of the Valley."

Upon the mountain brow I herd a lowing cow,
(And my sense is gone now through a maiden);
I drive her east and west, where'er the sun shines best
To return with her white milk laden.
But when I look above, to the village of my love,
My grey eyes fill in their dreaming;
O mighty God of Grace, take pity on my case,
'Tis the Dark Girl left them streaming.

Number 27 of the Cuala books is *The Kiltartan Poetry Book*, translated into prose by Lady Gregory. In a long introduction, Lady Gregory explains how her romantic patriotism was aroused in early girlhood, how she tried under great difficulties and with small success to learn the Irish language, how she became what the local stationer called his best customer for Feinian books, and how at last she turned her attention to the old legends, the old heroic poems of Ireland. She got many stories from the lips of aged persons. She says it was a man a hundred years old who told her the story of Cuchulain's fight with his son.

Lady Gregory at last decided to make her own translations of several of the old poems into English prose. "I have chosen," she said, "to translate these poems in the speech of the thatched houses where I have heard and gathered them. This Gaelic construction, these Elizabethan phrases, had already been used in *The Love Songs of Connacht*, as I

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myself previously used them in my creative work." Here is a sample:

"O Donall og, it is late last night the dog was speaking of you. It is you are the lonely bird through the woods. It is I would be better to you than a high, proud, spendthrift lady."

Twelve years earlier Miss Yeats's eighth book had been *A Book of Saints and Wonders Put Down Here by Lady Gregory According to the Old Writings and the Memory of the People of Ireland*. It is one of the largest books in the entire series—a full hundred pages. It contains 78 legends and hymns. Printed in red, at the bottom of the title page is this statement: "The Irish text of the greater number of the hymns and legends in this book has been published, and from this text I have worked, making my own translation as far as my scholarship goes, and when it fails, taking the meaning given by better scholars. I am grateful to those men and women I have met in the poorhouse and on the roadsides or by the hearth, who have kept in mind through many years the great wonders done among the children of the Gael."

An item of some interest to bibliographers, because of its contents, is No. 46: *Coole*, by Lady Gregory. The author wrote to Yeats: "After my marriage my husband told me that very soon after he had first met me, and when I knew him but slightly, he had in making his will left me the choice of any six books in his library at Coole. And after our marriage, he directed in his later testament, that not six, but all should be mine through my life time. But if, as seems likely, I am now to be divorced from these companionable shelves, I sometimes ponder which among the volumes should I choose from their long accustomed places to go with me for the scanty years or days of eyesight and understanding that may remain." Lady Gregory then mentions the *Iliad* of 1609, the *Odyssey* of 1611, the *Ovid*, the *Livy*, and the *Catullus*—all products of the famous Elzevir

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Press. There was sentiment attached to the 1635 copy of Terrence, because in it, in her husband's schoolboy hand, was written: "Gul. Gregory, Harrow, 1834."

"My husband's taste," wrote Lady Gregory, "was not for fine editions or bindings, but for the contents. The many, many volumes of the classics belonging to him were well used, well loved."

It is interesting to note what another Irish writer, a close friend of Yeats, thought about this old Gaelic poetry. John Eglinton, essayist and literary critic, said of it: "Irish folk poetry has far more in common with the later developments of English poetry, with Shelley and Meredith for example, than anything produced by the wits of the London coffee houses." As to the themes of the Irish sagas, Eglinton wrote: "These subjects, much as we admire them and regret that we have nothing equivalent to them in the modern world, obstinately refuse to be taken up out of their old environment and to be translated into the world of modern sympathies."

Eglinton didn't entirely approve of the selections from his essays which William Butler Yeats chose for the sixth of the Cuala books, entitled *Some Essays and Passages by John Eglinton*. At the end of the table of contents appears in red ink a curious apology: "The writer of the following pages would like to say that he had no hand in the selection which Mr. Yeats has done him the honor to make for the Dun Emer series, and in particular, that if consulted he would hardly have approved of the inclusion of the last essay, written over twelve years ago, in which a metaphor is pressed to the point of being recommended as a gospel." No one can read that without wanting to know what was the metaphor. Here it is:

What means this precious discontent with institutions, sacred and profane, but a loose idealism caught from the reckless talk of the Chosen People: so to name that curiously situated class of Idealists who, as Israel took over the brick-manufacture of Egypt, have in this

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century been taking over the manufacture of literature, and through it have been directing politics and a society in which they have no longer any natural concern. Had those natural promptings been followed by the apparition of some modern equivalent to Moses and Aaron, and the peaceable withdrawal of Idealists into the wilderness, there would have been no oppression in store for them and no weary dreams for the Pharaoh of civilization. The French Revolution was only the first of the great plagues.

Another writer honored by the Cuala Press is Lord Dunsany, about whose writing William Butler Yeats didn't hesitate to be choosy. In the preface to this Cuala book, he wrote: "Not all of Dunsany's moods delight me, for he writes out of a careless abundance; so I have put between two covers something of all the moods that do."

Oliver Gogarty is another of the Irish writers for whom William Butler Yeats had only a qualified admiration. In the Cuala edition of Gogarty's *Wild Apples*, Yeats paid one of those notorious left-handed compliments of his to the younger writer. "Oliver Gogarty is a careless writer, often writing first drafts of poems rather than poems themselves, but often with animation and beauty. Why am I content to search through so many careless verses for what is excellent? It is because he gives me something that I need at this moment of time. Hardship borne and chosen out of pride and joy—I find *that* in every poem of Oliver Gogarty's that delights me, sometimes in the whole poem, sometimes in an astringent adjective."

The first of the Cuala books to contain drawings to accompany the text was Number 44, published in 1929—*Lyrics and Satires of Tom Moore*. It had black and white designs by Hilda Roberts. Illustrations did not again appear until Number 63, *The Last Ditch* by Louis MacNeice, which has illustrations colored by Eileen Colum and Kathleen Banfield, perhaps two of the girls employed at the Press. Then in Number 64—*A Lament for Art O'Leary* by Frank O'Connor—the youngest of the four Yeats children enters the Cuala scene. For that volume Jack Yeats made six pen

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and ink drawings, which add much to the attractiveness of the book. Perhaps Esther Ryan had something to do with this, because Elizabeth Yeats had died in the previous year; or it is possible that the business manager of the Press, Mrs. William Butler Yeats, was responsible. In either event, there is no evidence that in Elizabeth's lifetime Jack had anything to do with the Press.

Three years later, in January, 1943, when the Press was forty years old, it brought out *La La Noo*, a play in two acts by Jack B. Yeats. Jack's play had been produced at the Abbey Theatre in May, 1942, and it was appropriate that it should now be preserved among the Cuala publications. In celebration of forty years of continuous publication, Miss Ryan and her associates decided to append to this and all other volumes published by Cuala in 1943 a list of all 72 of the Dun Emer and Cuala books finished up to that time. Thus is preserved for us by the publishers themselves an authentic bibliography of every item from the Press between 1903 and 1943.

Since the publication of *La La Noo*, the Cuala Press has issued six other books, some of which (to the best of our knowledge) have not been identified in any previously published check-list. It will therefore be helpful if the titles are given here:

73. A Picture Book, by Frank O'Connor
 Illustrated by Elizabeth Rivers June, 1943
74. Masada, by W. B. Yeats October, 1943
75. Dafydd Ap Guilym, Selected Poems trans-
 lated by Nigel Heseltine February, 1944
76. Pages from a Diary, Written in 1930 by
 W. B. Yeats September, 1944
77. The Love Story of Thomas Davis
 Told in the Letters of Annie Hutton,
 edited by Joseph Hone September, 1945
78. Stranger in Aran, Written and Illustrated
 by Elizabeth Rivers July, 1946

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Since no books seem to have appeared in the past seven years under the Cuala imprint, we must conclude that its operations have now ceased.

The Cuala Press is not merely a tribute to the talents of the Yeats family. It is much more than that. It is evidence of what an intelligent, kindly and persistent person like Elizabeth Yeats can do when once deeply convinced of a cause bigger than oneself. The glory that once was Ireland and could again be Ireland was the fire that burned unquenched in the mind and will of Elizabeth Corbett Yeats. Hundreds of thousands of English speaking people have never heard of her, but as long as there remain those who love fine printing and exquisite books, her memory will be kept as green as her own loved Emerald Isle.



SOME FURTHER IRISH NOTES

DEAN MARRINER, in addressing the Colby Library Associates last May, remarked: "Here on Mayflower Hill is a little bit of Ireland." This little bit is not confined to the Cuala Press books and prints, for in addition to these reminders of the Emerald Isle the Library is indebted to Mr. Healy for copies of *Irish Writing* (one of which contains a poem by Oliver St. John Gogarty, who is among the authors discussed by Dean Marriner), and a complete file of *Ireland of the Welcomes*, a handsome bi-monthly publication now in its second year, with charmingly-done colored illustrations of Irish scenes and landscapes.

Mr. Healy's interest in Ireland and its literature and art has encouraged the purchasing committee of the Library Associates to supplement his gifts with at least one other Irish item—a notable edition of Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*. It is now just about two hundred years since Goldsmith deserted his native Ireland, and in the course of these two centuries the price of a copy of the original (1770) edi-