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## Edwin Arlington Robinson And His Manuscripts, By Esther Willard Bates

Denham Sutcliffe

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In addition to its manifold other activities, the Colby Library has made available to the outside world the excellent address on Edwin Arlington Robinson delivered a year ago to the Library Associates by Miss Esther W. Bates. The address has been printed in book-form and beautifully bound by the Southworth-Anthoensen Press. A review of this book follows.



### EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON AND HIS MANUSCRIPTS, BY ESTHER WILLARD BATES

BY DENHAM SUTCLIFFE

FROM this monograph there is more to be learned of what E.A.R. was like than from some longer accounts whose flowery pomposity of style beclouds the poet's features and drowns the sound of his voice. For over twenty years, beginning at the MacDowell Colony in 1913, Miss Bates acted somewhat as secretary for Robinson, transcribing the spidery precision of his longhand into "the full flare of type." Inevitably she saw him often, corresponded with him, and discussed the poems before they had been submitted to the popular judgment. All too briefly she relates some memories of that pleasant association, keeping herself graciously in the background while she quotes directly from Robinson's letters and from his casual remarks. One imagines again and again that he can hear the laconic inflections of the poet's authentic voice—as when E. A. says of a sonnet, 'You could call that a poem.'

Among the best of these reflections are Robinson's own judgments on his work—both on individual poems and upon his performance as a whole. He believed in his work. "It's all I could have done, write poetry," he said. "I can't do anything else; I never could. And I have to write the kind of stuff I do write." He was therefore sensitive, almost

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hypersensitive, to criticism, but it was a sensitivity of conscience, not of vanity. His own critical standards were the most severe that he could meet with, and he so thoroughly achieved them before he began to write that in the shorter poems, "from four to eight of the opening lines remained exactly as written." He composed slowly and then, with a passionate intensity of care, revised or expunged every line or word to which an objection could be raised. When the work was finished, he would himself speak of it with an oblique understatement, but from others he demanded direct and precise criticisms. One can quite believe Miss Bates when she says that it was not always easy to make "an adequate and satisfying response."

It is reported elsewhere that once when someone asked E. A. what a poem meant, he snorted, "That's a hell of a question to ask a poet!" He is quoted as saying on another occasion, "I like to leave a poem with a fringe on it." Miss Bates says nothing to destroy the effect of such reports. Robinson would ask her to read a poem and then to explain it. She would try—but he never would say if she were right. "It would be futile," he wrote to her, "for me to pretend my work is always transparent. . . . If you and others can like half of what I do, you will be doing your share." Miss Bates nevertheless records many of his remarks about his poems, his characters, and his difficulties of composition that will be welcomed by every reader and critic.

There is not a line of speculation in this book. What Miss Bates tells us about Robinson she has seen for herself or has had from his lips. That in itself makes the book a valuable source of information, and a more valuable and extensive one than the modest title implies. For example, in one or two brief paragraphs Miss Bates speaks more sense about Robinson's attitude toward women than has yet been offered by any other writer on the subject. Simply enough: "he both liked and trusted them," but perhaps did not wholly understand them. For a man, that was scarcely a unique or perverted situation! Until more satisfactory evi-

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dence is produced it ought to stifle some rather absurd speculations that have lately been popular.

Robinson would have known how to value the clarity and gracious dignity of Miss Bates's style, which makes this volume an excellent memento of her friendship for him. His friends will thank her for her pains in thus setting down her memories and thereby enabling the Colby College Library to make yet one more distinguished contribution to the canon of Robinsonian literature.



ONE good turn deserves another; and one good gift continues to encourage another. The magnificent Pope gift from Carroll A. Wilson, announced on the occasion of the Pope bicentenary in 1944, has encouraged the Colby Library Associates to purchase a first edition of *An Essay on Criticism*, London, 1711.

Similarly, our Kelmescott Collection continues to grow. When (in March 1944) we reported on Kelmescott Press items in New England libraries, only four copies of Ruskin's *The Nature of Gothic* (the fourth title issued by Morris's press) were located. Now, thanks to the generosity of Raymond Spinney, '21, there is a fifth copy—in the Colby library. Our copy is in "mint" unopened condition.

Only five copies of *Of the Friendship of Amis and Amile*, No. 23 on the Kelmescott list, were reported. Now, thanks to the generosity of Professor N. Orwin Rush, our librarian, Colby has the sixth copy to reach New England. And the Colby Library Associates have purchased a copy of Sir Thomas Clanvowe's *The Floure and the Leafe*, No. 43 on the Kelmescott list, 1896. Harvard and Brown alone share with us possession of this interesting poem, once attributed to Chaucer. This brings our Kelmescott holdings to twenty-four titles. And there is a twenty-fifth on the way, for which we are indebted to the Boston Colby Club: a splendid item

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about which we shall have to comment at length in a future issue; there is not room, here and now, to let our enthusiasm over this latest gift have free play.

This interest in books printed by the Kelmescott Press is no mere matter of sentiment. William Morris's influence is still traceable, in one form or another, in the books that issue from modern printing presses. This fact was noticed by A. Ehrman, writing in the July 22, 1944, issue (page 355) of the *London Times Literary Supplement*: "Some fifteen years ago . . . we received the American 'Fifty Books', and it was noticeable how much . . . Americans [are] still . . . deeply influenced by the Morris School."

From Mrs. Charles E. Hamlin (Myra Sawyer Hamlin) we have received a copy of her genealogical book *Eleazer Hamlin and his Descendants* (Bangor, 1909), in which (on page 26) Hannibal Hamlin appears, together with nearly a score of letters to Charles S. Hamlin, all bearing well-known autographs.

From the library of the late Gertrude B. Lane, former editor of the *Woman's Home Companion*, we have received a fine selection of books, including numerous works on Maine and several volumes dealing with the fine arts. Two items demand special mention: one, a folio atlas, bound in fine vellum, by Johann Homan; the other, an edition of Georg Agricola's *De Re Metallica*. Agricola was one of the great European mineralogists of the sixteenth century and his work is a standard classic. The newly acquired copy was edited by former president Herbert Hoover and was inscribed by him to Miss Lane.

On the occasion of the centenary of the death of Noah Webster, the Colby Library exhibited various copies of his famous *Spelling Book*, among them one printed in Concord, New Hampshire, in 1823. In commenting on this exhibition the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY quoted Webster's biographer, Harry R. Warfel, to the effect that "no other book, the Bible excepted, played so unifying a part in American culture" as Webster's *Spelling Book*. From Noah

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Webster's great-grand-daughter, Mrs. E. E. F. Skeel, we have received the following communication:

"The 1823 Concord edition of the *Speller* is a rarity. This edition appears to be a 'sport', showing points unlike most other editions of the period. Actually I have some vague theories about it, too long to be placed in a letter. . . . Though loth to question the figures stated in the article on Webster in the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY, may I venture to point out that it is now generally admitted and proved that M'Guffey's *Reader* outsold Webster's *Speller* by from twenty-five to forty million? After all, would not a *Reader* reach and actually influence the thoughts of a child more than a speller, which did not supply many imaginary pictures for his mind? Believe me, as a Webster descendant, I would gladly garble statistics if I did not fear my great-grandfather's stern disapproval."



In a book published in 1925 Willa Cather remarked: "If I were asked to name three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life, I would say at once, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. I can think of no others that confront time and change so serenely." This appraisal was recalled to our mind recently, when we noticed a copy of one of Sarah Orne Jewett's modest little books standing on a shelf in the college library surrounded by a whole platoon of raucous volumes by modern authors in garish bindings. The contrast prompted the recollection of a sentence by Edmund Burke:

"Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink whilst thousands of great cattle chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field."

In these days of bombs and shells men are more in need than ever of those still, small voices that speak from the

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pages of good books. *Good* books. Which are the good ones? Christopher Morley has recently told us about one man's war-time selection:—

“A man I know went off for service overseas. . . . He left behind on his book-shelves seven little empty spaces. . . . I'll tell you what had been there. The Bible, Shakespeare, St. Augustine, a pocket atlas, and Robert Bridges' little anthology *The Spirit of Man* . . . , and the two great books about whales—*Moby Dick*, and its natural companion about the great whale of literature, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. . . . Man, God help him, is the loneliest of creatures, and most lonely in armies. Books are the most effective medicine to comfort that hidden sickness, for it is only in books that man has taken time and courage to communicate himself without reserve.”

Nor is man in armies the only one in need of “medicine to comfort that hidden sickness.” The woman who stays at home is equally in need. Alfred Tennyson once received a letter from a Mrs. Vyner; it touched him so deeply that he kept it among the things he most prized. Written in 1855, the letter read:

“I *must* write and thank you with a true and grateful heart for the happy moments your thoughts and your pen have given me. I am in the wildest bush of Australia, far away from all that makes life beautiful and enduring excepting the strong and stern sense of duty, the consciousness that where God has placed us is our lot to be, and that our most becoming posture is to accept our destiny with grateful humility. You must let me tell you how in a lonely home among the mountains, with my young children asleep, my husband absent, no sound to be heard but the cry of the wild dog or the wail of the curlew, no lock or bolt to guard our solitary hut, strong in our utter helplessness I have turned . . . to you as a friend, and read far into the night till my lot seemed light and a joy seemed cast around my very menial toils: then I have said, ‘God bless the poet . . . ’”