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CHARLES RICKETTS AND HIS BOOKS

By CARL J. WEBER

WHEN Charles Dickens visited America in 1842, he found frequent opportunity for expressing his indignation that the laws of the United States granted him no copyright protection. Piratical American printers then took with impunity whatever they wanted. On February 24, 1842, Dickens wrote to his friend John Forster and reported what he had been doing: "I spoke . . . of international copyright at Boston, and I spoke of it again at Hartford. . . . [In New York] they besought me not to pursue the subject. . . . I answered that I would . . . [and] when the night came, I asserted my right. . . . All this copyright agitation . . . has . . . lighted up such a blaze that . . . it would be a thousand pities if we did not strike as hard as we can, now that the iron is so hot."

Dickens's blood was hot, all right, but Congress was cold; and nothing came of all the "agitation" for almost fifty years. At last, in December, 1890, long after Dickens was dead, Congress passed the international copyright bill. An American publisher, James R. Osgood (whose name had appeared, thirty years before, on many a Boston title-page), now saw an inviting opportunity to set up a new publishing house in London. On December 4, 1890, Osgood wrote to the novelist Thomas Hardy: "The good news has come of the passage of the Copyright Bill by the House of Representatives by a handsome majority. This makes it practically certain that it will become a law. . . ." And Osgood then made Hardy such an attractive offer that it resulted

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in the transfer of all Hardy's business to the new London firm of James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co.

The new law went into effect on July 1, 1891. Three days later, the serial publication of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* began, and before the year was over, this now-famous then-notorious novel was published in three volumes by Osgood, McIlvaine & Co. Anyone who has ever examined a set of those three volumes must have been struck by the fact that they are different—both in the general attractiveness of the tan (or brownish yellow) bindings with their floral decorations, and in the unusual arrangement of the title-pages—different from almost all previously published books by Thomas Hardy, or, for that matter, by any other author. These books were obviously designed by someone with a genius for artistic lay-out, by someone with taste and originality. The designer was not identified at the time of the publication of *Tess*, and Osgood, McIlvaine & Co. doubtless saw no reason why they should make any special mention of the twenty-four-year-old young man employed by them to design books for the newly established firm.

They knew him, however, to be an artist with a careful eye for detail and with a trained designer's hand. When the binding projected for the three-volume *Tess* was still in its trial stage, it was discovered (doubtless by the young designer himself) that the stem of the flower on the front cover of the binding was divided into three parts, instead of being a single whole as it should be. The error was detected in time, the design was changed, and (with the exception of the one trial binding) all published copies of the 1891 *Tess* are now found to be botanically correct. Carroll A. Wilson's *Catalogue of the Grolier Club Hardy Exhibition* (published by Colby in 1940) states in detail the complex facts here summarized.

Mr. Wilson did not give—probably did not know—the name of Osgood and McIlvaine's book designer, but it is now known that the young man was Charles Ricketts.

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Born in Geneva, October 2, 1866, and educated in France, Ricketts had come to London and had served an apprenticeship under a Mr. Roberts, a wood-engraver at the City & Guilds Technical Art School in Kennington Road. In 1889, at the age of twenty-three, Ricketts became joint editor with Charles Shannon of *The Dial*, and a year later was engaged by Osgood, McIlvaine & Co. to design the books they were about to publish. In commenting on his "earliest experiments in the shaping of books," Ricketts afterwards remarked: "They were unlike the ordinary books in the matter of title-page," etc., and anyone who has examined the 1891 *Tess* will agree.

It was just at this time that William Morris began producing books at his Kelmscott Press, and Ricketts's own attempts at book-designing enabled him to appreciate fully the significance of what Morris was doing. As Will Ransom has recently put it, "William Morris at the Kelmscott Press not only inaugurated a new era—he created it." After four years of Morris's leadership, Ricketts found a chance to strike out for himself. He inherited five hundred pounds from his grandfather, and in W. L. Hacon he found a friend who agreed to contribute a thousand pounds for the establishment of a "private press." Thus the Vale Press was set up, named after Ricketts's London home, The Vale, just off King's Road. The year 1895 was devoted to preparing type, woodcut initials, borders, and other decorations. The first type designed by Ricketts he called the Vale font, and most of his books were printed with this type. Later, he cut two other fonts: the "Avon," used in his Shakespeare set, and the "King's" font, used in *The Kingis Quair* and in two other volumes of 1902 and 1903. The Vale books were all to be the products of Ricketts's own designing, from cover to cover.

A little shop was taken in Warwick Street, off Regent Street, and the Vale Press opened for business in the spring of 1896. Charles J. Holmes became business manager in

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the summer of that year. In 1899 the Press moved its place of business to 17 Craven Street, off the Strand, and there it continued until it closed its doors forever, in June, 1903. The last book on the Vale list was privately issued by Ricketts in 1904.

One of the reasons for the discontinuance of the operations of the Vale Press was a disastrous fire in 1899 at the Ballantyne Press, where the Vale books were printed. Many of the woodcut initials and the engraved decorations on which Ricketts had lavished the labor of many years were burned; and, as Manager Holmes put it, "the loss was irreparable." Ricketts decided to destroy the type and matrices, so that they could not "drift into other hands . . . and become stale by unthinking use." The plan was eventually carried out and thus "the Vale Press books remain unique."

Shortly after Ricketts's death in 1931, Holmes wrote: "Unique the books still appear to me in some respects. It is a mistake to regard them as imitations of the Kelmscott Press. The resemblances are few and . . . unimportant. Ricketts . . . stands alone . . . as a designer of woodcut borders . . . and . . . the 'Avon' fount of the Shakespeare is one of the most handsome and readable of modern types."

Holbrook Jackson distinguishes between the work of Morris and Ricketts in this way: "The Kelmscott books not only look as if letter and decoration had grown one out of the other; they look as though they could keep on growing. The Vale Press books, on the other hand, have all the supersensitiveness of things which have been deliberately made according to a fastidious though eclectic taste and a strict formula. It is the difference between naturalness and refinement."

Mr. Will Ransom thinks (in *Private Presses*, New York, 1929) that the distinct personal element in the Vale Press books "derives from the woodcut designs and illustrations drawn and cut by Ricketts" but that the three type fonts designed by him have not proved permanent and have

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“had little or no influence on later practice.” This is probably true, as far as printers are concerned, but Philip James claims (in *English Book Illustration*, London, 1947, p. 58) that Ricketts exerted “a greater immediate influence on artists and publishers” than did Morris. Ricketts’s “lovely volumes,” so James maintains, “were less self-conscious than the Kelmscott books and had a far greater effect on general taste.”

About one thing there can certainly be no doubt. Never in the history of printing have books been made which reflect so directly and so completely the inventive genius and the artistic work of one man as do the Vale books. Morris designed his borders and his type, but Emery Walker attended to the presswork, Burne-Jones drew the illustrations, Cobden-Sanderson planned the bindings, for the Kelmscott products. In the case of the Vale books, Charles Ricketts ran the whole show. As A. E. Gallatin remarked, at the time of his Vale Press Exhibition at Harvard in 1946, “if Ricketts had lived in Italy during the Renaissance, his versatility would have been considered in no way remarkable, [but] being an Englishman . . . , he presented a very unusual figure. . . . Both a painter and a sculptor . . . , he was a highly gifted designer and engraver on wood and a lithographer. His stage settings and costume designs . . . were notable and striking. He was the author of excellent books on art and on printing. . . . He was a musician, and . . . a great connoisseur of the arts, and . . . a most discriminating collector. . . . The beautiful [book] formats which he built . . . constitute his chief and most lasting accomplishment.”

That is why the Colby College Library is proud to be able to announce that its librarian has completed the collecting of a set of the Vale Press books, and why the editor of this QUARTERLY has asked him to write in some detail about them.

