

# Colby



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## Annus Mirabilis

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# Colby Library Quarterly

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Series V

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## ANNUS MIRABILIS

THE year 1666 was a memorable one for Englishmen—almost as memorable as the year 1066 had been for their Saxon (or Norman) ancestors. In June, 1666, the British navy fought an indecisive four days' battle and then on July 25 it defeated the Dutch off the North Foreland. On September 2, 1666, the Great Fire of London broke out and raged out of control for an entire week. (Among the interesting side lights on human nature that have come down to us from this Year of Wonders is the record in Sam Pepys's *Diary* for September 8, 1666, to the effect that "Alderman Starling, a very rich man, without children," distributed two shillings and sixpence [about thirty-five cents today; seventy-five cents in 1930; let's say \$7.50 in 1666!] among *thirty* London men who had saved his house from destruction by the Great Fire.) All these events were celebrated by John Dryden in a poem called "Annus Mirabilis," published in 1667.

For book-lovers, however, the year 1859 is a *much* more important year than 1666. It is *the* Annus Mirabilis without rival, and the present year 1959 will be marked by one memorable centenary after another. The Colby College Library has planned a series of centennial exhibitions, the occasions for which can be briefly noted here.

*The Professor at the Breakfast-Table* by Oliver Wendell Holmes began its run in the January 1859 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. This series of rambling Addisonian essays was written in the same easy, genial, and witty style which had made *The Autocrat* a favorite on both sides of the ocean only a year before.

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On the first day of February, 1859, *Adam Bede* was published. Although this three-volume novel was by a wholly unknown author named George Eliot, nearly two thousand copies were sold in a little over one month. The Colby set of these three volumes went on exhibition on the first day of February.

In March, 1859, the *Atlantic Monthly* printed the third and final installment of *The Life of Dante* by Charles Eliot Norton. When published in book form, this work confidently invited readers to approach this "cathedral into which no one can enter without having his spirit elevated and purified."

In May, 1859, appeared *England and her Soldiers* by an author in whom Colby College can take a special interest. This little book (our copy of which is to be put on exhibition next May) was by Harriet Martineau, who had visited America and had made an on-the-spot study of the Abolition Movement and had written vivid accounts of life in the United States. The editor of the *Westminster Review* had been particularly impressed by what Harriet Martineau had to say about the martyrdom of Elijah Parish Lovejoy and about his education at an obscure institution called Waterville College.

A two-volume novel entitled *Love Me Little, Love Me Long* attracted many readers when it appeared in 1859, if only because they remembered that its author was the same Charles Reade who had written the immensely successful play, *Masks and Faces*, only seven years previously. *The Cloister and the Hearth* was yet to come.

For those readers of 1859 who preferred poetry to novels, the Poet Laureate had a new book to offer. *The Idylls of the King* by Alfred Tennyson made a great hit, and over 15,000 copies were sold in the first month after its publication.

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* was another 1859 "hit," and a large body of enthusiastic readers promptly made a great reputation for this book.

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George Meredith's novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, soon had people talking about this penetrating study of how *not* to bring up a boy, and the book sold well in spite of the eccentricities of the author's style.

On November 24, 1859, appeared the most famous of all the publications of this year: Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*—a book shortly described by Professor Huxley as the “most potent instrument for the extension of the realm of natural knowledge which has come into men's hands since the publication of Newton's *Principia*.” The Colby College Library will take great pride next November in being able to place on exhibition its copy of the first edition of this famous book.

The Annus Mirabilis ended with the publication of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. Issued in time for the Christmas trade, this book soon had the critics declaring that the opening scene of the coach-drive on the Dover Road was one of the finest things Charles Dickens had ever done. The Colby copy of this distinguished work will be on exhibition next Christmas.

What a year for the book-lover! What a grand time the Book-of-the-Month Club would have had, if only it had been in existence in 1859!

Into the record of this crowded year, one further title has to be squeezed. On (or about) March 31, 1859, a little pamphlet was published in London bearing the curious title *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam*. Not a single copy was sold in that year. But now, a hundred years later, it is not at all unusual for literary critics to call the *Rubáiyát* the most important poetic product of the Victorian era. As Professor Joseph Warren Beach (of Minnesota) pointed out only a few years ago, it is “*not* the strenuous faith of Tennyson and Browning, or the yearning doubt of Arnold, that found the finest expression in Victorian verse, but the witty and often impudent skepticism of a medieval Persian metaphysician.”

It is therefore highly fitting that the Colby College Li-

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brary, in planning its series of 1959 Centennial Exhibitions, should make a special occasion of March 31. For on this day in 1859, when Edward FitzGerald was fifty years old, his little pamphlet made its quiet and unobserved appearance in London. As the Centennial Edition of this poem (about to be published by the Colby College Press) states, FitzGerald's original edition "dropped into the world of 1859 with no more sound than that of a feather falling into the Grand Canyon." Seventy years later, when Jerome Kern sold at auction his copy of this little pamphlet, it brought eight thousand dollars. The Colby College Library is proud to be able to exhibit not only its copy of the First Edition, but also more than two hundred other editions of this famous work.

In the Centennial Edition referred to in the preceding paragraph, there is a check-list of the entire Colby Collection of the *Rubáiyát*—a check-list compiled by former Colby librarian James Humphry III. Among the more-than-two-hundred items in Mr. Humphry's list, there are at least a dozen "Firsts," and visitors to the Colby Centennial Exhibition will have a chance to see such rare items as the following: from the year

1859: the "editio princeps," London, March 31; 75 quatrains.

1868: the first printing of the Second Version, in which FitzGerald increased the number of quatrains to 110.

1870: the first American printing: Columbus, Ohio; one of 100 copies, most of which have apparently failed to survive. Indiana University appears to be the only other institution whose library now boasts a copy of this 1870 Ohio printing.

1872: the first printing of the Third Version, London, with the number of quatrains reduced by FitzGerald to 101.

1878: the first American publication: Boston, James R. Osgood's edition. (The Ohio printing of 1870 was not a published edition but a privately printed affair.)

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1879: the first printing of the Fourth Version, London, with one hundred and one quatrains.

1884: the first illustrated edition: Boston, with Vedder's drawings.

1885: the first New York edition, issued by The Grolier Club.

1889: the first printing of the Fifth Version, London.

1894: the first printing in Portland, Maine: the first of Thomas B. Mosher's many editions of this poem.

1906: the first Australian printing, at Melbourne.

1910: the first German printing, at Leipzig.

The Centennial Edition planned for publication by the Colby College Press this month presumably marks the first time that this famous work has been published in Waterville. The printing has been done in Portland by the distinguished Anthoensen Press.



### PREPARING FOR THE CENTENARY OF FITZGERALD'S RUBAIYAT

*By* CARL J. WEBER

EMILY DICKINSON remarks in one of her poems that the bustle in a house the morning after death is the solemnest of industries. The bustle in the house of the literary historian as he prepares for the arrival of the year 1959 is, if not so solemn, at least as noticeable and as emphatic as the bustle of which Emily Dickinson writes. And with good reason. For the year 1859 was the most phenomenally productive year of the entire Victorian Age, and libraries will be kept busy throughout the year 1959 celebrating one centenary after another.

One of these anniversaries is bound to stand out—at least in the literary world—with great prominence, for in that world men have quite generally come “to think of