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THE BICENTENARY OF GRAY'S "ELEGY"

On February 16, 1751, there appeared in London a small quarto with a title-page that read: "An Elegy wrote in a Country Church Yard. London: Printed for R. Dodsley in Pall-mall; And sold by M. Cooper in Paternoster-Row. 1751. Price Six-pence." The author's name was not given, but the whole world now knows that this Elegy was "wrote" by Thomas Gray. He was then thirty-five years old and had twenty more years to live; but nothing in the fifty-five years of his whole life was so important as the publication of that eleven-page pamphlet. In fact, now that two hundred years have since passed, there are those who aver that Gray's Elegy is the most important single publication of the entire eighteenth century—the chief literary legacy of the era that saw the birth of Pope's Homer, of Johnson's Dictionary, of Goldsmith's Deserted Village, of Fielding's Tom Jones, and of Boswell's Life of Johnson.

We will not pause on this anniversary occasion to debate the relative merits of these works. On this day at least, Gray's Elegy stands at the top. "Now gentlemen," said General Wolfe, "I would rather be the author of that poem than have the honor of taking Quebec tomorrow."

Two hundred years have passed, and the price of that little quarto has increased from the six-pence that bookseller Robert Dodsley got for it to twelve thousand dollars, the price paid in 1929 for Jerome Kern's copy of the first edition. No, there is no copy of this edition in the Col-
by College Library, and we will be glad to receive one from any friend or benefactor who wishes to join the ranks of the immortals. Opportunities to pick up the 1751 *Elegy* occur from time to time. Sir Walter Scott’s copy was sold in 1946 for $7,250, and Lucius Wilmerding’s copy was sold at auction in New York on November 28, 1950.

The omission of Gray’s name on the original title-page was by his own request. He had begun the poem eight years or more before its publication and had finished it in 1750. It was circulated in manuscript among his acquaintances, who were delighted with it. Gray’s friend Horace Walpole was so delighted that he passed it around a little too freely, and it shortly came into the hands of the editor of the *Magazine of Magazines*, who promptly informed Gray that he was going to print the poem, with or without permission, in his magazine. Gray thenupon hurried off a letter to Walpole, asking him to “make Dodsley print it immediately . . . but without my name. . . .”

The haste in which that letter to Walpole was written probably accounts for the word “wrote” in the title. For Gray informed Walpole that “the title must be *Elegy wrote in a Country Churchyard.*” He had previously entitled the poem “Stanzas wrote in a Country Churchyard,” and this is the way the title reads in the Eton College manuscript—a manuscript originally in the possession of Gray’s friend William Mason. But Mason persuaded Gray to treat his poem with greater formality and to call it an elegy, and both the Pembroke College (Cambridge) manuscript (originally Gray’s own copy) and the British Museum’s “Wharton Manuscript” (sent by Gray in 1750 to his friend Dr. Thomas Wharton) have the word “written” instead of “wrote” in the title.

The *Elegy* proved immensely popular from the very start. Dodsley issued a second edition within three weeks; it too was entitled *An Elegy wrote in a Country Church Yard*. Ten days later a third edition appeared, again “printed
for R. Dodsley," but this time entitled *An Elegy written in a Country Church Yard*. Before the year was over, Dodsley issued at least six editions (he called the last one "The Fifth Edition" but his fourth exists in two distinct forms, one of which is represented by the copy in the Colby College Library: see page 14 below). In addition to the authorized printings by Dodsley, there were several unauthorized editions published in 1751, and since that date the number has passed all possibility of accurate counting. Northup's *Bibliography of Thomas Gray* lists 244 separate editions of the *Elegy* down to 1915, and there are on record translations into fifteen foreign languages.

Gray's pontifical contemporary, Samuel Johnson, was no great admirer of much that Gray wrote, but when he came to comment on the *Elegy*, Johnson had to admit: "I rejoice to concur with the common reader... The Churchyard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo... Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him."

As Matthew Arnold pointed out, nearly a century later, Samuel Johnson "was not by nature fitted to do justice to Gray and to his poetry.... It made its way, however,... and... Johnson’s disparagement of Gray was [eventually] called 'petulant' and severely blamed. Beattie, at the end of the eighteenth century,... says: 'Of all the English poets of this age, Mr. Gray is most admired, and I think with justice.' Cowper writes: 'I have been reading Gray... and think him the only poet since Shakespeare entitled to the character of sublime.'... Adam Smith says: 'Gray... is..., perhaps, the first poet in the English language....' And Sir James Mackintosh speaks of Gray thus: 'Of all English poets he was the most finished artist.' And Arnold concludes: "The *Elegy* is a beautiful poem, and in admiring it the public showed a true feeling for poetry."
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As a result of this "true feeling" on the part of the public, there appeared in London, early in the nineteenth century, one of the most ambitious—and certainly one of the most successful—of all editions of the Elegy. It was the undertaking of a young Dutch publisher named John Van Voorst, whose family had emigrated to England early in the Napoleonic era. He himself began business in London in 1832, when he was twenty-eight years old, and two years later he published Gray's Elegy as his first important venture. He got John Martin, librarian to the Duke of Bedford, to write an introduction (the Gentleman's Magazine refers to the book as "Mr. Martin's illustrated edition") and hired a group of wood engravers to reproduce a large number of paintings by well-known artists—one illustration for each stanza of the Elegy. The Gentleman's Magazine (in a review published in December, 1834) called the landscapes "exquisitely beautiful" and the London Athenæum later referred to the "exquisite engravings drawn . . . by Constable, Copley Fielding, Cattermole, . . . and others."

In this issue of our QUARTERLY, we reproduce nine of Van Voorst's illustrations—three of them by John Constable, two by Copley Fielding, and one each by G. Barret, George Cattermole, Thales Fielding, and C. R. Stanley. Van Voorst's publishing venture was eminently successful. His illustrated Elegy was re-issued in 1836 (and again in 1839 and in 1854), and it soon received the compliment of numerous imitations and of American piracy. John W. Moore, a Philadelphia publisher, hired R. S. Gilbert to re-engrave all the Van Voorst pictures and thus achieved an American illustrated Elegy in 1845. In Boston, Moses A. Dow issued a similar edition in 1852, dedicated "to the memory of Daniel Webster," who died in that year. In this edition the Elegy is said to have been Webster's favorite poem.

In the symposium of critical comment compiled by Matthew Arnold from writers of the eighteenth century,
there was little attempt at analysis of the precise reasons for the almost universal admiration of the *Elegy*, but the reader may have noticed in passing that three qualities or characteristics were mentioned: the sublimity of the thought, the finished art of the verse, and the beauty of the images. These same qualities have, in the years since Matthew Arnold's time, continued to elicit praise, but there has been a growing divergence of critical emphasis, accompanied by a surprising obtuseness on the part of many critics—all of which invites a close inspection of the literary judgments of the past century. Let us examine some of them.

In a lecture delivered in 1872, Stopford A. Brooke declared: “The exquisite choice and studious simplicity of the natural description in the *Elegy* . . . is the result of art more than of the pure imagination; and Gray weighed every word, especially every adjective, till he reached . . . his ideal. . . . Gray established a standard of careful accuracy in natural description which has never left our poetry.”

*This picture of Stoke Poges church was drawn by John Constable, R.A., and was engraved on wood by W. H. Powis for the Van Voorst edition.*
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Edward FitzGerald, like Brooke, regarded the *Elegy* as the “result of art” and once remarked: “It seems to me strange that Browning, Swinburne, & Co., should go on pouring out poem after poem, as if such haste could prosper with any but first-rate men . . . I feel sure that Gray’s *Elegy*, pieced and patched together so laboriously by a man of . . . abundant taste, will outlive all these hasty abortions.”

Two of FitzGerald’s contemporaries also expressed great admiration for Gray’s poem but for different reasons. Tennyson, after quoting “The paths of glory lead but to the grave” and confessing that “these divine truisms make me weep,” observed: “Gray has a wonderful ear.” And Walter Savage Landor declared: “Gray’s *Elegy* will be read as long as any work of Shakespeare. . . . It is the first poem that ever touched my heart, and it strikes it now just in the same place.”

Edmund Gosse, while writing the English-Men-of-Letters volume on Gray, tried to give a summarizing judgment. Said he: “The *Elegy* may almost be looked upon as

* Wood engraving by J. Jackson from a painting by Copley Fielding.
the typical piece of English verse, our poem of poems; not that it is the most brilliant or original or profound lyric in our language, but because it combines in more balanced perfection than any other all the qualities that go to the production of a fine poetical effect. . . . We may well leave to its fate a poem with so splendid a history, a poem more thickly studded with phrases that have become a part and parcel of colloquial speech than any other piece, even of Shakespeare's, consisting of so few consecutive lines.

Gosse also asserts that the Elegy "belongs to a class apart, as it is not addressed to the memory of any particular person." This is true, as far as what may be called the original form of the poem is concerned. But, as Professors Odell Shepard and Paul Wood point out (in their eighteenth-century anthology of English Prose and Poetry, Boston, 1934), to the original form of the Elegy "Gray later attached eight stanzas . . . dealing . . . with his dead friend, [Richard] West." But while Sir Edmund Gosse comes very near to noting an important point, neither he nor the

* Wood engraving by T. Bagg, from a painting by John Constable, R.A.
American editors just quoted, nor any of their critical predecessors identify the specific note of genuine originality to be found in Gray's poem—an omission by the critics so serious that we will return to say more about it a little later.

The first American appearance of the Elegy took place in Boston in 1772, when J. Boyles printed it for J. F. Condy. A century later, James Russell Lowell made this professorial comment in the New Princeton Review:

Gray's great claim to the rank he holds is derived from his almost unrivalled skill as an artist, in words and sounds. . . . This explains why he is so easy to remember. . . . Gray's phrases have the . . . gift of hooking themselves into the memory. . . . [thanks] to the exquisite artifice of their construction. His Elegy, certainly not through any originality of thought, but far more through originality of sound, has charmed all ears from the day it was published; and the [stanzaic] measure in which it is written, though borrowed by Gray of Dryden, by Dryden of Davenant, by Davenant of Davies, and by him of Raleigh, is ever since associated with that poem as if by some exclusive right of property. Perhaps the great charm of the Elegy is to be found in its embodying that pensively stingleless pessimism which comes with the first gray hair, that vague sympathy with ourselves, which is so much cheaper than sympathy with others.

This "academic" if not pedantic view of an unoriginal Elegy was repeated by another American critic, William Lyon Phelps, who in 1894 declared:

The Elegy is not a Romantic poem; its moralizing is conventional, and pleased eighteenth century readers for that very reason. Scores of poems were written at that time in which the strength of thought was neither above nor below that of the Elegy, and these poems have nearly all perished. What has kept Gray's contribution . . . alive and popular . . . is its absolute perfection of language. There are few poems in English literature that express the sentiment of the author with such felicity and beauty. This insures its immortality.

Remarks of this sort have continued right down to our own time. Henry Van Dyke was satisfied (in Little Masterpieces of Poetry, 1923) to say that in Gray's Elegy "the subject of Man's mortality is broadly treated"; and Edwin

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Markham (in *The Book of Poetry*, 1927) likewise saw little in the poem except man's mortality. The *Elegy*, he declared, "remains the masterpiece of the *Il Penseroso* school and has summed up for all English readers, for all time, the poetry of the tomb... This elegy... has the threefold charm of exquisite diction, musical versification, and homely human... sentiment." Shepard and Wood are equally undiscerning. They remark (*op. cit.*, p. 519) that "the *Elegy* is a noble phrasing of commonplace thought... gathered from the literature of the world... It is a triumph of patient art rather than of genius."

Is it not curious that in all this chorus of praise on both sides of the Atlantic, we fail to hear any voice raised in praise of the real mark of Gray's originality, the real reason for his being taken to the heart of the world?

Oh to love so, be so loved, yet so mistaken!

Not that the critics are mistaken in calling our attention to Gray's fine ear, to his excellent choice of adjectives, to

*Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mold'reing heap...*
the accuracy of his descriptions of nature, to his divine
truisms, to the music of his "measure," to his felicity in the
creation of phrases that hook themselves into our memory:
all this is true enough. But it is not the whole truth.
The truly original note in the *Elegy* was identified by
President Arthur J. Roberts of Colby College on Sunday,
June 27, 1920, in the course of a baccalaureate sermon
which he preached to the graduating class. Said President
Roberts:
"Gray's *Elegy*, the richest bequest of eighteenth century
English literature, has for its central theme the idea of un-
developed human power.

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

That is, perhaps in this graveyard lies some man who,
under other and favoring circumstances, might have been
a great statesman or a great poet, but who lived out his
life . . . without giving evidence . . . of the possession of
extraordinary powers."

In these words of Arthur J. Roberts (Colby, '90), the
"central theme" of Gray's *Elegy* is given the emphasis it
deserves. Thomas Gray wrote his poem about the "rude
forefathers of the hamlet" two hundred years ago. Let the
date sink in. Then ask yourself: Who, before Gray, had
celebrated the "homely joys and destiny obscure" of the
ordinary man? Where in Shakespeare or Milton or Dryden
or Pope can you read "the short and simple annals of the
poor"? In Shakespeare, poor men are "the common herd"
or "the tag-rag people," or mere "varletry," or "the rab-
blement," and Shakespeare's successors learned well the
snobbish lesson he had taught them, that whereas

The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes,
When beggars die there are no comets seen.
Gray's unprecedented and courageous act lay in his addressing his elegy to the memory, not of “princes,” but of humble workmen, buried in now-neglected graves after living lives of hard-handed toil.

Gray’s critics can be so smugly superior in their verdict that the *Elegy* “is not the most original in our language” and that it has charmed all ears but “not through any originality of thought”; but where is their recognition of the true originality of Gray’s democratic sympathy? Gray wrote twenty-five years before the American Revolution; he wrote forty years before the French Revolution. Goldsmith’s *Deserted Village*, with its celebration of “a bold peasantry, their country’s pride,” follows the *Elegy* by almost twenty years. Burns’s “A man’s a man for a’ that” is a quarter of a century later still. If Gray’s solicitous interest in the dwellers in “this neglected spot” isn’t original and new—and very modern—let the critics announce the source from which he borrowed the idea. Thomas Gray is the pioneer literary spokesman for the Ordinary Man, the patron saint of the Unknown Soldier: and the year 1751,

* Wood engraving by J. Byfield, from a painting by Copley Fielding.*
in which Gray put his finger on ignorance and "chill pen­
yury" as the two greatest foes of the common man, is the
literary landmark from which we can date and measure
modern literature with far greater justice than we exhibit
when we date it all from 1798, the year in which Words­
worth published his Lyrical Ballads. Gray's "rude fore­
fathers of the hamlet" were also the forefathers of Words­
worth's Wagoner, and of his Michael, and of his Peter
Bell.

On this two hundredth anniversary of the Elegy, cer­
tainly we who are concerned with education, in a land
devoted to efforts aimed at guaranteeing that no heart
pregnant with celestial fire shall be neglected or its "noble
rage" frozen, certainly we of all people ought to hail the
Elegy as our "theme song," our devotional hymn, and our
triumphal march.

President Roberts once remarked, in addressing the stu­
dents at Colby College, that "the world's greatest tragedy
is that of undeveloped human power," and he declared
that he found support for his conviction in the utterances
of two men at Harvard. "In a speech before the Freshman
class at Harvard College [delivered on October 4, 1897],
Lieutenant Governor Wolcott said, 'If among your teach­
ers you find one man to inspire you with the determina­
tion to make the most of yourself, cling to him, for he is
giving you the most that any man can give.'" And again:

The late Professor Shaler of Harvard University, one of the wisest
men of his day and generation, in the last book he ever wrote said
that it was his deliberate conviction that of all the talent entrusted to
human kind not one one-hundredth is ever brought to full fruition.
And he said that this conviction was based not merely upon his ob­
servation of boys in college, but of men in mills and mines and armies.

No wonder President Roberts was an admirer of Gray's
Elegy, for in that poem of two hundred years ago he found
the same conviction expressed:
Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Along the cool sequestered vale of life*

Two hundred years after Gray, we are certainly making progress. Fewer flowers now blush unseen; less sweetness is wasted on the desert air. If the tragedy of undeveloped human power is now less extensive than in times past, Gray's *Elegy* has certainly had something to do with bringing about this result. Poetry has humanized us. We no longer mock useful toil and destiny obscure. We put up memorials to unknown soldiers.

So, in honor of that great event of February 16, 1751, when Robert Dodsley published the first edition of the *Elegy*, the Colby College Library will take from its shelves and on February 16, 1951, will place on exhibition the following printings of the poem:

1. A facsimile of the manuscript of the *Elegy*—the so-called "Wharton Manuscript" now in the British Museum. The title reads: "Elegy, written in a Country Church-

* Wood engraving by J. Jackson, from a painting by C. R. Stanley.
"The poem is not divided into stanzas by leaving any blank space between them, but only by indenting the first line of each stanza after the first.


4. London: R. Dodsley, 1751. "The Fourth Edition." This edition was announced on April 7, 1751, only seven weeks after Dodsley's first edition. As recently as twenty-five years ago, Francis G. Stokes discovered that there were really two different printings of the Fourth Edition. The copy in the British Museum has a text which differs in many respects from the copy in the Guildhall Library in London. (Stokes reported the differences in the two texts in the London Times Literary Supplement for December 16, 1926, page 935.) The Colby copy is like the British Museum copy, and this version of the Fourth Edition is presumed to be the earlier of the two.


8. Kennebunk, Maine: James K. Remich, 1814. This is not only one of the earliest printings of the poem in America, but it is also the earliest Maine imprint of the poem, as far as our present knowledge goes. (Northup lists only three earlier American editions: Boston, 1772; Wilmington, Delaware, 1803; and Boston, 1808; and he fails to list the Litchfield, Connecticut, printing by T. Collier in 1799.) The existence of this Kennebunk edition seems to have eluded the compilers of bibliographies of Maine imprints (Charles Evans, for example, and Joseph William-
Son, and R. W. Noyes, and McMurtrie) as well as the bibliographer of Gray, Professor Clark S. Northup; and it seems safe to infer that the Colby copy of this printing of the *Elegy* is a very rare item indeed. Can any reader of these words tells us where there is another copy?


11. Boston: Moses A. Dow, n.d. (presumably 1852 or 1853). Dedicated "to the memory of Daniel Webster," who died October 24, 1852. The *Elegy* is here said to be "his favorite poem," and on the evening preceding his death, Webster is reported to have called for a reading of a portion of the poem. This edition contains beautifully-done,

*Wood engraving by J. Baxter, from a painting by G. Barret.*

*His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.*
enlarged reproductions of the Van Voorst illustrations first published in London in 1834. It was reprinted in 1856.


16. London: Castell Brothers; New York: E. & J. B. Young & Co., [1887?]. Illustrated by Percy Tarrant, J. B. Browne, A. W. Parsons (the English artist who was selected by the London office of Harper & Brothers to do the illustrations for Thomas Hardy's "The First Countess of Wessex," published in Harper's Magazine for December, 1886), A. M. Clausen, and Herbert Dicksee. Ex Libris Florence E. Dunn (Colby, '96). It is worth noting that this book was published just about the time that William Morris was making preparations for the establishment of his famous Kelmscott Press; but no edition of Gray's Elegy came from the Kelmscott Press. Shortly afterwards, Thomas B. Mosher began the publication of dainty little books in Portland, Maine, but he, too, never issued Gray's Elegy. The same statement can be made about another follower of Morris, Charles Ricketts, for the Elegy never appeared among the publications of the Vale Press. Not until after the days of World War I does Gray's poem reappear among the lists of distinguished books.
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22. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1907. In A Collection of Eighteenth Century Verse, edited by Margaret Lynn. Ex Libris D. G. Munson (Colby, '92). The editor remarks: "The satisfaction that the poem affords almost every reader is probably due not only to its philosophy, but to the exaltation that the noble verse gives to the sentiment. . . ."

Herd by yon wood, now smiling . . . , he would rove.*


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* Wood engraving by Sly and Wilson, from a painting by Thales Fielding.
It is a poem for the race. . . . The democracy of feeling shown in it was as remarkable in its time as any other element of the poem."

25. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, [1918]. In English Poets of the Eighteenth Century, edited by Ernest Bernbaum. In his Introduction, the editor states that the Elegy is "by many held [to be] the noblest English lyric."
26. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926. In The Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse, edited by David Nichol Smith. In making this anthology, the editor has had, as he confesses in the Preface, "to consider the favorites of the public," and the Elegy duly appears on page 373. This inclusion is (one may guess) a somewhat grudging one, for neither Gray nor his Elegy is mentioned in the Preface—eight pages in which the editor finds room for John Pomfret, Charles Churchill, Mark Akenside, and others of similar stature.
27. Portland, Maine: The Southworth Press, 1930. No. 853 of an edition limited to 900 copies. This book was designed by Mr. Fred Anthoensen; its distinction and charm make it the first distinguished book to be published in what may be called the modern revival of interest in the Elegy. Mr. Anthoensen's own comment on this edition is worth quoting. In Types and Bookmaking (1943) he remarks: "I had always wanted to design and print An Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard by Thomas Gray, in a small, appropriate format. I realized that many editions had already been printed, and that a new one would need marked features to give it a reason for existence. In this book I happily succeeded, I think, in capturing something of the old English charm that is so inherent a part of the Elegy. The illustrations, reproduced from a mid-nine-
teenth-century edition, were printed in various colors appropriate to the mood of each separate verse. Thus, the

verse commencing: 'Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight' is illustrated in a melancholy blue, and other colors were chosen to reflect the moods of the verses on the various pages. This was a daring feature in bookmaking at the time, and has since been copied by other designers. . . . The binding, a specially designed decorated paper printed in three colors, repeated the quaint illustrations of urns and sheaves of wheat suggestive of the theme. . . . The book . . . was chosen as one of the Fifty Books of the Year and proved to be a quite successful edition of the poem." So successful, it may be added, that no copy has as yet ever been offered for sale in a bookseller's catalogue. Lucky owners hold on to the book! The illustrations used by Mr. Anthoensen in this Southworth Press edition of the *Elegy* are, by his kind permission, reproduced in the present issue of the *Colby Library Quarterly*.

* Wood engraving by W. H. Powis, from a painting by John Constable, R.A.


31. London: Golden Cockerell Press, 1946. Although the Golden Cockerell Press was founded in 1920, before Fred Anthoensen had designed and published his 1930 edition of the Elegy, it was not until after the Golden Cockerell Press had changed hands several times that Gray's poem appeared on its list of publications. In 1933, three years after Mr. Anthoensen's edition, the Golden Cockerell Press came under the ownership and direction of Christopher Sandford, and not until 1946 did he issue this edition of the Elegy, which was limited to 750 copies. It contains nine wood engravings by Gwenda Morgan, and there is a foreword by Christopher Sandford himself.

32. Mt. Vernon, New York: Peter Pauper Press, 1948. With nine wood engravings by Gray's contemporary, Thomas Bewick, who was born just two years after the publication of the Elegy. The engravings in this volume are characteristic Bewick performances, but some of them have only a very distant suitability for illustrating Gray's verses.

Also on exhibition: several portraits of Thomas Gray.