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The Vernon Lee Papers

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ONE of the pleasantest duties of the college librarian is the acknowledgment of the gifts that graduates of the College and other friends of the Library are constantly sending us. Unfortunately we are unable to make public announcement of many of these gifts, but from time to time the Library receives presents of such magnitude and importance as to demand special recognition. Of this sort was the Harold Trowbridge Pulsifer Poetry Collection, presented by Mrs. Pulsifer, and the Thomas Sergeant Perry Library, given us by his daughter, Miss Margaret Perry. These two gifts came from New England. I am now happy to be able to announce our receipt of a gift from old England—a very important and very extensive gift which will keep our Catalogue Department busy for a long time to come.

Thanks to Miss Irene Cooper Willis, of the Inner Temple, London, the Colby Library has received the private papers and correspondence of Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) and of her half-brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton. There are books and manuscripts—some published and some unpublished—and photographs; there are letters to and from Vernon Lee; there are biographical notes, and miscellaneous memorabilia, and manuscript notebooks in great quantity; and, what is more, there is the promise of additional books yet to come.
A graduate student at Harvard has already applied for (and has been granted) permission to make use of these Vernon Lee Papers in connection with his preparation of a dissertation at Harvard; and since certain restrictions have been attached to the recently acquired material, it is, I think, desirable to state at once just what these restrictions are, and for how long they are to apply, so that all who read this announcement of the gift to Colby College will also have an opportunity to learn what rules must apply to its use. I therefore quote from the letter of gift signed by Miss Cooper Willis:

"To the Librarian, Colby College, Waterville, Maine, U.S.A.:

"In sending the papers and correspondence of Vernon Lee to Colby College, I have been influenced in the first place by the consideration that in the event of another war America would be safer than England for their depository. Secondly, I have chosen Colby College because of my regard for Professor Carl Weber personally and for his work on English literature.

"I enjoin him and the College to be faithful to Vernon Lee's express wishes, written upon the labels of the original packets of her Letters Home, that these shall not be read except privately until 1980 and that all examination of them shall be subject to this restriction.

"In her testamentary instructions to me Vernon Lee wrote: 'I absolutely prohibit any biography of me. My life is my own and I leave that to nobody.' As, however, she apparently contemplated publication of the Letters Home after 1980, I interpret this prohibition as binding only up to that date. Publication of the unpublished literary material (apart from the letters) can be undertaken at any time, and I hereby, as Vernon Lee's executor and sole beneficiary under her will, give to Colby College the copyright in
this material, the copyright in the Letters (subject to restrictions as above stated), and I intend, at my death, to leave the copyrights in all Vernon Lee’s published works also to Colby College, together with my copies of her books.

“I also now give to Colby College: (1) the copyright of my Preface to the privately printed edition of the Letters; (2) the copyright of my memorandum on the Files sent; and (3) the copyright of my notes on the letters contained in the Files from various correspondents.

“As to Eugene Lee-Hamilton’s letters and books, sent herewith, I am uncertain whether I can give the copyrights. They were in Vernon Lee’s possession and she told me that she had the copyrights but I cannot prove this. Eugene Lee-Hamilton died circa 1911; his child predeceased him, but his widow survived him and died a widow soon after the 1914-1918 war. I have not seen her will. In so far as the copyrights were with Vernon Lee, I give them to Colby College.

[Signed:]
IRENE COOPER WILLIS”

In accepting this gift from Miss Cooper Willis, the Library of course accepts her charge “to be faithful to Vernon Lee’s express wishes,” and twenty-eight years must pass before permission can be granted for the publication of any of her letters.

As to who she was, and what books she wrote, and why the modern world should be expected to maintain any interest in her or her books, these questions will (so the editor of this QUARTERLY has informed me) be dealt with in the pages that are to follow this announcement.