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John Bartlett: A Biographical Memoir on the Centenary of his Familiar Quotations

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JOHN BARTLETT
1820–1905
Although Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations* is an essential book in every library, public or private, and has been a favorite since the initial publication in 1855, little is generally known about the originator of this useful book.

John Bartlett was born in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on June 14, 1820, two hundred years after his ancestors arrived there. At the age of three his education was well under way when he read to his mother a verse from the Bible. Continuing this practice he had read through the entire Bible when nine years old. His formal education was completed at the public school in Plymouth when he was sixteen, but he had read and absorbed an amazing number of books. Before he was twelve he had read most of the juvenile literature of the period as well as *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Josephus*, *Arabian Nights*, *Scottish Chiefs*, *Opie on Lying*, *Telemachus*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Munchausen and many of the works of Cooper and Scott. This passion for reading continued throughout his life.

In 1836, at the age of sixteen, Bartlett’s business life began. He was employed by Joel Owen, who kept the University Bookstore in Cambridge and did much publishing for...
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New England writers. Bartlett's success was such that thirteen years later, in 1849, he became owner of the establishment and began his publishing career.

The book store was opposite the Harvard College buildings. In the back of the store was a room in which he took great pride. Here he laid out copies of new books and foreign periodicals and the professors used this as a reading room, so his close associates were all men of especial culture and learning.

Bartlett published many of the Harvard textbooks. The earliest of these was issued in Greek in 1850, *The Oration of Aeschines Against Ctesiphon*. In the back of my third edition of the *Quotations*, 1858, is a list of thirty-six textbooks published by John Bartlett, used in Harvard College, many of them Greek or Latin classics.

In December, 1854, *The Harvard Magazine* was first published in Cambridge by John Bartlett. At that time there were 350 students in the college, editors of the magazine being members of the senior and junior classes. In the Introduction to the first number all students were urged to make contributions; this was signed by six of the editors, including F. B. Sanborn and Phillips Brooks. Among the book reviews in the first issue of forty-eight pages, is one of *Walden, or Life in the Woods* by H. D. Thoreau. Ten issues were published each year. Vol. II, September, 1856, has a six-page article on *English Traits* by R. W. Emerson, and Vol. III, 1857, has a most interesting review of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, 1856. Bartlett continued as publisher of the magazine through Vol. IV. On the last page of No. 1 of Vol. V, 1859, it is "Resolved: That our thanks be presented to John Bartlett for his kindness in issuing this magazine in the past years, and for the uniform courtesy he has always displayed towards the editors."

Another of his manifold interests and activities was the publication from 1851 to 1858 of the term catalogues of the University, ninety or more pages each.
As the result of Bartlett's omnivorous reading and his unusually retentive memory, he always had an unlimited number of quotations for every occasion. After a while whenever anyone was in doubt as to the origin of a familiar quotation he was told to "ask Bartlett." He was pleased over the reputation he had secured and finally determined to keep a commonplace book and let no quotation escape. His book grew as time went on, then someone said, "Bartlett, why don't you give the public the benefit of that library of quotations you have collected?"

In 1856 came the second edition of *Familiar Quotations*, the little 1855 edition of 1,000 copies having sold out in less than three months. Sixty-three pages were added to the first edition of 295 pages. In 1858 there was a third edition of 446 pages.\(^2\)

In 1859 Bartlett disposed of his store and for four years was not engaged in business. During the Civil War he served in 1862 and 1863 as a volunteer paymaster in the South Atlantic Squadron. In 1863 he joined the publishing house of Little, Brown and Company in Boston and became a partner in 1865. The first three editions of the *Quotations* had been published by John Bartlett. Future editions were published by Little, Brown and Company and edited by Bartlett from the fourth in 1863 to the ninth in 1891, this being his swan song, grown to a tall, thick volume of 1,158 pages.\(^3\)

In 1851 John Bartlett had married Hannah Staniford Willard, daughter of Professor Sydney Willard and granddaughter of President Joseph Willard, both of Harvard. She was a true helpmate, her sympathies were entirely with her husband in all his undertakings, especially in his Shakespeare studies.

Bartlett edited the *Shakespeare Phrase Book*, 1,034 pages,

\(^2\) Colby has a copy of this third edition, but no copy of the two that preceded it. Won't some friend of the library correct this omission?—*Editor*.

\(^3\) Colby has two copies of this ninth edition, but none of the five editions that immediately preceded it.—*Editor*.
published by Little, Brown in 1881. In 1889 he retired from the publishing firm in order to devote his time to finishing his *New and Complete Concordance to Shakespeare*, a large quarto of 1,910 pages on which Mr. and Mrs. Bartlett had been working for about twenty years. This was published by Macmillan, New York, in 1889 and by Macmillan, in London and New York, in 1896, and has been given first place by scholars. The London *Times Literary Supplement*, May 12, 1945, in an article on “Shakespeare Concordances” by W. M. Parker, on the occasion of the centenary celebration of Mrs. Cowden Clarke’s famous *Shakespeare Concordance*, conceded that the “consensus of opinion has acknowledged Bartlett’s tome to be the Shakespeare Concordance *par excellence* during these fifty years.”

In addition to the works already mentioned, Bartlett prepared the *New Method of Chess Notation* and the *Catalogue of Books on Angling*. He was a devoted angler and made a collection of books on his favorite sport, numbering 1,014 volumes and 269 pamphlets, given to Harvard College Library in 1892. Another collection given to the college was “Proverbs,” 140 volumes, and “Emblems,” 130 volumes.

One of this busy man’s favorite interests was for many years the famous Whist Club composed of himself, James Russell Lowell, John Holmes (brother of the Autocrat) and Charles F. Choate. Lowell’s poems include “To Mr. John Bartlett, who has sent me a seven pound trout.”

In 1871 Harvard conferred the degree of Master of Arts on the author and in 1894 he was elected an honorary member of the Harvard Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1892.

Ever since acquiring many years ago a copy of the little 1855 first edition of the *Quotations*, I have found special interest in collecting all the twelve editions, some autographed, letters, and other Bartlett books and publica-
tions, but the Chess Notation continues to remain on the absent list, perhaps because of the small edition and because it is in demand for Chess Collections. In my John Bartlett collection is an interesting little London edition of Familiar Quotations, Author's Edition, published by George Routledge and Sons. No date is given, but the text seems to follow the fifth edition. On the title page is an inscription, "A relic from Waterloo for Henry Irving from his mother. Sept. 1874."

So little has been written about John Bartlett as an individual that I have had to rely entirely on items in my own collection in writing this article; numerous books of reference and articles having the merest mention, a book of essays by T. W. Higginson, "Carlyle's Laugh," with a chapter on John Bartlett, a copy of his will, and the long obituary in the Boston Transcript, also a five-page article by Dr. M. H. Morgan, much of which was taken from a manuscript book given to Harvard College Library in 1900.

With the publication of each new edition of the Quotations many pages were added, with the exception of the sixth edition, which, curiously, is an exact duplicate of the fifth edition. Copyright remains the same, 1868; it is printed from the same plates, has the same introductory notes, and each has 778 pages. The fifth edition was first published in 1868 with later issues in 1869 and 1870. The only change in number six is the title page which has "Sixth Edition," and under name of publishers is the date 1872. There was a later issue in 1873. The seventh edition came out in 1875, the eighth in 1882 and the ninth, Bartlett's last, in 1891.

The tenth edition was edited by Nathan Haskell Dole in 1914; it has 1,454 pages. This was the first to include Whitman quotations. In 1937 came the eleventh edition, 4 Mrs. Sprague's collection includes copies of all twelve editions of the Familiar Quotations and is doubtless the finest Bartlett Collection in any private library.—Editor.
enlarged and revised by Christopher Morley and Louella D. Everett. In each edition there have been many Bible quotations, and later ones had also a few from the Book of Common Prayer, but number eleven was the first to include quotations from the Apocrypha. Also Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, William Blake and many others were first included in this edition and retained in the latest, number twelve, enlarged and revised by the same editors in 1948. This great book has 1,831 pages. The main text to page 787 stands identical with the 1937 edition; thence forward it is entirely re-edited and has 253 added pages.

Reading of John Bartlett's numerous literary and publishing activities, one would naturally picture him as a serious, scholarly type, with few interests outside his reading. But Dr. M. H. Morgan's article describes him as a "lover of social life and blest with close friendships. His sense of humor and his never-failing cheerfulness made him a delightful companion and even in extreme old age, although he abounded in anecdotes of the past, he never lost interest in the affairs of the day." He belonged to many clubs, to the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, and to the Boston Society of Sons of the Revolution.

John Bartlett died on December 3, 1905, at the age of eighty-five, his beloved wife having died a year earlier.

THE COLBY COLLEGE PRESS
An Anniversary Report

As that mythical prodigy "every schoolboy" knows, William Caxton set up the first printing press in England in 1476. Only two years later, a press was set up at Oxford—to produce learned works for the university rather than the popular books favored by Caxton himself. Thus early in the history of typography was the