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GEORGE WILLIAM RUSSELL ("AE")
AND THE COLBY COLLECTION

By CARLIN T. KINDIEN

When George W. Russell died on July 17, 1935, a world already depressed by economic tragedy and the threat of war took notice of the passing of one of the most remarkable personalities of the modern world. The dean of Irish letters, George W. Russell, was best known in the United States as AE, the Irish poet; but the big man with the genial eyes and the handsome beard was also a painter who had seen the visions that must have been Blake's, a philosopher who had probed with the sages of the East for a mystical faith, an economist who was a leader in the Irish agrarian movement, an editor of one of the unique magazines of the century—a man who was many things to many friends but never to the neglect of the development of his own character and soul. To know the totality of George Russell’s life and work is to know the rich possibilities of the happy and useful life which is open to every man but which is realized only by the few who have a genius for living.

A new generation that would know the genius of AE is rightly sent to his works, which suggest his thought, and to his friends’ reminiscences, which suggest his character. This special issue of the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY will, it is hoped, stimulate just such an interest in AE. In this introduction there is need only for a brief review of his life and an account of AE’s place among the Colby collections.
Born in Lurgan, County Armagh, on April 10, 1867, George Russell came of poor parents. He was educated in the local schools and at the age of ten moved with his family to Dublin where he became a pupil at Rathmines School and where he was later employed as a clerk in a business house. To escape the monotony of his work, he attended painting classes at the Metropolitan School of Art, and there began his lifelong friendship with William Butler Yeats. His interest in mysticism brought him into the inner circle of a group of young writers—Charles Johnson, John Eglinton, Charles Weekes, and Yeats—who formed a Theosophical Society. While contributing to the magazine published by this society, Russell attracted attention locally and acquired the pseudonym “AE” under which he was to achieve international fame. (A printer’s difficulty in deciphering the word “Aeon,” with which Russell had signed an article for the theosophical journal, and which had been printed “AE—?,” suggested the pen-name.)

In 1894 Charles Weekes persuaded AE to collect some of his verse, and a small volume was published in Dublin under the title *Homeward: Songs by the Way*. This little book, the first of several volumes of verse AE was to publish during his lifetime, was an immediate success. At about the same time he wrote a series of prose pamphlets dealing with the literary and spiritual ideals which he believed might guide a sick Ireland. These pamphlets brought AE to the notice of Sir Horace Plunkett, and ultimately into an active role in the Irish Agricultural Organization Society. He made the magazine of this Society, the *Irish Homestead*—of which he remained editor from 1906 until its amalgamation with the *Irish Statesman* in 1923—a unique periodical more appreciated, perhaps, by Irish and English intellectuals than by Irish farmers. AE served as editor of the *Irish Statesman* until it ceased publication in 1930 and expressed his economic beliefs in various writings, most notably *Co-operation and Society* (1912) and
The National Being (1916), his most influential and widely read work. Ever on the side of the distressed and the mistreated, AE came into prominence during the Dublin labor disputes in 1913 and again during the Irish Convention of 1917. On each of his three visits to the United States, AE preached the doctrine that was closest to his heart—the return to the soil, to the rural life. His religious philosophy was expressed most fully in The Candle of Vision (1918) and his political idealism in two fantasies, The Interpreters (1922) and The Avatars (1933).

What aspect of AE's mind and work can one emphasize to reveal the man? His economic theorizing? His religious mysticism? His artistic sensitivity which overflowed in painting, poetry, and the drama? Primarily AE will be remembered for the man who was all these things combined—and something more. The man who died at Bournemouth, England, in 1935 passed easily into the world which had long been as real to him as the one in which he had lived for nearly seventy years.

The story of AE's place in the Colby Library begins with his first volume of verse: Homeward: Songs by the Way. The book was published in Dublin by Whaley in June, 1894, and in January of the following year a second edition was published. A copy of this second edition came into the hands of Thomas Bird Mosher who only a few years previously had set up his publishing business in Portland, Maine. With the second Dublin edition of Homeward in hand, Mosher set about issuing the first American edition of these poems. Shortly before this time, Mosher had received a letter from a student at Purdue University in Indiana. This student had been taking an art course in which he had done some experimental lettering and book-designing; and having learned of Mosher's little publications, the Purdue student—whose name was Bruce Rogers (a name destined to become famous as one of the most distinguished book-designers in American his-
tory)—sent Mosher some examples of his work. The result was that Mosher hired young Rogers to design the Portland (1895) edition of AE's *Homeward: Songs by the Way*, and in this way this book, with its original headbands and decorations, became the first book ever designed by Bruce Rogers. When Edward F. Stevens initiated the Book Arts Collection in the Colby College Library, Mosher's edition of AE's poems was among the first books presented. AE's *Homeward* has thus long held an honored place on the shelves of the Colby College Library. In time it was joined there by copies of the two Dublin editions.

Now, thanks to the benefaction of Mr. James A. Healy, of New York and Portland, these AE items find themselves surrounded by a host of AE material. Over the last two decades Mr. Healy has devoted himself to the task of building an outstanding collection of AE's work. Consisting of first editions—many inscribed and autographed—of nearly all of AE's poetry and prose writings, together with considerable manuscript material and over one hundred letters in AE's holograph, this collection is without question the most comprehensive library of AE material on this side of the Atlantic and equaled by few, if any, in Ireland itself. This special issue of the Colby Library Quarterly will clearly reveal the extent of Mr. Healy’s devotion to AE, and the opportunity his collection now offers to scholars.

AN ANGELIC ANARCHIST

By Oliver St. John Gogarty

There was a time when men felt that over and above poetry, painting and music there were deeds that were better worth the doing, a time when the artist was not regarded as a complete human being, a time when, in fact,

1 Dr. Gogarty has kindly given the Colby Library Quarterly permission to use an excerpt from a chapter on AE in his forthcoming volume, *The Nine Worthies*.