November 1956

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 4, no.8, November 1956, p.153-156

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Colby Library Quarterly

From Mrs. M. Compton Woods we have received a six-volume set of the Lucy Books (New York: Clark, Austin & Smith, 1854) by Jacob Abbott. He is not named on the title-page but is identified as “the Author of the Rollo Books.”

To Miss Mildred Howells, daughter of William Dean Howells, we are indebted for one of the most interesting gifts to come to the Library in many months, namely, the five-volume edition of Pietro Metastasio’s *Opera Scelte* (Milan: Società Tipografica de Classici Italiani, 1820). Metastasio, a much-neglected eighteenth-century contemporary of Goldoni, has often been called the “poet of music”—at least three literary geniuses, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Stendhal, praised his art—and librettos of his were used for the operas of Pergolesi, Vivaldi, Gluck, Mozart, and others. In this year, during which the bicentenary of Mozart’s birth has been widely celebrated, it is specially heart-warming to be able to add to our shelves Metastasio’s librettos for *La Clemenza di Tito* and *Il Re Pastore*. By a very appropriate coincidence, they become a close neighbor, in our Library, of one of Violet Paget’s (“Vernon Lee’s”) best-known and rightfully admired works, her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, in which she devotes no less than 133 pages to a detailed description and penetrating analysis of Metastasio’s life and works.

SOME TICKNOR CENTENNIALS

Two years ago, the Colby Library Associates observed the centenary of Thoreau’s *Walden* by spending an evening in a re-examination of that pungent book, and last year they engaged in the same sort of centennial memorialization by spending an evening with Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Now that 1956 is about to join the endless procession of the years into the past, what important book
or books have we failed to commemorate this year among those that first saw the light in 1856?

In looking over the candidates we have noticed two Boston books that bear "1856" on the title-page: Browning's *Men and Women* and Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*. It is, of course, true that the London edition of Browning's work appeared in 1855, but the Boston reprint of which we are now speaking appeared in '56. It was published by Ticknor & Fields—the same publishing house that issued *Walden* in 1854. Patmore's *Angel* was likewise published by Ticknor & Fields.

Among the books that are just a century old is a copy of *Hiawatha*, a reprint of the first edition of Longfellow's poem published in 1855. This, too, was a Ticknor & Fields publication. While these three Boston veterans were lined up before our eyes, we noticed for the first time that they are all dressed alike, and that all three wear the same dress as that worn by *Walden*. This fact aroused our curiosity regarding Ticknor's book-binding habits. A few minutes' search among the shelves in the rare book room soon enabled us to add half a dozen other titles, all published by Ticknor & Fields in the decade 1851-1860, and all bound in the same drab, unrelieved, muddy brown cloth as that in which *Walden* appeared. The six are: Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Longfellow's *Golden Legend* (1851), Whittier's *Literary Recreations* (1854), Bayard Taylor's *Poems of the Orient* (1855), Tennyson's *Maud* (1855), and Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* (1860). These ten Ticknor books, when lined up side by side, look like a squad of soldiers just back from a march on a muddy road: no distinction in shape, color, size, or lettering; same cloth, same paper, same type, same everything. To the eye they are all alike, and all drab. In the course of a century the brown cloth has in some cases faded more than in others; the ten books vary slightly in color because of this aging. They look (in color) like ten cups of coffee which vary slightly in brownness because a different quantity of cream has
been poured into the cups. It is obvious, however, that when Ticknor & Fields published books in Boston a century ago, it made no difference to them what the contents of the books were, or what the subject was; coffee-brown cloth was made to serve as covering for them all.

Looking at the faded reprint of Hiawatha (1855), we are reminded anew of how time fades reputations and judgments as well as the bindings of books. When Hiawatha was first published, it was severely attacked in certain newspapers. After reading one of these attacks, James T. Fields, the junior partner in the publishing firm, went to see Longfellow in order to discuss what might be done. "Mr. Fields," said the poet, "how is the book selling?" "Enormously," replied the publisher; "we are running presses night and day to fill the orders." "Very well," observed Longfellow, "then don't you think we had better let these critics go on advertising it?"

The fire of the reviewers was eventually spent and Hiawatha went on selling. Half a century later, when Professor Curtis Hidden Page of Dartmouth was preparing his Chief American Poets (1905) for publication by the successors of Ticknor & Fields, he wrote: "Hiawatha has worn surprisingly well, and has stood the test. . . . It stands out, more and more, as Longfellow's most important work. This is anything but the fate predicted for it by those intellectual critics who judged it so severely at its first appearance."

However, since Page wrote this comment, another half-century has passed. The Oxford Anthology of American Literature, recently edited by William Rose Benét and Professor Norman H. Pearson of Yale, carries the statement that "no other American poetry has undergone a more thorough reversal of its original popularity . . . than has that of Longfellow." Benét and Pearson give no evidence whatever of agreeing with Page that Hiawatha "stands out, more and more, as Longfellow's most important work."

Well, the centenary of this poem has come and gone.
It is now one hundred years since poetry-readers have been able to quote

As unto the bow the cord is,
So unto the man is woman;
Though she bends him, she obeys him;
Though she draws him, yet she follows,
Useless each without the other.

These words have found their way into Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations*—a book, by the way, which made its first appearance at almost the same time as *Hiawatha*—but there has been no centennial birthday party for the Indian “Song.” *Leaves of Grass*, another product of 1855, is doing very well. But has any reader of this page heard even the lightest tap of gloved hands in applause for *Hiawatha* at any time in the course of the year in which the poem passed its centenary milestone? We have neither seen nor heard any mention of it.

If this represents the final lot of Longfellow’s “most important work,” the muddy-brown cloth in which it was first bound is appropriate enough. “Thy fate is the common fate of all,” Longfellow once wrote in another poem. He would, perhaps, not be wholly surprised about the fate of *Hiawatha*. Of the ninety or more plays which Aeschylus wrote, only seven have come down to us.