

# Colby



## Colby Quarterly

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Volume 4  
Issue 14 *May*

Article 4

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May 1958

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 4, no.14, May 1958, p.252-260

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### A FORMER COLBY LIBRARIAN COMMENTS AUTHORITATIVELY ON RARE BOOKS

**A**N interesting issue of *The Book Collector* (Volume 6, Autumn, 1957) contains an article by Dr. Robert B. Downs, librarian at Colby College in 1929-1931 and now director of the third largest university library in America, the University of Illinois Library at Urbana. Writing in this London quarterly on "Rare Books in American State University Libraries," he points out, in what reads like a memory of his days in Waterville, Maine, that "a generation ago, a typical university library provided a safe or a locked cabinet in the librarian's office for perhaps a few scores of volumes which . . . it was considered necessary to segregate." But, continues Dr. Downs (page 233), "by 1956 the situation had undergone a radical shift." He calls attention to "the great Treasure Rooms in the Sterling Library at Yale, the Houghton Library at Harvard, the rare book rooms in the Library of Congress, the special quarters for the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, and similar provisions in most of the newer university library buildings, such as Virginia, Texas, North Carolina, Ohio State, Princeton, and Wisconsin. These institutions typify the present-day attitude toward rare books."

Dr. Downs concludes his article by remarking that this phenomenal expansion of rare book collections in state university libraries is a growth which has moved at an especially rapid pace in the last decade. This mounting concern with rare books, particularly in literature, history, and science, is the result, he declares, not of institutional rivalry, but of the need to meet specific requirements of scholars at work. "The inevitable results have been," Dr. Downs concludes, "increasing scarcities in the rare book market, keen competition for desirable items, and rapidly rising prices."

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In the light of these remarks by the former Colby librarian, we here at Colby can take special pleasure in the thought that our own concern with rare books led rather than followed the parade. It goes back twenty-five years or more. Our own Robinson Memorial Treasure Room has been long enough in use to have already completed its first ten years of service. Opened for the first time in December 1947, the Treasure Room was expected to meet the rare book room needs of the Colby Library for many years to come. By December 1957, however, it was already apparent that the room could no longer hold the quantities of rare books that have rolled in like a flood—by gift, by bequest, and by purchase. As the present librarian of the college has recently pointed out on various occasions, one of the happiest results to be expected from the opening of the new humanities and social science building, when it is completed, is the release of space in the crowded Miller Library; and among the benefits to which we can look forward, few will take precedence over the long-awaited and often-deferred establishment of the Perry Room, the Pulsifer Room, the Yeats (or Healy) Room, and others in which our proliferating rare books can be properly housed.

This phenomenal growth in our special collections, as well as the severe limitation of available space in which to house them, has forced upon us a careful consideration of those factors or features which cause a volume to be regarded as a rare book. In general, of course, everyone knows that a rare book is one that is hard to find, and hard to get when you have found it. But this generalization needs amplification; and for the purpose of defining just what considerations have determined the assignment of a book to the Treasure Room, we have found it convenient to make use of the name of the institution. The letters in the name COLBY COLLEGE serve to identify our categories of segregation. That is, "C," "O," "L," "B," "Y," and "Coll." provide convenient headings.

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**C**OSTLY BOOKS make up a natural and easily recognized Treasure Room category. Anyone who has ever learned that Jerome Kern's copy of the 1859 edition of Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* brought eight thousand dollars at auction will not wonder that the Colby copy of this famous book, now approaching its centennial anniversary, is classed as a Treasure. The Kelmscott *Chaucer* with which William Morris delighted the book world in 1896 now brings twelve to fifteen hundred dollars whenever a copy turns up at a sale; and that is not often, for Morris printed only 450 copies. The Colby Library was therefore never tempted to put its copy of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* out with the dictionaries and the encyclopedias in the reference room. When a copy of Thomas Hardy's *Desperate Remedies* was sold in New York in the year after his death, it brought close to three thousand dollars. When, then, some friends of the Colby College Library made us a present of a copy of *Desperate Remedies*, it was not difficult to decide that it belonged in the Treasure Room. When one of our trustees came off victorious in an auction-room contest for a book which was once in the library of Robert Browning (and came out of the room five hundred dollars poorer as a result of his victory), it did not take long to decide, after the book had been given to Colby, that it belonged in the Treasure Room.

Any book which costs in the thousands, any book, even if (like Wordsworth's famous *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798) it cost us no more than one hundred dollars, any book the price of which lies beyond the replacement-power of the library budget, any COSTLY volume is classed as a rare book.

**O**LD BOOKS are similarly treated. But what *is* an old book? We have known Freshmen to boast of owning some "old books," only to discover that they were referring to a family Bible dated 1902, or to a school dictionary dated 1894.

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In general, we have been inclined to regard no book as really old unless it has passed its one-hundredth anniversary. But Gray's *Elegy* passed its two-hundredth in 1951; we do call that an old book, and we treat our copy of the 1751 *Elegy* accordingly. Our copy of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which will be four hundred years old in 1987, is similarly given Veterans' treatment—treatment merited by old age, quite apart from the fact that William Shakespeare made frequent use of this book.

Our copy of Philelphus (or, if you prefer, the *Letters* of Mario Filelfo) is now 465 years old, for (as its colophon declares) it was "printed at Venice with great diligence and care by John Cereto" and completed "on the 20th day of October, 1492." The issue of the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY for October 1943 gives (on page 69) some account of this venerable book.

Older still is our copy of a Bible commentary by Johannes Marchesinus. It was printed in Venice in 1476 and is now 482 years old. (See the issue of this quarterly for October 1943, page 70.)

Oldest of all our veterans is the Sung Dynasty example of Chinese printing described in detail in this quarterly in October 1945 (pages 185-187). It has been variously dated as "about 1150" and "about 1215," but in either case, it is very old. If one date is correct, the printing is well over seven hundred years old, and in the other case it is over eight hundred years old. No one will dispute the classification of such a venerable ancient as "rare." We have been assured by specialists in the field of Chinese literature that this is one of the oldest pieces of printing to be found anywhere in America.

LIMITED EDITIONS make up a very interesting group of rare books, for they have been rare from the first day of publication or production. Edwin Arlington Robinson's *The Torrent and The Night Before*, for example, was limited, back in 1896, to a little over three hundred cop-

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ies, less than seventy of which seem to have survived. Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát* as printed in Columbus, Ohio, in 1870—the first American printing of this famous poem—was limited to one hundred copies. If more than two of these have survived, we do not know where the third is to be found. Our copy appears to be the *only* one which has reached the safe harborage of an American library.

Other examples of Limited Editions are scattered all around our Treasure Room. For example, here is one of the first American edition of A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (New York: John Lane, 1897), limited to 150 copies; here is one of Edna St. Vincent Millay's *King's Henchman* (1927), the *de luxe* format limited to eight signed copies; and—*ne plus ultra!*—here is a copy of Henry James's *The Point of View* (1882), limited (can it be true?) to one copy, *this* copy, printed by James himself for his own use. When Limited Editions like these have come to hand, there has been no delay in deciding where they belong. They take up privileged positions among our rare books.

**B** stands for BRANDED BOOKS—if we can be permitted to borrow the word from the vocabulary of Western cattle-ranchers.

Our books have been branded in one or another of three ways: (1) The former owner has written his name in the book. Here, for example, is William Wordsworth's copy of *Cicero* (London, 1664) with his name autographed on the title page. Here is Thomas Hardy's copy of *Horace* (London, 1859) with his name written in a boyish hand on the title page. Here is Robinson's copy of Shakespeare with his name inked on the fore-edge. (2) The owner has pasted his bookplate into the volume. Here, for example, is Charles Dickens's copy of Thomas Bewick's *History of British Birds* with the flamboyant Dickens bookplate. Here is Oliver Wendell Holmes's copy of the *Poems* of William

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Cullen Bryant, with Holmes's chambered-nautilus bookplate. And here—to take a quite different example—is a copy of Richard Burton's *The Wars in England, Scotland, and Ireland* (Westminster: Stace, 1810) with the bookplate of Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex (1773-1843). He was the sixth son (and ninth child) of King George the Third and, like his father, a great book-collector. There were over fifty thousand volumes in the duke's library. This book was one of them. (3) The third kind of Branded Book is inscribed *by someone to someone*, both donor and recipient adding their fame to that of the author. Books like this are often called association items. Here, for example, is a copy of Browning's *Poems* inscribed by Laura E. Richards to Edwin Arlington Robinson. Here is a two-volume set of *Wessex Tales* inscribed by their author, Thomas Hardy, to Robert Browning on the latter's birthday. Here is a copy of the *Psalter* written by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, printed by William Morris at the Kelmscott Press in 1896, inscribed by Sir Sydney C. Cockerell "To Algernon C. Swinburne."

These, and other similarly "branded" association items, make up a sort of Sentimental Library—to use the designation made famous fifty years ago by Harry B. Smith. In the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY for May 1948 we devoted twenty-two pages to listing one hundred association items in this Sentimental Section of the Treasure Room of the Colby College Library. Looking back at those pages of a decade ago, written shortly after the Treasure Room was first opened, we are tempted to quote from them here, especially with regard to the *Dante* given to E. A. Robinson by his Harvard classmate, I. Mowry Saben, or with regard to the copy of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Hand and Soul*, printed by William Morris in 1895, bought by Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the actress, and inscribed by her to Thomas Hardy "in dear remembrance."

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But the temptation to quote must be resisted. These Branded Books make up, indeed, a most fascinating group of treasures.

**Y** may seem a curious *aide-memoire*. And it is. Let it stand for "Yours truly," or "Yours sincerely," or "Yours faithfully"—in short, for any autograph letter. And closely allied to the autograph letters in the library, particularly the unpublished ones, are the manuscripts. In other words, let "Y" stand as a sort of code-category for autographs, whether epistolary, literary, documentary, or historical.

Our largest collection of autograph letters consists of those written by E. A. Robinson. We also have fifteen of his manuscripts, some of them of book-length. In our Hardy Collection there are over one hundred of his autograph letters, and from the pen of Sarah Orne Jewett we have nearly a hundred letters.

Scattered around our Treasure Room (i.e., on view in one or another of its show-cases) are letters written by Charles Dickens, A. E. Housman, Henry James, Henry W. Longfellow, Kenneth Roberts, and many others. Among the manuscripts now on exhibition are works by Mary Ellen Chase, Robert P. T. Coffin, Kenneth Roberts, E. A. Robinson, and S. F. Smith (the autograph of "America"). This "Y" part of our treasures constitutes one of the most interesting features of the rare book room.

**C**OLL. (the first four letters of "College") may also stand for "Collections." In addition to the individual books, or letters, or manuscripts already described, we have a number of special Collections which make up a final category of literary or historical treasures.

The Book Arts Collection, founded by Dr. Edward F. Stevens and supplemented by the Capon Collection formed by Charles R. Capon, is one of these special collections. Allied to it is the Kelmscott Press Collection,

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which includes a copy of all the books produced by William Morris at the Kelmscott Press. We have also a complete file of the products of the Vale Press of London (see the issue of this quarterly for November 1951) and of the Cuala Press of Dublin (see our issue of August 1953). Our files of the Mosher Press (1891-1923) and of The Anthoensen Press, both of Portland, Maine, while not complete, are extensive and varied.

Among our Special Author Collections, the most distinguished is the Robinson Collection, which includes not only all the books written by the Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet but his personal library as well. Our Hardy Collection is even more extensive and has often been described as the largest and most inclusive Hardy Collection to be found anywhere. It is *not* rich in manuscripts, but in every other respect it is a distinguished collection. Our Henry James Collection, our Jewett Collection, our Jacob Abbott Collection, have often elicited praise. More recently we have acquired distinguished collections of A.E. (George Russell), J. M. Synge, and other Irish authors.

When all these treasures are put together, when the "C" and the "O" and the "L" and the "B" and the "Y" categories are supplemented by the "Coll." groups in our Treasure Room, the result is indeed impressive. No wonder scholars have come here from Boston and New York, from Texas and Toronto, even from California and London, solely with a view to seeing the rare books and manuscripts here assembled.

Dr. Downs's article, which we began by quoting, was devoted specifically to describing the rare book collections in American State University Libraries. That specification ruled out any consideration of small college libraries, and Dr. Downs therefore had nothing to say about the library which he directed back in 1929. By comparison with Illinois or Indiana, with Michigan or California, with Tex-

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as or Wisconsin, the Colby College Library is indeed a small affair, but the phenomenal growth of its rare books and manuscripts section well justifies those Colby men and women who point with pride to its Treasure Room.



### AN INCUNABULUM BY SAINT AMBROSE

By JOHN R. MCKENNA

THE Library's holdings of incunabula have recently been greatly enriched by a gift from Mr. Eugene Bernat, of Milton, Massachusetts, consisting of a copy of Saint Ambrose's *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke* as printed in Augsburg, Germany, by Anton Sorg in 1476. This book now takes its place as the oldest example of German printed book-making in the Colby College Library, for though we have had in our possession another incunabulum dated 1476—the *Mammotrectus* of Marchesinus—it was printed in Venice, and Mr. Bernat's gift is, apparently, Colby's first example of Sorg's printing.

Augsburg is best known in history for the famous "Augsburg Confession," which associates this German city with Martin Luther and the beginnings of Protestantism. Anton Sorg began his career in Augsburg in 1472 at the Monastery of Saints Ulrich and Afra. In 1475 he set up a printing press for himself and operated it for eighteen years, becoming one of the most prolific of German printers and publishers. The most famous product of Sorg's press was Ulrich von Reichenthal's *Account of the Council of Constance* (1483), which was illustrated with more than eleven hundred woodcuts.

Sorg's edition of St. Ambrose's *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke* is printed in type that closely resembled the local handwriting of the time. The book contains 158