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"Go Little Book": An Odyssey of Robinson's The Torrent and the Night Before

Richard Cary

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Cary: "Go Little Book": An Odyssey of Robinson's The Torrent and the Ni

Autograph Presentation to Carl Marr
THE TORRENT AND THE NIGHT BEFORE

By Carl W. Marr

Such strains that swept the sin-struck world
Have left a path of beauty wherein shines
The worthiness of friends, the past unfurled;
Each life in its immortal cloak repines
Until the blended whole makes song divine,
The strong and weak together, all as one,
So noble is the purpose of the line
That we are brothers till the course is done.
Why sing the praise of mighty kings apart,
When, sinking in the mire at the beck
Of human passion, the groanings of the heart
Bring forth a song to make the seeming wreck
Misfortune? What though the wanton hand of sin
Claims now another, are we not here to bind
The wounds; and strange, perchance, if in the din
The softness and coolness of the rising wind
Should quick allay an inward seething, fanned
By the very flame itself that spread the ground
With such a fury, 'tis such a helping hand
That makes the doctrine of the ages sound
And brings the song of gladness, song of love,
Alike to all who tread the mortal sphere,
And not for gain, but Truth, as from above,
Come soft the accents sweet to those that hear.

[1921]
In the winter of 1895 Edwin Arlington Robinson's life began to take on definite lineaments of its future mold. After graduation from Gardiner High School in 1888 he had stayed on for an additional year of study, followed by two seasons of maturescence with the town's bantam intellectuals before repairing to Harvard for two dilating academic years. Back at Gardiner, he labored unfruitfully on a set of prose sketches and a translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, never completed. At age 26 he had published just twelve poems: two in a hometown paper, five in a Harvard journal, the others in minor New York periodicals. The first hint of emergence from this inchoate state came in a letter to Harry De Forest Smith on December 14, 1895: "The poetry-book is getting on and will be pretty well shaken out by the first of February—sent off, I hope."\(^1\)

He was well on his way to producing a manuscript of some hundred pages, and irrevocably committing himself to the life of the poet.

The next few months were an ordeal by expectation. Although Robinson prepared himself for disappointment ("It isn't worth while"), he hoped of course for acceptance, waiting on several publishers' decisions in a mood of "optimistic desperation."\(^2\) His venture "proved a fizzle," and by June he decided to print the book "on my own hook." Through the intermediation of an uncle, Edward Proby Fox, who was employed at the Riverside Press of Houghton Mifflin, the company

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2 Ibid., 244.
agreed to turn it out before the holidays. On December 7, 1896, Robinson wrote Smith that he had "received the whole thing (312 copies) the other morning, but did not take enough interest in them to open the package until evening. In fact, I feel as if I should like to kick them from here to Augusta and never see them again."\(^3\) He paid $52 for the lot, not quite seventeen cents for each 44-page, blue paperbound duodecimo pamphlet, entitled *The Torrent and The Night Before.* On page 3 he announced insouciantly: "This book is dedicated to any man, woman, or critic who will cut the edges. I have done the top."

When Robinson recovered from his initial auctorial revulsion, he got down to the chore of disseminating the "confounded little" books. Convinced that no one would buy them, he proceeded to give thirty or forty to Gardiner friends and Cambridge acquaintances. The remainder he mailed "unsolicited and unannounced into the unknown,"\(^4\) to critics and publications that might be productive of a review, and to men of literary reputation, such as Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Bliss Carman, Edward Eggleston, Richard Watson Gilder, Edmund Gosse, Thomas Hardy, S. Weir Mitchell, Clinton Scollard, Edmund Clarence Stedman, and Algernon Swinburne. On December 22 he informed Smith with a show of relief, "The books are all gone now."\(^5\)

Gone, perhaps, but not entirely done with. The "devilish blue" booklets were "received generally with a respect and an enthusiasm that was gratifying to me."\(^6\) Commendatory notices sprouted in newspapers and magazines from Maine to Oregon, New Orleans to Denver; among the eminences Gosse, Eggleston, and Scollard favored him with personal endorsements; in Academe his stock soared.\(^7\) The result of this acclaim was a demand for copies by friends and strangers. Robinson obliged when he could. More than once he crossed out the original inscription on the title page of an unclaimed, returned copy, inscribed it afresh, and sent it out again. To one of these

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\(^3\) *Ibid.*, 265.  
\(^5\) Sutcliffe, 266.  
\(^6\) *The Colophon*, op. cit.  
\(^7\) Sutcliffe, 267-278.
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ricochet recipients—Edith Brower, a bluestocking from Wilkes-Barre—Robinson said: “At first I was rather sorry for the poems and myself; but since they have met the approbation of almost everyone who has read them (publishers excepted) I have concluded to let them go their own way and to fuss no more about them. It’s another case of ‘Go, little book, etc.’ How far it will go I have no means of knowing.” This essay records the peregrinations of one such copy and Robinson’s relations with the people involved in its movements. Incrementally, Robinson’s three letters, herein published for the first time, reveal his reactions to the fledgling publication a quarter-century later and his mordant views on the profession of journalism.

John Wilson Marr, born twelve months before “Pinny” Robinson, lived off the Common in Gardiner, a short distance from the Robinsons. As boys, in company with the Barstows, the Longfellows, the Swantons, Willis Atwood, John “Peg-Leg” Talbot, and others, they hunted grey squirrels, picked early mayflowers and blueberries, took canoe trips on the Cobbosseecontee Stream, camped in the woods, smoked sweet fern and dried corn silk, skated, played ice hockey, and fished for smelt through the ice. Sometimes the trio of Pinny, Peg-Leg, and Johnny Marr would retreat to their cabin in the woods upstream, which they called Purgatory, to enjoy a special sense of solitude and adventure. Marr shared with Robinson a passion for music which they developed through their school-days, Marr playing the piccolo and bass viol, Robinson the violin and piano (black keys only).

After completing high school Marr turned to the town’s main commercial operation, the Hollingsworth & Whitney Paper Mill, for a livelihood. Through diligence on the job and study at night, by collaborating in the invention of a caliper rule for scaling logs, Marr made his way upward in the organization.

8 Letter, January 26, 1897, in Colby College Library. Robinson’s allusion is to Robert Southey’s “I. Envoi”: “Go, little Book; from this my solitude / I cast thee on the waters;—go thy ways! / And if, as I believe, thy vein be good, / The World will find thee after many days.”

9 James S. Barstow, My Tilbury Town (New York, 1939), 10.

10 From an unpublished typescript memoir by Carl Wellington Marr, entitled “Doctor of Billiards.” Other quotations attributed to him are from his letters to me, or from copies supplied by him of his letters to Robinson.
In 1896 he was married, a father, and solidly established in community affairs. Shortly after concluding the major phase of posting *The Torrent*, Robinson walked to Marr's home on the hill near the plant and gave him a copy inscribed in typical microscript on the center of the title page: "John W. Marr/ from his friend/E. A. Robinson/Jan. 1897." Marr, a reader and lover of books, instantly realized the worth of this gift and assigned it a favored place among his possessions. When not being read, it was protectively wrapped in layers of the strong manila paper that was the chief product of the mill.

When Hollingsworth & Whitney erected a new branch in Winslow on the Kennebec River, Marr was transferred there as paymaster and office manager. He soon built a home in Waterville, across the river, where he resided until his death in 1907. Years later Robinson recalled his visits there with the Marrs and his romps with the children Carl and Helen, whose head he inadvertently bumped against the ceiling in a playful moment. "From my earliest memory," writes Carl, "the little blue book was on the hall table and it became a part of my life, so that when I left high school I felt that I was its protector for life and it had to go with me wherever I went." He was to foster this mystic resolve, up to a point.

In the fall of 1913 Carl Marr packed *The Torrent* in his trunk and entrained for the University of Maine at Orono. For reasons of health he departed the campus at the end of one semester and headed for California. After some expectable vicissitudes he became a cub reporter for the Santa Ana *Blade*, then society editor. The virus of poesy which had stirred within him before—including a jape in the high school paper—now attacked in full seriousness. In this Western interlude he published several poems on the front page, one of which he was particularly proud, "The Walnut Tree," an apostrophic nature lyric recollective of Keats and Wordsworth.

Returning to the East, Marr took a course in a Boston business college "and learned enough to get a civil service job in Washington, D. C. as the First World War broke out." At war's end he took employment at the Hollingsworth & Whitney
mill in Winslow. It was during this period that he espied in the Gardiner Journal\textsuperscript{12} the following notice:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|}
\hline
\textbf{WANTED} \\
--- A COPY OF --- \\
"The Torrent and The Night Before" \\
A book of poems, bound in paper, \textit{by Edwin Arlington Robinson.} \\
Price, $25.00 \\
\textbf{ANSWER TO} \\
7 East 42nd St. \textit{Theatre Arts Magazine} \\
New York City \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

The next day, February 25, 1921, Marr wrote to the "Gentlemen" he presumed had sponsored the advertisement. Despite the "great deal of sentiment in this book to me and my family," he said, "I feel that you must have some good use to put it to,"\textsuperscript{13} so he offered it. On February 28 it occurred to him that the poet himself might be behind this search for the book. Marr composed a four-page letter, assuring Robinson that he "would be glad to let you have it or borrow it, or assist you in any way." He recited the reasons that had prompted him to "adopt" it in the first place, and described his stewardship of the volume over the past eight years. He enlarged upon his ambitions to become a writer, and enclosed "The Walnut Tree" and a new poem on \textit{The Torrent and The Night Before} written after recently mulling over its contents again (see page facing 511). However, not knowing Robinson's address, he did not mail this message at this time.

To his surprise, on March 2 he received "a nice letter with a check from Mrs. Edith J. R. Isaacs." He immediately re-

\textsuperscript{12} February 24, 1921, p. [4]; repeated March 3, p. [4].
\textsuperscript{13} The letters of Carl Marr to Mrs. Edith J. R. Isaacs and the March 13, 1921 letter by Robinson are in the Manuscripts Division of the New York Public Library, and are quoted by permission.
turned the check, explaining that "It is my intention to write Mr. Robinson another letter and offer him the book as a gift from friends who cherish the memories of days gone by and would like to see him in possession of it, if he desires it. I would like to send the book to him and let him do what he pleases with it. If he chooses to keep it, and I am sure you would like to see him have a copy of it, I will make a trip to Gardiner and see if I cannot get a copy for you." He added graciously, "It may be that Mr. Robinson will send the book right along to you and, if he does, I shall be pleased to know that it is in the hands of friends at whose home he visits and where it will be available. May I ask you to consent to this, as I am doing it for our mutual benefit in serving Mr. Robinson as best I can."

On the same day Marr wrote, in part, to Robinson: "I understand that you have no copy of this book, or I would have written to you before, and I take this opportunity of offering it to you as a gift, with the best wishes and kindest regards of my mother, Mrs. R. H. Gay, my sister, Miss Helen Marr, and myself... I sincerely hope you understand the spirit in which I am letting The Torrent and The Night Before go out of my possession, as it is the desire of a friend to be of service to another and I will feel that I still have a part interest in it, at least in the associations it represents." He enclosed his February 28 letter and the poems, and dispatched them "to simply New York," for he had not yet ascertained Robinson's address.

On March 10 Mrs. Isaacs sent him her approval and Robinson's street address. Marr forthwith posted the book to Robinson, "telling him, that if for any reason he does not feel like accepting it, I would appreciate it if he would send it to you not only as a gift from himself but from me." Three days later, Robinson responded.

810 Washington Avenue
Brooklyn
March 13, 1921

Dear Mr. Marr:

I hardly know how to answer your very kind letter, for the simple reason that I hardly know how to accept the book which you are good enough to send, in spite of the fact that I have wanted a copy for a long time. But in view of all the trouble that you have taken in the matter, I have decided to keep it, though I do so with some reluctance. I fear this all sounds as if I set an unwarranted value on it, but you
will, I am sure, understand that I do nothing of the sort. The sight of it brings back many memories of your father and mother as I used to see them when I made my occasional trips to Waterville for this purpose, also of yourself and your sister as you will hardly remember yourselves. Naturally it gives me great pleasure to know that the book has been kept and cared for, when so many copies of it must have been destroyed or lost.14 Next October the Macmillans are to bring out a collected edition of all my things in one volume, and when it appears I shall take great pleasure in sending you a copy.

Please give my kindest regards to your mother and to your sister, and please remember that I shall be very glad to see you whenever you are in these parts. In the meantime I am, with many thanks and with all good wishes

Yours very sincerely,
E. A. Robinson

I might add that while Mrs. Isaacs inserted the advertisement more or less at my suggestion, I was not responsible for her enthusiasm and had no ulterior motive. By the merest chance I have just been able to get her a copy by way of England.

E. A. R.

Edith Isaacs was one of the few females Robinson called by first name. Depicted as “a dark, opulent woman of penetrating intelligence and quick sympathies,”15 she was currently an editor of *Theatre Arts Magazine* and a hopeful playwright. Mrs. Isaacs’ interior connections with the world of the theater attracted Robinson, for he—like Henry James and Flaubert—had squandered years writing unsuccessfully for the stage. He had met her one summer at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where she and her husband Lewis Montefiore Isaacs were in residence. Isaacs, who held a bachelor degree in law and a master of arts in music, soon fulfilled Robinson’s needs in both respects: he became his legal adviser, investment counselor, and buffer against quacks; he set “John Evereldown” and “The Dark Hills” to music, played Gilbert and

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14 “I have no means of knowing how many copies of *The Torrent* are now in existence. Considering the few that have come up for sale, perhaps it may be safe to assume that of the original three hundred, something like half that number may have been lost or destroyed,” said Robinson in The *Colophon* article. In “A Book and Its Author,” *Yankee*, II (June 1936), Laura E. Richards somewhat controverts his statement to Smith that the books were “all gone” within a fortnight of receipt. On page 28 she remarks: “his little nieces found that they made enchanting dollhouses—blue walls—blue roofs. They served this purpose for a time, and then, ‘as rare things will, they vanished.’” These may have been a number that he reserved for the immediate family.

Sullivan repeatedly, joined him at the phonograph for hours of Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, and Verdi, and frequently took him to the Metropolitan Opera House. The Isaacs home became a regular port of call for Robinson, where he left his excess baggage, where he could always depend upon an affectionate welcome. When away from New York he sent back faithful progress reports. In cooperation with eleven others, Isaacs arranged an annual stipend for Robinson from 1916 until his royalties sufficed to keep him. Robinson gratefully dedicated Lancelot (1920) "To Lewis M. Isaacs."

For several years they met habitually at the Hotel Commodore on 42nd Street in Manhattan. While Robinson had breakfast and Isaacs lunch, they talked of music and poetry, the latest mystery melodramas and book collecting. Shortly after high school Robinson cultivated the hobby of having his imported French paperbacks redone in varicolored crushed morocco—"You can get an elegant binding for $1.25 or so."

The leanness of his poet's purse, however, forced him to abandon even this small extravagance. Isaacs contracted his enthusiasm, began by collecting first editions of Trollope, then shifted to Robinson's own books and related memorabilia.

Isaacs had long provided him the convenience of a typist to prepare his poems for publication, and now this proved a cornucopia. More often than not, after a manuscript was typed, Robinson would insist that Isaacs keep the original "and maybe buy a hat with it sometime." Isaacs also fell heir to corrected typescripts, galley proofs, and printer's dummies, all of which Robinson shrugged off as so much "lumber," but which form a vital sector of the impressive collection now reposing in the New York Public Library. The copy of The Torrent cited by Robinson in his postscript is one of the most valuable association items in this accumulation. The initial inscription on the title page reads: "A. C. Swinburne,/with compliments of E. A. Robinson./12 December, 1896." Below and to the
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right of it Robinson added: “To L. M. Isaacs/from E. A. Rob­
inson/May, 1921.” And on the dedicatory leaf: “This copy
was sent to Swinburne in/1896 and was returned to this coun­
try/in 1921, when it was given to the/author by Arthur Spin­
garn./E. A. R./May 22, 1921.” It would be intriguing to trace
the intermediate meanderings of this volume, but that is lateral
to the history of the John Marr copy.20

By one of those miracles occasionally perpetrated by the
U. S. postal system, the shot-in-the-dark envelope mailed by
Carl Marr to Robinson in “simply New York” reached him.
Marr had specified his desire to come to the city, secure work
as a stenographer, and attend a summer course at the School
of Journalism in Columbia University to flush out whatever
talents he might have as a writer. Always loath to play God
in other people’s lives, Robinson ruminated these proposals
(probably recalling the days, more than two decades ago, when
he too had contemplated leaving Maine to test his skills on the
big town), then wrote this letter which moves from his low
opinion of any man’s chance in a murky game to a statement on
his fundamental philosophy of the arts.

810 Washington Avenue
March 25, 1921

Dear Mr. Marr:

I have delayed my reply to your letter for the reason that I am always
a bit doubtful as to wisdom in advising anyone to try to make a living
in New York by writing. The mere fact that I have never succeeded
myself in doing it is not much to the point, for there would be no money
anywhere in the sort of thing that I do. But I have seen, and still see,
so many who have failed and so few who have succeeded, that I have
come to wonder if the whole thing is not a matter of chance. In jour­
nalism there appears to be an intangible thing—not a very lofty or com­
mendable one, God knows—that may be called the New York “touch”;
and if one doesn’t have it, or soon acquire it, his chances here are
pretty poor. It has nothing to do with literature, but it has everything
do to with making a living with one’s pen—or rather with one’s type­
writer—in this remorseless town. As for schools of journalism, I can
only say that I know nothing whatever about them. Probably the sum­
mer course you mention would benefit you in many ways, and the form­
ing of new acquaintances here might lead to something valuable. Gener­

20 A summary of 112 identified copies of The Torrent is published in Colby
Library Quarterly, February 1947, with appendages in August 1947, February
1948, May 1948, August 1948, February 1949, May 1949, February 1954,
August 1955, and February 1956.

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ally speaking, I am slow to recommend any form of literature to any human being who is strong enough to resist it, though if you are sure that it is the one thing for you to do, of course no words of mine will, or should, have the slightest effect upon you; and you will not even be offended when I say that an unmanageable literary urge usually manifests itself in some tangible form before the age of twenty-six. On the other hand it doesn’t always do so; and there you are.

If you care to infer from the foregoing that I am inclined to take a somewhat fatalistic view of all things appertaining to the arts, you will not be far out of the way. Something over a quarter of a century of observation has led me to believe that a man has it in him or that he hasn’t it, and that success that depends upon any sort of special talent is in the hands of the same powers that control the weather. On the whole, however, I should say that you might be wise in gambling away one summer at Columbia—if you do so without depending upon stenography. I don’t say that you could not get employment of that nature, but I cannot advise you even to think of counting on it. But you are still young, and presumably healthy, and you will therefore do pretty much as you like. I am sorry to say that my acquaintance with newspaper men is very slight, but of course I shall be glad to be of any possible service to you. I expect to leave New York about the middle of May, and will probably return about the first of October, which is, I fear, rather unfortunate for my chance of seeing you this year, though I hope you understand clearly that I shall be very glad to see [you] whenever it may be possible for me to do so.

I suppose the general drift of this letter is to let you know that I consider journalism, on the whole, a dog’s life, and literature an infernally precarious one, with multitudinous blanks and few prizes, mostly small. All the same, there is nothing in all this to deter you if you are sure that you are doomed to write. If you are not sure, and absolutely sure, I hope for the sake of your soul and body, that you may turn to something less grinding and more remunerative.

If you happen to get hold of another book you may keep it yourself, or I will pay you, as agent for one who is looking for it, twenty-five dollars.

With many thanks and with all good wishes,

Yours very sincerely,

E. A. Robinson

Robinson was not unqualified to speak on the quirks of journalism and its practitioners. With intuitive aversion he had declined the position of literary editor on the Kansas City Star in February 1899 at the then capital salary of $2000, knowing well “that slap-dash literary criticism was not for him or his ‘damfool impossible ambitions.’ ”

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21 This letter, the one which follows, and Robinson’s signed photograph are now in Colby College Library, the gift of Carl W. Marr.
22 Hagedorn, 153.
he came to know closely—histrionic Joseph Lewis French and over-exuberant Carty Ranck—did nothing to convince him of the stability of the species. And for three months in the autumn of 1900 he struggled to gain a place for himself in the metropolitan press, succeeding to the extent of one published editorial which earned him $4.25. Ruefully he confessed: “They praise me for never doing anything but write poetry. I would always have taken a job if I had known how to get one and keep it.”

In the summer of 1921 Carl Marr took the Portland boat to New York, thereafter settling into a clerkship in the local office of Hollingsworth & Whitney instead of attending the Columbia School of Journalism. Upon his return from MacDowell Colony Robinson invited Marr to come to his flat in Brooklyn, where he was living with his Gardiner friend, Seth Ellis Pope. Marr boarded the subway in Manhattan and after three devious changes of route emerged into the twilight of Washington Avenue. At number 810 he climbed “a flight of stairs that seemed to reflect the presence of statues and heirlooms. Anyway, it was a venerable house.” This was Marr’s euphemism for the air of dilapidating grandeur that overlay the aged edifice. Robinson offered him his best chair and took the “somewhat rickety rocker” himself.

Conversation lagged at first. Robinson held out “a dish of rosy apples,” and Marr conjectured that “No doubt he was thinking of the wonderful Gravensteins that grew on his place back home in Gardiner.” They briefly considered going out.

25 It would seem that Pope was, in today’s vernacular, a born loser, and as such attracted Robinson’s natural sympathy for the type. A teacher in Gardiner, he was censured for inability to control unruly boys, but Robinson stoutly protested to Laura Richards that the real reason lay in his poverty and shabby appearance. Unemployed and deserted by his wife, Pope drifted to New York, obtained a post as librarian, and set up his “sorry travesty” of an apartment on the third floor of the Brooklyn address. Robinson moved in with this gentle, generous, ineffectual spirit, and in March 1921 dedicated Avon’s Harvest to him.
26 Marr’s insight is faultless in this respect. In November 1899 Robinson revealed to Daniel Gregory Mason that he could not “put down the old bucolic appetite” for apples, and that they induced “nostalgic disturbances” within him. “As I analyse my feelings while eating them, I have to confess that my edification is more than half-sentiment... I remember one rainy afternoon, the deuce knows how long ago, when I went down to the orchard with a tin pail and an umbrella and got Gravensteins... After I had eaten about ten I began to blow scales on the clarinet.” Torrence, 26.
to play a game of pool or billiards (a favorite diversion for both), but it was a cold night and they decided to stay in. Talk turned to Robinson’s relatives in Waterville, to the good days at Capitol Island in Boothbay Harbor, and to mutual friends in Gardiner. The atmosphere warmed perceptibly as Robinson became more easy in the company of his old comrade’s son. “Although much wasn’t said, his reserve and piercing eyes said a great deal.” Marr did not stay long, for it was fairly late and there was that complicated subway system to vie against. “True to his promise . . . he sent me off with the precious book [Collected Poems, 1921] and the only regret I have now is that I didn’t offer to pay for it. He might have been out of funds.”

Within two years Marr’s passion for New York was depleted and he determined on California as a permanent abode. In the interim he had assiduously collected first editions and other Robinsoniana, at the outset to accommodate Mrs. Issacs’ entreaty for another copy of The Torrent (he promised before leaving Gardiner to “paw over every attic in town”), later to satisfy his own hankering. On the eve of departure he sought out the poet again. After the sudden death of Pope in 1922, Robinson had gone to live with the sculptor James Earle Fraser and his wife, in a top-floor room of their studio on West 8th Street and Macdougal Alley. To this place Marr lugged his satchel with “a dozen or more books” in hopes of having them autographed on the morning he was to leave for the West.

“The house I entered looked like a studio downstairs but on climbing the stairway I came to quite a large room containing a couch or bed, a pigeonhole desk, and a chair or two, where E. A. R. was ensconced. It was fairly early in the morning and he seemed to be in a state of confusion, for he was cooking an egg which was apparently bad or not to his liking. However, my coming made him forget about breakfast. He showed me some things he was doing, pulling out manuscripts from

27 Carl Van Doren describes Robinson during this period: “The most notable things about his face were his eyes, which hunted about the room as if looking for words, but which were a little obscured by his glasses and his sensitive mouth. It was a guarded mouth, with lips that puckered continually . . . They seemed to keep out as much as they kept in ... He did not appear to mind if silence fell upon the conversation, for he did not need to talk as some more nervous persons did . . . I always thought of him as a great poet who happened to occupy a house of flesh and blood in which he lived secretly. For the neighbors, talking to them he had only simple prose.” Op. cit., 156.
the pigeonholes where he said they might lie for a year or two before being published, if ever.” Robinson signed Marr’s stock of first editions, “throwing in one or two of his own for good measure,” and gave him a copy of “The Peterborough Idea,” and an autographed, framed photograph of himself “for which I paid him three dollars.” Knowing that they would probably never meet again, Marr made his farewells with an omega note of sadness. He recollects vividly “having the buttons on my overcoat torn off in the subway rush, my suitcase trampled on, and my glasses broken on my way to the boat.”

On the steamer Comus, bound for the west coast by the Sunset Route, Marr had ample leisure to relive his visits with Robinson and to reread his father’s copy of The Torrent, for indeed it was making its second trip to California. After Robinson had garnered Swinburne’s copy for Lewis Isaacs, he decided to part with the one Carl Marr had given him. On the title page, above and to the right of the original inscription to John W. Marr, Robinson added “Louis V. Ledoux/from E. A. R./1921,” and presented it to this esteemed friend.

Louis Vernon Ledoux was an authority on Japanese art, a superior tennis player, a poet and lyrical dramatist. Through his friendship with Ridgely Torrence, he came to consort with the bohemian coterie in the Hotel Judson on Washington Square, where Robinson was living in 1906. At the Ledoux home in Cornwall-on-the-Hudson, which was always open to him, Robinson derived the feeling of family that was so badly missing in the succession of dreary one-room flats he had inhabited since forsaking Maine at the turn of the century. Like Mrs. Isaacs, Mrs. Jean Ledoux was a woman of exceptional talents and culture who soon exerted a special influence over him. She sang the Scotch ballads he doted on and read Dickens to him. She accompanied him to plays and to the opera, and she sent him a basket of apples on every birthday. After each summer at MacDowell Colony Robinson would ask Ledoux to read his work aloud from sight in order “to find out how much of what he had written would have instant comprehension.”

to him. To Ledoux's daughter Renée, Robinson signed his greetings “Uncle E. A.”

Ledoux wrote essays, reviews, defensive letters, and celebratory pieces about Robinson principally in the New York Times Book Review and the Saturday Review of Literature. He dedicated his The Story of Eleusis (New York, 1916) “To E. A. R. and R. T.” When Scribner's refused Robinson's two plays, Ledoux called upon his friend George P. Brett, president of Macmillan, who published them and, thereafter, every book except Lancelot that Robinson wrote. A man of wealth, Ledoux often eased the poet through financial shoals, and he acted with Isaacs to establish the fund that tided Robinson over his crucial creative years. In triunity, they produced “Slumber Song,” a lullaby for which Robinson composed the melody, Ledoux the words, and Isaacs the piano accompaniment. The two were in daily attendance during Robinson's terminal illness, rendering vital service to his affairs and to his spirits. When Robinson died, they were named honorary pallbearers. And in final accreditation Robinson designated “my friends, Louis V. Ledoux and Lewis M. Isaacs, Executors of this my Will, and I expressly direct that they shall not be required to give any bond for the performance of their duties as such Executors.”

When Carl Marr learned that Robinson had dispensed his father's copy of The Torrent to Louis Ledoux, he began to devise means of retrieving it. “Being a Yankee trader by nature, I got the idea I might be able to get it back by exchanging it for another good copy.” His researches in Gardiner garrets having met with uncommon luck, he had on hand at this moment a Torrent which Robinson had autographed and dated “4 December, 1896,” the earliest inscription known. This he proffered to Ledoux, who acceded to the swap without demurral. In time Marr acquired two others: 1) the presentation copy to J. M. Larrabee, which he sold to the Huntington Library with


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a number of his other autographed volumes; 2) a copy namelessly launched "With the compliments of E. A. Robinson," which he disposed to the New York dealer James F. Drake.

Now in California—and mindful of Robinson's admonition to seek a less grinding and more remunerative occupation than literature—Marr set himself up in the business of paint manufacture and distribution, from which he retired seven years ago. Early in 1924 he registered his father's copy at Zeitlin & Ver Brugge, prominent Los Angeles rare book dealers. By them it was sold to a Mr. Goetz, and from his wife it passed to the bookseller H. Bertram Smith of Long Beach and Cincinnati. Its long trek eastward continued to Philadelphia where, in the rare book collection of the University of Pennsylvania Library, the odyssey of John Marr's copy of The Torrent and The Night Before culminated.

A sequel which elicited another letter from Robinson to Marr is worthy of record here for its disclosure of the poet's ambivalent attitude toward his modest first—now historic—book: ostensible disinterest grating against indubitable concern for its survival. Marr wrote Robinson an account of his sale to the Huntington Library. This was Robinson's rejoinder.

28 West 8th Street
February 20, 1924

Dear Marr:

Perhaps you did well enough to sell the book for $200, though two copies have been sold here lately for $260 and $275. Of course I want you to do the best you can for yourself, having naturally no personal interest in the matter save that of a little curiosity. It has been told to me that it would be well for you to have a morocco case made for the other copy, without covers, and then correspond with the Brick Row Book Shop, 19 East 47th Street. I have no means of telling you how much it will bring.

I hope that things will soon be going better with you, and feel sure that they will. I'll also send my belated thanks for your Christmas card, which was pleasant to receive.

Yours always sincerely,
E. A. Robinson

31 Edmond Byrne Hackett (1879-1953) maintained several branches of the Brick Row Bookshop in New York and at Yale and Princeton universities, specializing in limited, signed editions of fine quality. Basically a distributor, he also published volumes of this genre, among them three of Robinson's: Collected Poems, 2 vols. (1921) in 200 copies; The Torrent and The Night Before (1928) in 110 copies; and Modred, A Fragment (1929) in 250 copies.
From the beginning Robinson was not entirely unaware of *The Torrent’s* potential as a high-selling prodigy. Almost painfully self-deprecative, he nevertheless nourished within himself—even through the grimmest years—a stubborn belief in his credentials as a genuine poet. As he gave Will Gay a copy, he remarked prophetically, “Some day that’s going to be worth something.” And when he talked to Carl Marr about prices, “He said it would be ten or twenty years after he was dead to tell what *The Torrent* was worth.” John T. Winterich once appraised it as “easily the most costly unit of American verse of its generation”—heady ranking for what Robinson with customary humility called “an obscure pamphlet.” But time has vindicated both Winterich’s judgment and Robinson’s instinct.

As he testified in his letter of 1924, the book had become a recognized rarity in his own lifetime, commanding up to $275 per copy. Sales in the thirties stayed consistently in that range, except the volume he had inscribed and sent to Thomas Hardy. This brought $550 at an auction in New York, more than ten times the original cost of the whole edition. The next decade saw a sag in values, the highest recorded sale at $140, and this with two presentation signatures. In the past fifteen years—leaving out copies lacking the blue wrappers—prices have upturned to the earliest levels and have surged beyond them. The peak was reached in 1962 when a copy inscribed in 1896 and again in 1933, with the omitted line at the top of page 7 written in by the poet and signed thereon, together with a copy of Byrne Hackett’s 1928 edition, were sold for $625. Should another of comparable caliber come into the market in these inflated days, it will unquestionably fetch closer to $1000.

Robinson would have watched this spiral with mingled satisfaction, repugnance, and suppressed amusement. It would have reminded him of some acrid lines in his “Cassandra” and “The

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32 Hagedorn, 108.
34 The figures quoted in this paragraph are extracted from the annual volumes of *American Book-Prices Current* (New York: R. R. Bowker Co.). It must be kept in mind that they represent sales at public auctions, and that the dealers who ordinarily purchase most of the materials affix a substantial markup for private resales.
35 Line 5 of stanza 2 in “Ballade of a Ship” does not appear in the 1896 edition of *The Torrent*. Robinson wrote the missing line—“But they danced and they drank and their souls grew gay”—on some of the copies. He included the poem in *The Children of the Night* (1897) but in none of the subsequent *Collected Poems*. 

https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol7/iss12/3
Sheaves.” The following passage, evoking a Dantean fantasy of retribution, is probably the one he would elect as his last pronouncement on the subject: “I am naturally a well-wishing person, and not in the least vindictive; yet sometimes I have wished that all surviving editors and publishers who pointed a cold nose at those early poems might find themselves afflicted with a collector’s frenzy for the possession of a copy of that first book of mine published in 1896. My constructive imagination would be mean enough to enjoy the sight of them signing cheques for it.”

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E. A. ROBINSON AND THE GARDEN OF EDEN

By Richard Crowder

Robinson was basically a romantic poet, though with important reservations. One of his pervading themes is mutability, colored by intuitional idealism. In communicating this concept, he used the Eden myth, whether directly from the Bible or through Milton. Edwin S. Fussell’s chapter on the Bible permits him space to point out only four examples of Edenic symbolism, and his study of Paradise Lost focuses on style rather than on matter. Nicholas Ayo’s recent dissertation on Robinson and the Bible (Duke, 1965) lists thirteen passages echoing the pertinent verses from Genesis. Much can be done to show this myth at work. I only suggest a program: (1) Miltonic influence; (2) use of characters, symbols, and situations of the Bible story; and (3) the poet’s additions and final position.

(1) First, Milton’s version. In 1931 Robinson wrote to Mrs. Laura E. Richards that he had not read Paradise Lost in its entirety since high-school days, but that he was still fond of certain lines, particularly “where Adam tells Mrs. Adam what he thinks of her and of women in general.” Then he added at once: “Not that I agree with him entirely, for some women are rather nice.”

36 The Colophon, op. cit.