

Southern California's Collection Builders

By Jacob Zeitlin

[The following article is based on a presentation made at last year's Preconference of the A.C.R.L. Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, by Jake Zeitlin, the doyen of rare book dealers in this country. — JLC]

In approaching the discussion of collecting, I would like to focus on the "Why," the "Who" and the "What" of the subject.

Why people collect has always been a sensitive question. One of the most penetrating inquiries is that of Norman D. Weiner in the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* of 1966. Some of what he has to say is too shocking for public utterance, but I will quote a few less sensational lines. He says,

Bibliomania may be defined as a state of mind in which an individual has an excessive regard for books and an inordinate desire to collect them . . . often he is not a scholarly person and is known not to read the books he buys. The book functions as a talisman for its owner, but it is a temporary and fleeting pleasure. The boasting, the search for new conquests and the delight in recounting the tales of acquisition, bring to mind the activities of the hypersexual male hysteric. Casanova, after his many amatory adventures, settled down as a librarian in the castle of Count Waldenstein at Dux.

Weiner goes on to emphasize the role of book collecting in briefly allaying anxiety. I shall refrain from quoting him on fetishism and the varieties of gratification which book collecting provides, lest I arouse too many latent appetites.

HUNTINGTON AND CLARK

Who collects books? In Southern California, we have had Henry E. Huntington and William Andrews Clark, who founded libraries to house their collections. These were both men of great wealth. There were several great women collectors, including Mrs. Estelle Doheny and Mrs. Esther Getz. (How do these ladies relate to the motives Dr. Weiner imputes to Casanova?)

Among our great specialist collectors, I must name Robert B. Honeyman and Dr. Elmer Belt, and many other dedicated book

lovers who formed lesser but notable collections. I think of A. G. Beaman, Arthur Ellis, William W. Clary, Homer Crotty, John Perkins, Joseph Halle Schaffner, Henry R. Wagner and the lady, whose name eludes me, who specialized in D. H. Lawrence, Lafcadio Hearn, pornography and elephants.

Robert Schad and James Thorpe have both written extensive essays on Henry E. Huntington. So far as I know, neither of these has dwelt on the many shelves of finely-bound deluxe editions of standard authors which adorn the drawing room of what used to be Mr. Huntington's residence. I venture to say that not one volume had ever been opened, but I am sure that Mr. Huntington derived much pleasure from caressing the elegant morocco and calf bindings and the silk and satin doublures which adorned them. Neither the glib salesmen who sold them, nor the interior decorators who ordained them, had any intimation that these were the vanguard of the great library in San Marino.

I have learned never to put down anybody's collection of books. Many years ago, I used to disparage the poor taste of beginners, but I have learned to encourage them, no matter how misguided. We all have to start somewhere.

William Andrews Clark, Jr., inherited a substantial share of the great copper fortune of Senator Clark. He was an eccentric of whose antics many tales are told. Paul Jordan Smith told me of his visit many years ago; he asked, "Mr. Clark, why did you decide to collect Dryden?" Clark answered, "Because he was so neglected," as he wiped a bibulous tear from his eye. He formed a great library of 17th-century English literature, to which he added a collection of Oscar Wilde acquired in one fell swoop when he purchased the entire catalogue of Wildeiana issued by Dulau and Company. And to that Richard Archer, Larry Powell and Bob Vosper have appended outstanding collections of Eric Gill and 17th-century English science and music.

Estelle Doheny was inspired to collect by the memorable Frank Hogan. She was aided by the legendary Alice Millard and by

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Maxwell Hunley. She acquired one volume of the Gutenberg Bible from Maggs Brothers, the only one besides the Huntington copy on the West Coast. Her taste also ran to fore-edge paintings and glass paperweights in overabundance.

She was nearly blind when she commenced to collect and became totally so before her end, but there are priceless manuscripts and books in the library which was later housed in a seminary at Camarillo.

Book collecting was a lifetime addiction of Dr. Elmer Belt. He began at 12 years of age with a little group of Elzeviers which he acquired while working part-time at Dawson's bookshop. Herbert M. Evans, who was the greatest collector of science books of all time, inspired Belt to collect his great library of books by and about Leonardo Da Vinci. Elmer Belt bought two sets of Verga's *Bibliographia Vinciani* in 1928. He gave one of them to me and said, "I want every book in here, I can spend so much a month. If you treat me fairly you can go on

for years. If you overcharge me, you are through." For almost 40 years, I had the good fortune to work with him and with Kate Steinitz, his librarian. During those years, his collection became the lodestone of research for scholars from all parts of the world; it is now housed in separate quarters at U.C.L.A.

THE HONEYMAN COLLECTION

It seems to have been sheer happenstance that started Robert B. Honeyman as a book collector. Shortly after his marriage to Marian Stuart in 1927, he found himself living in the leased apartment of Adrian Joline, a noted New York book and autograph collector of that time. The walls were covered with framed autograph letters and the shelves were full of first and rare editions of great books. Christopher Morley once prayed, "Sweat God. Souse me in books" and here he was inescapably saturated with the prize fruits of a great bibliophile's many years of pursuit.

Honeyman began by collecting American authors. He formed collections of James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane and Washington Irving, all

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of which he gave to his Alma Mater, Lehigh University. He soon fell under the guidance of David Randall of Scribner's, who had gone to Lehigh too, and bought many landmarks of English literature from him.

But it was Honeyman's education as a metallurgical engineer that determined the major course of his collecting, and when the early scientific catalogues of Henry Sotheran fell into his hands about 1937, he began what became his major pursuit, the building of one of the greatest collections of significant books in the history of science of all time. It was not until 1955 that I met him and I believe that my enthusiastic admiration of the collection he had already formed inspired him to intensify his interest.

He consulted the lists of I. Bernard Cohen and Dr. Evans, he built a reference collection on the history of science and he consulted science historians such as Henry Guerlac, Stillman Drake and A. R. Hall. He commissioned me to buy for him at important sales, such as the Herschel Library in 1958, the De Andrade sale in 1964 and the Horblit sale in 1974. He supplied me with lists of desiderata and gave me authority to buy any important book, whenever and wherever I travelled.

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He kept careful and detailed records of his purchases and bought widely from many other dealers including E. P. Goldschmidt, Ernst Weil, Maggs Brothers, Dawson's of Pall Mall, Quaritch, Lathrop Harper, Warren Howell, and in recent years, Brooke-Hitchings.

He had one limit, not to spend more than \$2,500 in one day. Of course, if you came back the next day with something tempting, he would spend up to his limit again. Marginal to his field of interest, he decided to collect early arithmetics and books of exchange. He became knowledgeable both as to importance and market values of his subject.

Forming his collection became a career for him, and his great ambition was to leave his collection to his Alma Mater. This, he felt, would be his greatest monument. The institution of his first choice proved not to have the facilities for maintaining and preserving his collection and none of the other institutions he offered it to could meet his minimum conditions.

Finally, having passed his 80th birthday, he decided to sell his collection and commissioned me to do so. I lost no time in contacting Peter Wilson of Sotheby's who, together with Lord John Kerr and John Collins, came to California and, after viewing the library, decided to buy it. It took a full year of highly complex negotiations to close the transaction.

Finally, because of the confidence of both parties, I was able to bring about an agreement, and Sotheby's purchased it for \$4,000,000 cash before removal. This is, I believe, the highest price ever paid for a single collection of books. Sotheby's then proceeded to produce a set of catalogues for seven sales, beginning on October 30 and

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31 of 1978 and ending on May 19 and 20 of 1981.

The catalogues have already become a major source of information on the history of science. They are the monument which Robert Honeyman spent 50 years in building and will remain the lasting memorial to his creative spirit even though his library has been dispersed, so that it may enrich and delight the scholars, librarians and collectors of the world.

I have yet to answer the third question I posed: why? Before doing so, I do not want to ignore the implication in a recent publication by one of my oldest, most beloved friends and a great rare books librarian, who questioned the usefulness of booksellers in the forming of libraries. I am sure it was only a momentary lapse and trust that whatever the provocation may have been, he has upon mature reflection concluded that our role is a respectable and necessary aid to the building of great libraries.

Let me quote Bern Dibner who is one of the greatest collectors and most generous patrons of libraries. His dedication to **Her-**

alds of Science, which is a basic reference for historians and collectors, reads as follows:

To The Bookdealers in many lands, who patiently gathered, preserved, collated and catalogued our heritage of science, and who, in their transactions, invariably gave away more than they received.

Now back to the why of collection building. The cases of William Andrews Clark, Henry E. Huntington, Elmer Belt and Robert Honeyman that I have cited will, I hope, prove that despite Dr. Weiner's intriguing investigations, book collecting may result from a dedicated reverence for knowledge, the desire to accumulate the records of humanity's highest aspirations and achievements, and to cherish them against neglect and destruction.

Why people collect books is not really as important as the fact that they do collect, and preserve them for the enlightenment and delight of the generations which we hope and pray will follow us, provided the mad war makers do not reduce us all to primitive chaos.