

Obituaries

RUTH ELIZABETH ADOMEIT

When Ruth Adomeit died in Cleveland, Ohio, on February 16, 1996, she left to a multitude of friends indelible memories of her good cheer, her courage, her lively and retentive mind, her capacity for friendship and abiding loyalties, and her exceptional generosity. Despite Ruth's active involvement with friends and organizations scattered across the land between Worcester and Mount Pleasant, Michigan, in some ways Ruth was a private person. She attempted to disguise, or at least minimize, to others her very serious health problems that had plagued her for many years. Despite her illness, Ruth insisted on keeping up. Her friend, Richard Morgan of Mentor, Ohio, drove Ruth to the annual meeting of this Society in October 1994 and immediately returned her to Cleveland where she caught a bus at 7:00 A.M. to carry her to a board meeting of the Clarke Historical Library at Central Michigan University. A year later, in the late fall of 1995, Morgan drove Ruth through a snowstorm to a meeting of the Friends of the Pennsylvania State University Library (where Linda Lapidés spoke on editions of 'Slovenly Peter'); then later that same week to Indiana University's Lilly Library where Ruth was elected to the board of trustees of its Friends. Ruth liked to 'run the roads,' as a Vermonter would put it. She did so because she insisted on maintaining her association with her lively community of book people. She was a 'regular' at book fairs, where she greeted and was greeted enthusiastically by her friends and followers. But, not long after the trip to State College and Bloomington, unbeknownst to most of us, Ruth entered a nursing home, where she died at the age of eighty-six.

Ruth Adomeit was born in Cleveland on January 30, 1910, to a

family with interests in and commitment to the arts and collecting. She grew up in her family's large home, located at 2054 East 102nd Street between Carnegie and Euclid avenues in a once-proud neighborhood. It was filled with family treasures that had migrated to America with Ruth's forebears—portraits, a pewter coffee urn, the punch bowl, a mantel clock, a wooden tool box, etc., etc. (her von den Steinem grandparents came to this country from the German city of Memel). She was the daughter of George G. Adomeit, whose landscape paintings of Cleveland scenes and portraits, which hung in the Adomeit home, are memorable. He was a highly accomplished painter and a member of the well-known Cleveland School of artists. A printer and a skilled craftsman, he was the owner of the Caxton Printing Company and a member of the Rowfant Club.

Ruth Adomeit graduated from Wellesley College in the class of 1931. Following college, Ruth returned to Cleveland and served as the private secretary to businessmen and to the director of the Art Institute before becoming a teacher at an elementary school in nearby Beachwood. Her interests were wide and varied. She was a life member of the Archaeological Institute of America, state and local historical societies, several conservation groups, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Bibliographical Society of America, and (of course) the American Antiquarian Society, to which she was elected on October 19, 1983.

While she was still an undergraduate, her father gave Ruth two miniature books, thereby setting a course that she followed enthusiastically to the end of her life. When Ruth settled into a much smaller house on Coleridge Road in Cleveland Heights after the large family home was sold, she filled it to overflowing with the collections gathered by her father and herself. Collecting was Ruth Adomeit's life work. She collected wooden butter molds and other molds for cakes and cookies, for maple sugar, for plaster decorations, and even for bricks. Along with the molds, she collected the books and catalogues pertaining to them. Ruth bequeathed this collection to Shelburne Museum at Shelburne,

Vermont. Ruth also collected Mexican, pre-Columbian artifacts, which she left to the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. The collection of her father's sketch books went to the Archives of American Art. George Adomeit's paintings were left to various family members. The Cleveland Museum of Art inherited the paintings and drawings of Earle Teale.

Although Ruth collected (or preserved, as the case may be) the objects listed above, with much else not here specified, her true commitment was to miniature books. At the time of her death her collection numbered more than 8,000 examples. It is the finest in existence and includes miniature volumes from all latitudes and longitudes. They were sorted and organized, and kept in miniature book cases, in files, in drawers, and in boxes. One had the sense that she knew exactly where each one was located, but events proved otherwise, as we shall see.

Julian Edison, the editor of *Miniature Book News*, described her in the March 1996 issue as the 'Mother of miniature book collecting.' Having had much to do with the revival of miniature book collecting and as editor of *The Miniature Book Collector* in 1960-62, Ruth watched over the field and her colleagues with care and affection. Ruth strictly limited the size of her miniatures. She was, and her fellow collectors are, contemptuous of any example whose height exceeds 10.2 cm. (4 inches); Ruth really preferred those under 7.6 cm. (3 inches). With some asperity she criticized books in the AAS collection that fell beyond the pale—and they were removed. In his memoir of Miss Adomeit in *Miniature Book News* Justin Schiller tells how he bought forty-two miniatures in her behalf at Arthur Houghton's 1979 London sale. Following the sale, Ruth came by night to New York City bringing with her a shopping bag full of cash to pay for her purchases. Replacing the cash with her books, Ruth got back on a bus and went home.

In September 1989 Miss Adomeit mounted an exhibition of 3,500 of her miniature books at the Cleveland Public Library. The display must have been mind-boggling, but the event was

marred by the loss of some of her earliest, irreplaceable Thumb Bibles. A Thumb Bible is the epitome of the Bible, made up of verses and illustrations designed to introduce the Bible to children. Miss Adomeit was particular that they measure not more than 6.4 cm. (2½ inches) in height. Various examples are *Agnus Dei* (1601) written by John Weever; the more famous *Verbum Sempiternum* with *Salvator Mundi* (1614) by John Taylor, which often appeared as *History of the Bible*, or *A Concise History of the Holy Bible*; and the *Miniature Bible, or Abstract of Sacred History* by Thomas Green Fessenden, published in Brattleboro, Vermont, in 1816. In any case, in June 1996, when Ruth's executrix was sorting through belongings at the house, she opened a cigar box and found the lost forty-one Thumb Bibles that had been missing since the 1989 exhibition. It was a happy moment and closed the mystery of their disappearance.

Ruth spent some forty years compiling a bibliography of 300 American, British, and European examples of these charming books, which was published in 1980 as *Three Centuries of Thumb Bibles*. It is gratifying to report that the American Antiquarian Society has the largest institutional collection of early American Thumb Bibles (all published before 1877), numbering some eighty-eight examples of a total of 156. Three of them were given to AAS by Ruth following her election to the Society. Miss Adomeit's unparalleled collection of miniature books and manuscripts was sent in seventy-three cartons as her bequest to the Lilly Library at Indiana University, along with those once missing Thumb Bibles.

In addition to her beloved miniature books, Ruth Adomeit collected American children's books dated before 1851. Over the years she amassed a very large number of them, but they were placed well below the salt on Ruth's scale of bibliographical values. Several years ago, she began sending us lists (one was headed 'Not very interesting') and, later, cartons of books. In the early fall of 1995 Ruth packed up all the remaining examples, sending them east so that we might search titles and compare copies. Joan

Pingeton of our acquisitions staff spent months going through the entire lot, selecting some 1,300 copies that were added to the already exceptional collection of juveniles located in the AAS stacks. Ruth's movable and pop-up children's books and games have gone to the Lilly Library.

Miss Adomeit's connection with the American Antiquarian Society began sometime after 1943 when she first met d'Alté Welch, professor of biology at John Carroll University and the preeminent collector of British and American children's books. Professor Welch and Ruth became devoted friends, d'Alté introducing Ruth to Elisabeth Ball, Julia Wakeman, and other collectors of miniature or children's books. This coterie of collectors together searched for books, traded copies, and competed for rarities within a close circle of bibliographical enthusiasm. It was d'Alté Welch who insisted that Ruth become acquainted with the collections at AAS, and upon his urging Ruth visited the library, where Clarence Brigham opened the AAS collection of miniature books to her.

Your memorialist first met Ruth in 1970 at the home of Mrs. Welch. I had gone to Cleveland to pack up d'Alté's great collection of pre-1821 American children's books which he had bequeathed to the Society (he had suffered a fatal gunshot wound during a robbery) and which was greatly augmented by the gift from his family of all of his American examples. That meeting on such an unfortunate occasion began a friendship that persisted until Ruth Adomeit's own death twenty-six years later. Ruth attended several meetings of the Society after her 1983 election and stopped to work at the library on occasion when she was east to attend college events or to visit friends in New England. The correspondence file is thick with inquiries on dates, identities of printers, or other bibliographical matters to and from Ruth and Carolyn Allen of our acquisitions department (who became a true expert in many areas).

It is impossible to think of Ruth Adomeit without remembering her remarkable generosity. We have already noted her be-

quests and gifts to the Lilly Library, to this Society, to other organizations, and to her family. At AAS her kindness goes back twenty years, when she sent \$1,000 to be placed in an endowment fund for acquisitions. Later, she established the first deferred income plan at AAS in the amount of \$20,000. Still later, she gave \$5,000 to endow the Adomeit Fund to enable us to buy books not taller than four inches. In her will she made the Society a residual beneficiary of her estate, intending that half the bequest be used to establish the Adomeit Endowment Fund, the income from which shall be used to purchase and conserve miniature books or pre-1850 children's books and games. The other half of her bequest will be known as the Ruth E. Adomeit Endowment Fund, the income from which shall be used 'where most needed.'

The members of the American Antiquarian Society are grateful, and will remain so for years to come, to Ruth Elizabeth Adomeit for her legacies of joyful friendship, thoughtful concern, and astonishing generosity. We profoundly thank her for all her bounteous gifts and will cherish the memory of this remarkable lady.

Marcus A. McCorison

MERLE EUGENE CURTI

Merle Eugene Curti, Frederick Jackson Turner professor of history emeritus at the University of Wisconsin and a member of the American Antiquarian Society since 1978, died in Madison, Wisconsin, on March 9, 1996, at the age of ninety-eight. He was one of this country's most distinguished scholars of American history.

The prolific author of twenty books, texts, and edited collections, as well as some fifty articles, Curti's major works were *The Growth of American Thought* (1943) and *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier Community*

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