

*The American Book and the
American Bookman:
For Marcus McCorison, on his Retirement*

ROGER E. STODDARD

I. A POLYPTYCH

JUST NOW I wouldn't trade this spot for any other, here with the Boss, conversing with you about him so that he can hear every word. I've brought the lesson to read to you, but I thought I'd begin by sketching out a polyptych on the wall beside us, so you can repair to it if you get bored by my conversation. It's a typical polyptych. Across the bottom is the predella, a series of horizontal history paintings. Above it is a triptych, in this case a large central panel flanked by smaller ones. Finally, above are four small rounds. I'll do my best to interpret for you, but some spots are hazy on account of wear or perhaps parts are unfinished.

a. We begin with the predella, six horizontal panels.

1a. At the left are the First Printers with their presses, wooden and metal, hand-pulled and power-driven. To me, they are a smug-looking lot, just waiting around to be memorialized.

2a. The next panel is full of boys and girls and women, as well as men, for they are sewing and pasting books and pamphlets into paper and boards and leather and cloth. There are some small presses and hand tools but some big power presses also.

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3a. Next are papermakers with their vats and troughs. That enormous pile of finished sheets and rolls at the right side threatens to throw the whole work out of balance, don't you think?

4a. Then the artists, graphic artists that is: woodcutters, engravers, lithographers, colorists. Just admire their concentration.

5a. Now the booksellers, publishers, and librarians—with some books . . . no, they're only account books, there are no real books in sight. At first I thought they had their hands in each other's pockets, but I'm probably wrong.

6a. You can really feel the silence in this final panel, can't you? Here are students and teachers and authors and readers, studying, annotating books, taking notes, writing.

b. Now above to the triptych, beginning with the panel on the left.

1b. In the center is a genial old man, bald, and he holds in his right hand an old print of the Boston Massacre, garishly daubed. At his right is another man in glasses with a book under his right arm. It is bound in crimson red. In his left hand he holds out to us what can only be a reel of microfilm. In front of them is a pile of books ascending toward the right side. The genial-looking old man raises his left hand toward the central panel in a toast, but it is not a goblet that he holds. The vessel is transparent, conical—oh, it's a martini glass!

2b. The central panel is dominated by a tall figure with a crew cut who wears a long robe. Over his right arm are many gaily colored sashes, and *under* his arm a book with a green cover. So, we have a red book in the left panel and a green one in the center. Behind him is an old man with a family resemblance. He holds some pamphlets in his hand and on the first cover we can make out the profile of Abraham Lincoln in silhouette. Behind them—and this is typical of such works—stands a multitude of people all in a much smaller scale. They must be fiefs or acolytes. Some are offering grants, others money or books. The pile of books that began in the left panel has gotten out of control in the center, for it fills the

foreground: maps, broadsides, pamphlets, books—no two alike. The central figure raises his left hand to grasp a thunderbolt which is moving horizontally toward the right. There is much pointing toward the right side, probably you have noticed. I would venture to suggest that the thunderbolt signifies communication, what we might today call networking.

3b. Now we come to the right panel. Very difficult to make out, isn't it? The figure is female, I'm sure of that. She reaches up with her right hand and catches that thunderbolt. More than that I can't say. This panel simply is not finished.

c. The small round paintings above are portrait heads, and I am able to identify all of them for you, from left to right: Lawrence C. Wroth, Frederick R. Goff, William A. Jackson, Edwin Wolf 2nd. All are smiling. That is worth remark in the case of Wroth, who was never known to smile during his lifetime. Take it from a pupil.

II. THE LESSON

The lesson consists of selections from the diary of a librarian who served the American Antiquarian Society from 1832 until his accidental death in 1835. Hear now the words of Christopher Columbus Baldwin, writing in 1834.¹

Friday, August 1. 'We reached Boston about half past 11. . . . I called upon the Rev. Robert F. Walcott, nephew of our benefactor, Mr. Thomas Walcott,² and he agreed to shew me the collections of his uncle in the morning.'

Saturday, August 2. 'I called on Mr. Walcott this morning, who lives in Columbia Street, and he went with me to India Street where the pamphlets, &c., of his uncle were deposited. They were in the fourth story of an oil store kept by C. W. Cartwright & Son, where they had been placed about four months ago. They were

1. *Diary of Christopher Columbus Baldwin, Librarian of the American Antiquarian Society 1829-1835*, 'Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society 8' (Worcester, Published by the Society, 1901), pp. 317-26.

2. Thomas Wallcut (1758-1840). Baldwin spells the name 'Walcott' throughout.

put in ancient trunks, bureaus, and chests, baskets, tea chests and old drawers, and presented a very odd appearance. The extent of them was altogether beyond my expectations. Mr. Walcott told me that I might take all the pamphlets and newspapers I could find and all the books that treated of American history, and that I might make use of any of the boxes containing them. I went immediately to work to putting them in order for transporting to Worcester. Every thing was covered with venerable dust, and as I was under a slated roof and the thermometer at ninety-three, I had a pretty hot time of it. Nothing but a love of such work could inspire any man to labor in such a place. The value of the rarities I found, however, soon made me forget the heat, and I have never seen such happy moments. Every thing I opened discovered to my eyes some unexpected treasure. Great numbers of the productions of our early authors were turned up at every turn. I could hardly persuade myself that it was not all a dream, and I applied myself with all industry to packing, lest capricious fortune should snatch something from my hands. I worked from 8 in the morning until half past two in a heat and dust and stench of oil that would have been intolerable in any other circumstances. When I came out to go to dinner I could but just crawl. Yet at three o'clock, I returned to it again and labored until night.'

Sunday, August 3. 'Mr. William Bentley Fowle, nephew of the late Dr. Bentley of Salem, called upon me in the morning and invited me to accompany him to church. . . . After meeting, I went home with Mr. Fowle and dined there. . . . After dinner Mr. Fowle showed me his library and his phrenological collections, he being famous as a lecturer upon that subject. He has a good collection of books, most of which he inherited from his uncle, Rev. Dr. [William] Bentley, besides his uncle's manuscripts, which are very numerous, all of which he says shall be added to the library of the Antiquarian Society. . . . His letters and diary are very valuable.'

Monday, August 4. 'I arose at four, and not finding the store open where my pamphlets were deposited, I wandered about the city

and visited different book stores. At seven, I had access to the garret of my oyl-store, and I resumed my labors with fresh fury. One of the first things that gladdened my eyes was the forty first year of the Diary of the never to be forgotten Cotton Mather. It was perfect and in good condition and the first pages contain an account of a young lady's having asked him to marry her! After several fasts, and plenty of prayers for divine direction in such an embarrassment, he wrote her a letter declining her suit! I worked until two o'clock, when the heat becoming so oppressive, I gave over my work and accompanied Mr. Jackson (from Georgia) to the Athenæum, Historical Society's Rooms, the Market, State House and other places of interest.'

Tuesday, August 5. 'The thermometer was at 93, and I worked upon the pamphlets as before.'

Wednesday, August 6. 'I prosecuted my labors the same as yesterday and in the same heat.'

Thursday, August 7. 'I finished packing my things today and help^d load them and saw them start for Worcester. Their weight was forty four hundred and seventy six pounds! I cannot but think that it is the most valuable collection of the early productions of New England authors in the country. As to the number of pamphlets, I am unable to form even a conjecture. . . . There must be ten thousand of them at least. The newspapers are broken files and are of no great value. Many of them are from Ohio & Kentucky. After I had made out my load the Rev. Mr. Walcott, who is the agent or guardian of his uncle, invited me to come to his house and take some books which related to American history. . . . He told me that his uncle had given all his collections to him, but that as his intention always had been that they should go to some public institution, he felt an obligation to see that his purposes should be complied with, and he then showed me all the books given to him by his uncle, and told me that I might take any which would promote the objects of the institution. Was ever such an offer made to an antiquary before? I told him that he was rash to make

such an offer, for if he knew my fury for collecting, he could not expect me to leave him so much as a Psalter. He answered that he was doing what had long been his design, and that it was only fulfilling his uncle's wishes.

'Seeing that there were something like fifteen hundred volumes before me, my phrenological development of acquisitiveness, not yet satisfied with two tons and a quarter of books and pamphlets, began to enlarge itself and sigh for further accumulations. I could not, however, take advantage of his generosity and I told him that we would begin with one end of the cases and as we came to books relating to America, we would take them out and see what should then be done. This he consented to and we soon found volumes enough to fill a hand cart, which I laid by and brought them away. Among them were many rare and scarce books, which I had never seen before, though I was familiar with their value and titles.

'There are not very many persons who would deal so honorably as this clergyman. He is very poor and is now without employment, except occasionally. He was at liberty to dispose of the collection, which would have placed some thousand dollars in pocket, but instead of this, he gives the whole up to the Antiquarian Society. I cannot enough admire and applaud such a generous spirit. Few heirs entertain so much respect for the intentions of ancestors.'

On the same day Baldwin wrote back to Samuel Jennison in Worcester: 'I have just completed loading the Team with Mr. Walcott's donation. It makes a most imposing appearance, being about as large as a load of hay. It has started and will reach Worcester on Friday evening or Saturday morning. . . . The pamphlets are almost innumerable. I cannot even guess at their number. There must be seven or 8 thousand. I venture to say that there are three times as many as are now in our Library—at least four times as valuable. Dr. Jenks informs me that he has been familiar with them and that they are exceedingly rare.'

Friday, August 8. 'After breakfast, I called on the Rev. Mr. Walcott (Robert Folger Walcott), and he accompanied me to see his uncle

[Thomas Walcott], our Society's benefactor. . . . He is a tall, well-shaped man, appearing not much above sixty, although I was told he was in his seventy-seventh year . . . the furniture in his room was of the most antique stamp. I saw hardly anything which was less than two hundred years' old. . . . He is very much broken and debilitated, though his memory is very good as to the events of his youth.'

Saturday, August 9. 'Today my waggoner came about noon with the donation of Mr. Walcott, which was safely lodged in our hall.'

Wednesday, August 27. 'There was a meeting of the Council at my room this evening. I am particular to mention it because some things transpired which affected me very unpleasantly. I was congratulating myself that the valuable addition made to our Library by Mr. Walcott would be thought very well of by the Council, and that the agency I had had in obtaining it would be something of a feather in my cap. But I was amazed to find that instead of thanks for my pains in the acquisition, I was like to receive quite a different sort of entertainment. They did not so much as utter a single note of gratitude. . . . It was some comfort to me to know that no one knew so much of their worth as I did myself, for no one had examined them. I had the horrors for a few days, but ultimately recovered.'

Now that we've got Marcus resonating with fellow feeling, let's see what we can learn from our lesson.

1. The Wallcut trove was one of the great strikes of all time—pure gold. Thomas Wallcut, seventy-seven years old in 1834, could have begun collecting in the 1780s, when he was in his twenties. Granted the primitive nature of the American book trade from the 1780s through the 1820s, Mr. Wallcut could only have built his collection of pamphlets and newspapers out of estate auctions and Boston detritus collected by the Rag-and-Bone Men.

2. Remember that it is local produce, not imported goods, that concerned Messrs. Wallcut and Baldwin. When it comes to local produce—whether it is English collecting English things or Ger-

mans collecting German ones—there is a distinction between store-bought and farm-fresh. If you collect for historical rather than aesthetic or sentimental or trendy purposes, then you must get *out* to the country or get *in* to the ghetto so as to gather things as close to the sources as possible. The contemporary market—the organized book trade—is only partly with you: you need that also, but attics, cellars, warehouses, and barns—the half-way houses between use and discard—are the happy hunting grounds of the antiquary.

3. What an antiquary he is, our C. C. Baldwin. He really knows his stuff: 'I was familiar with their value and titles' he says of the 'many rare and scarce books, which I had never seen before.' He admits of a 'fury for collecting,' he loves his work, he has 'never seen such happy moments.' He takes the time to visit local bookshops and the owner of the William Bentley Diary—which would occupy four volumes in the Essex Institute Proceedings after its gift to the Antiquarian Society.

4. Finally, the unpleasant part. This is work that others can not or will not understand. The Council 'did not so much as utter a single note of gratitude. . . . I had the horrors for a few days.' Small comfort that only *he* knew the value of the Wallcut donation. He 'ultimately recovered.'

UNCLEVERNESS

We are not very clever with books. I have just returned from Italy, where I found special libraries full of kids whose universities do not support the curriculum with library service, where most bookshops stock the imprints of a few publishers instead of subjects and genres, where eighty percent of the books printed are never sold,³ and where the remainder trade—*Il Libro Dimezzato*⁴ ("The Book Cut In Half")—threatens the development of a legitimate practice

3. Enzo Crea, publisher, with his wife Benedetta, of Edizioni dell'Elefante, reported this to me.

4. The title of a new pamphlet in the 'Millelire' series of Stampa Alternativa (Viterbo, 1992).

of publication and distribution. The situation of the book in Italy today—contrast it if you will with the Golden Years from 1465 through the Risorgimento when the book was identical with the Renaissance of the Spirit and the Liberty of a People—could be your best defense for current predictions that the Book is Dead, the Age of Print has Closed, the Sooner we Discard the Book the Quicker we can Join the Future.

The issue is over texts, both numbers and letters, sailing across your computer screen, incessantly reformatted so that you can hardly tell where they came from or where—and in what mutant form—they will travel next. Texts are the fundamentals of business and industry—and library control: speed, accuracy, updating, accessibility. The death of the book has no implications there, but what if your motive is critical and historical study? Disembodied texts have no contexts, their only linkage is electronic. In business all you want is a text, in critical study you may actually want everything else but. . . .

But, everyone seems so relieved to learn that the Book is Dead. Most people, including but not limited to Italians, are so fearful of books. The world authority on Bookfear was Holbrook Jackson, who wrote a 210-page monograph about it, fully footnoted and indexed.⁵ Let me summarize it here, in ten words or fewer. Books are people—or the next thing to them. Why should it surprise us to admit that they suffer, then, just as people do, from suppression, assassination, jealousy, neglect, and overpopulation. Small wonder that in the spring of 1989, when their country was celebrating the bicentennial of the Revolution and the Rights of Man, French booksellers, out of regard to Salman Rushdie, placarded their shops with a Declaration of the Rights of the Book. 'Article 1. Books, all books, have the right to exist. Article 2. Every book has the right to live, to be marketed, to be shown to readers, and to give to its author the right of being heard and of being properly remunerated. Article 7. The book exists, and lives to guarantee our

5. *The Fear of Books* (London: The Soncino Press; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).

liberty. It cannot submit in any way to alienation either on account of its line of thought or its fundamental purpose, which is to promote the free exchange of cultures, mentalities, and knowledge. Article 8. The book, opening up of the spirit, of research, of pleasure, a record of knowledge as much as a work of creativity, ought to be treated as a benefaction indispensable to culture, to social and spiritual well-being, to information, and cannot be treated simply as an object of commerce.⁶ All are responses to historic abuses, and surviving book stocks show the results!

THE AMERICAN BOOK

It has been a long time since we had a single language, religion, politics, and tradition in this country. The most obvious evidence of that is our books. The notion of Melting-Pot Books—assimilation in the printing office—hasn't worked out. Diverse cultures, like species, either die out or survive; and the toleration that we preach and defend can be illustrated in our books. To some of us it is a joy to spot first appearances of poems by members of the Irish Literary Renaissance in the *Providence Journal*⁷ or to discover a first edition of Karl Marx in a New York newspaper extra.⁸ Or to find American books in Creole, or Yiddish, or Italian, or Portuguese—in addition to the more common German and French ones.

It has been a long time, also, since we had a single printing center. From wilderness frontier, to settlement, to printing office, to newspaper, to pamphlets and books is the normal progression. The paper trail of American history is a gigantic tapestry, interwoven by countless hands in textures and colors that challenge all our senses.

The freedom of print enjoyed here has encouraged even small communities, not simply language groups but religious, philo-

6. Printed as a broadside and also in *Livres Hebdo* no. 6 (June 2, 1989), p. 24.

7. See Horace Reynolds, *A Providence Episode in the Irish Literary Renaissance* (Providence: Study Hill Club, 1929).

8. 'Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon' was first published in Joseph Weydemeyer's *Die Revolution, eine Zeitschrift in zwanglosen Hefte* (New York, 1852).

sophic, and social ones to express themselves in print. These are closed circles: it seems that they are holding private conversations in their books and tracts.

There is every manner of genre that you could possibly imagine, from Pornography to Prayerbooks, Comics to Bible Prints, Laws to . . .

How to assemble all the threads, granted that some are cut or lost or hidden? Scholars may challenge the whole idea of Rare Books as effete and peripheral to their concerns; but ask a scholar why he or she is working at the Antiquarian Society or some other special library and you will be told that most of the books they are looking for are there. How did they get there? How has that natural imbalance between common and rare ones, between known and unknown, been redressed? Who has found the lost and uncovered the hidden? Who will collect the books that no library has? Build resonant collections that are stronger than any other? It takes a certain kind of librarian and a certain kind of bookseller, who share a certain frame of mind.

THE AMERICAN BOOKMAN

We have a tradition in this country about that. There are those who travel from bookshop to bookshop, looking at every book. They know what they are looking for. They have ways of finding out about books they have never seen, so that they can recognize them when they find them. Perhaps more important, when they find them they can recognize the value of books they have never even heard about.

The quintessential figure here is Isidore Rosenbaum Bruzel (1897-1972), who adopted the more familiar epithet Ike Brussel, L. O. G. S.—for ‘Last of the Great Scouts.’⁹ His Brooklyn girlfriend, soon to become his first wife, got him to manage Ginz-

9. See *AB Bookman's Weekly* December 25, 1972, pp. 2091-2101, for pieces by William White, John Carter, Sol. M. Malkin, and I. R. Brussel. See also Carter's ‘New Introduction,’ pp. 33a-h, in the reprint of Brussel's *Anglo-American First Editions 1826-1900 East to West* (New York: Sol Lewis, 1981).

burg's Book Shop on Pitkin Avenue near Christopher when her father fell ill, back in the early 'twenties. There he introduced Sol. M. Malkin to the antiquarian book trade; later he would introduce Jacob Blanck to Merle Johnson. From there he began scouting. As a freelancer, soon without a shop of his own, he scoured the bookshops of New York, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Dallas, Columbus, and San Francisco, but not to the neglect of Toronto, London, Oxford, Cambridge, and Birmingham. Often he carried, in his head, a specific desiderata list of a thousand titles requested by librarians and collectors. Any book on any subject was his boast. His clients included the most sophisticated collectors of the day: Lord Esher (Oliver Brett) and Michael Sadleir as well as Carroll A. Wilson and Morris L. Parrish.

Out of his experience with Victorian literature came the definitive studies on *Anglo-American First Editions 1826-1900 East to West and West to East* (1935). Dressed in an old suit with a turtleneck sweater—'unabashedly disreputable sartorial style' John Carter said—and despite his 'polyglot Brooklyn accent' he endeared himself to A. E. Housman, who would entertain him in his Trinity College, Cambridge, rooms. Fabled was his memory for books and what they looked like: he could spot variants, and he recalled where they were shelved, so he could find them again. When his order for a book he had seen in a Canadian bookshop was returned as 'not in stock' he corrected the proprietor by cabling 'Alice third from left on second shelf from top in juvenile section at rear of balcony please ship at once' and got the book. 'Sleepers,' misshelved items, books in dark corners—he always carried a flashlight—were his forte, and his discoveries were legion.

Another one of them, Ernest James Wessen (1887-1974),¹⁰ came late to bookselling, for it was not until 1938 that he established the Midland Rare Book Co. in Mansfield, Ohio. He said that he sent out his first catalogue, *Midland Notes, No. 1, Almanacs of the Ohio Country*, and got out of town, because he was sure that

10. See *AB Bookman's Weekly* January 6, 1975, pp. 8-11, and February 3, 1975, pp. 466-68.

it would be a failure. When he returned home he found that the catalogue had sold out. The largest order came from Clarence S. Brigham for the Antiquarian Society. Thereafter he offered more out-of-the-way, unheard-of Americana, well and sometimes impiously annotated, than anyone in the trade, first scouting and then scouted for by others. Marcus and I used to compete for items in the advance copies of his catalogues that he would send to us, and we saw him for the last time while we were scouting at Bob Kolvoord's Old Settler Bookshop in Walpole, New Hampshire.

Benjamin Tighe of Athol, Massachusetts (1895-1975)¹¹ also entered bookselling as a second career. Scouting constantly and advertising incessantly, he formed for sale a great Civil War collection and important collections of American watermarked paper and of booksellers' labels. The latter two collections together with no fewer than three prime collections of early American children's books were purchased by Marcus McCorison for the Antiquarian Society.

Ike *was* the Last of the Greatest, but there are still some active book scouts, and they know who they are. The maintenance of good relations with them is a special faculty, and who would want to spoil things for Marcus's successor by naming them here?

MARCUS MCCORISON

Georgia Barnhill has provided for you the exhibition of the day, a picnic lunch out of that feast of books assembled for the Society over many years and detailed in his annual reports by Marcus McCorison. It is very tasty. In fact, it is delicious! How I wish that Marcus and I could converse for you about them. I think that I could learn a lot, and I am sure that *you* would. Instead, let me offer a one-sided conversation about only a handful of them.

The printed draft of the Bill of Rights (Philadelphia, 1792), acquired in a group of eighty slip laws—ephemeral working printings of the first four congresses—is typical of things you never

11. See *AB Bookman's Weekly* June 2, 1975, p. 2630.

heard about or saw, but which could change American history. Many of the eighty are unrecorded, and the whole subject of early congressional study and revision has yet to be essayed.

The gold-tooled binding by John Ratcliff for Thomas Deane on a copy of Nathaniel Morton's *New-Englands Memoriall* (Cambridge, 1669) is one of the earliest American bookbinding commissions and one of the strongest fully documented works of American artistry of the seventeenth century. It is part of the greatest collection of early American bookbindings, formed by the learned antiquarian bookseller Michael Papantonio.

The binding in printed green-glazed paper boards on William Wells Brown's *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (Boston, 1863) comes from the greatest collection of American publisher's bindings in paper, formed by another learned antiquarian bookseller, Kenneth G. Leach.

Those two bookbindings require a bit of a gloss. If you begin your study of books with bindings, you probably will not penetrate beyond them. If, however, you begin with printed books measured against the historical study of a subject or genre, you may make your way to bookbindings as the final element in comprehending the book as a whole. If you care for reception study, you must begin with the covers if you turn to books. One of my colleagues¹² in the Reserve of the French National Library is studying the way French authors marked ownership and commissioned bookbindings on their own copies of their own books. There it is in a flash if you want proof of our own uncleverness with books. How did the author perceive the book that he or she was making?

It is not easy to find copies of books in original trade bindings—like the Leach copies—and that is what piqued the collector's interest. Now those books are here for the historical record, to demonstrate the final product that the publisher intended. And the Papantonio copies are here to attest to the skill and style of native craftsmen in the medium of books.

12. Mme. Isabelle de Conihout.

What to say for the first Florida imprint, an almanac (St. Augustine, 1782), unique. The unique Samuel Cheever Almanac (Cambridge, 1661). The unique Thomas Tilestone Funeral Elegy to John Foster (Cambridge, 1681), acquired with four other seventeenth-century broadsides. The account book of the Boston bookseller Benjamin Condy, 1759–70. In historical studies material evidence in books carries an inordinate burden—for lack of that kind of evidence on sales, customers, and prices. Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* (New York, 1832), a cute little book and the first American sex manual. The earliest Hawaiian imprint of the ABCFM? The first collection of White Spirituals in Shape Notes? Five unrecorded caricatures of James Akin? Just like peanuts, aren't they?

So what do you do with Marcus McCorison, who has the mind of a Brussel and the heart of a Baldwin, the breadth of a Brigham and the modernity of a Shipton? A librarian for the future who is just about to walk out the front door. If we are more clever with people than we are with books—and I suspect that we are, I just hope that we are—then we will send him into libraries to talk with the librarians and the trustees in order to improve acquisitions and other library services. We will challenge him with missions both national and international so that politicians, foundations, and educators can think more clearly about libraries at a time when our perception of the book is changing from carrier of current information to historical source material. For the Antiquarian Society the problem begins: how to fill in the book we know about but never saw, how to get the book we never even heard about, the one that could change history.

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