

OBITUARIES

GEORGE WATSON COLE

George Watson Cole, librarian emeritus of the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, and one of the outstanding American bibliographers of the day, died at his home in Pasadena, California, October 10, 1939, in his ninetieth year. He was born in Warren, Litchfield County, Connecticut, a few miles west of Litchfield, September 6, 1850, only child of Munson and Antoinette Fidelia (Taylor) Cole. At Colebrook and Torrington his father manufactured hooples—children's hoops—for the New York market, dealt in bone dust and other homely products, interested himself in some patents, and undertook some real estate ventures in New York and Pennsylvania, and even in Minnesota. The son at sixteen was away from home in another neighboring town, getting a simple but straightforward education, learning easily anything which interested him, as his teacher said in somewhat gentle rebuke. Besides taking the regulation studies, he also had lessons on the piano. In later years he played the violin and he loved music all his life.

When George was seventeen, his father died at the age of fifty. Two years later his mother, at the age of forty, married Levi W. Thrall, a widower with nine children, of Guilford, Conn. George had moved on to Phillips Academy at Andover and, nearing eighteen, wrote to the Rev. Archibald Geikie, his old pastor, that he had decided on civil engineering as a profession. Six months later he was seeking, from the same correspondent, advice on what to read. This was the

beginning of his lifelong habit of seeking advice at any contemplated advance in his career. At nineteen he was apparently headed for Harvard, and was more than toying with the idea of making "literature" his livelihood. In this last he was bluntly discouraged by Mr. Geikie, who felt that literature would lead, in its poverty, to a "life of mortification." "Choose rather," he wrote, "medicine or civil engineering, and if you have leisure and feel inclined to write, make that a pastime or a means of relaxation and gratification." The literary bug had evidently bitten rather deep; George contributed a brief story to the "Waverly Magazine, and Literary Repository" of December 10, 1870. When Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was twenty-four, in 1868, she published "The Gates Ajar." She had grown up in Andover and felt a deep interest in the spiritual welfare of the Academy boys. Five of her letters to George Watson Cole have been preserved. Four of them date after his two years' stay at the Andover school had ended—ended to the relief, apparently, both of George and of the administration. He went from Andover to Exeter, and Miss Phelps begs him not to be discouraged or depressed, but to retrieve at Exeter the ground lost at Andover.

Family life, however, did not run smoothly. Money was tied up in unfortunate real estate and George's mother was much involved in her large step-family. A full calendar year (1871) at Exeter and he was floundering over possibilities and impossibilities of a special course at Yale. Then, three days after his twenty-second birthday, he married one of the nine step-children, with school teaching in one of the little country schools of Litchfield County his only financial refuge. Before he was twenty-three, he was a widower. He kept on teaching school and decided to combine with it the study of law. He read law in various law offices and taught in various country schools, always in Litchfield County. On his twenty-sixth birthday, September 6, 1876, he was admitted to the Bar, and in

January of the following year he hung out his shingle as Attorney and Counsellor at Law in Plymouth, Litchfield County, a town of some six hundred inhabitants. Business was not lucrative, but in his first year he mastered Takigraphy, or shorthand, Lindsley's System, which he adapted to his own ideas, and used constantly throughout his life. In January 1878 he married Miss Louise E. Warner of New Haven, daughter of the Rev. Wyllys Warner, late Treasurer and Secretary of Yale College. She had been an invalid, and remained in delicate health during the thirteen years of their married life.

Mr. Cole stood "lawyering" at Plymouth for two years and then moved about ten miles up the railroad to Wolcottville, or Torrington, as it became soon afterwards. Mr. and Mrs. Cole's violins and the Torrington Library were the chief solaces. There was hardly a living in the "profession." But there were always the books in the Library; Mr. Cole was active on the Library board and had much to do with the purchase of new books. In 1881, as variously in his early career, he consulted Cyrus Northrup, this time about writing book reviews as a possible means of increasing his income. Professor Northrup of Yale, as he then was, for the University of Minnesota came later, wrote back: "Your plan does not strike me favorably . . . Make yourself a first class lawyer and business will come." But the young lawyer could only accept the thankless and arduous task of prosecuting agent for liquor violations in his home county. For five years he endured this, making a remarkable reputation for his office, but at the cost of whatever little private practice with which he had started. Nor could sending in items for a newspaper at Waterbury in the next county bolster his income very much. Something must be done, and his mother-in-law, seeing how he loved books and how he took to the labors at the Library, suggested that library work might be more congenial to him. He had made the acquaintance

of the Library Journal. He had discovered, too, that the application of the Size Rules of the American Library Association for measuring books could be simplified by transferring them to a card. This later became the Cole Size Card—invented at Torrington, drafted at Chicago in 1888 (by his friend C. O. Henry in the employ of the Otis Elevator Company) and, to quote Mr. Cole, “at length published by the Library Bureau in Boston, 1889. It instantly became popular, as it answered in every respect the conditions imposed by the American Library Association Size Rules . . . I voluntarily donated it to the Library Bureau as a contribution in recognition of the lasting benefit I had received from engaging in library work.”

So in the middle of 1885 the law work was given up. Library work was ahead. Mr. Cole went to New York and consulted Melville Dewey, Librarian of the Columbia College Library, at 49th Street near Madison Avenue. Mr. Dewey was favorably impressed and shortly informed Cole of an opening at Fitchburg, Mass. That city had a new library building and 16,500 books in it. The doors were closed till the books could be catalogued. Mr. Dewey recommended Mr. Cole. “Despite my lack of experience,” Mr. Cole records in 1932, “I accepted the responsibility. Recognizing the fact that Opportunity had knocked at my door, I hastened to welcome her call. I again went to New York to consult Mr. Dewey about the proper steps to be taken to carry on the work and to obtain from him a set of cataloguing rules.” The rules, since famous, were still incomplete, but with those already formulated copied into a blank book, Mr. Cole left Torrington in August 1885, for Fitchburg. Gaining access to the building, he found the books in an orderly arrangement on the shelves, strictly according to sizes. He first sorted out the volumes of fiction, arranged them in alphabetical order by authors, and admitted the public. Then he went off in September, at Mr. Dewey’s urgent advice, to the Lake George

Conference of the American Library Association, and there met the most distinguished members of his newly chosen profession. Among them were Justin Winsor, Charles Ammi Cutler and William Frederick Poole. Mr. Dewey had with him the Second Edition of his Decimal Classification, just off the press; he was delighted with the story of the first days of Cole's work at Fitchburg. The Conference over, Mr. Cole returned to his task, and, working ardently, took thirteen months to complete what the Fitchburg trustees had thought would consume three months. But the result was a well set up library, and a printed catalogue which, till rendered obsolete in library science, was a model in the land. Mr. Dewey was much pleased and impressed; he secured for the author a temporary position as librarian to Mr. Charles Pratt, of Astral oil fame, who was then planning to found the Pratt Institute and Free Library. Mr. Cole at the same time attended the Library School which Mr. Dewey had just opened at Columbia.

In April 1888 Mr. Cole went to the then embryonic Newberry Library in Chicago as assistant to Mr. William F. Poole at a salary of \$1200, which was raised the next year to \$1300. The salary was not adequate, but Mr. Cole was revelling in the work as the choice library grew. On December 6, 1890, he wrote from Chicago to his wife who had been very ill in New Haven: "Yesterday we finished unpacking the Probasco books. It is a truly wonderful collection and an opportunity of a lifetime to be permitted to handle such treasures. We unearthed bindings with clasps set with precious stones and others inlaid with silver. Many are rich beyond description, the tooling in gilt and colors being simply magnificent." Six days later, on Friday, December 12th, he wrote his wife of receiving that day news of the possible librarianship of the public library being formed at Jersey City. He went to New York the next day, Saturday, met the Jersey City Trustees on Monday morning, and Mon-

day evening was elected to the post. The salary was \$2000 a year. He was to begin work January 15, 1891. Mrs. Cole had journeyed to Chicago as planned and anticipated, but died there January 13th. Her death was a great blow, but, the funeral over, Mr. Cole went immediately to Jersey City and threw himself into the work of organization. In June the library was opened to the public. It instantly became popular and for five years Mr. Cole built it up, adding 50,000 volumes and giving it a prestige among libraries of its class. His system of Delivery Stations was new and very successful. He was becoming one of the outstanding librarians in the East.

On January 20, 1894 he married Mrs. Laura (Ward) Roys of Lyons, N. Y., a very dear friend of his previous wife. In the autumn of the following year, Mr. and Mrs. Cole crossed the Atlantic for a month on the Continent and in England. It was Mr. Cole's first ocean voyage, but it was followed by various others which, in his meticulous manner, he tabulated in a place-to-place record, and summarized, nine voyages, 1895-1929, as totalling 3 years, 3 months and 23 days.

On returning from the first European trip, Mr. Cole was stricken with typhoid fever and, resigning his position at the Jersey City Library in December 1895, he went to Bermuda with Mrs. Cole. In a three months' visit to the islands, Bermuda in all its phases—its history, its fauna, its flora—absorbed his attention. A great bicyclist, he travelled some 800 miles. On returning to New York, he headed for the New York State Library to see his friend Dewey—who had transferred from Columbia, school and all—and to “ransack” the institution for everything he could find relating to Bermuda. From then on he was a bibliographer, with Americana as his special field. It was not until December 1901, however, that he entered upon the task which was to establish his name as an outstanding American bibliographer—the cataloguing of the private library of E. Dwight Church of Brook-

lyn. This monumental labor consumed the years 1902–1909. The catalogue is in seven large volumes, comprising 3788 pages on special Holland paper. It will stand as a superb literary achievement and as one of the milestones in bibliographical progress.

Mr. and Mrs. Cole were approaching the end of a sixteen months' trip abroad and were in Germany when they were caught by the outbreak of war, in August 1914; they managed to reach New York in mid-September and were preparing to return to the home which they had established in California. On the day set for leaving New York, Mr. Cole went to the rare book rooms of Dodd, Mead and Company to call on his friend Robert H. Dodd. There he was introduced to Henry E. Huntington, who had in recent years purchased several famous libraries, including that of E. Dwight Church. The three men talked briefly and Mr. Cole took his departure. When he had gone, Mr. Huntington exclaimed: "That is the very man I have been looking for." The next Spring (1915), at his Los Angeles home, Mr. Cole was surprised by a telephone call from Mr. Huntington, who would like very much to visit Mr. Cole that afternoon, if possible. Mr. Cole was at home. The interview was brief. Mr. Huntington was planning to devote the remainder of his life to building up his collection of books and art, then in his New York home, and wanted Mr. Cole to become his Librarian. In due course all arrangements were made, and on October 1, 1915, Mr. Cole began his duties in New York in the Huntington home at Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, where the priceless books from fabulous purchases were stored.

Mr. Cole, through his custodianship of one of the world's greatest collections of rare books, and with his experience in the early English and American field, was now in a position to give notable service to the bibliographical world. The culmination of his labors was a "Checklist of English Literature to 1640 in the Library of Henry E. Huntington," brought out in 1919, with

"Additions and Corrections" in 1920. This is one of the most accurate and valuable works of its kind yet produced, superior, because of its inclusion of the collation of books by signatures, even to the famous "Short Title Catalogue" published by the Bibliographical Society in 1926.

Mr. Huntington continued his purchases of rare books, both through buying at auction and the acquisition of entire private libraries, and in 1920 the vast collection was moved to its new and present home at San Marino, California. Mr. Cole had reached one of the pinnacles of the library world. In 1924, at the age of seventy-four, he became Librarian Emeritus.

Still sturdy, he devoted remaining years to lecturing and producing various scholarly works. In 1935, at the age of eighty-five, he published a plan for the systematic arrangement of "Postcards—The World in Miniature." In December 1937 he suffered a stroke which made him an invalid for the last two years of his long and active life.

Mr. Cole received the honorary degree of Litt.D. from Trinity College, Hartford, in 1920. His membership in bibliographical, library and historical societies, both in the United States and abroad, was wide. He was a founder of the Bibliographical Society of America in 1904, and its President in 1916-1921. He contributed frequently to its Papers, including "The First Folio of Shakespeare," 1908; "Book-collectors as Benefactors of Public Libraries," 1915; "Bibliographical Problems," 1916; "Bibliography—a Forecast," 1920; "The Photostat in Bibliographical Work," 1922; "Bibliographical Pitfalls," 1926; and "A Survey of the Bibliography of English Literature," 1930. In 1933 he compiled the elaborate "Index to Bibliographical Papers Published by the Bibliographical Society and the Library Association," which was published by the American Society and distributed to all the members of the English Society. Of the Bibliographical Society of London he was an honorary member.

He was a constant contributor to literary and bibliographical journals. In 1936 "A List of the Printed Productions of George Watson Cole" included 113 titles, nearly all on bibliographical or library problems. Outside of titles already mentioned, his largest work was "Bermuda in Periodical Literature," a book of nearly 300 pages, published in 1907.

As the result of much visiting, gathering notes and pictures, he published in 1910: "Missions and Mission Pictures; A Contribution towards an Iconography of the Franciscan Missions of California."

Mr. Cole was elected to the American Antiquarian Society in 1918. He came to the meetings when he was in the East, and in 1928 read at the October meeting a highly valuable paper on "Lewis Hughes, the Militant Minister of the Bermudas and his Printed Works." He was in friendly touch with the Society for many years, sending frequent gifts of material to the Library. In 1934 he gave to the Library his entire Bermuda collection, including printed literature, maps and manuscripts. The following year he forwarded his collection of 35,000 postcards, his private journals and his collection of personal correspondence and papers. This material, when it is finally arranged and indexed, will form a record of a busy life of over half a century, and a valuable contribution to the study of American bibliography.

Mr. Cole's most munificent gift came through his will. He bequeathed to the Society three-tenths of his residuary estate, to which was subsequently added the estate of his wife, who died December 3, 1939, surviving him by less than two months. According to the Cole trust, the Yale Library, to which he had given his reference books, Trinity College, and the Bibliographical Society of America also shared in the bequest. Thus Mr. Cole died as he had lived, continuing his service to American scholarship through his generous benefactions to the institutions in which he was interested.

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