

# A storm sans égal

What do you get when you combine a thunderous Mosher-Wiksell archive with a mighty downpour of books from the Zahn Bindery, both of which are struck with a lightening burst of a great William Butler Yeats association item? I'll tell you what you get: a perfect storm, a thunderous fusion of supreme goods demanding liquidation of a collector's bank account in exchange for such chattels. It's the creation of storm *sans égal* bringing about an unparalleled opportunity sparking the memory of what your personal genie asked you heed, "one must be careful when making one's three wishes." I'll tell you what else you get: a gargantuan headache, which is why I'm drinking some Scotch whiskey and taking some aspirin while writing this essay.

These "meteorological" events conjoined at virtually the same time, this after the careful nudging of one collector for seven years (starting back on March 8, 2004), the slow coaxing of the Wiksell family for about nine years, and since May 2010 working with the family who's forbearers owned the S. C. Toof & Co. where the bindery was located. To each one of these events I now turn your attention, starting with the thunderclap of the letter archive, then moving to the drenching downpour of bindings, and lastly the blinding flash of the Yeats material which ended the storm leaving me somewhat stunned but otherwise in an odd sort of peaceful state.

## The Wiksell Archive

The family papers, books and other material from the remaining estate of Gustav Percival Wiksell have finally come in my direction after nine years. Several years ago I acquired a number of items from the family but they finally decided to have the remainder find the best of homes. Along with their consignment of some excellent Walt Whitman material which I sold on their behalf, all the other Whitman related material and correspondence from Mosher to Wiksell has finally been added to the collection. Wiksell was a dentist in Boston; area leader of Boston Walt Whitman Fellowship; and a very close friend of Horace Traubel (foremost Whitman disciple, editor of *With Walt Whitman in Camden*). He also had a correspondence with Thomas Bird Mosher. Indeed, Mosher considered him one of his closest friends. There are several lengthy letters from Mosher to Wiksell, some of which detail why certain Mosher books were being specially forwarded to Wiksell. A good example is one of only two copies (Mosher himself owned the other copy) of a very special printer's proof of *The Book of Heavenly Death* with a hilarious red title

page device of Horace Traubel leading his merry band of Whitman disciples. In his April 5, 1905 letter to Wiksell, Mosher writes:

Here is a decided rarity! My pressman (who is a barn wag, as I think you will say) has just brought me in a proof of this title page device in red – and you can imagine my howls of laughter when I beheld his deed.

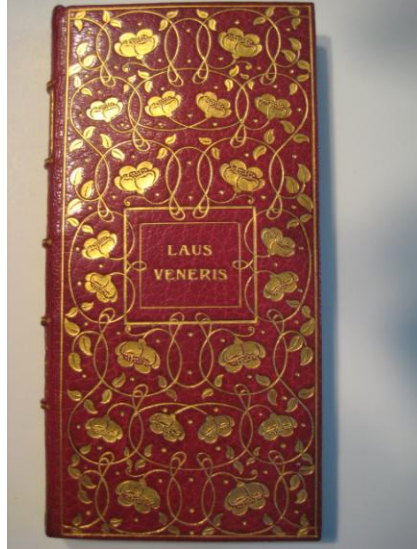
That's just one of the many exciting "finds" in this archive of material. There's another copy of the same Mosher Press *Book of Heavenly Death*, this one being inscribed by Horace Traubel saying that what is called a book of heavenly death is, if read correctly, actually a book of heavenly life. There are press-pulls of Walt Whitman's portrait on Japan vellum and one on real animal vellum, and a picture of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, all described in an attending letter. Another really nice grouping of papers is described in Mosher's April 21, 1905 letter telling Wiksell, "I thought you might like to see how your friend in Maine slowly builds up a foreword, not without much vexation of spirit." Accompanying the letter is (a) Mosher's hand-written forward, followed by (b) the initial galley proof on which the publisher has made numerous hand-written corrections, and then (c) a trial printing of all the pages of that issue of *The Bibelot*, but again with a corrections. Quite instructive and such material would provide a rather nice sequential layout in an exhibition some day.

There are printer copies of some Mosher Press announcements, advance notices with Mosher's notes, trial title pages, books like Havelock Ellis's *The New Spirit* (London: Walter Scott, n.d. [ca. 1900-05]) which is partly inscribed, "The Whitman essay I should think was well nigh perfect in its appreciation," and a copy of Whitman's *Memories of President Lincoln and Other Lyrics of the War* (Portland, ME: Mosher, 1904, Copy #44 of 50) in which Mosher wrote "I hope this will rejoice you in the matter of book-making. If it don't then I must give up the job!" Horace Traubel also signed the book after his print-signed foreword to the book. These items are now added to the other Wiksell material previously acquired from the estate, and a full inventory is being made of the contents.

### The Zahn – Schwartz Bindings

While Wiksell material was coming in, I was also receiving the first five of ten utterly exquisite, highly decorated bindings from the S. C. Toof & Co. Bindery of Memphis, TN, later renamed the Zahn Bindery, which was formed sometime between 1904-1909 and continued until 1915. Otto Zahn (1857-1928) headed the bindery in toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His binding designs bounce from old world styles to Art Nouveau, and many of his productions are made from *Petit s Fers* (small tools used for decoration, esp. pointille, roundlettes and the like), a variety of gouges, and either roulette or

simple fillet borders, which he combines with a supreme mastery of design and which exhibits the uncommonly high skill of a master designer-binder. Zahn referred to his work as “Art-Binding” and the sensitive forms and delightful patterns produced are truly works of art.



Upon seeing some of these books, a Canadian colleague of mine indicated, “the bindings transcend that type of ooh and aah into the more appropriate ‘they border on national treasures and supreme examples of the Arts & Crafts bindery work’... they are works of art, not just examples of the technical mastery of binding, but of art.” A prestigious London collector of bindings remarked that they are, “quite spectacular. I particularly like (lust after) *Laus Veneris*...” So there was indeed good reason why

Thomas Bird Mosher thought of Otto Zahn as being one of the foremost binders in this country when he said “I believe he is without an equal on this side the waters” (Mosher to Grigsby ALS, March 21, 1989 at the Gleeson Library, University of San Francisco).

These bindings were kept at the bindery, along with forty others, perhaps as handy examples to show clients visiting the shop, and Zahn often sent pictures to prospective clients. Some served as examples to be shown to the public and to the practicing profession in such periodicals as the *American Bookmaker*, the *Printer and Bookmaker*, the *American Printer and Bookmaker*, *Brush and Pencil*, the *Book Buyer*, the *British Bookmaker*, and several others. In 1904 he wrote and published a monograph, *On Art Binding*, which served as a promotional piece to accompany his work exhibited at the St. Louis Exposition of 1904. He also pictures a couple of these bindings in that monograph.

The family located me by means of my article on “Extra Binding and the Mosher Books—An Overview from the Bishop Collection” written for the *IOBA Standard* located on the Internet. This article contains a number of examples of bindings by Otto Zahn and one by Lorenz Schwartz. It was just what they needed to contact me and from there we went into negotiations. Quite frankly, without that Internet article I don’t think we would have ever connected.

Eight of the ten bindings finally acquired for the Mosher Collection were done by Otto Zahn himself (three are pictured in black & white

in this issue of *Endpapers*), while two others are the intriguing work of Lorenz Schwartz who later worked with The Zahn Bindery, starting sometime between 1904-1909. Schwartz was a Danish binder whose position of binder and head instructor at The Zahn School of Art Bookbinding lasted until around 1915. Like Otto Zahn, he first learned his bookbinding skills in Germany before coming to the United States. After working at the Zahn Bindery he was later found in the employ of the Roycrofters in East Aurora, New York. His finest bindings are masterpieces comparable to the work of Otto Zahn himself, to those of Louis Herman Kinder of the Roycrofters, and even to the work of the French binders of the Club Bindery in New York City, but Schwartz has a highly distinctive style which differs measurably from all those other binders. An example of his style can be seen in the Internet article I mentioned above.

I cannot begin to fully express just how pleasurable an experience it is to hold, feel, and view these bindings. They add to the five other Zahn bindings already collected over the decades, bringing the total to thirteen; and add two more Schwartz bindings which brings that binder's total to three. In all then there are sixteen bindings which emanated from the S. C. Toof & Co. (later Zahn) bindery and which now accompany about 400 other bindings in the Mosher Collection, but these are certainly some of the highlights of the collection. I might also add that there were only two bindings on Mosher books which were pictured in Zahn's monograph of *On Art Binding* and both now reside here. So a great deal of depth has added to, and enriched, the special bindings area of the Mosher Collection. As you might surmise, further research and writing on Otto Zahn is well underway.

### The Yeatsean Lightning Bolt

The third part of this perfect storm convergence was admittedly the most emotionally draining experience of my collecting career. The Wiksell and Zahn procurements required a great deal of patience, but I managed to suppress my emotional attachment until they were finally entered into the collection. Not so with the Yeats material.

In June 1908 Lily Yeats, sister to the great poet William Butler Yeats (WBY), got her brother to inscribe a seventh, 1908 edition of the Mosher publication, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, for a friend she met in New York. The inscription was actually a four-line poem written, dated and signed by WBY. As it turns out, there is only one other known manuscript version of this poem dating before its published appearance in the *Collected Works* of 1908. Accompanying the book is Lily Yeats's 2 ½ page letter to her friend, a Miss Brachvogel. It's a marvelous association package, and I've kept track of it for seven

years following the owner's first revelation to me that he had this material in his own collection. So for seven years I faithfully and persistently contacted the owner to let him know that if he ever wishes to sell it, I'd be very interested. Then, finally, just before the March 2011 Washington Antiquarian Book Show, I put together some material for this collector and sent him an email asking if he had any interest in horse trading. I got a call. Indeed, it was enough to pique his interest and we made provisions to meet at my motel room on Saturday, March 5 to see if we could come to terms.

I freely admit that the prospect of acquiring this material both greatly excited me, keeping me awake at nights, but also pervaded my being with a foreboding feeling of dread. As it turns out I was correct in harboring both sets of feelings, for the final two-hour negotiations in my room were some of the most harrowing in my collecting lifetime. (Only one other time comes close, that being when I negotiated the purchase of Mosher's personal papers in Portland, Maine) As previously arranged, my wife stayed with my bookseller's booth at show's opening, so I tread alone on this part of the quest, while the owner of the Yeats material was accompanied by a close friend and associate. The three of us were in the hotel room trading fascinating book collecting stories of yore which were a kind of a necessary propaedeutic to the actual brass tack negotiations. It's hard to concentrate on the stories when the matter-at-hand leers in the background. Midway into the negotiations proper, the collector's friend asked to be excused because she couldn't take the stress and tension which was obviously building. I remember more than once how my head bowed low whilst thinking all was lost. Had I come so far only to find the Yeats material permanently withdrawn and unreachable? Somehow, however, we finally arrived at a package of goods plus cash deal, and I even ended up throwing a fore-edge painting into the mix—a lovely and rather large painting by the world-renown Martin Frost depicting the famous death of Thomas Chatterton after Henry Wallis's 1856 oil painting. We went back downstairs to the book show where the collector met up with his companion and I off to my booth—my “treasure” being placed under the skirt of a table. I couldn't believe what had just happened, but my feeling of being emotionally spent and physically drained accompanied me the rest of the day.

I've kept this essay purposely short, and will add only a couple insights which now occur to me. When I acquire an item for the collection, my mind stays focused on its further research. The more important the item, the more focused I become. The next day and into the next week, I intensely began researching just who this “Miss Brachvogel” was to whom Lily Yeats wrote and to whom she sent her

brother's holograph poem. I contacted several Yeats authorities and even submitted a query to an on-line WBY eGroup. One member of that group was especially intrigued by my new acquisition: Professor Warwick Gould of the University of London, editor of the prestigious *Yeats Annual*. Following a brief exchange of emails over the next couple days, Professor Gould invited me to submit an article to *Yeats Annual*, and even offered to collaborate on some of its research. Long story short, my finished article (which couldn't have been done without Professor Gould's assistance) was submitted this past June 30th. Its reception was acknowledged and I was thanked for the article. It goes to three Yeats scholar referees for their review and thumbs up or down. My fingers are crossed.

I suppose if there is any last reflection to make on this perfect storm of acquisitions, it's this: at some point --at least for some of us-- we become one with our collections. When you start out in book collecting there is the collector vis-à-vis the objects collected. Somewhere along the line that changes, and we become more a part of our collections, or they of us, than we first realized. The set of occurrences this past spring certainly brought that forcefully home to me. I always liked to think that, if I had to, I could walk away from the Mosher Collection, divest myself of its importance to my life and go about doing something else. Now I don't know if that would be possible, and I can certainly appreciate the strain under which the former Yeats owner, whom I have the utmost respect, toiled in finally agreeing to a deal which separated him from his long-held trophy. Perhaps it's not much in comparison to some of the fabulous association items in the great collections of yesteryear, or even to those formed by today's great collectors, but it's what I have and what has me. I don't foresee a time when I won't be dedicated to the collection nor when I'll lose interest in researching and writing something based on its contents and its connection to the greater world of books. Its reaches are co-terminus with my own, and together we'll go down until one is left to carry on—and we all know what one that will be, barring fire or some other catastrophe. It's my privilege, indeed my distinct honor, to have such a "place" in the world of book collecting.

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