

A Peek Behind the Letters of Two Other Mosher Collectors

Back on June 10 I received an offer from Marc Selvaggio, an ABAA bookseller out of Berkeley, CA. I had many good book buying experiences through him, including the best of all: my selection of items from the Fred J. Board Collection which I've written about elsewhere in earlier *Endpapers* (Sept. 2007; briefly in March 2012). Once he also sent me a gift of copy #10 of 100 of Rossetti's *House of Life* (Mosher, 1898) printed on Japan vellum on March 7, 2007 but with a notes on his mailing label marked "Merry Christmas." Must have been belated. Anywho, it's been a few years since I've heard from him, but his email to me was about a couple files that remained in his possession after the Board Collection was divvied up between me, a couple institutions, and an auction house in New England where the unwanted/unsold portion (the "dregs" I called them, although still nice and clean) went mostly to one bidder. I attended the auction to see what would happen to the remaining portion I had dismissed and actually bid on a few items, unsuccessfully I might add, so I was there basically for entertainment. The files were the last remnants of the Board Collection, at least in Selvaggio's possession, and he wrote me that perhaps an article like "A Collector collects Mosher" or something like that might come out of it. Well this is that brief essay.

The files arrived and their overview didn't turn up much exciting material. There were a number of notes and letters that were concerned with WPA guides which weren't of much interest to me as a Mosher collector. There were a few letters from the first Mosher bibliographer, Benton Hatch, one letter from Flora Lamb (Mosher's assistant) and a few letters from others whose names meant very little to me, but the bulk of the files contained correspondence between Kenneth Shanks (the memorial dedication to Kenneth H. Shanks, 1911-1989, appeared in my bio-bibliography *Thomas Bird Mosher—Pirate Prince of Publishers*, and his collection is at the University of Louisville) and Fred Board, vice president of corporate development for the Borden Company in New York. Shanks wrote from Princeton, Indiana in 1973-75 and the letters are oft times written on graph paper (you know, an overall pattern of little squares) and mostly in all caps. Although rather arcane, what is sort of interesting to me is that each collector depended on different bibliographical lists and sources. Ken Shanks used Benton Hatch's *A Check List of the Publications of Thomas Bird Mosher...* (Gehenna Press publication of 1966) while Fred Board used Will Ransom's Mosher list in his *Selective Check List of Press Books* (1945) which Board refers to as "Duschnes" (Philip C. Duschnes was the publisher). Board repeatedly emphasized to Shanks that he collects only the first Mosher Press edition of each title, so Duschnes was sufficient for his needs. The two men exchanged lists of titles they were still seeking, and the lists get further broken down into columns of Ransom/Hatch equivalencies and a myriad of bibliographic details. As the latest Mosher Press bibliographer I can appreciate how they struggled to accurately define things, but it does get tedious and even a bit boring.

In the dozen or more letters Shanks indicates what he had and didn't have in the various Mosher Books series (lots of enclosed lists with notes), proposed

trades, and offered brief remarks on Mosher's life. Shanks also indicates that he worked closely with Benton Hatch in the preparation of the Hatch bibliography update of the Mosher Books (subsequently first published in Jean-François Vilain and Bishop's *Thomas Bird Mosher and the Art of the Book* (Phila.: F. A. Davis Co, 1992, "Addenda & Corrigenda" section). Apparently there were also several parcels exchanged between the two men. But what is colorful is in how Shanks viewed himself and Mosher, examples of which I randomly pull from his correspondence with Board:

"I'm a poor man—poor by any monetary standard you want to apply. But in my memories I am rich. In my judgment life could cheat me only by handing me a lingering death. If that does not happen I'll always be ahead of the game." --Nov. 8, 1974

"As to Mr. Mosher, I've studied him—through his works and what has been written about him. I've corresponded with Mr. Hatch and he and I understand one another. I've learned from him, and he has learned from me. I have one advantage over him—I have the books at my finger tips. He saw them briefly on visits to libraries or had them for short periods on loan. I have another thing going for me—almost unlimited time. [and later] Altogether I've come to have, actually and as a matter of fact and not wishfully or conceitedly, as good a knowledge of Mosher and his books as anyone around. We can't explain Mr. Mosher, but we can know him. I do." --April 5, 1975

"My want list is down to about 70 now. This number includes "catalogues" and 7 of the 8(?) "Reprints from The Bibelot" which I have little hope of finding. I've misplaced by note book so I'll have to make another for you. I have your last xerox list. I shall mark and return a copy as you requested." -- Feb. 1, 1974

"I wish I could say something which might help you with the 'time' problem. That's the great thing about the folks in Mexico—time does not much concern them. How great it would be if we could learn that lesson from them. It would do more for us than did penicillin." --Dec. 2, 1973

"Mosher was indeed inconsistent. His mind became fuzzy when he was a comparatively young man. You recall his stroke and how irascible he became as a result of it? No doubt he recognized or realized that it had made him fuzzy----though one [might] not expect him to be able to access the extent with accuracy—and became irascible because of this affect." -- March 8, 1973

"If you want to dig into this further I suggest you write Norman Strouse. I wrote him once and was not pleased with his response. Wealth shows on some folks and the poor people are apt to resent the showing. He claims to have 99% of the works [of T. B. Mosher]--Don't know if he means titles or issues. I would expect him to have just what I have in these titles since I'm convinced that's all there are. If he had something more it would justify (prove) your point." - -March 8, 1973

The two men did have a somewhat vigorous correspondence, and received mutual benefits involving the exchange of information, suggestions for further contacts, and book trades. There are also pages of photocopies of some of Fred Board's 3" x 5" index card files for his Mosher Collection (there were many more catalogue cards I actually saw at one point when visiting Board), and I can even glean some similarities between Board's letters and my own correspondence with him during somewhat strange and befuddling dealings I had with Fred Board years later, but that's a story for another time.

There were two items stuck away in the files that are more of just passing interest. One was a Philip C. Duschnes bookseller catalogue listing (Cat. 127, entry 103) referring to a pure vellum copy of Marcel Schwob's *Mimes* (Mosher, 1901, one of six) bound in full purple crushed levant morocco by

Zucker of Philadelphia (location currently unknown). The other is a 22 page double-spaced typescript entitled "Thomas Bird Mosher—A Sentimental Journal into the Byways of Literature." I have a copy of Shanks article "Thomas Bird Mosher" that appeared in the *Library Review* 24 (Nov. 1976, pp. 107-08), but this is not the typescript of that article. This paper is not signed, and the only identification of the writer is on p. 2 where he writes:

The writer might well be asked what qualifications he possessed that he should write about Mr. Mosher and the Mosher Press. Were I to assume to speak with authority on typography, layout or general book design, or upon the history of the private press movement in this country or in England, I would be hard pressed to defend myself. My only qualification is that of an enthusiasm which, lighted some twenty odd years ago, has burned steadily ever since; and during that time has acquired more than three hundred Mosher books, representative of every phase of the work of this versatile genius. So I write, not as an authority or a near-authority on any phase of the written or publishing box books, but merely as one who wishes to spread among others a fuller appreciation of who Thomas Bird Mosher was and what he should mean to all those who love the physical and spiritual beauty of books.

I wrote to George McWhorter, curator of the Burroughs Memorial Collection at the Ekstrom Library at the University of Louisville. McWhorter was one of Ken Shank's closest friends and checked their correspondence and Shanks writings and this paper is not mentioned anywhere. Was it a paper by Fred Board? McWhorter suggested it might be by Norman Strouse and recommended that I go the route of checking for internal clues. I did. And it is indeed a paper by Norman Strouse, quite possibly his Roxburghe Club of San Francisco talk in 1937, or more likely the revised version of that talk only this time before members of The Rowfant Club in Cleveland in 1960. There is definite wording in the typescript that directly corresponds to the Prologue in Norman Strouse's *The Passionate Pirate* (North Hills, PA: Bird & Bull Press, 1964), for example:

Typescript: "It is a reassuring peculiarity of American civilization that during its highly mechanize phase of the past fifty years, when pattern of success seems as inflexible and monotonous as the products of its machines, there have been those who violated all rules established for personal or business success, and with impunity. In fact, it seems almost as though their achievements, and their influence upon American art, culture or commerce can be directly attributed to their serene disregard for such rules." [p.1]

Passionate Pirate: "It is a reassuring peculiarity or American civilization that during the last century, a period during which there have been such intense drives toward mechanization and mass production, there have been those who have found a way to live quiet and modestly successful lives while seeming to defy the normal rules for success. In fact, it would appear almost as though their achievements, and their influence within their own sphere of action, can be attributed to their serene disregard for such rules." (p.14)

Typescript: "Often as not, these errant souls are found living in places quite isolated from our vast centers of population; and although hardly one in ten thousand has ever have heard of them, their quiet influence is a permanent leaven in our American life." [p.1]

Passionate Pirate: "Often as not, these seemingly eccentric individuals have been found living in places quite isolated from our vast centers of population, and though only one in a thousand may ever have heard of them, they have provided a singular and permanent leaven in our cultural life." (pp. 14-15)

So there we go, the author of the typescript is Norman Strouse. Mystery all but solved. The only outstanding question is whether this is the 1937 or the 1960 address, but because of the closeness of the wording to the 1964 *Passionate Pirate*, it would seem that the later date is most probable.

There must have been many more files, underlined and checked dealer catalogues, but these are the only two files that I know of. I myself had a correspondence with Fred Board, but none of that appears. But speculation aside, it's of some interest to see the two collectors "go at it" in their pursuit to strengthen their own collections. Now we just do it by email. My own "files" between myself and another Mosher collector numbers 3,552 pieces of correspondence from January 9, 2003 until October 20, 2011. I can just imagine being sent those notes and letters in physical manila file folders! And the poor sucker trying to wade through them all. The Shanks/Board correspondence was a much easier task, thank gawd.

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