

SHOULD COLLECTORS READ BOOKS?

BY GEORGE H. SARGENT

It always has been the privilege of book collectors to criticize their fellows for the use they make—or do not make—of their treasures. The sales of the present season have been notable for the number of private libraries which have come into the market during the lifetime of their owners. In the days of John Hill Burton, who made the dogmatic assertion that a collector should confine all his transactions in the market to purchasing only, it was thought that when a collector put any of his books under the hammer of the auctioneer he did so involuntarily, and suspicions were awakened as to his financial soundness. Nowadays there are almost as many reasons for selling as for collecting. Rare books have always been looked upon by many of their possessors as more or less of an investment. The commercial instinct is revealed in the records of the ancient Egyptians. When Athens was stricken with famine, Ptolemy Euergetes, by allowing Egyptian corn to be sold, obtained from the Athenians the official copy of the works of Sophocles, Æschylus, and Euripides. Fifteen talents were deposited to guarantee the safe return of the manuscripts, but the crafty Ptolemy, who seems to have been one of the earliest to appreciate a first edition, sent back a sumptuous copy, kept the originals, and forfeited the guarantee.

Now whether or not a collector sells his books is a matter of primary concern to himself. If he buys an automobile, nobody complains because he

parts with it at the end of the season or exchanges it for another model. Certain collectors, however, seem to take it for granted, as did Burton, that a book-lover must be so infatuated with his treasures that nothing but death should be allowed to part him and his books. Burton made the specious argument that the possessor of a rare book takes an exaggerated view of its market value, and is likely to become unscrupulous in his effort to do justice to himself. The sales of the present season do not bear out this view. If such libraries as those of Herschel V. Jones and Lord Mostyn paid their owners a handsome profit by their dispersal in the auction room, let the non-selling collector congratulate the owner for his good investment, and himself for the opportunity to secure the rare books which their former possessor, to his way of thinking, did not seem to appreciate. The same collector who is inclined to find fault with Henry E. Huntington for buying libraries *en bloc*—libraries of books which he cannot possibly find time to read, is likely to cavil because Mr. Huntington has disposed of some of his choicest and rarest works in the auction room. But collectors of rare books usually possess individuality in a marked degree, and no two view things from the same angle—which is a good thing for book collecting in general.

But there is another complaint, almost as old as that against the commercial instinct of book collectors—that the modern wealthy collector does

not use his books. "Scarcely without exception", said a book collector whose name I will not use—or of whose magnificent special collection I will not give a hint lest it instantly lead to identification, "scarcely without exception, I find the wealthy collector has very little bibliographical knowledge and practically no biographical knowledge of the men who have written the books he collects. As for a love of reading and literary taste, that is absolutely nil. None of the collectors read their books."

Now this arraignment is a serious one. Of course to know how serious it is, one should know all this collector's book-loving, or rather book-collecting, associates. It is gratifying to learn that there are exceptions, in his case. It goes without saying that he himself is not an offender; that his own bibliographical knowledge is profound; his acquaintance with the life-details of his favorite author almost amounts to a personal acquaintance, his love of reading is a passion, and his own literary taste is unimpeachable. The charge that the wealthy collector does not read his books is another matter. Probably he intends to do so when he gets time. For the present he is satisfied with allowing his friends to see his books and talk with him about them, reserving for himself the pleasure of knowing as much about his books, some day, as does the man to whom he shows them. If he is able to indulge in the luxury of a librarian for his private collection, he may keep the librarian sitting up o' nights to read the books and impart to him on the following morning the kernel of knowledge in the nut which the librarian has cracked. Such vicarious reading saves a lot of time and is likely to do no harm, either to the

librarian or the owner of the book. At any rate, if the librarian has directed his attention to something that he wishes to know more about, there is the book in his library.

The dealer in rare books, who looks upon them as merchandise, is not stirred to wrath by the discovery that the collector does not read the books he sells him. The "Aristotle" with the Commentary of Averroes, printed by Andreas di Asola at Venice in 1483, weighs about thirty pounds, and has been described as "the most magnificent book in the world". Making due allowance for the enthusiasm of the possessor who thus described it, it is a magnificent book and one of the monuments of early printing. But its weight would make it serviceable as a receptacle for pressed autumn leaves or for holding open the door of the butler's pantry. If the owner of the "Aristotle" decides to put it to such base uses, the dealer has no fault to find. His contention is that the purchaser of a rare book has an absolute right to do what he pleases with it, and that it is no other collector's business. From his point of view he is perfectly right.

There is honorable and ancient precedent for the use which many wealthy collectors make of their libraries today. Licinius Lucullus, returning from his Eastern campaigns in 67 B. C., came laden with spoil in the form of "a great number of books which were well transcribed"; and as Plutarch says, "the mode in which they were used was more honorable to him than the acquisition of them; for the libraries were open to all, and the walking places which surrounded them; and the reading-rooms were accessible to the Greeks without any restriction, and they went there as to an abode of the Muses and spent the

day there in company with one another, gladly betaking themselves to the libraries from their other occupations". Lucullus was a plebeian much given to display; but he was a man of literary tastes, a patron of literature, and had the glad hand for the Greek literati and the philosophers, feeling himself repaid by the pleasure and amusement which discussion of his treasures gave him. Cicero's large library was principally for his own use, although it is not conceivable that he was able to read more than a fraction of the books he collected.

Studying the lives of the great book collectors of the past, one is struck by the fact that the buyers of books in all ages have been conservers rather than creators. Yet the service performed is perhaps none the less useful. With a single exception, Henry E. Huntington has a copy of the first edition of every known Shakespeare quarto, yet he doubtless delegates to George Watson Cole the reading of them. The student of Shakespeare quartos who is a producer of literary comment could not naturally own all these treasures, and perhaps would not wish for them all, if he could; yet I have never heard that access to this magnificent collection was refused to the poorest student who had a serious purpose. Here the conserver performs a function possibly even more important than that of the producer—for the product may not be worth while, and a later commentator may find undiscovered richness in what a less painstaking forebear has passed over unnoticed. Reprints of most of the Shakespeare quartos are available, and it is not often necessary to consult the priceless originals; yet it is a satisfaction in which the caviling collector may

share, to know that in the last resort a copy of the original is available. A few scholars know how much of knowledge has been allowed to go out of the treasures of the Morgan library; let it remain caviar to the general.

That the majority of wealthy book collectors possess little bibliographical knowledge is undoubtedly true. Nor is it really to be expected. Bibliography is not one of the pursuits which leads to wealth; and many of our richest collectors have been so occupied with obtaining in other ways the wealth which would supply the materials for bibliographical uses, that they have not had the time to study the material. That pleasure is reserved for themselves at some future time, or for someone else immediately. Yet it is equally true that much of our bibliographical knowledge comes from these same collections, and in the case of my erudite and critical friend, the collector of the works of say, John Gilpin, valuable and lasting bibliographical work has been done by the owner. The science of bibliography owes much to the late Luther S. Livingston, although his means did not enable him to become an extensive collector of rare books. Yet all private libraries were open to him, and their owners found pleasure in allowing their collections to be used for the benefit of bibliography in general. The mean or miserly collector is in such a hopeless minority that his "splendid isolation"—or shall we call it hoggishness—makes him an object of execration among his fellows. So there is really little cause for complaint because one collector does not use his books in the way that another would.

As for biographical knowledge of the writer whose books are collected,

that is another matter of personal taste. Some readers cannot enjoy a book without knowing all about the personality of the writer apart from his writings. The disillusionments which sometimes follow the pursuit of personal knowledge are often pathetic or ludicrous. It is a question whether the real lover of literature, after all, is not the one who is satisfied with knowing so much of the author as is contained in his work, and is content to let it go at that. The thrills which may come from reading "The Fall of the House of Usher" may not be accentuated by learning that Poe was sometimes muddled with taking a drink; it adds no pleasure to a story like "A Municipal Report" to know that O. Henry once served a term in prison. There is some reason why a collector of Thackeray or Dickens or any other author should wish to know such details of the author's life as touch upon his literary workmanship. But if Thackeray took delight in swinging cats by their tails or Dickens took four lumps of sugar in his tea, I do not care to know of it. Probably most collectors of Thackeray and Dickens know the essential facts of the lives of those chosen authors—enough, at least, to give them an understanding of how, when, where, and why their different books were produced. Indictment discharged.

It is a desirable although sometimes an inconvenient thing, to have "literary taste". But if a collector of rare books lacks it, he cannot fairly be called anathema. The very thing which he is accused of lacking is a thing about which there can be no dispute, according to a well-acknowledged maxim. The formation of a literary taste is not an overnight matter. If some gentleman finds

himself in the possession of unexpected wealth and turns his attention to the collecting of rare books, he is not wholly to be blamed for not having at the same time acquired an appreciation of the finer qualities of the new possession. The only reasonable course for other collectors, it seems to me, is to help him to develop an appreciation of what he has got, and to impress upon him the canons of literary taste, trusting that he has seen "a beam in darkness; let it grow".

Now comes the charge that the collector does not read his books. We all know the old story of the collector who was horrified by finding that another collector had actually been caught reading a book. It impressed him with the same feeling that one might have in finding that a collector of old English plate was using it on his dining-room table every day, or that a collector of unused postage stamps was using them for postage. That is another side of the shield.

We all like the collector who buys rare books not only to show to his friends: who allows students and scholars to use them freely for the enrichment of bibliographical and other literature; who finds time to study them for himself and contributes to human knowledge by his labors. But in the nature of things this is not possible for all collectors, wealthy or otherwise; and the larger and more valuable the collection, the greater the handicaps placed in the owner's way. But does the indictment lie solely against the modern wealthy collector? Take a few of the books that collectors delight to place in their libraries, usually in first editions, and see how many of them would be read by their owners. And these are books that are generally

known and talked about. For instance, how many people have ever read "dear old Izaak Walton's 'Compleat Angler' "? The owner may tell you that his copy is the "correct" first edition, with the word "Fordidg" on page 88; with "contention" instead of "contentment" on page 245, "diligence" instead of "diligence" on the recto of A3, and page 217 reversed in printing. But there is little chance that he has learned these facts for himself in reading the book. And there is still less chance that you would be in a position to deny any other categorical statement which he might make regarding the text of Walton's "immortal classic of angling". Take Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy", with its thousands of references to the writers of antiquity. Much time has been spent in running down the authorities so profusely quoted, and the result has been to leave no doubt as to Burton's omniscient reading. On any subject under the sun Burton can be quoted, if one has the time to go through his sections, subsections and subdivisions of subdivisions; but be he collector or gentle reader, no man has any more business with sitting down and reading Burton through from cover to cover than he has with reading seriatim a book of "Familiar Quotations". "Robinson Crusoe" is an exceptional case. Most of us read it before we came to the age of book collecting—very few afterward.

Yet there is pleasure and profit in reading some of these collectors' books. Since the discovery of Lord Mostyn's copy of the first English secular drama, "Fulgens and Lucrece", "Gammer Gurton's Nedle" has fallen into third place. But the old English play, which is yet attributed in some quarters to John Still, is worth while.

Its humor is broad, familiar and sometimes grotesque. The incidents are connected, and the characters, not omitting Gib, the cat, are sharply drawn. Yet as reading material ten thousand dollars seems to be an absurdly high price. No purchaser of a copy at this figure can be blamed, but only pitied, if he does not read the little quarto. So, too, of John Gower's "Confessio Amantis". It might profit a man to read it, if only to find the answer of the question which puzzled Florent and which he happily answered: "What alle women most desire". Yet most book collectors would prefer to give a woman her own way at the outset rather than read through the long poem of "the morall Gower".

Therefore we must not be too hard on the collector who does not read his books. Happy if he is able to do so. To few men is it to be given to collect books as did the late Frederick L. Gay. During sixteen years of his life he read the three thousand volumes written by his colonial ancestors and their contemporaries, which came into his possession by bequest. As he read, he noted other titles which would help to a fuller understanding of his chosen studies. As he bought these, he read them. Puritan theology, genealogy, and early New England history interested him. Through verifying footnotes he came to study the "Calendar of British State Papers", and had transcripts made of those which held the slightest prospect of additional information, filling fifty-six bound volumes. A rough list of these was made; seventy-five copies were printed in a volume of two hundred and seventy-three pages and sent to students with the introductory statement that these transcripts were "at the service of

those who receive this book from me". This series of volumes, now given to the Massachusetts Historical Society, is for the benefit of future historians who may make profitable use of them. Mr. Gay's activities extended to many lines of research, and his splendid collection of American and British historical tracts, now in the Harvard Library, testifies to the value of intelligent book collecting by one who reads his books.

If other collectors fail to accomplish the work that ample means and leisure allowed this Boston collector to do, it only leaves more work for the collector of the future. It seems as unnecessary to defend the ways of collectors as it does to chide them for being collectors at all. It is useless for the man of science to explain to the mystic that his philosophy is unscientific. The mystic knows it, and does not care a rap. The critic who complains that his associates do not read their books must answer the question with which they reply: "Why should we?"

Coming back to the original matter, it seems that any collector has a perfect legal right to dispose of his books as he sees fit. Undoubtedly a higher purpose can be served by putting his books where they will be useful to scholarship for all time, than by using them for kindling the kitchen fire. He has a moral right to dispose of them either by auction sale or by private sale, or by giving them to his friends, or in any other manner which will insure their preser-

vation. The collector who has had the pleasure of acquiring a fine library of books of any author, having enjoyed them and made such use of them as will be of benefit to those who follow after him, cannot do better than put them in the hands of other collectors who may find in their possession the same pleasure that he has had. If the purchaser reads them, uses them, or places them at the service of others, all the better. If the seller finds that his books bring more than they have cost him, he should rejoice, and we with him. There are collectors, like A. Edward Newton, who still believe, with Burton, that they should never sell a book. Very well, let them keep their treasures while they live, and enrich learning as much as they are able. If another collector wishes to dispose of his great collection of the works of Dickens and let others get them for what they are willing to pay, let him do it and take up some other line of collecting. If book collecting seems to have fallen into evil ways and "gentlemen amateurs become speculators" in the book market, the evidence is not preponderating. More book collectors are being made than are dying off or are losing interest; and it is for the collector who is a thorough book-lover, student of biography, bibliographer, and reader with literary taste, to greet the reinforcing host with open arms and show them the charts of the land that lies before them, full of trenches to be taken and heights to be stormed.

HISTORY AS LITERATURE: AND THE INDIVIDUAL DEFINITION

BY CONSTANCE LINDSAY SKINNER

What is an American? It should not be difficult to arrive at the individual definition. The history of America is, comparatively, a short chronicle; and the Declaration of Independence was the brief opening chapter of a modern tale. It is a vivid, direct, pulsing narrative, not obscure in meaning nor doubtful in trend. Not by candlelight in dark places has America worked out one hundred and forty years of her destined way, but under open sky. That dear nickname, "God's Country"—humble and significant, or blasphemous and bombastic, according as you regard Deity,—was the coinage of some crude poet who felt that a roof did not shut him away from the enkindled blue, and from the stars, which are the light by day and night from the eyes of Him who dwelleth in the heavens. The persistence of the phrase shows that he voiced the thought of his tribesmen, who have woven the stars into their flags and taken the eagle for their symbol.

If the average American today really knows little of his country beyond his own emotions toward it, if he understands the history of his country so imperfectly that he has not a clear concept of either the emblem or the symbol, the fault lies with the writers of American history. Shrouded in dulness, befogged by blind prejudice and wilfully perverted through partisanship and propaganda, the narrative of America has come into the American's hands to bore and

to mislead him. It would hardly be exaggeration to say that, as far as the relation of the past to the present and the future is concerned, all he has learned is that he should cross his fingers, blow hard, and curse England on every fourth of July, and, on the other three hundred and sixty-four days of the year, prepare for the chance to go in and take Canada away from her. Small blame to him that he has not found the individual definition in history written after this fashion, for it is not there. There is little if anything there to help him answer the question, "What is an American?"

Dulness, perversion, propaganda, hymn-of-hate-stuff—all have conspired to keep the native American as ignorant of the spiritual history and import of America as if he were an agitating immigrant from darkest Bolshevikia, with a beardful of tangled theories, making his initial landing from Ellis Island by a graceful leap onto the nearest corner scap-box in Manhattan.

It is one thing, and a soothing thing, to inveigh against poky historians and propagandists; but invective does not uncover the root of the evil. Pokes and partisans have only occupied the field because it was left open to them. They have assisted in spreading, but they did not create, the erroneous belief prevalent in America that history is not vital, that the past is dead and the present cut off from it; that the age of invention,