

# THE SKETCH BOOK

## A LOST LIBRARY

By William A. McGarry

**L**ET it be a favor for the eminent works of fiction to be found upon the shelves, but let it not keep cushioned seats for time wasting and lounging readers, nor places for every day novels, mind tainting reviews, controversial politics, scribblings of poetry and prose, biographies of unknown names, nor for those teachers of disjointed thinking — the daily newspapers.”

The foregoing injunction might well be carved on a panel of the finest bit of pure Doric architecture in America — perhaps the finest in the world. It is located, this building, or rather “lost”, in a section of Philadelphia otherwise given over to sweatshops, railroad freight stations, junk yards, and the forlorn remnants of once pretentious homes. Architects the world over are familiar with the solemn grandeur of its perfect lines, and scholars know it as one of the great storehouses of scientific and historic knowledge. But the legend above, coupled with the accident of circumstance, explains why the Ridgway Library is almost unknown to the millions even at home.

The quotation is taken from the will of Dr. James Rush, who at his death in 1869 left half his fortune of two million dollars to the Library Company of Philadelphia to build a memorial to his wife, Phoebe Ann Ridgway. In another paragraph this unusual testament also provided that the shelves of the library must not be “encumbered with the ephemeral biographies, novels and works of fiction or amusement, newspapers or periodicals, which form

so large a part of the current literature of the day”. Dr. Rush also prohibited, in the building or on the lot of ground whereon it was to stand, “any lectures, public orations, addresses or exhibitions of any kind”; likewise “the formation of any museum, cabinet, gallery, or collection of natural history, statuary, sculpture, portraits or paintings (and especially the portrait of the testator)”.

The result of these and other even more detailed instructions has been to make the Ridgway a sort of “lost library”. Yet by some quirk in the minds of collectors, it is also the custodian of the finest collection of Americana in the world. More exclusive than the private libraries of millionaires, it holds in its barred and wired shelves treasures that would be worth a king’s ransom if thrown on the market. In many fields of American Colonial history it is the only existing source of original information; from the point of view of the scholar and scientist its collections of books are incomparable.

The building is located at Broad and Christian Streets in Philadelphia, a short fifteen minutes’ walk from the heart of the city. It occupies the front centre of an entire city square. In Dr. Rush’s lifetime this was the choice residential section of Philadelphia, or at least within a few minutes’ walk of the exclusive Spruce and Pine Street homes. To the south lay then nearly five miles of open land traversed by Broad Street and ending in the Navy Yard at the junction of the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers. In common with many others, Dr. Rush believed that the city would grow to

the south before expanding in any other direction, and therefore he chose what was an ideal site from that point of view for his wife's memorial.

It is nearly three quarters of a century since the will was written, and even today there are miles of unoccupied lowlands in the great area that Dr. Rush expected would soon be built up. Expanding north and west over country filled with hills and streams, Philadelphia grew away from the library. Even though it is within sight of the busiest centres, it is virtually lost. In twenty five years, the highest record of attendance was reached on a day on which the circus parade passed the library and 450 persons crowded into its spacious windows to get a view of the elephants. The average attendance is about twelve persons a day, and fully half of these are foreign visitors who have heard of the historic treasures on display.

Location, of course, is only partly responsible for this lack of patronage. The real reason lies in the extent to which the trustees have held to the wishes of the founder in excluding fiction from the shelves. At one time, when the average attendance was a little larger, it was the boast of the Ridgway Library that on shelves containing 100,000 volumes not a single work of modern fiction could be found. But since then the library has gathered into its collections thousands of the "eminent works of fiction" referred to by Dr. Rush. It contains hundreds of books famous among scholars but never popular with the masses.

In view, however, of the other attractions, it is somewhat of a mystery why the library is not more popular. Several years ago the trustees obtained legal authority to place on exhibition in the main hall the chief treas-

ures of Americana, and these are open to public inspection. Some of them are of absorbing interest to anyone with the slightest historic curiosity.

Chief among them, perhaps, is the little known illustrated postcard which Benjamin Franklin had made for his use in 1765. It shows that ten years before the American Revolution the great scientist-philosopher-printer was predicting just such an outcome of England's arbitrary treatment of the Colonies. But wholly apart from its historic value, the postcard indicates that 160 years ago Franklin foresaw the modern picture postcard now familiar to the world as a force in advertising and propaganda.

The card is entitled "Magna Britannia her Colonies Reduced", and is said to be the only known copy in existence. It bears the inscription: "The original print done in England on the back of a message card, the invention and for the use of Benjamin Franklin, Esq., LL.D., Agent for the Province of Pennsylvania in London." This legend throws a new light on the intrepidity of Poor Richard, who probably risked life and liberty in circulating this attack on the Crown in the homeland of England. But the explanation that was circulated with it is even more significant. It is as follows:

The above is a Prophetical Emblem of what wou'd be the Miserable State of Great Britain and her Colonies shou'd she persist in restraining their Trade, destroying their Currency, and Taxing their People by Laws made by a Legislature where they are not Represented. The Author, with a Sagacity and invention natural to himself, has compriz'd in one View, under the character of Belisarius, the late Flourishing State of Great Britain in the Zenith of Glory and Honour, with her Fall into the most abject State of Disgrace, Misery and Ruin.

In the same case with this gem lies the original manuscript of "Watson's Annals", one of the most invaluable

sources of Colonial historical information in existence. It is open at a page that triples or quadruples its value, for here the author inserted a water color by Major André, the British officer who was caught by General Washington's men and executed as a spy in connection with the treason of Benedict Arnold. In Watson's neat script appears the following explanation:

This is a drawing done by the unfortunate Major André. It was drawn to give the ladies of the Meschianza-Knights an idea of how they should dress as the Ladies of the Knights of the Blended Rose. It was presented to me by Jane Craig, one of those Belles.

The Meschianza was an entertainment given by American Tories to British officers during the occupancy of Philadelphia by Lord Howe and the Redcoats. In addition to the drawing by André, Watson preserved many others. Elsewhere in the collection are scores of broadsides issued by the British calling on the Colonists to lay down their arms, under threat of dire punishment.

Of even greater interest is the letter, famous among historians, which represents the most daring attempt at propaganda by the British during the Revolution. It was signed with the name of General Washington, and was issued by the British as an intercepted communication from the General to his wife. The marginal note explains that it is "spurious — wrote in London by a Mr. Randolph, of Virginia", but experts have been fooled by the imitation of Washington's handwriting, and it is recognized as one of the most brilliantly executed literary forgeries of history. The letter was just such a message as a well bred gentleman of the time would write to his wife, but all through it was woven a note of despair as to the outcome of the war. The following paragraphs will show how

cleverly the British "faked" the mis-  
sive:

I have often told you, that as far as I have the controul of them, all our preparations of war aim only at peace. Neither do I, at this moment, see the least likelihood of there being any considerable military operations this season and, if not this season, certainly in no other. It is impossible to suppose, that in the leisure and quiet of Winter quarters, men will not have the virtue to listen to the dictates of plain common sense and sober reason.

The only true interest of both sides is reconciliation. We must at last agree and be friends; for we cannot live without them, and they will not without us, and a bystander might well be puzzled to find out, why as good terms cannot be given and taken now. For all these reasons, which cannot but be obvious to the English Commissioners, and ours, as they are to me, I am at a loss to imagine how anything can arise to obstruct a negotiation, and, of consequence, a pacification.

Of modern newspapers there are none in the Ridgway Library, but the collection has more copies of early American journals than any other in the country. Many of these far antedate the Revolution. In the collection there are also the originals of some famous cartoons of the day.

Notable in this list is the ludicrous drawing of the first fist fight in Congress, which took place between Colonel Matthew Lyon and Roger Griswold on January 30, 1798. For many years the verses accompanying this drawing remained popular:

He in a trice struck Lyon thrice,  
Upon his head, Enrag'd, Sir;  
Who seized the tongs to right his wrongs  
And Griswold thus engag'd, Sir.

Dr. Rush was a son of Dr. Benjamin Rush, the noted physician-patriot of the Revolution, and one of the treasures which the younger Rush donated to the library was the collection of his father's letters — forty volumes in all. These have been a constant source of information to historians. Other equally valuable collections in the

Ridgway's possession include the Loganian Library, left to the city of Philadelphia by Logan, secretary to William Penn, and for many years housed in a separate building opposite Independence Square. The diaries and books of John Fitch, rival of the discoverer of the steamboat, are also on the Ridgway shelves. For a time the library held the only copies of some important English state papers left by Crowe, secretary to the Pretender James III. Several years ago these were returned to England to complete the files, and reproductions were provided for the Philadelphia institution.

Because of the value of its books, and the fact that several important volumes had been stolen, the Library years ago found it necessary to prohibit the public from approaching the shelves. In addition to this protection, all the shelves are wired and some are barred. Visitors are not permitted on the upper floor, which is reached by a broad staircase in keeping with the architectural features of the exterior. All books, however, are available to readers, who ask at the desk for what they want. Library members are permitted to take books home, or they may read in the great reading room on the first floor. In an alcove off this room there are chess tables. Ridgway, incidentally, owns what is said to be the second best collection of chessmen in the world.

Externally, the structure is by all odds the most striking bit of architecture of its type to be found anywhere in the country. The main hall of Girard College, also in Philadelphia, is often cited as a remarkable example of the Corinthian order. But most experts agree that the Ridgway building is even more imposing. It is built with three groups of columns on the portico, otherwise it is severely devoid

of any attempt at decoration. The form and balance of the pile are magnificent.

Part of the site is surrounded by a high granite wall, and in the front there is an iron fence. For many years campaigns were waged to have the vast expanses of lawn turned into a park. The Board finally compromised by making the lawns a resting place in summer for women and children. Hundreds of tired mothers from the slums find cool breezes and rest in the hot weather, away from the crowded city squares and streets.

It is possible that some day the Ridgway Library will be thronged with patrons, for Philadelphia is now being forced downtown. A subway is being constructed under Broad Street. Freight yards eventually are to be removed to distant points along the two rivers, and the whole area of lowlands far below the library, now known as "The Neck", is to be filled in and developed. In the meantime the Library is the habitat of a few students and scholars, and a trickle of foreign visitors who have heard of its architectural loveliness and its famous historical collections. To these the peace and quiet of its lofty halls are worth more than all the crowded fiction libraries the world has to offer.

## THOSE GENTEEL LADIES

By Kathleen Robertson

"THE daughter of the West will now see the seducer and slanderer of female innocence consigned to that immortality of infamy which he so richly deserved." In such terms, which not the most optimistic could call uncertain, is the protagonist of "Beauchamp, or The Kentucky Tragedy — A Tale of