



Leather-Bound Beauty in a Cowboy Outpost

ONCE BITTEN, TWICE SHY. If Philip R. Bishop had heeded those words, he never would have snagged a book he calls “an incredible gem” and “one of the major highlights of my collecting.” Instead, Bishop references the mantra of Zack Jenks, the successful Coke-bottle scout in Larry McMurtry’s novel, *Cadillac Jack*: “Anything can be anywhere.” It is a sentiment held dear—and much quoted—by those in the rare book world. It is also, adds McMurtry, “a statement that is to scouting what $E=MC^2$ is to physics.”

Bishop is both a collector and a bookseller, which is not, in itself, a rare thing, but many dealers find it too easy to be their own best customer when they collect and sell the same material. Not Bishop. In both capacities, he focuses on the work of Thomas Bird Mosher (1852–1923), a publisher based in Portland, Maine, who was inspired by the late nineteenth-century English private press movement to make beautiful books under his Mosher Press imprint. He was also, it must be said, something of a pirate, in the publishing sense of the word. He reprinted English titles for an American audience, with or without the authors’ permission, the first of which was

George Meredith's *Modern Love*. As Bishop writes on the website he has devoted to Mosher, thomasbirdmosher.net, "That first book in 1891 heralded a flow of limited editions that would reach a total of 730 titles and editions by the end of his publishing career."

During one of his visits to the nearby Book Haven in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he had worked as a clerk in the mid-1980s, Bishop picked up his first Mosher Press book: a copy of Richard Jefferies' *The Story of My Heart*. He bought it mainly because he felt a strong parallel between his personal philosophy and that of Jefferies, a nature writer sometimes referred to as the English Henry David Thoreau. It was the content that intrigued him, but he was impressed by the careful typography and high production value of the book itself. He returned to the shop the following day to buy more Moshers, thus beginning a decades-long journey to becoming the leading collector of the Mosher Press.

But this story dates to 1993. Just two years before, Bishop had struck out on his own as a bookseller after fourteen years in academia, opening a shop adjoining the Water Street Bindery in Lancaster. In these largely pre-Internet days, antiquarian booksellers and collectors relied on *AB Bookman's Weekly*, and Bishop was dutifully reading *AB* when he saw an ad for "books on books," one of his specialties at the time. He was befuddled by the source, however. It seemed to be some kind of trading post out West—he refers to it now as "Saddles and Books" though that wasn't its real name. Still, he figured he'd give it a shot. He called up and requested a catalog.

When the slight, blue, mimeographed catalog—"a shabby looking thing"—arrived in the mail, he shook his head and thought to himself, "Oh boy." There were books on Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, cowboys, Indians, and the Old West, plus saddles, chaps, reins, and equestrian supplies. As promised, it did have a small section of books on books, where three books bound in specialty leather bindings from a doctor's collection attracted his attention. Not yet the days of jpegs via e-mail, Bishop took a chance and sent a check. What arrived on his doorstep dumbfounded him. "They were horrible. They were absolutely abysmal," he recalled with a chuckle. "The leather did not join—like when [the binder] moved from red to blue or something like that, there was a wide gap. It had faded at spots." Needless to say, he shipped the books back to Saddles and Books for a refund.

Surprisingly, he was still on their mailing list. A couple of months later, he received "another one of their fabulous typographical wonders, this one

in a mustard-colored cover.” He perused the books on books category. Nothing. So he turned to the miscellaneous section, and all of a sudden, “my eyes lighted upon words to this effect: *The Germ*. Copy 4 of 4. Signed HC. SC.” (In booksellers’ code, HC means hardcover, and SC denotes that the book is in a slipcase.) There was no other information, and yet Bishop felt like lightning had struck. “I knew this had to be one of the copies of *The Germ* printed on vellum. . . . It’s the black orchid of Mosher’s publications. It’s one of the finest specimens of his book production. It’s the first reprinting of this great pre-Raphaelite benchmark that first appeared in England, mid-nineteenth century. It’s the first American appearance. It’s the first book Mosher had printed on animal vellum, in 1898. And it’s the first book printed on vellum in the state of Maine. I knew this book!” His passion for the subject is infectious. *The Germ*, by the by, is the short title of *The Germ: Thoughts toward Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art*, a reprint of a short-lived periodical that published the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti, among others.

Bishop grabbed the phone. Whoever answered at Saddles and Books remembered him and grumbled about his last purchase and subsequent return. He told them he’d pay by credit card, and they could write “non-returnable” on the receipt. He also requested \$50 overnight shipping. He knew there was a distinct possibility that the binding might be just as bad as the others, but “I didn’t care if the binding was in that doctor’s horrible leather patches,” he said. “All I wanted was the vellum copy of the book. There are only four in existence, and I just wanted *that book*.”

When the mail arrived the next day, Bishop locked the door of his shop, sat down, unwrapped the box, and dug through the packing peanuts, getting a glimpse of a mint-green slipcase. The way he remembers it, he was trembling with excitement, which is not difficult to believe, considering his level of excitement while chatting about it more than twenty years later. One look at the spine pretty well sealed it. “Oh my God! I’m looking at this book and I’m seeing the onlays, the incredible tooling, and all edges gold, bright, shimmering. I opened the front cover and this incredible, attractive moiré (watered) silk **endpaper** and **doublure** and tooling around the inner board, and at the bottom it says, Mounteney, binder.”

Turns out Leonard Mounteney was what’s called an exhibition binder—meaning he handcrafted extremely fine, high-end leather bindings suitable for show at exhibitions. He had worked for the famous English

bookbindery Riviere & Sons, and once he emigrated to America, he became employed by the Donnelley Bindery in Chicago and then founded and directed the Cuneo Fine Binding Studio of Milwaukee and Chicago. Such a binding—full orange mahogany **morocco**—was the cherry on top. “The printing is so incredibly beautiful, the **parchment** that’s used is absolutely exquisite, everything about this book screams ‘top quality,’” he said. “It also proves to me that anything can be found anywhere.”

To have listed a Mosher Press book on vellum in a designer binding alongside boots and spurs was sheer folly, and yet how many collectors, aside from Bishop, might have detected it? While he is not alone in collecting Mosher Press, Bishop is foremost in the area, with what some say is the largest research collection of its kind. He tends to concur. After all, he has personally examined every institutional and private collection of any significance. In a 2008 interview with the Independent Online Booksellers Association’s *Standard*, he lists a handful of fellow collectors, but only one whose collection rivaled his own in breadth and depth—that which once belonged to Mosher biographer and Bishop’s friend and mentor, Norman Strouse, who died in 1993. The majority of that collection is now, according to Bishop, at the University of San Francisco’s Gleeson Library, with some of the fine bindings going to the University of California Berkeley’s Bancroft Library.

Bishop’s collection is extensive. It includes hundreds of books from Mosher’s personal library, piles of manuscripts including correspondence, Mosher-printed books in fine bindings, inscribed and association copies of Mosher books, Mosher books printed on real vellum, hand-illuminated copies, Mosher lookalike books, publications with references to Mosher, paraphernalia and press ephemera, correspondence

Endpaper refers to the sometimes decorative paper pasted down to the inside front and back cover of a book— a.k.a. pastedown—and its component “free” endpaper that appears before the title page.

Doubleure is a French term that means that the endpaper is leather, instead of paper, and usually decorated.

Morocco is leather made from goatskin. Amenable to dyeing, the leather is a top choice for fine bookbinding.

Parchment is animal skin processed for use as a writing surface. Like vellum (calf only), it is used in the production of fine and limited editions as an alternative to paper.

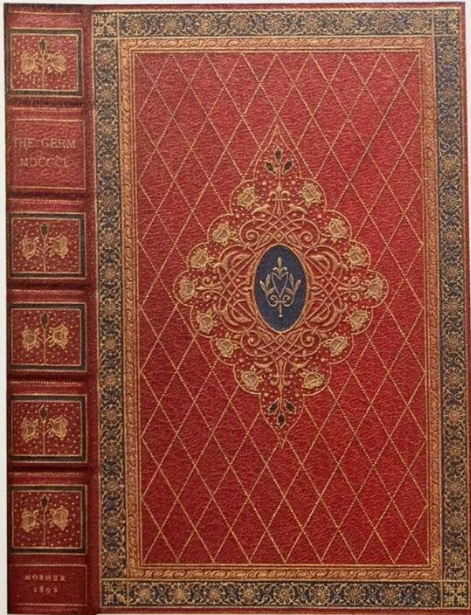
with other Mosher collectors, and personal research materials on the Mosher Press, particularly those related to a bio-bibliography he wrote and published in 1998, *Thomas Bird Mosher—Pirate Prince of Publishers: A Comprehensive Bibliography and Source Guide to The Mosher Books Reflecting England's National Literature and Design* (Oak Knoll Press and The British Library). When pressed to put a number on his collection, he estimates about 3,500 volumes, which doesn't account for the manuscripts or ephemera, and though there are a few items that elude him—he'd love to get his hands on Mosher's thirty-four-volume set of *Bell's British Theatre*—he is, at this point, engaged more in upgrading certain titles or acquiring books with significant Mosher inscriptions and ultra-rarities.

The Germ, of course, falls into the sacred "vellum" category above, in which he now counts thirty-three in the collection, more than any modern competitor, including the great Norman Strouse.

After almost three decades, Bishop hasn't yet exhausted the thrill of collecting Mosher Press. As he told the *Standard*, "In my view, simply stated, Thomas Bird Mosher not only expressed an ideal in bookmaking but *lived* it." Most of the buying he does now is at book fairs and over the Internet, but he has pleasant recollections of book buying in the "old days" of bookstore sleuthing. He said, "I enjoyed the hunt. I enjoyed finding material in out-of-the-way haunts. I enjoyed the serendipity."

Amazingly, while Bishop's intense focus is on Mosher, he does acquire in other areas. He and his wife, Susann, add to a delightful collection of books with acorns and oak leaves as part of their cover design, and he assists with her collection on American authors' homes. He's also helping his son build a Dante collection. "Otherwise," he said, "I collect vicariously through my book-buying customers. For example, I helped in a big way to build one of the finest Roycroft collections in the country."

Ever since he was a child, Bishop felt a zeal for collecting. At the time, it was rocks, fossils, insects, and coins. "I think it instills in you the sense of trying to find things and focusing and what it means to have things adhere to one another by virtue of the fact that they've got their own shelf," he said. It wasn't until the mid-1970s, after leaving seminary, that someone offered him some early printed books and leaves from the Kelmscott Chaucer and the King James Bible of 1611. That directed his desire toward books. Thomas Bird Mosher couldn't have asked for a more ardent or diligent champion of his work.



LEFT: Philip R. Bishop turned up this incredibly beautiful book (chapter 7), printed by Thomas Bird Mosher and bound by Leonard Mounteney, from a trading post out West. *Courtesy of Philip R. Bishop*

BELOW: Retired Chicago engineer and book collector Joel Birenbaum's perusal of the *Sun-Times* classifieds led to his first rare book purchase: this Salvador Dalí-illustrated *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (chapter 8). *Courtesy of a private collector*

Larger version of image:

