

Take that Mr. Quinn!

Part I

The 2011 Baltimore Book Fair was an unusual one in that we set up a day after that 5.8 magnitude East Coast earthquake of Tuesday, August 23. Then came Hurricane Irene, and many of us booksellers were asked to dismantle our booths and reset everything in another location of the Baltimore Convention Center because the ceiling above us was actually just below a street and the ceiling at spots was beginning to leak due to the excessive rain. Business was hampered because some of the customers who ordinarily would have come stayed at home—I mean who could blame them if they wanted to avoid traveling during a hurricane.

Still, the book fair turned out to be more than just a passing event with the usual purchases and sales in that I actually bought a stellar book for the Mosher Collection. This event made the otherwise terrible trip worthwhile. The book was apparently destined to come to the Mosher Collection even though the book dealer who brought it to the show kept it hidden from me (I'll never understand such quirks of human nature). Another dealer on the floor was offered the book, in fact it actually became somewhat of a contentious affair in that two dealers in the booth actually wanted to buy it—one for his own collection since it bears a notable provenance—but somehow it was physically passed to another dealer who quickly snatched it up. So how did I become involved?

I walked into the booth of the dealer who bought the book and he asked me the question, “So Phil, how much would a Mosher book printed on vellum book go for, say if it was one of four copies... oh, and in a Club Binding?” I must have looked perplexed if not stunned because, after all, why would he ask me such a question if he didn't already have such a book or know where to get such a prize. I said of course it depends on condition, provenance, desirability of the subject matter to collectors, and so on, but I did suggest some prices. While I was answering his original question he reached under a bookcase on the table and pulled out the item in question, and oh what an item, especially desirable to the many collectors of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. He quoted me a price and without blinking an eye I accepted. Within a couple minutes the other dealer-collector who had seen it entered the booth and asked if I was offered “the book.” Its qualities were extolled and he admitted that he thought the dealer was correct in offering it to me even though he would have liked it for his own collection. I was stunned, or better yet in shock, and guess I looked like a deer in the middle of the road of an approaching car at

night.

I took the vellum book back to my booth and my wife noticed how gingerly I was fondling it. She asked me if I had found something and I told her that I hadn't found it, but it had found me. After a quick look she took off to the dealer's booth to kid him about what I had brought back, and apparently he told her how much I paid for the book (gads, it's not supposed to work that way) but upon her return she said it must have been a good price and I was lucky to have it. Could I disagree? The other dealer who was hoping to purchase the book came over to my booth and watched me look it over. He again confirmed that even though he wanted to own it, he nevertheless agreed that it went to the proper collection, indicated that he felt I bought it at a very reasonable price, and again offered his congratulations. While he was there with me, I asked if he would have told me about the book if he had been the one who purchased it for his own collection. His honest response was an unequivocal "no."

So what is this little gem? It's John Hay's *In Praise of Omar--An Address Before the Omar Khayyám Club* (Mosher, 1898). The is the Henry William Poor / William Francis Gable copy, No. 3 of 4 printed on American vellum and rubricated, bound in full russet levant morocco, with floriated border of gilt tooling on sides, heavily gilt paneled spine with flower in each panel, gilt top, pages uncut, by the Club Bindery of New

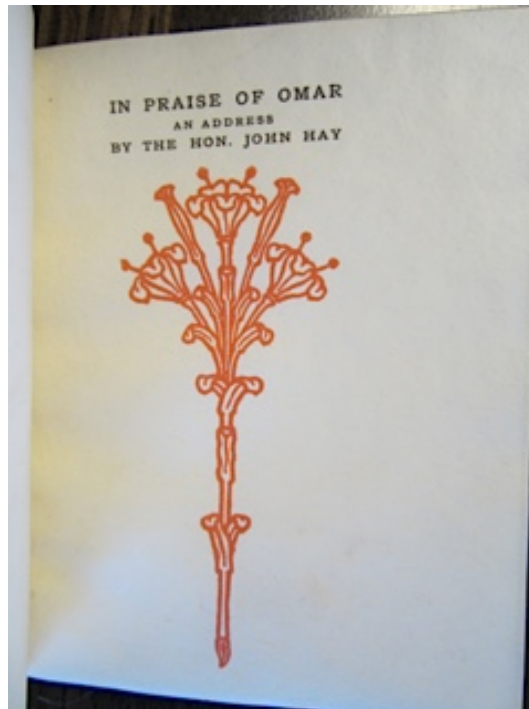


York. The book is enclosed in the original marbled board slipcase with morocco-lined mouth. I wasn't looking for, or even expecting anything in the Mosher line of things, but as I mentioned earlier, this little book found me and not the other way around. Negotiations were swift and slightly painful, but the book now resides where it

belongs (of course I'm biased). With this acquisition, the total number of Mosher books I have printed on real vellum has been brought to a benchmark number of 29--the number I needed to finally surpass John Quinn's total vellum Mosher holdings as reported in the Quinn Library

sale catalogue (Anderson Galleries, 1924). Admittedly, Mr. Quinn had no idea he'd ever be involved in this somewhat artificial race, and even if he did he's running with a severe handicap—he's dead. Of course, one only has to look over the 12,096 entries to his library to appreciate the fact that neither would he have cared--being that he had so many great items in his library! Obviously, there is no race, and there is no winner, but the comparison between his holdings and my own has nevertheless been something which I've kept in mind. So anyway, I've passed Mr. Quinn, and don't mind cheering "Take that Mr. Quinn!" even though I admit my miniscule position beside such a collecting giant.

Fastidious as I am, I developed a chart for just this purpose and list the seven all-time best collectors, chronicling each of their holdings of Mosher books printed on vellum. Thomas Bird Mosher himself, and Henry William Poor head the list, followed by John Quinn, Emilie Grigsby, and Gertrude Cowdin—all contemporaries of Mosher. Of the remaining two, there is only one collector of modern times, Norman Strouse, who had acquired more (31 total) than I, but I'm gaining and Strouse suffers the same handicap that Mr. Quinn does. Norman Strouse and I were friendly correspondents over the last four years of his life, and I'm sure he would have been pleased that I'm gaining but still lag behind. You did a great job of it Norman, but I'm a'commin'! (Incidentally, there was one British collector who purchased a number of the Mosher Books printed on vellum, but thus far I have not been able to assemble a complete list.)



Turning to the provenance of this latest acquisition, "The Library of Henry W. Poor of New York City" auction catalogue (Part II, NY: The Anderson Auction Company, Dec. 7-9, 1908, entry 555 on p. 75) describes the book as:

555. HAY (JOHN), In Praise of Omar: an Address before the Omar

Khayyám Club. Printed in black and red. Square 16mo, full russet crased levant morocco, with floral tooled boarder on each side, back tooled to match, gilt top, uncut, by the CLUB BINDERY. Portland, Me: Mosher, 1898

*ONE OF 4 COPIES PRNTEED ON VELLUM. In case.



This copy was either directly bought by William F. Gable, or at least ended up in his hands. In one of his auction catalogues (there were many), I found it again listed in "The Collection of the Late William F. Gable of Altoona, Pennsylvania" Part One. New York: American Art Association, November 5-6, 1923, entry 441, listed as:

441. HAY (JOHN). In Praise of Omar: An Address Before the Omar Khayyám Club. Rubricated. Square 16mo, full russet levant morocco, with floriated boarder of gilt tooling on sides, gilt paneled back, gilt top, uncut, BY THE CLUB BINDERY. Enclosed in a marbled board slip-case.

Portland (Maine): Thomas B. Mosher, 1898
EDITION LIMITED TO 4 COPIES. PRINTED THROUGHOUT ON VELLUM, of which this is No. 3.

From the collection of Henry William Poor, with his bookplate.

Laid in is an Autograph Letter Signed in full, but the author to Mr. Stone, 1p. 12mo. Washington D.C., Dec. 21, in which he begs not to be invited to attend a certain large dinner. He also says he hadn't attended large dinners for years. Desiring to preserve what little life he had left. The letter terminates: *I suppose I shall never again take part in any public meeting or formal festivity. . . . This explanation is for you alone. I don't want to publish my infirmities. If you have anything to do with the invitations, do not have me especially invited.*

Laid in also, is an Autograph Letter Signed, by Thomas Bailey Aldrich to Mr. T. B. Mosher, the publisher of this volume, 1p. 12mo, Mass. May 5, 1898, saying: *My friend Hay's brief address "In Praise of Omar" was well worth putting into so exquisite a shape. It is a little gem of a book and I am greatly obliged to you for your kindness in sending a copy to me.*

Slight and hardly visible slide marks on the covers of the binding show that this extra inserted material was at one time responsible given that the Club Bindery made such cases with utmost care and with glove fitting precision. Stuffing two letters inside the volume would have been enough to produce at least a hint of wear which it carries to this day. The letters were added by Gable since the Poor sale makes no

mention of them, and sometime later they were taken out of the volume, so having the Gable catalogue listing is very useful in identifying what had one time been married to the book.

Part II

After I submitted to the editor of *Endpapers* much of what I've recounted above, Gordon Pfeiffer wrote back with several questions about how many vellum books Mosher published, how many others had collected, how mine compared, etc., so I wrote back to him giving these details which some readers of *Endpapers* may find of interest:

Mosher printed 48 of his books on "pure" vellum. There were a small number of persons who got the vellum Mosher books. Here's a breakdown:

TBM himself had 47
Gertrude Cowdin has 46
Henry William Poor had 46
John Quinn had 28
Emilie Grigsby had 22

Norman Strouse had 31
Bishop has 29

Now you've got to understand that those counts include some duplicate titles. For example...

John Quinn had 2 copies of *The Poems of Villon*, 2 copies of *The Blessed Damozel*, 2 copies of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*, 2 copies of the *Poems* by Dante G. Rossetti.

Norman Strouse also had some duplicates in his collection which were all included in that count of 31: 2 copies of *Mimes*, 2 copies of the 1902 *Rubaiyat*, 2 copies of *Fragilia Labilia*, 2 copies of Pater's *The Renaissance*, 2 of Swinburne's *Ballads & Sonnets*, 2 copies of Arthur Symons's *Lyrics*, and 2 copies of *Tristram of Lyonesse*.

The Bishop count also includes some duplicates: 2 copies of *The Blessed Damozel*, 3 copies of Arthur Symons's *Lyrics*, and 2 copies of *A Little Garland of Celtic Verse*.

Why have some duplicate copies--and in my case even one triplicate set--of the Mosher book printed on vellum? Two major reasons are

that some are special association copies, and some are in special bindings. Now if you just count how many of the titles are in the collection: Norman Strouse had 31, minus his 7 duplicates = 24 of the titles, and Bishop has 29 minus his 4 duplicates = 25 of the titles. So in terms of how many of the titles were collected, Bishop has already passed Strouse in that regard. I think the odds are good that I'll eventually pass Strouse in the total vellum holding count, just as I've already passed him in the number of titles printed on vellum. With regard to Quinn, if you take away John Quinn's duplicates, that also puts him equal to Norman Strouse: 28 vellum titles minus 4 duplicates = 24 of the titles. So I've passed John Quinn in both the total count and in the number of titles represented in the collection. Again, take THAT John Quinn which I say tongue in cheek, with a bit of a knowing-full-well smile on my face.

To conclude, I'd like to make a few parting comments. First, I should mention that only one of all these collectors (including Mosher himself!) has the only book Mosher had printed with the severest of limitations: only one copy being printed on vellum. That book, Cicero's *De Amicitia*, was owned by Edward Woods and his family and is now in the Bishop Collection. Another thing to keep in mind is that there was one British collector, the actor Edward S. Willard (1853-1915) who had a number of the Mosher books printed on real vellum, but I haven't gotten all of the catalogues of his library so don't know what he all had or didn't have. There was a Mosher collector who had a few of the Mosher books on vellum, and so far as I've been able to keep track, he has only managed to assemble seven of the Mosher vellum books.

I have a seven page census of all the Mosher books printed on vellum, with a variety of notes as to which were placed into fine bindings, and other trivia of importance perhaps only to me. This list is continually kept updated. Over the years I also sold three of my duplicate Mosher books printed on vellum. Darn, that would have brought up the count to 32, but I hadn't gotten to the point where I accepted having duplicates as part of the "race." Oh well, no matter. As I said before, this race business is really quite artificial.

Over the past two years I also turned down six Mosher books printed on vellum, one in a binding but on yet another copy of Arthur Symons's *Lyrics* (I already have three). I turned down a copy of Rossetti's *Poems* (too expensive for substandard condition in my estimation), another copy of W. B. Yeats's *The Land of Hearts Desire* (I had it at a good price but mistakenly passed on it), a copy of Wilde's *Intentions* (just didn't have the money to bid at auction), and two copies of *Our Lady's Tumbler* (have H. W. Poor's copy and just didn't

want to spend thousands for another). If I had bought all of those I'd be far and away ahead of all modern collectors, but I don't have unlimited funds so I regretfully passed. In a couple cases I tried to apply a certain creative strategy to acquire the volumes which ended up backfiring on me, and so I lost out. All part of the collecting game I suppose.

Incidentally, I thought I'd relate a little story here about one of the most amusing responses I ever received involving a Mosher book on vellum which, at one time, I was offering for sale but have since decided that I would keep in hopes of building up the "pure vellum" portion of the Mosher Collection. The librarian to whom I sent my quote wrote back to me that they have several copies of the book in other states and that they have other "Mosher's in Roman Vellum, so your 'dandy' is not a priority item for our collection." The librarian then proceeded to tell me that on Aristotle Onassis's yacht there were barstools "upholstered in the foreskin of sperm whales" and that even if I had quoted their library the same Mosher book made out of the same skin, they would not be interested. I've always kept that response in mind since it adds a bit of levity to the whole subject of books printed on vellum. He quoted Puck as saying "What fools these mortals be." Indeed, what fool is at the heart of every bibliomaniac.

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