

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Warden's Meeting: A Tribute to John Sparrow (Oxford: Oxford University Society of Bibliophiles, 1977), £6, 131 pages, 6 halftone plates. Copies are available from The Secretary, Oxford University Society of Bibliophiles, 13 Bevington Road, Oxford, Oxon OX2 6NB, England.

BY CHARLES C. NICKERSON

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Despite the impression likely to result from a hasty glance at the title, *The Warden's Meeting* has nothing whatever to do with penology. Quite the contrary: it is a collection of twenty-nine essays in celebration of the unfettered joys—scholarly and aesthetic—of book collecting.

A word must be said first about the publisher. Founded in Hilary Term, 1951—the present volume marks its twenty-fifth year—the Oxford University Society of Bibliophiles is composed of undergraduates, graduate students, and dons having in common interests of a bibliographical and/or bibliophilic kind. There are no formal requirements for membership, and dues have remained modest from the outset. Each term the Society organizes a program usually including two informal talks and two visits to collections—sometimes involving journeys well beyond the purlieu of Oxford. Those who have entertained the Society either as speakers or hosts include (to choose a few names almost at random) A.N.L. Munby, Stanley Morison, C. H. Wilkinson, John Carter, William A. Jackson, Graham Pollard, Lars Hanson, Simon Nowell-Smith, Harry Carter, William Rees-Mogg, Rauri McLean, and Dennis Rhodes while visits have been paid to such libraries as those at Chatsworth, Longleat, Madresfield Court, Hatfield House, Worcester Cathedral, Lamport Hall, and Eton College. There is only slight, and certainly pardonable, exaggeration in the remark made in the introduction by Bent Juel-Jensen, a bulwark of the Society from its earliest days, that “the situation is now that no one has arrived on the bibliographical let alone the bibliophilic scene unless he (or she) has addressed the O.U.S.B.”

Such a record, sustained by a largely undergraduate society over a quarter century, argues the existence of some persistent and benevolent

guiding force—and in the case of the Bibliophiles that force is John Sparrow, until his recent retirement Warden of All Souls College. “He is,” Juel-Jensen writes, “one of an increasingly rare species: the truly civilized man. He has, as Head of a College that has no students, graduate or undergraduate, done as much as most *praepositi* for the civilized young of this University.” As George M. Story remarks elsewhere in this volume, “the Warden, through precept and rich example, tutored us all in the taste and technique of collecting. To misquote Houseman, he helped us as no one else did to enter into the pleasure of collecting which ‘differs from other pleasures in this, that it is shadowed by no fear of satiety. Other desires perish in their gratification, but the desire of books never.’”

Almost from its inception the Society has concluded each term with a meeting at the Warden’s Lodgings (hence the title) to which members bring books, manuscripts, or “ephemera” to discourse briefly upon and then pass round for general inspection and comment. Amazing discoveries not infrequently result from this bibliographical show-and-tell. John Simmons introduces his own contribution to the present volume with a delightful and entirely characteristic description of one such Warden’s Meeting:

Charles Whibley wrote of W. P. Ker—that master of pregnant silences, Scottish ballads, and early-hours Common Room converse—that ‘he never gave up to an imagined necessity of toil the hours which he might dedicate to talk and to his friends.’ Lesser men have a coarser sense of values and I have been a sadly infrequent attendant at Warden’s Evenings—Thursdays in the last week of term when Oxford University bibliophiles bring their ewe-lambs to the Lodgings. But every occasion on which I have been present has been memorable—even what our grandparents might have described as ‘genuinely edifying.’ The elegance of the surroundings, the easy hospitality, the generous access to the shelves, and the well-masked but detectable enthusiasm of the host, all form part of a unique and imperceptible process of teaching by example.

Uniqueness is one of the characteristics of the book that the Evenings both bring out and call in question. One’s copy of the folio edition of the account of the visit to Oxford of the Prince Regent and the Allied sovereigns in June 1814 (not a common book, one hundred copies only in the large format) is demonstrated—to be quickly capped by our host’s five exemplars (two folios and three quartos). One of the folios

is one of twelve copies on vellum, superbly bound in straight-grain dark blue morocco (perhaps by John Mackinlay, cf. *The Book Collector*, Winter 1964, p. 486), withdrawn from the Radcliffe Library as a 'duplicate'. The other folio is in dark olive morocco and carries the armorial book-stamp of the Chancellor of the University, Lord Grenville. One of the quarto copies once belonged to William Crowe, the Public Orator, whose speeches (delivered Wykehamically 'ore rotundo') were so impressive on the great day. Its extra illustrations include a silhouette portrait of Crowe and a copy of the caricature depicting the visit a month earlier of the Tsar's sister, the Duchess of Oldenburg, when the vastness of her bonnet made attempts to see her features 'like looking at Venus through a telescope,' and when an Under-Librarian of the Bodleian included in a scurrilous list of works said to be then preparing at the Clarendon Press, a book in which: 'Respondetur serenissimae Archiducissae de Oldenburg quaerenti, "Les Associés du Collège que vous appelez 'All Souls,' de quoi s'occupent t-ils?"'

The Warden's copies of the *Account* provide striking confirmation of Falconer Madan's belief in the inherent duplicity of duplicates and argue powerfully for multiple-copy collection. They demonstrate, too, the human interest of association copies, and they remind one that association can sometimes do more than add a romantic dimension to a copy of a book.

The purpose of the present volume, then, is to pay tribute to the Warden in a collection of short, often anecdotal, essays each describing a particular book in a manner that approximates on paper the learned conviviality and rich variety of those end-of-term meetings. It would be hard to imagine how the task could be better handled than it is here. Written by active and former members, these essays make plain the thrill of the chase as well as the particular fascination of the works discussed. Paul Morgan, for example, describes his protracted and finally successful quest for an allegedly libellous verse pamphlet called *The Epwell Hunt* (1807) by Edward Goulburn, author of *The Blueviad* and later a Member of Parliament, while Nicholas Barker recounts his discovery, "improbably enough, in the window of a bookseller's shop," of a copy of Joseph Scaliger's ill-fated memorial of his father, the *Epistoa de vetustate et splendore gentis Scaligerae* (Plantin Press, 1594), inscribed by the author to Justus Lipsius—a volume, given its associations and the contemporary limp vellum binding, distinctly to the Warden's taste. Under the title "The species of Origen," David

Rogers describes his copy of the first edition (1605) of the original Greek text of “the most celebrated of the early Christian apologies,” Origen’s eight books against Celsus, commenting succinctly on the sources of the text and the provenance of this particular copy. The contribution of Christopher de Hamel brings to light a hitherto unrecorded Grolier binding, and Giles Barber examines a book “designed to be cut up” bearing the bizarre title *Coup d’oeil éclairé d’une bibliothèque, à l’usage de tout possesseurs de livres* (1773) and consisting principally of “some classification tables, a series of labels, three to a page, each printed with the various subheadings of the classification and intended to be pasted on pinewood dummies . . . and placed on the shelves as guides to the owner or other readers in their search for any particular section of the library.” Another French work—strange in a different way—is discussed by Robert Shackleton, Bodley’s Librarian: *Les Etrennes de la Saint-Jean* (1742), a collection of miscellaneous aristocratic facetiae in verse and prose, printed partially in blue and containing some highly complex punning on the part of the publisher; the work is “a curious and interesting example . . . of the literary amusements of the great in the age of the *salon*. It is also an example of that rare phenomenon, a humorous printer who allowed his personality to be revealed in his work.” Simon Nowell-Smith, prompted by a copy of the first number of *Farrago*, comments briefly on that lively and controversial undergraduate journal (contributors including Max Beerbohm, Robert Bridges, Richard Crossman, and John Sparrow), and John Buxton describes the background to *Peplus* (1587), a collection of Latin elegies written by New College men in honor of Sir Philip Sidney. As if to illustrate “the inherent duplicity of duplicates,” Warner Barnes refutes “the myth of the unpopular Browning—never read after his publication of *The Ring and the Book*” by establishing, with the aid of a Hinman collator, that between 1868 and 1889 there were numerous issues and at least two distinct typesettings of the collected poems.

Other works treated include a copy of the 1602 black-letter Chaucer which may have belonged to Alexander Pope; the bizarre late sixteenth century *Secrets of maister Alexis*; the elegant 1751 Paris edition of *L’Eloge de la Folie* illustrated by Eisen rather than Holbein; the 1738 Dublin edition of Plato’s dialogues (the first work issued by the Dublin University Press and the first work printed in Greek in Ireland)—this copy once in the collection of Frances Currer, England’s first female book collector whose enormous library was described by Dibdin; the

eighteenth century bookseller John Ives's annotated copies of the sale catalogues of the library of the antiquary "Honest" Tom Martin of Palgrave; a copy of Alaric Watts's *Literary Souvenir* for 1834 containing a short story by a niece of Jane Austen (perhaps Anna Lefroy); Frances Trollope's copy of the third edition of that remarkable collection of parodies, *The Rejected Addresses* (1812); a letter full of philological instruction from William Barnes to his daughter in Florence; a collection of *Poems in the Dorset Dialect* by Barnes's friend Robert Young; G. V. Cox's *Recollections of Oxford* with eight letters from the author; a copy of a work much admired by George Saintsbury, *Essays by the Late George Brimley, M.A.* (1858); some minor pieces from the Daniel Press; and Edmund Blunden's copy of the 1930 edition of *Undertones of War* inscribed to his publisher, Richard Cobden-Sanderson, and containing 278 manuscript alterations.

The Warden's Meeting concludes with a short sketch of the bibliophilic interests of C. H. Wilkinson, the Society's first Honorary President, by Richard Sayce, and a check-list of "The Writings of John Sparrow" by Dennis Rhodes and Simon Rendall. Although necessarily brief, the essays throughout the book are densely packed with interesting and often important information much of which is likely to be new to the reader.

As this quick survey may suggest, *The Warden's Meeting* is a delightful production—a worthy tribute to a most remarkable man and a sure source of pleasure to bibliophiles, bibliomaniacs, and even bibliographers. The book, indeed, prompts but one regretful thought: why should so excellent a society as the Bibliophiles have failed to inspire the formation of numerous sister societies? Certainly the bibliophilic opportunities of Oxford are exceptional—but so, as readers of the *Journal* will be aware, are those of many other academic communities. Harvard, it is true, has its Hollis Society, and there is the Botetourt Bibliographical Society at William and Mary. Are there others? If not, this book should prompt their creation.