Autographs of the Powerful and Famous in 1910

Autographs can be an intriguing and exciting way to recreate history. To examine the actual handwriting of individuals from the past who are known today because of their personal history decades ago usually stimulates one to explore what occurred when that man or woman passed through a period in time. Such motivation is found in a small but fine collection of autographs, housed in the Rare Book Room of Waldo Library, that was assembled at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The provenance of this collection or how it came to Western Michigan University is itself a strange story, albeit a sobering one when considering how temporal some records may be. Between 1900 and 1910, Sophie Levin, a young stage-struck woman in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, sat down and wrote letters to those from all walks of life who she considered to be famous personalities—and she asked for their autographs. Nearly ninety people answered her and sent their contributions. Some time later—no one knows the date—she gave the letters to the Carnegie Mellon Library in the same city. Still later, in 1936, a young page in the Library was helping a librarian to move materials and clean out the stacks when he found the box containing the autographs. The librarian, who shall remain anonymous, told the page to “throw them away.” The latter, more prescient than the librarian, asked if he could keep them; she agreed.

That young page, Fred Hartenstein, eventually earned a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in management from Pittsburgh and became a university faculty member. He came to Western Michigan University in 1959 serving as Chair of the Management Department and as a distinguished senior Professor for many years—retiring in 1985. Two years prior to that, he donated the collection of autographs to the University.

Many of the “great” people who responded to Sophie’s request for autographs were part of the economic and political environment that dominated and troubled the 19th and 20th centuries including the threat of wars and wars themselves as well as the degradation of the nation’s resources, the rise of feminism, and the scourge of racism. A number of the autographs are from individuals whose names are readily recognizable today; others have slipped into the mists of the past and mean nothing to the majority of us. Sic transit gloria mundi!

The names of former presidents are, of course, familiar to everyone; the signatures of Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson are found in the collection. Unsuccessful candidates, for example, Charles Evans Hughes, may not be recognized. Special recognition can be given to Taft’s signature; it is on the White House stationery of that time. Woodrow Wilson sent two—one while he was President of Princeton University and a later one when he was President (1913-1921) of the United States.

Many novelists have some hope for lasting fame because their books have become a permanent record that may be resurrected in later years. Frances Hodgson Burnett, 1849-1924, has recently come back into the public eye with the film release of her successful children’s story, A Little Princess. Others may be recalled because of their regional reputations. Stewart E. White, 1873-1946, is a native Michigander who was born and educated in Grand Rapids. One of his most popular books, The Blazed Trail, was his third publication; it takes place in the north Michigan forests.

Perhaps the most famous novelist whose autograph was saved from “tossing out” is Jack London, 1876-1916. London is well known for his adventure stories set around the world. His book, John Barleycorn, is autobiographical and tells of his struggle with what was known as “John Barley corn” or whiskey. He has added a note for Sophie to his signature.

On a different note comes the signature of Julia Ward Howe, 1819-1910, an author, poet, and reformer who may be best known for her poem, published first in the Atlantic Monthly in 1863. Once set to music, it became famous, and all of us know the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Poor Julia was paid only $4.00 by the magazine for her work—and there were no royalties in those days.

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Fred Hartenstein, Library Donor
Early English Manuscripts

The Goliards, a student organization associated with the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University, has donated $1,000 to the Richard Rawlinson Center for Anglo-Saxon Studies and Manuscript Research. The monies will be used to support the acquisition of a complete set of the Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile (EEMF)—as well as a continuing subscription to this unique resource. The gift, which represents in part proceeds from this year’s sale of T-shirts, caps, and other items at the Medieval Institute’s annual Congress, held each May at WMU, will make it possible for the University Libraries to develop its collection in Medieval Studies to the level of a Research II university classification as designated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

"Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile," notes Paul E. Szarmach, the Medieval Institute’s Director, "is the premier collection of manuscript facsimiles in Anglo-Saxon studies. The series aims to support the work of students and scholars by offering clear, accurate representations of the most important texts and images in early English history, literature, and art. These books are not deluxe, coffee-table productions; they are extraordinarily useful books with authoritative introductions. With this generous gift, we tell our students that they want Medieval and Anglo-Saxon Studies to remain major emphases here."

Currently, Waldo Library owns four of the 25 facsimiles published in the series thus far. Of these four, The Nowell Codex may be the most famous, containing the complete text of the only version of Beowulf and other works that describe monsters such as The Wonders of the East. Waldo Library patrons may consult the book in the third floor Rare Book Room.

The remaining volumes will enter the collection, if we can obtain funding, over the next two to three years, and the continuing subscription will become part of the overall acquisitions program. One volume to be added this coming year is The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, a facsimile of an eleventh century vernacular prose version of the first six books of the Old Testament with some 600 drawings. However, funding is not yet assured for the remaining volumes, and each volume has a limited printing of only 250 copies. Following is a list of the proposed purchases with the latest cost estimate although there could be increases due to the dollar exchange fluctuation.

| The Tollemanche Orosius          | $566  | (EEMF 3) |
| The Pastoral Care                | $822  | (EEMF 6) |
| The Moore Bede                   | $792  | (EEMF 9) |
| The Blockling Homilies           | $807  | (EEMF 10) |
| Alfric’s First Series of Catholic Homilies | $896 | (EEMF 13) |
| The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch | $1154 | (EEMF 18) |
| The Verelli Book                 | $1222 | (EEMF 19) |

We are seeking private donations, and welcome all inquiries as to the means to make such a gift. Please contact Lance Query, Dean, University Libraries, at 387-5202 or Dr. Paul Szarmach, Director, Medieval Institute, at 387-8745.

Autographs of the Powerful and Famous in 1910

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One of the most successful poets at the turn of the century would not gain easy recognition from the majority who saw her autograph. She was Ella Wheeler Wilcox, 1850-1919. Yet lines such as "Laugh, and the world laughs with you;/ Weep, and you weep alone" are now in the stock of common proverbs of the language. She took the time to include a short poem with her signature.

Another poet whose words have outlived recognition of her name is Rose Alnora Hartwick Thorpe, 1850-1939, who wrote poems which added unforgettable rallying calls to our language: "Remember the Alamo" and "Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight."

Victor Herbert, 1859-1924, was an Irish-American composer who wrote such perennially favorite operettas as Babes in Toyland, The Red Mill, and Naughty Marietta. His autograph is visually intriguing since he included bars of music. Marching to a steady beat, John Philips Sousa, 1854-1932, rose to prominence as the band master of the American Marine Band from 1880-1892. Internationally known as a composer of marches, every American celebrates the Fourth of July with his The Stars and Stripes Forever.

The only artist included in the collection is Will Hick Low, 1853-1932, an illustrator for such magazines as Our Young Folks and Appleton’s Journal, he studied in France under Jean-Francois Millet, and was a close friend of Robert Louis Stevenson. His work is still occasionally found on the art market.

Actors and actresses were and are extraordinarily popular, but while they may have fame for a time, they also slip into obscurity once the show has closed or, today, if the film is no longer available. The following were well-known to Sophie, but their fame and art have disappeared: Robert C. Hilliard, 1857-1928; Jack Norworth, 1879-1959; Nora Bayes (Norworth), 1880-1928; Blanche Ring, 1877-1961; and Robert Bruce Mantell, 1854-1928. Julia Marlow, 1866-1950, refused to send her autograph unless a dollar was donated to the Actors Retirement Fund; there is no autograph.

In the collection is an autograph of Booker T. Washington, 1856-1915, whose stature in time has continued to grow. Not all of his ideas are as acceptable today as when he advocated that Afro-Americans should strive for economic prosperity and independence before fighting for equality. Along with him as an agitator for rights would have stood Belva Ann Bennett Lockwood, 1830-1917, whose name and autograph are far less known to us, but who was a pioneer feminist. She received a law degree, and was the first woman admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of the United States. A life-long suffragette and advocate of women’s rights, she died before women got the vote.

And to conclude this peripatetic tour through turn of the century history, there is the signature and recognition of Thomas Alva Edison, 1847-1931. He was
Autographs
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one of the most important inventors of the 19th century whose imagination and creativity transformed modern living. From the moving picture to the incandescent lamp to the recorder and player of sounds, his contributions were truly as extraordinary in the realm of science and industry as the respective talents of those other great and powerful people who responded to Sophie Levin almost a century ago. From a microcosm of individuals comes a macrocosmic picture of a moment in time—discovered in some 90 autographs that were not thrown away.

B.B.

"A house without books is like a room without windows."

Henry Ward Beecher

A Different Look
Continued from page 2

The variety of maps found in Waldo includes topographic sheets covering all areas of the world, geologic maps of the United States, aeronautical charts of the earth, and nautical charts of the United States as well as numerous topical maps covering all hemispheres. If, just to salve your curiosity, you do pursue a pictorial map, be sure to look for the Souvenir Map of Newport, Rhode Island, that is replete with a wind rose and bell-bottomed sailors. Another splendid example of this genre is the 1952 map of Historic Michigan, published by the Historical Society of Michigan and drawn by Frank Barcus. Displayed are historical facts and events that occurred in Michigan—framed in a geographical context.

The presence of pictorial maps in a research collection brings into focus a particular aspect of both scholarship and cartography. That is, even in serious research and mapmaking, there is a place for simplicity, and a place for a diverse, possibly whimsical viewpoint. Looking at a problem, or a place, in a different way can be just what is needed.

M.M.

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