

Sybil Campbell Library Monograph Number 4

The Swan Press Collection

Summary of a talk by Margaret Roake, 19th June 2005

Contributions from Nancy Edwards, Cynthia Richmond and Elizabeth Cader

The Sybil Campbell Library holds a valued collection of seventeen volumes published by the Swan Press between 1927 and 1933. Founded in 1926 at 5, Swan Walk, Chelsea by L. Walters, M.H.H. Walters, and M.P. Eyre, the press produced limited editions, usually of 100 numbered copies, in fine print, handset in a variety of typefaces by L.D.O. Walters and M.P. Eyre, hand pressed by H.Gage-Cole on handmade paper, bound by hand, examples of fine craftsmanship. The characteristic Swan design, block-printed in colour, appears on the board covers of most of the volumes. The subject matter of the texts is not original, but selected from the works of earlier writers, some well known, others more obscure, which offer scope for fine printing, interesting page lay-out, and often for illustration by one of the Chelsea artists.

The books were presented to this library in memory of Michael Heriot Huth Walters, who died in 1934 at the age of 25. He may be the M.H.H. Walters named as one of the founders of the press. From the bookplates we know that he was a Scholar of Eton and King's College, Cambridge and Proctor Fellow of Princeton University USA.

It would be interesting to know of other volumes they published, but it appears, from Reading University archive of printing and publishing, that no public repository has records of the Swan Press. Very much a 'friends and family' concern, it seems possible that these volumes represent a major part of the output of the press. Our earliest volume, a version in Italian of Hans Anderson's fairy story *Cio Che Vide La Luna*, (1927), is translated by Penelope Eyre, probably a relation of the press-setter. It was illustrated by Joyce Garrick.

Chelsea became home to an artists' community early in the 20th century. In the 60 years prior to the 1st World War over 1300 domestic artists' studios were built in London. (V.C.H., Middlesex XII p. 103) Land was newly available, for Chelsea had been liable to flooding until protected by the Thames embankment. Walter Sickert and his Chelsea life school occupied No 1 The Vale, which was linked by Mallord and Mulberry Streets with Upper Church Street. At Whistler's home at No 2 the Vale, Ricketts and Shannon later established another private press, the Vale Press. Augustus John lived in Mallord Street and, on the corner with Church Street, stands Mallord House, an atelier built in 1911 for Cecil Hunt. Now it has become a block of apartments, but still has the Swan street-sign adorning its frontage. Whether the Swan Press moved there from 5 Swan Walk, or whether their sign, a fine piece of woodcarving, was added later has yet to be established.

C.R. Ashbee, architect of Crosby Hall, also had many commissions for artists' homes, all part of the Arts & Crafts movement following the somewhat earlier publishing venture by William Morris at Kelmscott.

The finest volume we hold from the Swan Press, quarter-bound in leather, is *A Florilege*, by Irene Gosse, whose father was a publisher, and sister Sylvia, an artist in Walter Sickert's school (DNB). Irene Gosse chose extracts about plants from the old herbals of Gerard, Lyte, Parkinson and Turner, and the Swan Press commissioned Gertrude Hermes, then aged 30, to illustrate them with 20 wood engravings. This beautiful book, published in 1931, proved to be a turning point in Gertrude's artistic development. In later life she lived in a flat in Danvers Street very near to Crosby Hall. Gertrude's sister, May Hermes was, from its foundation, associated with the Sybil Campbell Library and with Crosby Hall.

Judith Russell, Gertrude's daughter, edited a memorial volume of her mother's wood engravings. There the 'Florilege' engravings appear again with her later work. Judith gave May's copy to our library in 1997, in memory of her aunt, our May Hermes. In the preface (p. 10 note 2), Judith noted that wood engraving became a favourite medium for fine book illustration in England following the formation of two specialist societies in the 1920s. Such illustrations can be found in many of the books in this library. The English Wood Engraving Society, founded in 1925, was led by Leon Underwood from his school and studio at 12 Girdler's Road, Hammersmith, where Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Gertrude Hermes and Blair Hughes Stanton, who became her husband, were all students.

Since the foremost aim of the Swan Press was the production of fine typography, there was no standard format to the volumes. Each came in a size, typeface and style appropriate to the particular subject.

Nancy Edwards described their smallest publication, a pamphlet with a plain green cover, which commemorated an important neighbour.

"*My Lady of Chelsea, Kate Courtney of Penwith (1847-1929)* by Elizabeth Fox Howard (Swan Press 1929) is an obituary of Beatrice Webb's sister, reprinted from *Friends' Quarterly Examiner*. The obituary begins with a delightful description of the Courtneys' home, 15 Cheyne Walk (shown on Leonard Courtney's bookplate in many books donated by Mrs Webb). There are other links with the Library; Kate often took visitors to see Crosby Hall. We hold a biography of Lord Courtney and her own War Diary recording her work for peace during the war and for reconstruction after 1918; this brought her into close contact with the Society of Friends. She was buried at Chelsea Old Church."

A reprint of Maria Edgeworth's, *Angelina or L'amie inconnue*, (1933), in larger format, was studied by Cynthia Richmond who contributes this piece.

"Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849) was the eldest daughter of the first wife of Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Anglo-Irish inventor and educationist. Married four times, he had twenty-two children. Maria's mother died when she was fourteen, so she acted as

her father's assistant and governess to the younger children. She had a natural flair for storytelling and a great sense of humour. *Angelina* or *L'amie inconnue* is about a sentimental young lady of sixteen who runs away from her uncaring guardian aunt in pursuit of her heroine, an unknown female pen friend. Angelina searches for 'amiable Araminta' in the romantic depths of the Welsh countryside. She eventually discovers her, a vulgar, half-drunk slattern, living in sleazy city surroundings. She is grateful to be rescued by another, more understanding aunt.

The story is fast moving, full of incident, co-incident and confrontation. It satirises snobbery, exposing greed and hypocrisy. The use of dialogue is very effective, especially the Welsh and Irish dialects. Woodcut illustrations are by Helen Binyon (1904-1979), daughter of the poet Laurence Binyon."

Elizabeth Cader introduced us to *Ten Fables*, the Swan volume (1928) of Robert Louis Stevenson's tales.

"This collection of fables contains anecdotes, short stories, some very short, with moral messages and accounts of some incidents that end in a surprising way. The fables are very different from Stevenson's usual stories of adventure and travel. When living in Samoa, Stevenson was given the name *Tusitala*, that is storyteller; the fables often have a South Seas setting. Some of the animals in *The Cart Horses and the Saddle Horse*, for instance, seem to have come to a new country and cannot make sense of the social standing of the local inhabitant."

Reprinting poetry was another favourite theme for the Swan Press. Many of these verses have a pastoral flavour, recalling the pre-industrial age, celebrating the rural idyll, searching for the essence of contentment. They include *In Praise of Phillis, an anthology of 16th & 17th century verse*, and *The Curtain of Futurity: a sequence of visions in the pre-figuring of a golden age*.

We also hold four of the 'Swan Poets' series, all published in 1930, small uniform volumes with the characteristic Swan design on the covers. No 1 in the series presents a poem by Stephen Duck, *The Thresher's Labour* (1930). The poet (1705-1756) was born in the village of Charlton, near Pewsey in Wiltshire. He worked on the land, had little education but interested himself in verse. This poem muses on the growth of corn from seedtime to harvest. Lord Macclesfield brought his work to the notice of Queen Caroline who gave the poet a pension and made him Yeoman of the Guard. He went on to marry the royal housekeeper. Taking Holy Orders in 1746, he accepted the country living of Byfleet in Surrey in 1752 but drowned himself in a fit of depression in 1756. (DNB)

No 2 *Songs* by William Shenstone (1930) Eldest son of a Shropshire country gentleman at Leasowes, Shenstone was educated at Pembroke College, Oxford, where he became a friend of John Baskerville, which may account for the Swan Press taking an interest in his work. He later returned to Leasowes to write poetry and prose and landscape the garden. Though unmarried, he addressed most of the poems in this volume to ladies he admired. His poems were praised by Johnson, Burns, Hazlitt and Ruskin. Unfashionably, he powdered his own hair and usually dressed in a plain blue coat and a scarlet waistcoat with broad gold lace. (DNB)

No 3 *An Eighteenth Century Miscellany* (1930) provides a selection of witty epigrams, verses on gardens and romantic ramblings. Nancy read from it a verse by William Pulteney which praises the charms of Strawberry Hill. (See last SCL monograph). The pages are decorated with patterned borders.

No 4 John Dyer, *Grongar Hill* (1930) Almost contemporary with Stephen Duck, (1700-1758) the poet, son of a Carmarthenshire lawyer, was educated at Westminster. He enjoyed both poetry and painting and published *Grongar Hill* in 1727 describing the ascent to a viewpoint above his Welsh boyhood home. A friend at Westminster of the Wesleys, he took Holy Orders, married and became rector of Catthorpe in Leicestershire where he took up sheep farming and began a major work, *The Fleece*. Friends persuaded him to move to Coningsby, Lincs where, without the everyday demands of his flock, he completed this opus. He is best known for 'The Ruins of Rome'. Wordsworth enjoyed the power of the thrush's song in *Grongar Hill* and Samuel Johnson knew and wrote about John Dyer's work. (DNB) We do not possess No 5 in the Swan poets series, advertised as forthcoming, *Pastorals* by Alexander Pope.

Other volumes in our collection, not mentioned above:

Ed. Edward Henry Blakeney, *Canticles of the Old Testament*. In brown cover

Oliver Goldsmith, *The Traveller and The Deserted Village* (1929)

John Lydgate, *The Chorle and the Birde* (1929). Large format and black letter type.

Francis Bacon, *Of Gardens*. In large format and black letter type

Samuel Johnson, *Fourty-four letters* (1931)

Mary Queen of Scots, *The last letter of Mary, Queen. of Scotland to ...Henry III, King of France*.

Research on this collection is ongoing, but so far, I have been able to trace only 3 other copies of Swan Press books elsewhere: *Fourty-four letters from Samuel Johnson* at the University of Missouri, and 2 copies of *Canticles of the Old Testament* in the British Library.

The books in our Swan collection are not only rare and beautiful; they form part of our valued Chelsea collection, as well as complementing the poetry section, which has been noted as especially significant.