

Bookmen, Books, Inscriptions, And Bindings

WILLIAM BUTTS

HOLMES, David J. *“Wayfarers All”: Selections from the Kenneth Grahame Collection of David J. Holmes.* New York: The Grolier Club, 2008. Small 4to. Softbound. 46pp. Illustrations. **\$15.00.**

McMURTRY, Larry. *Books: A Memoir.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 259pp. **\$24.00.**

ELLENPORT, Samuel B. *Bookbinding at The Harcourt Bindery and Nineteenth-Century Bookbinding Techniques at the Harcourt Bindery.* Boston: The Harcourt Bindery, 2006-07. DVD. **\$15.00** each plus \$3.00 s/h.

The Grolier Club has again shown its consistency in publishing handsome, reasonably-priced publications worthwhile to book and autograph collectors alike. This time it's an exhibition catalogue that collectors and wannabe-collectors of literary autographs will wish to explore.

“Wayfarers All”: Selections from the Kenneth Grahame Collection of David J. Holmes introduces an author whose most famous book, the 1908 *Wind in the Willows*, has far eclipsed his few others and even his own name. Grahame was born in Scotland in 1859 and died in England in 1932, and today is quite neglected among

literate Americans.

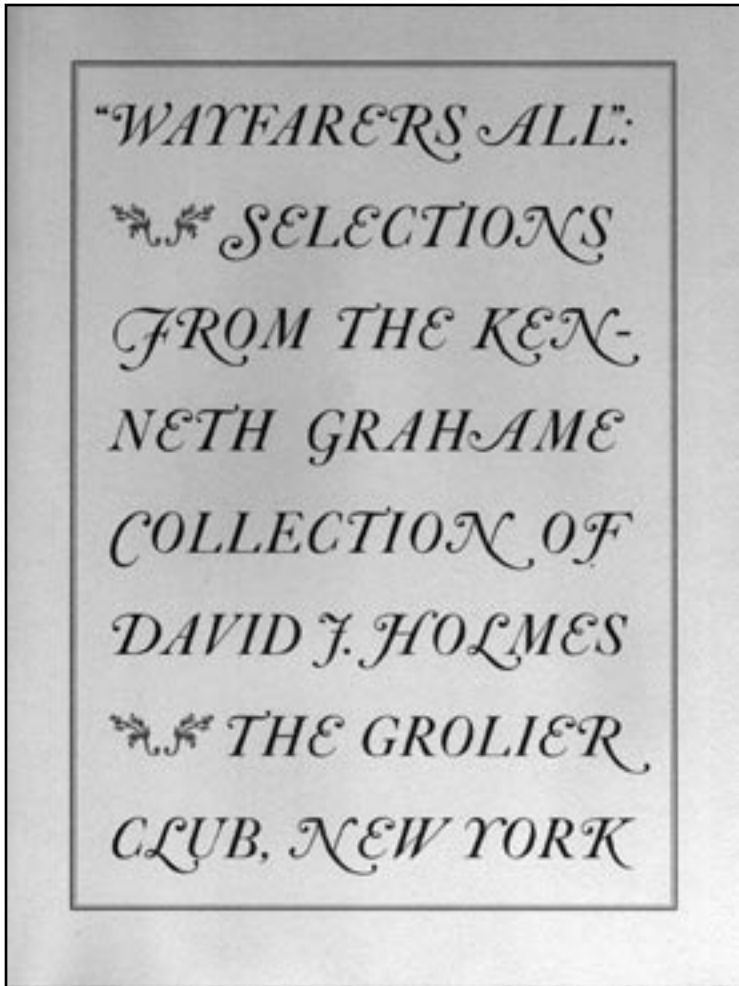
David Holmes – soft-spoken, articulate, a wealth of knowledge – is the only dealer in this country I can think of gutsy enough to specialize in fine literary autographs, primarily 18th through 20th century English and American. Luckily his own collecting passion fell on Grahame, and who better to understand this reticent and introspective writer. In a perceptive “Collector’s Statement,” Holmes notes,

I do not remember the exact moment when I decided to collect Kenneth Grahame. Perhaps I was collecting him before I knew it. As an admirer of his prose, I had purchased Grahame’s letters for my shop’s inventory, and they sparked my interest. They hinted at a mentality that seemed to be, curiously, both restrained and poetic, of the world and yet not of the world....

“*Wayfarers All*” presents descriptions of 63 items from Holmes’s collection, exhibited at the Grolier Club’s beautiful building on East 60th Street between March 19th and May 23rd. Of these 63 pieces, 24 are illustrated – mostly autographs and original artwork, plus a few books. While most of the exhibit represents primo Grahame material, Holmes fleshes this out this portrait nicely by including some illustrators, authors, publishers and others closely associated with Grahame.

The chapter on Grahame’s first book, for instance, the 1893 *Pagan Papers* (he only published four titles), features a fine Grahame postcard regarding the proof sheets for this book, the British limited edition of the book, a printed announcement for it and a letter from Grahame’s publisher William Ernest Henley. The chapter on his second book, *The Golden Age* (1895), contains two copies of the first English edition (one with a 1926 TLS from Grahame discussing it, the other with a presentation inscription from Grahame), an ALS from Grahame to the U.S. publisher discussing this book, the first English edition with Maxfield Parrish illustrations inscribed by the publisher to the poet A.C. Swinburne, the first edition with Ernest H. Shepard (of *Winnie the Pooh* fame) illustrations limited and signed by Grahame and Shepard, and a lovely Parrish ALS discussing the original *Golden Age* artwork.

And so it goes. Subsequent chapters, each featuring a modest



number of choice and relevant items, cover every Grahame book (including A.A. Milne’s *Toad of Toad Hall*, a dramatization of *The Wind in the Willows*, and a chapter on books which Grahame edited or contributed to). Of course *The Wind in the Willows*, Grahame’s blockbuster, gets star treatment, triple in length and number of illustrations as the other chapters. There’s a letter from Constance Smedley, English feminist and writer, who prodded Grahame into writing his masterpiece... a signed postcard

photograph of Theodore Roosevelt, who prodded Charles Scribner into taking Grahame's manuscript seriously... a first U.S. edition (the true first, preceding the English edition), "One of a very small known number of inscribed copies"... a first English edition, inscribed by Grahame to his older sister... an ALS from the English publisher A.M.S. Methuen congratulating Grahame on the book... a lengthy ALS from Grahame thanking a reviewer of the book... and on and on. If you're a *Wind in the Willows* fan, or simply appreciate nice literary material, it will take your breath away.

Not to sound like every infomercial, but – *that's not all!* Then comes a truly killer assortment of original artwork – by Shepard, Paul Bransom, Arthur Rackham.

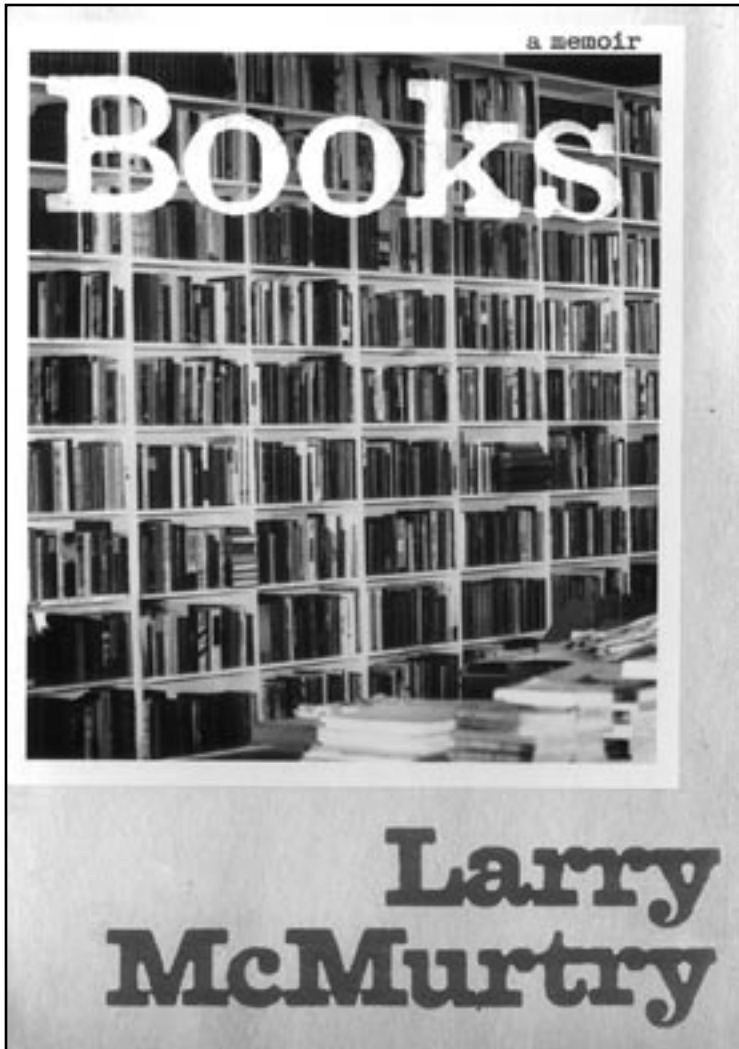
Illustrations throughout "*Wayfarers All*" are clear and sharp, though rarely printed at 100% actual size due to the book's trim size. As a collection of Grahame exemplars for authentication and research purposes, this exhibition catalogue cannot be beat and serious collectors should want it for that reason alone. David Holmes and the Grolier Club provide a real service to the autograph collecting community in sharing their appreciation and expertise of this rather neglected author.

For many years now I've had a lovely modern slipcased edition of *The Wind in the Willows* gracing my library. Pristine, too, because the cover's never been cracked. Like so many, it was on my books-to-be-read-when-time-permits-(but rarely does)-list – those classic titles every educated person is expected to have read. Thanks to David Holmes' first-rate collection and his ability to impart enthusiasm for Grahame, I'll be pulling that volume off the shelf tonight.

Larry McMurtry

Almost 25 years ago, as a budding bibliophile, I mailed Larry McMurtry for signing an oddball edition of *The Last Picture Show* I'd bought in a Chicago used book shop – cringingly cheesy, published by an outfit ostentatiously named International Collectors Library (Garden City, New York) and bound in black paper over boards stamped to resemble tooled leather, with gaudy giltstamping on the spine and front cover.

McMurtry returned it promptly, graciously inscribed and signed on the front flyleaf, with a note that baffled me: "*Could*



you please send me particulars on this edition, such as the address of The International Collectors Library. I have never seen this edition, never heard of it, and don't know but what it's a piracy...."

Such was my introduction to the fact that McMurry was not your garden-variety novelist and knew a thing or three about books as physical objects. This may surprise anyone not im-

mersed in the world of antiquarian bookselling, but McMurtry has for more than four decades been a serious general antiquarian bookseller. His shop Booked Up was long a mainstay of the Washington, DC book scene, and he now owns a large book operation out of the small Texas town of Archer, setting of *The Last Picture Show* and site of his childhood.

McMurtry is no mere celebrity book dabbler, either. Like any hardcore bibliophile worth his salt, many delightful signed books, autographs and manuscripts have passed through his hands over the years. *Books: A Memoir* shows a man around whom the handling of books has been a passion since his early years in a “bookless ranch house” – literally a house on a ranch, for his family “were all cattlemen on varying scales.” He notes, “There have been many stages to my life as a reader-writer-bookman.... my personal library – now some twenty-eight thousand volumes strong” is testament to McMurtry’s serious bibliomania. “Forming that library, and reading it, is surely one of the principal achievements of my life.”

Although roughly chronological, *Books: A Memoir* really represents a series of vivid book-related portraits from McMurtry’s bookish life. More like quick snapshots – how else could you squeeze 109 chapters into 258 pages? He charts his progress as a childhood reader, his first attempts at buying and selling books, his career as owner of a bookshop that’s bought all or large portions of about 30 other bookshops while cranking out his own bestselling novels – mostly in pithy chapters often numbering one, two or three pages.

Autograph collectors will thrill in the volume and variety of autograph material and the tales behind them that pepper *Books: A Memoir*. There was the bookshop McMurtry bought in a bad neighborhood in Fort Worth, whose owner put any “really good book” in a paper bag and squirreled it away. “In one of them was a nice copy of Mrs. Calderon de la Barca’s *Life in Mexico...* inscribed... to General William Tecumseh Sherman.” One trophy McMurtry kept (hazard of the trade!) from another collection was “a book that was very salable.. in Hollywood: Mrs. D. W. Griffith’s *My Life in Movies...* I bought a lovely, inscribed copy of Mrs. Griffith’s book in Mexico City, and I still have it.” And who could forget what McMurtry considers one of the all-time

greatest books he ever handled, the limited edition of Winston Churchill's *Marlborough* – each of the four volumes inscribed by Churchill to none less than the Duke of Windsor, each inscription using a different one of the Duke's noble titles.

From colorful trust fund baby David Dorman at his high-end short-lived Texas shop McMurtry acquired “a signed, limited copy of Dr. Rosenbach's *Early American Children's Books*, for which I paid a pittance” – but “Dorman chased me down and asked for it back – it was supposed to be part of his reference library, though, as far as I could see, there was no reference library.” Later, when Dorman fled the country for tax reasons, McMurtry helped Dorman's mother run the shop. “Dorman wandered over with some excellent Texana – letters from Sam Houston, Stephen F. Austin, and the like... Grace herself wouldn't have known a Stephen F. Austin letter from a possum.... There was just one catch: according to the reference books the whole lot belonged in the Rosenberg Library in Galveston.”

If it sounds like McMurtry bought everything in sight, there are treasures aplenty that he couldn't afford or otherwise missed out on. A noted Connecticut auction in 1977 featured “Faulkner's copy of *The Portable Faulkner*, in which Faulkner had written in mild rebuke that [Malcolm] Cowley had deprived him of what he had hoped would be the leisurely occupation of his old age. *The Portable Faulkner* brought \$5,000.” At that same auction appeared “a book I have regretted not competing for ever since: the dedication copy of Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*, simply inscribed: ‘From the old man to the old Wife.’ I like to read Arnold Bennett... and have acquired... some 110 volumes of his work.”

Eccentricity being practically a prerequisite for antiquarian bookselling (yours truly excepted), eccentrics of all ilk populate *Books: A Memoir*. There was the eccentric Sheri Martinelli, friend of Ezra Pound and other literary figures, who turned up at Booked Up in “the first Winnebago to roll off the line” dressed in black from veil to toe. Her cache of 400 Pound letters “stuffed in card boxes” were “way beyond our means,” but “some [E.E.] Cummings letters” and other lesser gems came his way.

Or how about the National Gallery of Art executive who wanted his 16,000 book library appraised the very same day – which

they nearly accomplished, only noticing later “more than sixty-five books given to [the executive] by Henry Miller – most were inscribed.”

McMurtry, like most bookmen, never holds back his strong opinions about books, book people and all matters bookish. Even as a youngster, he knew what he did and didn't like: As a teen, “we got a subscription to *Reader's Digest*, which soon included a chance to buy Reader's Digest Condensed Books, which I hated on sight and still hate. I always wanted the whole story or nothing.” With other strong opinions I cannot concur, as when he calls the handsome Limited Editions Club publications “a fancied-up line of reprints of which about ten have any intrinsic worth... expensive vulgarity.” About his own writings, McMurtry is refreshingly frank: “I'm known as a novelist whose books make excellent movies.... Most [of my books] were good, three or four were indifferent to bad, and two or three were really good. None, to my regret, were great....”

McMurtry is fond of making pronouncements on booksellers and bookselling – sometimes admiring, sometimes scathing, but always astute. “Many bookmen, and some of the best among them, rarely, if ever, read.” Elsewhere, he enjoys cutting down some of the biggest names: “Once you've seen the major players a time or two... they cease to be mythic presences and just become businessmen endlessly acquiring books for money, or selling books for money.” Among these savvy comments appears this favorite: “One of the best aspects of antiquarian book selling is that it is so educative. You learn about what you've bought after you've bought it, usually, in order to gain some idea of how to price it.” Here's another memorable sentiment: “One reason I've hung on to book selling is that it's progressive – the opposite of writing, pretty much. Eventually all novelists, if they persist long enough, get worse.... Book selling, though, being based on acquired knowledge, is progressive... The longer they deal and the more they know, the better books they handle....” Notions very apropos to the autograph market as well, I would add.

Books: A Memoir does show a flippancy toward the reader that I find off-putting. This shows in the form of a surprising number of “I think” and “I believe” statements, as in this case:

For most of my fifties, what I read for pleasure was travel writing, and

the book that introduced me to the pleasures of inspired travel writing was called Tent Life in Siberia, by George Kennan – the nineteenth-century George Kennan, a great-uncle, I believe, of the recently deceased George Kennan, the diplomat and historian who bore the same name.

The nineteenth-century George Kennan was a skilled telegrapher. After the initial failure to lay the Atlantic Cable, a number of wealthy men, led, I think, by E.H. Harriman....

Similar vagueness takes other forms, as when McMurtry visits Cannes: “On the way we passed one of Picasso’s homes – or perhaps it was one of Charlie Chaplin’s.” Was it or wasn’t it? It wouldn’t take much effort to pin down whether George Kennan was *in fact* great-uncle of the other George Kennan, whether E.H. Harriman was *in fact* leader of this group of wealthy men, whether Charlie Chaplin *in fact* owned this house outside Cannes. It’s basic fact checking.

This disregard toward the reader also crops up in, of all places, McMurtry’s references to a person being deceased. “Harry Sivia, now ‘late’ as the Botswanians say” is just one of too many bows to Alexander McCall Smith’s “No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency” mystery series set in Botswana. I appreciated the first such reference, being a devout reader of the series myself. The second reference – well, OK. The third – getting a tad annoying. By the umpteenth such use, I was wishing I’d never heard of Smith’s series. Quaint euphemisms can be charming and effective, but a little goes a long way.

But these are petty annoyances in a memoir I enjoyed to the core. *Books: A Memoir*, which I compared earlier to 109 quick snapshots, is like flipping through an album of Polaroids – in its delightful disjointedness, it tells this bookman’s story, it has a beginning and middle and end, it’s filled with many a memorable anecdote.

Samuel Ellenport

What interests historical autograph collectors generally interests hardcore bibliophiles – and vice versa. Hence the following bookish title, which on the surface bears little to do with autographs, bears relevance to those who view autographs in their broadest sense: that is, as including rare hand-lettered medieval texts such as Books of Hours or antiphonals, signed limited editions and the like.



Opportunities for bibliophiles to indulge their obsession at the theatre or in front of the telly are relatively few: The occasional book-related Hollywood film such as *The Ninth Gate* or obscure promotional DVDs such as the ABAA's *Bibliomania* come to mind. So master bookbinder Samuel B. Ellenport's DVDs covering *Bookbinding at The Harcourt Bindery* and *Nineteenth-Century Bookbinding Techniques at the Harcourt Bindery* represent a rare chance for collectors and dealers to peer over the shoulder of a great craftsman as he plies his trade.

Bookbinding at The Harcourt Bindery – a handy introduction to the trade that should precede *Nineteenth-Century Bookbinding Techniques at the Harcourt Bindery* – has a style reminiscent of Roy Underhill's *The Woodwright's Shop*, PBS's longest-running ever "how-to" series. Underhill's jeans and suspenders have been replaced by Ellenport's tie and apron, Underhill's folksy presence

by Ellenport's professorial demeanor – but Ellenport's manner is much the same: A dedicated professional who cherishes his craft and is willing to share techniques so well-honed he makes them look easy, chatting with the viewer in a knowledgeable yet leisurely fashion about each step he demonstrates.

Production value for both DVDs is straightforward and simple. Title, credits and each of many steps consist of clear white text against black background, a refreshing absence of canned mood music, a single stationary camera. Camera work is sharp and steady, with none of the uncertainty and fuzziness often found on low-budget documentaries. The lack of closeups – as when showing foil stamping in progress or the intricate folding of leather corners – is a bit off-putting. Those unfamiliar with these steps may be frustrated at not being able to truly see what's being shown.

Ellenport's on-screen persona strikes just the right tone. Bald, bearded and bespectacled, he fits the image of the old-school bookbinder. His comments aren't memorized prepared texts, yet are clearly well thought out. He never strays from his subject, but doesn't hesitate to briefly mention the history of a specific tool or apparatus when appropriate. The filmmakers wisely chose to film him not at a studio, with a set and backdrop and props, but simply at the various work stations of the warehouse-like Harcourt Bindery.

Bookbinding at The Harcourt Bindery is divided into two main sections, "Making a Cloth Cover" and "Making a Leather Cover." Each is then subdivided into smaller bite-size chunks, each averaging several minutes. "Making a Cloth Cover," for instance, consists of "Sewing Signatures," "Adding End Papers," "Using the Nipping Press," "Cutting Cardboard for the Cover," "Making a Cloth Cover," "Foil Stamping the Cloth Cover" and "Attaching the Cover to the Book." "Making a Leather Cover" consists of more than twice as many chunks, including such leather-specific jobs as "Using the Skiving Knife," which Ellenport quips is "the only job where one sat down" in a bindery.

Nineteenth-Century Bookbinding Techniques makes a nice companion to *Bookbinding*, though since Harcourt Bindery is an old-time hand bindery there's a certain amount of repetition – many of the methods they still employ are basically 19th century techniques. Much of their machinery has seen a century's worth

of use, and almost none of it is electrical. As we learn from a thumbnail company history Ellenport opens with, the Harcourt Bindery was founded in 1900 and has gone through only two changes in ownership and two changes in location in more than a century, giving a tangible sense of continuity.

Unlike the *Bookbinding* DVD, Ellenport reads from a script in *Nineteenth-Century Bookbinding Techniques*. His voiceover accompanies footage of himself performing each of many small operations – from gilding a book’s edges (for which Ellenport himself developed a new technique appropriate for modern books on pulpy paper) and making silk fly leaves and doublures to creating inner leather joints and creating spine onlay work. This DVD, by the way, does include closeups of certain procedures, unlike its predecessor.

Throughout each of these many operations, Ellenport seeks to answer the underlying question: How were 19th century binderies able to achieve such consistently high quality *and* achieve high production at the same time? During many operations depicted, he comments on the production time of each step and how many might be accomplished by the typical binder in an hour or a day.

Ellenport closes *Nineteenth-Century Bookbinding Techniques* appropriately with Ellenport reciting a favorite Cicero quote (which, like most Cicero quotes, exists in many different forms): “History is the witness of the times, the light of truth, the life of memory, and the mistress of life.” Anyone with an interest in how a beautiful book is constructed the old-fashioned way could ask for no better guide than Ellenport.