

## For Bibliophiles and Presidential Collectors

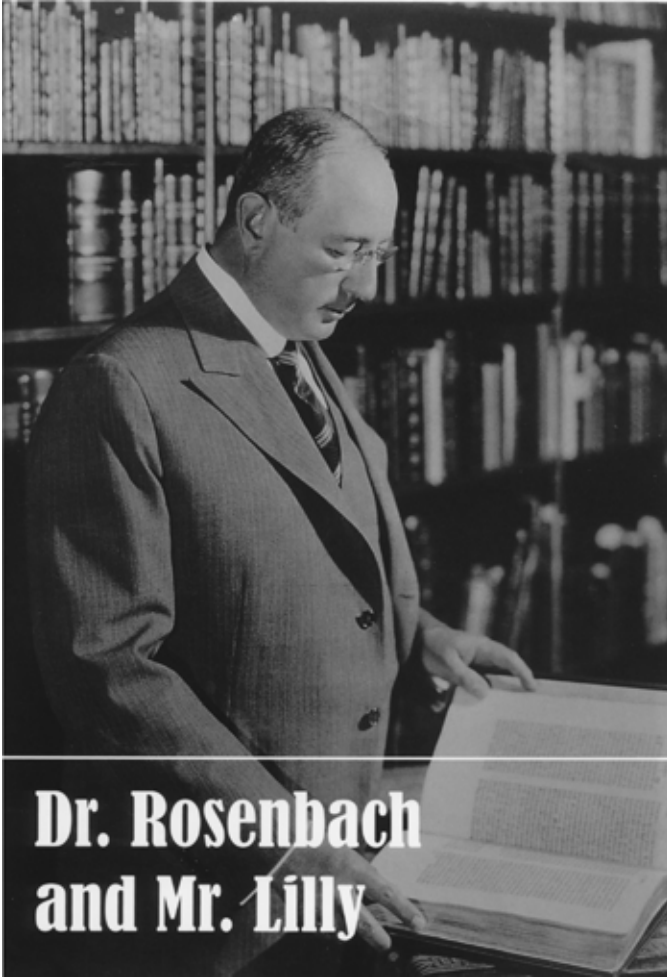
WILLIAM BUTTS

**SILVER, Joel.** *Dr. Rosenbach and Mr. Lilly: Book Collecting in a Golden Age.* New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2011. Small 4to. Clothbound, dust jacket. xiv, 144pp. Illustrations. **\$49.95.**

**KOSCHAL, Stephen.** *James A. Garfield: A Signature Study with a Focus on His Presidential Signatures.* Boynton Beach, FL: Rainbow Press, 2011. 4to. Softbound. 90pp. Numerous illustrations. Limited to 50 signed, numbered copies. **\$15.00.**

I was delighted to learn that Oak Knoll Press – friend to book and autograph collectors everywhere – was bringing out an affordable trade edition of my friend Joel Silver’s *Dr. Rosenbach and Mr. Lilly: Book Collecting in a Golden Age*, which the fine press publisher Bird & Bull Press of Newtown, Pennsylvania had published in 2010 in a sumptuous slipcased quarter leather edition limited to 140 copies – at about *one-tenth* the price. An under-fifty-dollar price should guarantee a whole new audience for this fun bibliophilic tale, as stunning as the \$425 Bird & Bull Press edition is.

*Dr. Rosenbach and Mr. Lilly* is hardly the tale of two BFFs (Bibliophilic Friends Forever) – the *Odd Couple* of the book world



## **Dr. Rosenbach and Mr. Lilly**

would be more accurate. “Dr. Rosenbach was never Lilly’s closest confidante in the trade,” remarks Silver, “nor was he ever Lilly’s primary bookseller.” A.S. W. Rosenbach (1876-1952), “Dr. R.” or “Rosey” to his friends, was probably the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most famous rare book dealer, a flamboyant Philadelphia legend whose spectacular buys and antics were regular newspaper fodder, who helped this country’s wealthiest industrialists (a la Huntington, Morgan, etc.) form the most famous rare book

libraries around, and whose Philadelphia digs are open to the public as The Rosenbach Museum & Library. Josiah K. Lilly Jr. (1893-1966) was a well-heeled Indiana businessman, the conservative, no-nonsense president of Eli Lilly and Company, the pharmaceutical behemoth founded by his grandfather. *Dr. Rosenbach and Mr. Lilly* chronicles the business relationship and semi-friendship that evolved over the course of 20 years between these two wealthy, middle-aged businessmen who could scarcely be more different from one another. Joel Silver, by the way, spans both worlds – a former antiquarian bookseller himself and for many years now the noted curator of books at the Lilly Library, the reknowned rare book and manuscript library at Indiana University in Bloomington. I had the pleasure of spending a week with Joel attending his “Reference Sources on Rare Books” seminar along with other antiquarian booksellers and special collections librarians, and it was an experience to remember. Joel is hardcore – the real deal.

Silver conveys well Dr. R’s magic at selling high-priced rarities, how he “passed on to his customer-listeners his innate sense of the importance of what he was offering them.” Lilly’s first in-person visit with Rosenbach ended up costing him \$20,800 – and those were 1929 dollars! English and American literature were his focus at that time, and that first haul included a set of Lawrence Sterne’s *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* for \$3,450 that “included the author’s signatures in volumes 5, 7 and 9, which Sterne had included to try to prevent pirated editions.”

By the end of that fateful year – a year in which Lilly self-published ten *List of One Hundred Books* profiling his collection, also a year in which he styled himself the “Busted Bibliophile of the Wabash” – the Indianapolis tycoon had changed from an accumulator of nice but routine “gentleman’s library” material to a serious collector of rare, high-end literature and other “high spots.” Early on, Lilly did what many affluent early 20<sup>th</sup> century collectors did: Adopted *One Hundred Books Famous in English Literature* – the title of an influential 1903 exhibit at New York’s esteemed Grolier Club, known among collectors simply as the “Grolier Hundred” – as his collecting goal. Silver likens this to “a competitive sport, in which Lilly could vie with his fellow collectors in the hunt for elusive titles.” He had already adopted a “One Hundred Good Novels” list compiled by one of his favorite

authors, A. Edward Newton, in *This Book-Collecting Game* (1928), and later he would be influenced by the far broader book *One Thousand Best Books: The Household Guide to a Lifetime's Reading* by Don Dickinson (1924), which included Americana.

Despite the hard times of the Depression, the ever-persistent Rosenbach peppered his new client with quotes and sent him new catalogues. Amidst the jaw-dropping rarities offered to Lilly, and occasionally purchased, were a trickle of choice autograph items. One May 1930 purchase was typical. It "included a Walt Whitman letter with a reference to *Leaves of Grass*; a James Whitcomb Riley manuscript; a first edition of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* [which the "Books and Manuscripts Purchased by J.K. Lilly, Jr. from The Rosenbach Co" inventory at this book's conclusion tells us came "with inserted autograph letter, signed"]." Another sale in early 1939 included, among fabled rarities such as Francis Bacon's 1598 *Essays*, Isaac Walton's 1653 *Compleat Angler* and Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein*, a first edition of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline* inscribed by the poet to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne ("far too good an association to turn down," notes Silver).

What *Dr. Rosenbach and Mr. Lilly* often shows is that J.K. Lilly was far from being some wealthy sycophant with more money than sense, buying whatever was offered to him by the celebrity antiquarian in order to impress his friends. Rosenbach's best bookselling oratory (far better in person than in letters) fell on common-sensical ears. Lilly's conservatism, coupled with his taste and high condition standards, often made him a "tough sell." On one occasion Rosenbach offered "one of the most difficult to find" of the Grolier Hundred: *The Tragedy of the Dutchesse of Malfy* by John Webster, the phenomenally rare 1623 first edition. "It is a good copy of one of the greatest rarities in English literature. There are only two copies in America..." Upon handling it, Lilly fired back, "I think the *Dutchesse of Malfy* is pretty awful in its present form!" Eventually Lilly did purchase it, though not until paying for repairing two damaged pages and replacing its "later undistinguished binding" with a custom Riviere binding "in their very best manner." The color images of this binding and the repaired pages will knock your socks off.

When in May 1943 Lilly ordered from Rosenbach a first edition of Meriwether Lewis's *History of the Expedition Under the*

*Command of Captains Lewis and Clark* (1814), the good doctor must have felt like Christopher Columbus as North America first came into view on the horizon – a whole New World of possibilities. American literature had been a mainstay for Lilly, but Americana was a radical departure. And Americana was a field in which Rosenbach had always been particularly strong. Silver dissects Lilly's evolving collecting interests:

*Lilly had... from his earliest days as a collector, purchased non-fiction books about the Midwest and about coastal New England, but these were usually well-produced editions of modern works rather than the primary sources that he was collecting in other fields. With the wartime economy of the early 1940s, and a pervasive sense of patriotism infusing daily life in the United States, Lilly began to think of a more focused approach to his collection and set about to collect historical Americana in a much more systematic way than he had done previously. Though his purchases of British literary first editions didn't stop entirely, Lilly now tended to concentrate more on American than British literature than he had during the early years of his collecting.*

Even adding Americana to his interests didn't turn Lilly into the cash cow that Rosenbach always hoped he would develop into, but in the last several years of their relationship it did maintain the Hoosier's interest in the Rosenbach Company's inventory.

*Dr. Rosenbach and Mr. Lilly* is abundantly illustrated with copies of Rosenbach's invoices to Lilly and many of the letters and telegrams from Rosenbach to Lilly, with Lilly's responses. (These latter are of course Lilly's retained carbon copies on heavily age toned plain onionskin paper – homely things. Am I persnickety in wishing Silver had seen if the Rosenbach Museum and Library still owns Lilly's original letters and used them instead? It'd be nice to see Lilly's letterhead and signature.) Also illustrated are title pages of many of the book gems Lilly purchased from Rosenbach – plus a color section of beauties that includes William Hubbard's *Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians* (Boston, 1677), bearing ownership signatures of many generations of the Hawthorne family, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, and a remarkable promotional real estate broadside of 1773 featuring extensive manuscript notes on both sides from George Washing-

ton. Incidentally, each chapter title is framed in with a delightful wood engraving by Canadian artist Wesley W. Bates showing a long row of book spines, Rosenbach at far left holding forth a book and Lilly at far right holding out his hand. Touché!

Not every item purchased by Lilly from Rosenbach is recounted in *Dr. Rosenbach and Mr. Lilly*, but the previously-mentioned “Books and Manuscripts Purchased by J.K. Lilly, Jr. from The Rosenbach Co.” annotated bibliography that concludes this book briefly lists almost every acquisition. Imagine buying a copy of the first census of the United States (*Return of the Whole Number of Persons within the Several Districts of the United States, 1791*), signed by Thomas Jefferson, in 1944 for a paltry \$385. Or Edgar Allan Poe’s *Poetical Works* (1858) with “Poe’s signature cut from end of letter... and a postscript concerning ‘The Raven’” in 1934 for \$950. Or a Percy Bysshe Shelley ALS about his poems “Helias” and “Adonais” in 1937 for \$1,292.50. And so on and so on..... Sigh.

No book is without its faults, so I’d be remiss if I failed to point out that the prologue cites the year of Rosenbach’s birth as 1875 – it was 1876, which Silver does correctly cite in the first chapter. The acknowledgements note a “‘Further Reading’ on p. 107” that actually begins on page 113. And lengthy block quotes are awkwardly set, lacking the double indent and other standard practices that make them easily readable, as in the two block quotes in this review – pet peeve. But these are snarky minutiae in a well written, well researched and handsomely produced volume.

“Book collecting is, ultimately, a solitary pursuit,” writes Silver in my favorite passage, which applies equally well to autograph collecting,

*but for many collectors, there is satisfaction in the knowledge that they have reached a high level of discrimination and taste in the pursuit of books for their library. Part of that satisfaction comes from a feeling that they are part of the continuum of collecting history, and that their names are worthy additions to a chain of provenance that adorns a famous book. The selection and purchase of a book is an exercise of taste for the collector, and both a validation of the taste, and the means of livelihood, of the bookseller from whom the collector purchased it. This book is about that intersection of taste.....*

*Dr. Rosenbach and Mr. Lilly* is a fascinating illumination of the

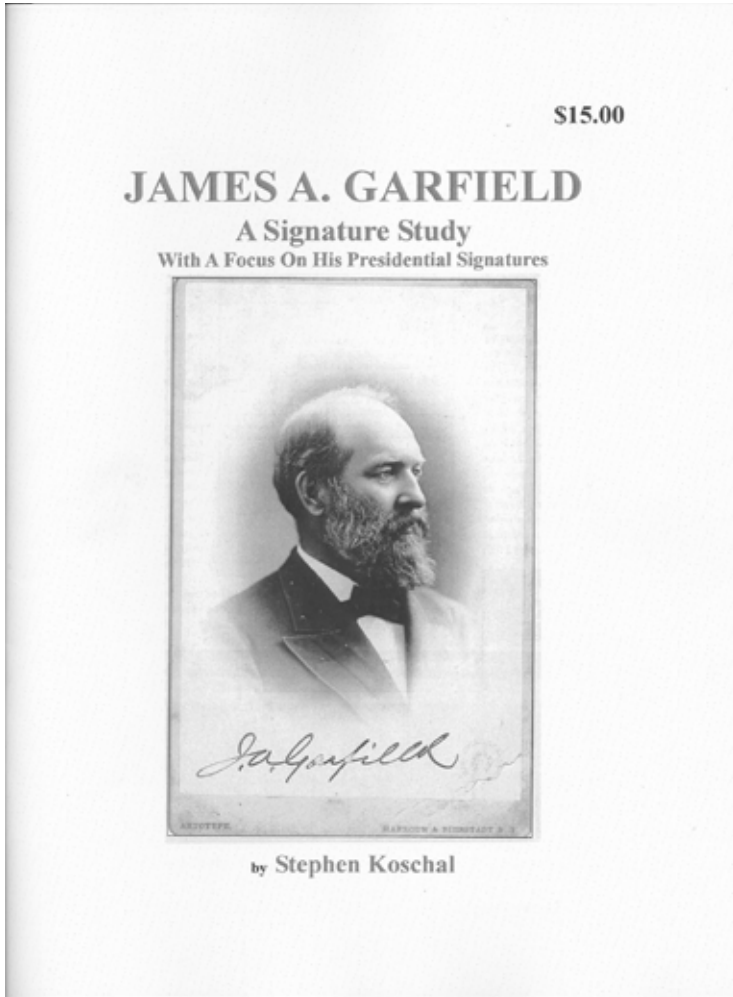
give-and-take between a famous dealer and a famous collector. It's also a microcosm of the very concept of collecting – how we coincide and collide about the aesthetics of objects, how we equate ideals of beauty with crass commercial value, how these historical objects we lust after give their possessors a satisfaction and sense of well-being matched by none other.

Silver does a fine job of bringing this unusual pairing to life. To me Rosenbach often comes across as a bit of a snake oil salesman, albeit an entertaining and likeable one, and Lilly as afraid of giving in to his enthusiasms and overspending. Theirs was an always cordial and ultimately beneficial relationship, though. What would the famed Lilly Library be today if not for the likes of A.S.W. Rosenbach?

### Garfield Signatures

You've got to hand it to Florida autograph dealer Steve Koschal. In an economic and publishing climate in which very few books about autographs are being published, he has managed over the years to self-publish a number of useful, inexpensive reference works. Many of these have been reviewed in this column – studies about the handwriting of Robert F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Thomas Jefferson, Muhammad Ali, White House cards and others. They aren't fancy hardbound affairs. They aren't the latest word in layout and style. But they're a strong source of numerous handwriting examples and interesting commentary. They get the job done.

Over the years, Steve and I have had a fun, friendly, healthy ongoing debate about autograph reference books. We're both gung-ho fanatics about autograph education and the need for collectors to build up the best reference library they possibly can. It goes without saying that autograph *dealers* should have the best reference libraries of all, but that's a whole other disturbing story. I (former book editor and English instructor) maintain that the message is only as good as the medium – that careful, detailed argument/analysis accompanied by plentiful illustrations provide the knowledge that best helps collectors refine their autograph sleuthing skills. Writing quality does matter, for weak, skimpy writing fails to communicate effectively and therefore does not accomplish its goal. Steve takes a “just the facts, ma'am” approach and argues that it's more important to simply get the



facts and exemplars in the hands of collectors however you can and let them make their own conclusions. The form in which it's conveyed isn't critical. Both approaches have merit. I like Steve's "just get the data out there any way you can" attitude, but think you still need to offer articulate and persuasive explanations: *Why* this example is authentic, *why* this one is a forgery, *why* this one is questionable.

*James A. Garfield: A Signature Study with a Focus on His Presiden-*



*tial Signatures* (henceforth *JAG*) is similar to Koschal's previous productions. Like all of his offerings, I find it (in order, in a nutshell) weak in writing and in-depth analysis, fair in presentation, good in organization, excellent in quantity of illustrations and outstanding in price. *JAG* takes the reader chronologically through the largest number of Garfield handwriting exemplars ever assembled under one roof – a great thing.

The first page of the first chapter (“The Early Years”), though, proves why this study would greatly benefit from in-depth explanations. There's an illustration of the most atypical Garfield signature you've ever seen: Small, cramped, vertical, poorly formed. Writes Koschal, “If the above signature was being sold as a clipped signature of James A. Garfield many would have their doubts that it is a genuine example.” Good point. Two other typical Garfield signatures from this time period are also illustrated and their general characteristics described.

So why even illustrate this oddity? It's noted that “On January 8, 1857 Garfield wrote a wonderful poem, entirely in his hand. It ran a full page and was signed ‘J.A. Garfield.’” But rather than taking this golden opportunity to show and explain why this bizarre exemplar is authentic – a great lesson in how “atypical” does not always mean “not authentic,” by the way – Koschal simply notes: “We have seen the original item, the entire poem is penned by the hand of Garfield and it is without question genuine.” Huh? In other words, the explanation is BISS – because I said so! Simply writing *Trust me, it's good* is not good enough. (And who, by the way, is this “We”? I see only one author's name on the title page.) An educator's job is not only to *tell* students what's correct – that's the easy part – but more importantly to *show them why*. Why wouldn't you want to illustrate the entire poem or portion of it and teach – show how this signature that doesn't resemble Garfield's is indeed authentic, and here's why..... To not do this not only doesn't educate the reader – it confuses and baffles them. Is this signature authentic? Search me – the author completely failed to demonstrate his expertise and prove an important point.

In fairness, after this unfortunate opening *JAG* recovers and with the 1860s period a nice discussion of Garfield's mature signature and handwriting characteristics follows. The two different style “A”s he employed for his middle initial – one

rounded, one printed – are covered and pictured, and the types of material collectors are most likely to find from this period are addressed. Koschal disagrees with other published comments about Garfield's handwriting "that [he] had a habit of connecting many of the words in his handwritten letters. I don't find this to be the general rule.... It has also been said that Garfield often failed to cross small case 't's,' particularly in the middle of words...." Unproductive argument here, for the issue is really not whether Garfield did these things, but rather how frequently – it's just a quantitative thing. Koschal does clarify these earlier general statements made by others.

Koschal is best when demonstrating the general development of Garfield's handwriting and his general letter writing practices. This 1860s chapter shows how and what Garfield typically signed and wrote as a Union officer. Later in the same decade we see him as a rising young Congressman, fulfilling autograph requests, signing photographs and quotations, and having a secretary to pen routine letters for him. The 1870s chapter continues along this same vein, with a fine cross section of Garfield letters and documents along with a signed calling or visiting card.

With the 1880s and the presidency Koschal vastly expands the chapter length, and in these pages will be found an impressively large selection of Garfield presidential exemplars of all types – mainly simply illustrations with brief descriptive captions. So many illustrations does he offer from the Garfield presidency that he actually has to offer them up month by month, with sections on February/March, April, May, June and July, plus separate sections on "Signatures as President," "Executive Mansion Cards," "Signed Photographs," "Signed Checks" and "Signed Books."

Koschal takes umbrage with the overuse of the word *rare* in all its varieties ("extremely rare," "exceedingly rare," "very rare," etc.) to describe presidential-date Garfield autograph material. He warns collectors: "Autograph dealer's and auction houses tend to hype up the description of something signed by Garfield as president... These terms are used to try and justify a high or even an inflated price for the item." While I do agree with this assessment, I wish that he would complete this thought and offer his opinion on how dealers should accurately qualify Garfield presidential signatures. "Scarce" and all its variants ("very

scarce,” “quite scarce,” etc.) are one step down from rare and I find perfectly appropriate and justified.

One point about the “Signed Checks” chapter. Two cut-in-half checks are pictured and another discussed that were all given by Lucretia Garfield to admirers with the remark that each was penned on July 1, 1881, one day before the assassination. The upper right portion of both of the illustrated checks has been left blank – never filled in. Koschal notes that “It is not known how many of these Garfield personal checks were cut in half by Mrs. Garfield. Obviously she did so to comply with requests for President Garfield’s autograph, after his death.” Is it cynical to think that Mrs. Garfield may well not have known for certain when her husband signed these undated checks? Or that out of kindness to admirers of her husband she engaged in a little wishful thinking?

*JAG* closes with a bang with a “Free Franks” chapter. This intriguing section raises the specter that non-authentic Garfield free franks regularly enter the market. Half a dozen fine authentic exemplars (signed with “MC,” of course) are pictured and described – followed by another half dozen that would indeed seem to warrant a closer look, so sloppy and atypical are they. “These secretarial signed free franks being sold as genuine are frequently offered,” he writes, and charges some unnamed but “high profile” dealers and auction houses with allowing this to happen – whether knowingly or not he does not note. “Amateurish attempts to authenticate only flood the hobby with spurious autographs being deemed authentic. Adding a worthless COA from an auction house is simply an unacceptable incessant practice of ignorance and incompetence.” What better evidence that studying the widest range of autograph reference books helps the serious collector to protect himself?

*James A. Garfield: A Signature Study with a Focus on His Presidential Signatures* may be shy on professional-level analysis in my view, but it’s a step in the right direction. With presidential autographs far and away the most popular category of autograph collecting, I envision the day when studies such along these lines exist for every single U.S. president. At the moment, other than a couple of sound general survey books about the autographs of all U.S. presidents, we’re less than one-quarter of the way there.

# Volunteer!

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