

# A Collector's Potluck, Paper Paraphernalia, Stamp Stories

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**ONG, George (editor).** *The Grolier Club Collects II: Books, Manuscripts and Works on Paper from the Collections of Grolier Club Members.* New York: The Grolier Club, 2015. 4to. Blue cloth. 183pp. Numerous color illustrations. **\$75.00.**

**SPELLERBERG, Ian.** *Reading & Writing Accessories: A Study of Paper-Knives, Paper Folders, Letter Openers and Mythical Page Turners.* New Castle: Oak Knoll Press, 2016. 4to. Softbound. xii, 124pp. Numerous color illustrations. **\$60.00.**

**HERST, Herman, Jr.** *Put a Stamp on It! Seventy-Seven Sparkling Stories Showcasing How Stamps Have Intercepted Historical Events.* N.p.: Lee Ann and Veronica's Publishing, 2016. Small 4to. Softbound. 354pp. **\$16.99.**

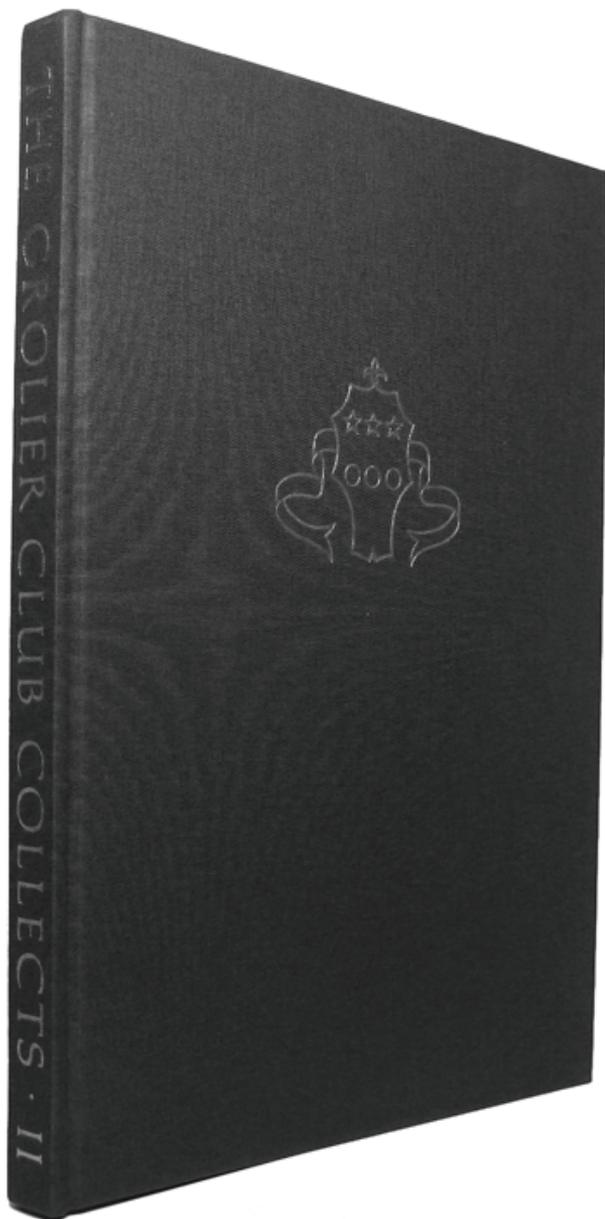
What if every Manuscript Society member were invited to choose one favorite item from their collection for inclusion in a volume of Manuscript Society member highlights? The item need not be exceptionally valuable or extraordinarily rare, although it can be; its value might be sentimental more so than monetary. It simply has to have that "Wow!" factor and resonate in a way the owner can clarify to readers. One page would be devoted to each item – nice color image and a paragraph or two from the collector explaining

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its significance. Would one hundred members participate? Two hundred? (My own contribution would be an item from Harry Chapin, the singer-songwriter best known for folksy rock hits such as “Taxi” and “Cat’s in the Cradle.” I’ve got an early driver’s license of his – appropriately, it’s a chauffeur’s license. A cherished gift from his widow Sandy, who long ago loaned me family scrapbooks when the literary journal I co-edited devoted an issue to legendary literary critic Kenneth Burke – Harry’s grandfather.) Whatever the number, a fair percentage of members could be counted on to purchase a copy and the product would surely intrigue enough collectors outside the membership find an audience there and help make the production worthwhile. What a powerful means of fostering interest in the hobby and increasing awareness of the Society. (Food for thought, Publications Committee...)

New York’s already high-profile Grolier Club has done just this with its beautifully-produced volume, *The Grolier Club Collects II: Books, Manuscripts and Works on Paper from the Collections of Grolier Club Members*. The first volume – same title less Roman numeral – was published in 2003 and included items from 135 members exhibited from December 2002 to February 2003. This sequel was curated by club director Eric J. Holzenberg and collector Arthur L. Schwarz and includes items from 132 members in an exhibition that opened in December 2015. Each of these exhibits concluded with a book collecting symposium featuring prominent speakers.

You know you’re in for an unusual read when the preface comes in the form of a poem. Bookman extraordinaire Terry Belanger, founding director of the University of Virginia’s noted Rare Book School, offers up “A Sentimental Journey: The Grolier Club Collects II,” a 23-stanza poem describing both collecting and this exhibition. “Rare books can cost the earth – unless they don’t,” he opines. “Taste, not cash, is crucial for cohesion. / Want it? A modest checkbook balance won’t / Rule out an acquisition you believe in. / Must-have books are never out of season; / You’re



not required to be a millionaire. / Collecting's rationalization over reason: / Purchasing what you think's passing fair / Resulting in a book to treasure and to share." Hats off to this versatile versifier for this fun and refreshing contribution.

*The Grolier Club Collects II* is organized into thirteen categories, most of which you'd expect: Americana; History; Theology; Science & Medicine; Voyages & Maps; Association Copies; Literature; Illustrated & Artist's Books; Fine Printing & Book Arts; Bindings; Bibliography & Book History; Photographs; Prints, Drawings, & Other Works on Paper. Note Holzenberg and Schwarz in their introduction, "Much thought went into the creation of these categories and the proper sorting of their constituent items. But in the end, in 2015 as in 2002, the more-or-less arbitrary labels under which submissions were grouped proved far less important, less compelling, and less appealing than the items themselves, and the stories attached to them by their collectors...."

And such items they are, of a staggering variety and each introduced by its owner, who explains how he or she acquired it, why it's important or interesting or unique. Naturally quite a few choice autograph rarities are found among these offerings. A few at random:

Recently-deceased artist Robert LaVigne made a charming sketch of young not-yet-poet Peter Orlovsky in 1954 just before the Beat movement exploded on the literary scene. This early image of Allen Ginsberg's long-time protégé comes from the collection of Donald A. Heneghan, who writes that "This was the first work on paper added to my collection, and it has expanded my interest and appreciation for a broader approach to my collecting."

The oldest items depicted, and among the most provocative, are a pair of small papyrus fragments from circa 250 A.D. Notes owner Gifford Combs, "This is, most probably, the oldest manuscript fragment of the New Testament in private hands. It was found in Egypt in the late nineteenth century, and... tells the stories of two miracles: that of the loaves and fishes and of Jesus walking

on water at Capernaem.”

Of a more contemporary nature is William Zachs' copy of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Acquired at a charity auction in 2013, this copy is extra-illustrated by the author herself, who “agreed to record her thoughts as she read through this copy. To over one thousand words of text she added more than twenty illustrations...” To the half-title page depicted she's sketched a large crest with commentary.

One of my favorites comes from colleague Kenneth W. Rendell, whose book about his Western Americana collection (*The Great West: Pursuing the American Dream*) was reviewed in the fall 2013 installment of this column, provides a superb autograph manuscript “from an unpublished essay” penned by Washington Irving. Irving's words give me chills: “One of the most striking characteristics is his self-dependence. Born to no fortune he knows...that he has nothing but his own mental and bodily exertions to rely on in the great struggle of existence....”

Another gem hails from the collection of my friend and colleague David Lowenherz, the noted New York dealer who's handled many an exceptional Robert Frost manuscript. Pictured is Frost's plain, homely physics notebook from his senior year in high school with a page filled with his “Breaking Strength of Wire” notes – remarkably unpoetic. Although not pictured, David points out that “on these pages, in Elinor's handwriting, is a transcription of Robert Browning's poem, ‘Incident in the French Camp’” – she being Frost's girlfriend, future spouse, and early poetic muse.

One book that staggers me belongs to renowned collector Michael Zinman, whose 1787 two-volume edition of *The Federalist* bears a presentation inscription in the second volume “From Mr Madison one of the supposed authors”! It seems Zinman purchased the first volume from a bookseller who did not have the second half, but “I suggested he speak with his seller, who told him that he donated a number of books he thought were of no value to a local thrift shop. Suffice it to say that my bookseller friend journeyed to

the shop and found the volume.” This jaw-dropping rarity is one of only two known presentation copies.

And lastly, the most humble in nature comes from Harvard Law School Professor Daniel R. Coquillette. “The focus of my recent collecting has been illustrated editions of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, and I have many,” he writes. He tells the moving story of his father, who “was penniless when he arrived from Iowa in 1935” but got into Harvard nonetheless. Imagine Coquillette’s surprise when, “After my father’s death, while going through the few books he bought at college with money he could not really afford to spend,” he found a three-volume 1815 edition of *Don Quixote*.

These seven exemplars fail to do justice to the 135 beauties that pull you along in *The Grolier Club Collects II*. Handsomely designed and printed on fine paper in an elegant typeface, this memorable gathering highlights the diversity and sense of wonder that accompanies book and autograph collecting at its finest.

We’ve all seen the scores of books about every conceivable type of collectible cranked out annually by certain publishers: Slick, slim softbound 8” x 11” affairs compiled (not authored, as these are generally 90% illustrations, 10% text) by persons from every walk of life whose collecting passion is the subject of their book. These volumes usually profile the compiler’s collection of nineteenth-century Amish salt cellars or what have you and consist of dozens of pages chock full of illustrations with brief captions and sometimes value estimates. I’m not belittling these guides. They serve a purpose, fill a void, and are thus a useful if limited weapon in a collector’s arsenal.

Ian Spellerberg’s *Reading & Writing Accessories: A Study of Paper-Knives, Paper Folders, Letter Openers and Mythical Page Turners* is likewise a slim softbound 8” x 11” affair replete with color illustrations – but there any resemblance ends. As its subtitle notes, this is indeed a *study*, implying thoughtful, balanced and well considered rather than a mere price guide or pictorial history. There’s actually more text than illustrations – a 75% to 25% ratio, I’d

estimate. For a softbound (would that it wasn't!), dare I suggest it's almost *elegant*? Oak Knoll Press's usual high production standards have yet to disappoint this reviewer.

*Reading & Writing Accessories* makes a worthwhile companion to those volumes about writing implements that any hardcore autograph enthusiast will want to have. Understanding what pens were in use at different times and the nuts and bolts of how they worked makes one a better-informed collector better able to identify anomalies: Does that sixteenth-century document appear to have been signed with a steel nib pen? That 1870s letter written using a quill pen? And what about that signed photograph dated 1934 in ballpoint ink? So too, to a lesser extent, with paper knives, paper folders and letter openers. After all, an anomaly such as an improperly sized or folded stampless cover might betray ignorance of proper letter forms, suggesting the possibility of forgery. Unlike pens, about which scores of books have been written over the past century, shockingly little has been written about reading and writing accessories, making Spellerberg's study almost a first of its kind. The fact that there's almost no literature about paper knives, paper folders, letter openers and page turners assures that most readers know next to nothing – it's a level playing field, so Spellerberg can begin at square one knowing the text won't seem too basic to some and too advanced to others.

What strikes this reviewer about *Reading & Writing Accessories* is its forensic-like thoroughness in treating its little-written-about subject. For instance, fully half the book is devoted to paper knives, also known as paper cutters, far more space than paper folders, letter openers and page turners combined. Paper knives, by the way, tend to be long, with cutting edges not sharp (sharp edges don't cut straight) and with one or both ends rounded and rather blunt. Spellerberg divides this section into "The primary evidence," "Materials and design" and "Paper-knives in use." The first takes the reader methodically through nine subsections such as their use (cutting paper down to size or more often opening uncut

# Reading & Writing Accessories

A Study of Paper-Knives, Paper Folders,  
Letter Openers and Mythical Page Turners

By  
Ian Spellerberg



*Paper-knives*

*Folders*

*Letter openers*

*Page turners*

Foreword by Marc Allum,  
'frequent specialist on the BBC Antiques Roadshow'

book leaves), history, literature on the subject, designs and more. Noteworthy examples from museums and private collections are illustrated and old advertisements for all of these accessories are used effectively throughout the book to highlight their evolution. Bookseller's tip: If you have to cut open some uncut outer edges of book pages, try a credit card (I prefer Visa, but some swear by Discover). Most people no longer own a paper knife and letter openers are too sharp and can leave too-jagged edges.

Spellerberg even culls together references to paper knives from books and periodicals from the late-eighteenth century to circa 1900, including excerpts from such writers as Balzac, Trollope, Emerson and Dickens. "Indeed, so numerous are the references that a whole chapter could be devoted to recording and studying all the examples," he quips. He also delves into the many materials from which paper knives were made, their shape and size, paper knives combined with other writing accessories (a surprisingly large subject), how they were stored and used, a survey of giving them as gifts (citing specific examples from 1776 to 1925), their use as advertisements, paper knives owned by famous authors and historical figures (Thomas Jefferson's is particularly charming), and on... and on... and on. Each of the many subsections are well illustrated, too. Spellerberg leaves no stone unturned in this exhaustive study of paper knives from every conceivable source. You'd never think such a *narrow* subject (!) could be so deeply explored, but Spellerberg does so in a lively yet scholarly fashion.

Sections on paper folders and letter openers (more accurately, envelope openers) prove equally engaging and eye opening. Aren't paper knives and letters, you say, the same thing? Au contraire. The thick, blunt edge and rounded end of a paper knife is hardly suitable for inserting into the tiny end opening of a modern envelope, which requires a sharper point to get inside and a narrower, sharper blade to cut cleanly through envelope paper.

As for mythical page turners, it's extraordinary to realize that references could abound and a body of lore exist for a supposed

device which, as Spellerberg makes clear – spoiler alert! – never existed and is surely simply other paper accessories mistakenly identified. The notion of a special device devoted to turning the page of a book when the flick of a finger accomplishes the same calls forth images of one of Rube Goldberg’s insanely convoluted cartoon contraptions that perform the simplest tasks.

One of the most delightful aspects of autograph collecting is the unexpected avenues it sometimes leads the collector into. Spellerberg’s *Reading & Writing Accessories* is one of the most scenic and enjoyable of these back roads.

Herman “Pat” Herst Jr. occupies the same spot in the stamp collecting world that Charles “Bud” Hamilton occupies in the autograph collecting world. These New York contemporaries (Herst died in 1999 at age 89, Hamilton in 1996 at age 82) were both genial, inveterate storytellers, dealers and auctioneers who penned popular books that created many new collectors in the 1960s and 1970s. Herst’s books include *Nassau Street: A Quarter Century of Stamp Dealing* (1960), *Fun and Profit in Stamp Collecting* (1962), *Stories to Collect Stamps By* (1968), *The Complete Philatelist* (1979) and others, while Hamilton’s books include *The Signature of America* (1979), *Great Forgers and Famous Fakes* (1980), *American Autographs* (1980) and many others. (Hamilton’s *Collecting Autographs and Manuscripts*, published 1962, was the first book about autographs I read as a teenager in the 1970s). I’d enjoyed a couple of Herst’s books as a young man, though the incredibly nitpicky and minutiae-driven nature of philately never stuck – but I knew how much autograph content found its way into his books.

So I was intrigued when, thirteen years after Herst’s death, his son Kenneth sent me the posthumous *Put a Stamp on It! Seventy-Seven Sparkling Stories Showcasing How Stamps Have Intercepted Historical Events*. Autograph and stamp collecting are often kissing cousins, and many of these seventy-seven chapters (which vary in length from only a couple pages to more than a dozen) shed light on

autograph collecting trends of long ago.

“Crime of the century” may sound epic and unforgettable, but this popular media phrase makes for a dodgy collecting principle since anyone can apply the phrase and a new “Crime of the century” continues to replace the previous title-holder. This caveat is more valid today than ever – true crime often fails the test of time. In “The Madeleine Smith Postmark” Herst chronicles in detail a mid-nineteenth century Scottish murder case involving well-to-do 19-year-old Madeleine Smith, who was charged with poisoning jilted lover Pierre L’Angelier. A long and tawdry tale with a philatelic angle, what will perk up autograph collectors’ ears is this:

*In all, there were one hundred and ninety-eight letters from Madeleine to Pierre. Almost all of them are still in existence, scattered in dozens of autograph collections the world over. Many were introduced at the trial, after which they went into dossiers, filed away once the case had ended. They did not last long there. By the end of the century, autograph dealers were offering them for sale. They still appear in price lists and auction sales of philographers.*

Elsewhere Herst explains how this came to pass:

*About the turn of the century, a bookseller in Glasgow was approached by an unknown individual who had for sale a huge bundle of letters written by the famous poisoner, Madeleine Smith. He bought the lot for eight guineas, then about \$40.00, and in so doing, he assured that Madeleine Smith’s fame would never die, even though at that time she was Mrs. Wardle. Her father had never obtained custody of her letters; they were apparently stolen from Scottish files.*

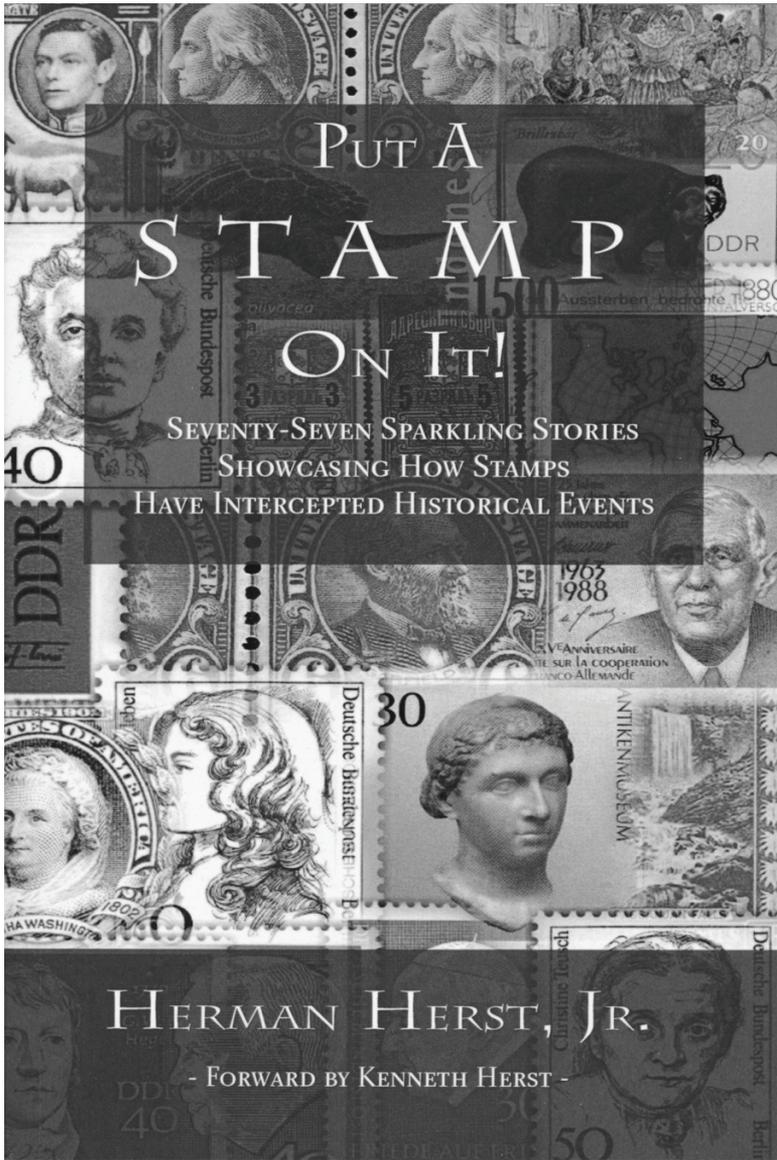
Where are these letters today? If one turned up in a collection

formed around the turn of the century, would it even be identified? Would it arouse much collector interest? Perhaps in Scotland, but in the United States? A cautionary tale, indeed.

“Robert E. Lee and Whistler’s Mother” tells a sad tale that any experienced dealer can relate to, as most of us have similar tales. “How many priceless covers, manuscripts and documents are lost to posterity through the carelessness and neglect of the owners?” laments Herst. “Alas, the number will never be known, just as the items themselves are destroyed before some collector has the opportunity to appreciate them.” A document pairing the unlikely duo of the Confederate military leader and the mother of artist James McNeill came to Herst’s attention in the collection “of a United States four-star general who was actually on his deathbed (and he knew it).” Ma Whistler wrote to West Point then-superintendent Lee in 1851 requesting a special leave of absence for her son. Herst handed the letter to the general, and “was shocked when he tore it in half.” The general had been West Point superintendent himself and apparently was accustomed to liberating not only European countries but documents that fit his collection from the archives. Not wanting his questionable borrowing to come to light upon his death, he at least allowed Herst to photocopy the document for posterity before tearing it to bits and having Herst take a match to it. Herst does give a full transcript of this letter and Lee’s reply (he granted her request), but one wonders where that photocopy rests today. Do the West Point archives know of it?

Such anecdotes of autograph interest abound in *Put a Stamp on It!* – some tragic, some trivial, but all entertaining. All philatelic material in a sense falls within the realm of autograph collectors – much of it involves handwriting and paper, after all. Only a small amount involving such fine points of stamp collecting as plate marks, cancellations, commemorative issues and other such hardcore specialties will leave the uninitiated autograph collector scratching his or her head.

*Put a Stamp on It!* is attractive enough physically, and the cover



# PUT A STAMP ON IT!

SEVENTY-SEVEN SPARKLING STORIES  
SHOWCASING HOW STAMPS  
HAVE INTERCEPTED HISTORICAL EVENTS

HERMAN HERST, JR.

- FORWARD BY KENNETH HERST -

design quite snazzy. The typesetting is – well, at least legible, though it won't win any awards. Most notably, certain essays seem to have evaded the proofreader's pen. "The Postal Card Gets Its Man," for instance, is an intriguing short piece about how law enforcement officials in the late-nineteenth century often used penny postcards as the fastest, most efficient way to spread the word about wanted criminals – but then this fascinating philatelic footnote closes with a couple of unrelated paragraphs that clearly aren't part of this essay. And in "Sherlock Holmes and the Littlewood's Pool," this pastiche of Arthur Conan Doyle's creation and his companion misspells the Baker Street detective's name as "Homes" one too many times. Additionally, alliteration abuse always annoys alert audiences (see what I mean?) – and this from one guilty of its judicial use, as per two sentences previous. But when the narrator of Herst's Sherlock piece makes a comment "that this fertile field for funds was found a fecund and fruitful find for filching florins for the fiscal fraternity," the writing clearly screams out for a strong editorial hand to pull in the reins.

Aside from these petty objections, *Put a Stamp on It!* makes entertaining, informative reading for autograph collectors with or without a philatelic bend. Even Herst's son, who took this manuscript "'discovered' in a shoe box on the top shelf of a closet by his late wife" and saw it through to publication, surprised and amused me when he emailed "I am not a philatelist, and my knowledge of stamps pretty much consists of knowing which side to lick." (Quoted with permission, by the way.) You can never have too much background when it comes to the twists and turns autograph collecting has taken over the years, and who better than this once-walking encyclopedia of stamp collecting lore to relate these nuggets. I never thought I would be adding a new volume to the Herman Herst canon, but Ken Herst's tribute to his father in bringing out *Put a Stamp on It!* also provides a service to those among us interested in the history of our hobby.