

Book Reviews: From London's Roxburghe Club to Chicago's Caxton Club

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HEBER, Reginald. *A Letter from India Written in 1824 by Reginald Heber.* London: The Roxburghe Club, 2020. 4to. Hardbound. 69pp. Frontispiece, illustrations. **£156.**

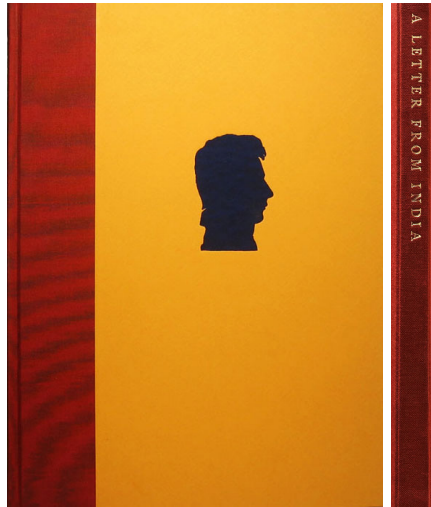
MEYER, David. *'With All Faults': Essays About Old Books.* Chicago: Waltham Street Press, 2021. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 137pp. Illustrations. **\$35.00.**

One of the great and recurring joys of pursuing autographs and historical documents is a lifetime of making acquaintance with a delightful array of characters you would otherwise not have met. Whether you love or loathe those persons, their personal letters – originals or as published in facsimile in books – allow us to share their intimate thoughts. They can enrich your life -- such is the allure, the enticement, that pulls us toward original historical documents.

Reginald Heber (1783-1826) is a name unknown to Americans and, I dare say, known only to those British immersed in Church of England history. This intriguing chap was, it turns out, extraordinary in an understated 19th century English manner – as *A Letter from India's* compiler and editor Nicolas Barker brings out in a dense, fact-filled foreword and afterword in an understated 21st century English manner.

Nicolas Barker, in case you're not familiar, is the 89-year-old Grand Old Man of British book and print historians – former editor of *The Book Collector*, long-time British Library head of conservation, editor or author of *ABC for Book Collectors*, *Bibliotheca Lindesiana*, *Stanley Morison*, *Treasures of the British Library*, *Form and Meaning in the History of the Book* and a long string of other titles. Not to be confused with his American counterpart, Nicholas Basbanes of *A Gentle Madness* fame.

The venerable Roxburghe Club for whom Barker produced this volume is the first and at two centuries plus the oldest book club still operating in England, founded around 1812, and what a pleasure to review one of their renowned publications in this column for the first time. Their membership has been fixed at forty since 1840. The complete roster appears in *A Letter from India*, one half gentry: five lords, four earls, four honorables, three dukes, two marquesses, two sirs, one lady, one prince. (And yes, it took all my restraint to *not* have those



lords a-leaping and conclude with a partridge in a pear tree.) The other half consists of non-gentry such as Barker and Christopher De Hamel, two of whose recent books have been reviewed in this column. None too shabby. Reserved for this membership best described as exclusive (Carl Sandburg's most disliked word in the English language) are forty copies of *A Letter from India* bound in red levant morocco and cloth, while for sale to the general public are 110 cloth-and-paper bound copies of the 150 total print run.

A Letter from India in 1824 by Reginald Heber is simply a 12-page handwritten letter beautifully reproduced in faithful color on appropriate non-gloss stock together with word-for-word transcript on facing pages.

But before the reader delves into this amazingly meaty missive we learn in Barker's foreword about the life of this exceptional figure up to the time of the letter. Born into wealth and privilege, Heber was brilliant and well educated. It turns out that two centuries ago, before the endless television, music, film, internet, social media and other entertainment distractions that consume our time, some people became accomplished in multiple ways difficult to fathom today. Thus "as a young man Heber learned to draw and paint in watercolours," Barker writes, and the front and rear endpapers show two outstanding color examples of well-executed watercolor landscapes. Barker notes too that Heber "had written verse, light and more serious, from his earliest years," winning Oxford University's poetry prize and at age twenty seeing his verse history of the Holy Land from Moses through Napoleon published in 1803. He felt inclined to take religious orders, but not before traveling across northern Europe to avoid Napoleon's war and touring Russia and the East with a friend for a couple of years. In an age when extensive foreign travel was rare "he returned to a hero's welcome" and "found himself treated as an authority on eastern Europe, consulted by government" and in demand as a writer. Ordainment as a deacon and marriage followed, though showing himself as an energetic and ambitious country clergyman could scarce contain his talents; composing numerous church hymns helped, as did having another poetry volume published.

A man of such boundless skills could not long a rural cleric remain. Having worked his way up the church ranks and having influential friends in high church places, by age forty he was offered to succeed the first Bishop of Calcutta, who had died suddenly. All of this is simply back story to the dozen page letter that's the centerpiece of *A Letter from India*.

Heber's book-chapter-length letter to a young female relative is the star of the show. *A Letter from India* really should be held up as a model of how to present a handwritten document as the central focus of a book – slim, elegant, handsomely photographed and finely typeset on high-quality paper, lovely to behold.

Writing from Tillyghur, India, in January 1824 from a grand country estate loaned him just three months after arriving in that country, this lively stream-of-conscious narrative describes in vibrant detail the avalanche of impressions this exotic locale rained upon him. The flat land and its lush fauna, the trees and fruits and crops, the fellow British and colorful locals he meets – in short, anything and everything – fall under his intense gaze and entertaining descriptive abilities.

On top of this, Heber illustrates the letter. Top of the opening page is a narrow, side to side likeness of this rural manor in its idyllic pastoral setting – quite stunning in brown ink and wash. Near the letter's middle, again at top, are two marvelous side-by-side drawings of jungle scenes, one replete with elephant (“The above paltry little sketch may serve to explain... the forms of the trees and the general outline of the scenery”). At bottom of the final page is the largest: In foreground an ox brooding alongside a large rustic building (which he captions “Bengalee Shop, Bazar of Barrackpore”) on the edge of a vast tropic landscape. Later, In Barker's afterword, we learn that Heber's journal is likewise illustrated “with his drawings, of landscape, wild life, the country people of all kinds, fishermen, women spinning, a ‘beautiful’ crocodile, swimming tortoises.”

My only criticism of Barker's transcript facing each facsimile page is that the typeset text ought to follow the precise line breaks of the handwritten original, which eases close comparing. I also happened upon a few words in the handwritten text that somehow got missed in the transcript.

Barker's afterword chronicles Heber's all-too-brief existence following this letter. A journey to get to know his pastoral territory

with a large entourage ends up taking a staggering sixteen grueling months. Writes Barker, “he determined to embark on an extensive tour of his diocese, including all India north of a line between Bombay and Calcutta, consecrating four churches, at Dacca, Benares, Futteh Ghum and Meerut, en route.... One 15 June he set off, reluctantly leaving Amelia and the children behind. The party was in four boats, Heber himself and his chaplain in a sixteen-oared pinnace.” Barker surveys this epic journey through city and country, observing jungles and famine, traveling by boat, elephants, and mules through plains to “the foothills of the Himalayas only sixty miles away, although visible in the haze.” It proved invigorating if exhausting and he returned to Calcutta “a year and four months after they had set out, far longer than he had originally planned.”

How exhilarating to meet someone Barker describes as “one of the heroes of missionary evangelism in the nineteenth century” in such a unique form as the Roxburghe Club’s handsome *A Letter from India*. I look forward to my next encounter with the endearing, engaging polymath Bishop of Calcutta.

It’s been twenty years since I reviewed David Meyer’s *Memoirs of a Book Snake: Forty Years of Seeking and Saving Old Books* in this column, and I’m pleased to see that his new *‘With All Faults’: Essays About Old Books* proves he is still at it. Meyer describes himself as “book scout, collector, dealer and publisher,” and this new collection highlights all of these. Strangely enough, many years ago I read another bookseller memoir by another David with that exact same title. David Low’s 1973 *‘With All Faults’* (no subtitle) chronicles the bookish dealings of this quirky-as-only-English-can-be mid-century London bookseller. It was published in, of all places, Tehran, that hotbed of books about books publishing....

Oddball. Eccentric. Eclectic. Lacking index (pet peeve). Quirky as only English can be? Perhaps – and enjoyably so, for Meyer’s baker’s dozen of essays “on divers topics” (to cite a phrase found in many 18th and 19th century subtitles) truly elaborates its title. The phrase “with all faults” or “w.a.f.” is bookseller jargon found mainly in auction catalogues and simply means “as is” – flaws, warts and all, you buy the book and no returns allowed. So too with Meyer’s *‘With All Faults’: Essays About Old Books*. Remember the “Island of Misfit Toys” from the 1964 classic *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*? Think of that as you peruse *‘With All Faults’*, for Meyer is clearly drawn to the oddball books and persons that often populate the book world. These essays first appeared, by the way, in the *Caxtonian*, the fine journal published by The Caxton Club, Chicago’s answer to London’s Roxburghe Club – although at 125 years old only about half its age.

The title essay, “With All Faults,” which strangely doesn’t open the collection but appears one-third of the way in, highlights all manner of flawed books and book people that have crossed his path. There’s his copy of the American holy of holies, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* –first edition, first issue, but seriously foxed throughout and lacking the iconic dust jacket. There’s the Chicago bookseller who “had the terrible habit of gluing the front free endpaper of a book to the inside of the front cover. Why would he do this? Although I never attempted to pry up a glued-down page to see what was underneath, most likely a former owner’s name, an inscription or, possibly, a bookplate was being covered. . . .” There’s his first edition of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* with jacket “in second- or third-class condition” acquired from the friend of a girlfriend for forty dollars. Most amusing of all, Meyer chronicles his copy of Francis W. Grimm’s 1929 *A Primer of Bookbinding*. What begins as a barely perceptible “Pinhole entrance” on the front board becomes one termite’s epic journey as he narrates its crazed appetizer path around the preliminary leaves before an entrée through the entire text block, the path of destruction ending with a grand exit out the rear board.

To profile a few other chapters at random, take “Temptations.” Meyer writes fondly of beloved elderly English professor Clyde “Tippy” Tull during his years at Cornell – but not *that* Cornell. “I attended Cornell College in Iowa in the 1960s,” he writes, “a small liberal arts college a long way from the famous university in Ithaca, New York”.

Many of the books in his living room were by writers who had come to Cornell to read from their work. Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Crowe Ransom and others had been house guests of the Tulls. Tippy had recollections of all these people, but few of their books in his library were signed or inscribed to him. He simply did not care about books in this way. It was the moment that counted: Sandburg sitting in Tippy’s favorite chair strumming his cigar, singing and reciting poems while students sat on the floor around him – that was what mattered.

(In freaky coincidences that happen to this reviewer with uncanny frequency, I had actually driven through the tiny town of Mount Vernon, Iowa where Cornell is located days *before* reading this; and the day *after* reading this I catalogued a scarce 1935 Cornell chapbook we’d never handled before -- edited by who else but Clyde Tull.)

Meyer writes of helping Tull “clear his attic of the accumulated publications from those exciting times,” for which Tull “gave me a copy of Sherwood Anderson’s 1925 novel, *Dark Laughter*, in a bright but frayed dust jacket. Anderson had signed the half-title page. . . .” Later, as a college senior, Meyer was shocked to find other of Tull’s books in the library’s circulating collection:

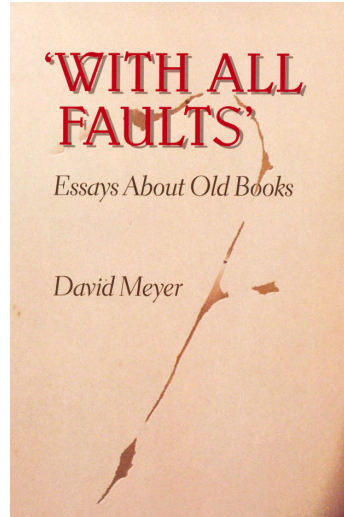
...I came across several volumes of Robert Frost’s poetry. Opening one book after another, I was astonished to find that Frost has transcribed some of his most famous poems

on their flyleafs and signed his name. I immediately took the books to the check-out desk, thinking as I went that although there was no evidence to support my belief, they had most likely belonged to Toppo. The books sat on the shelf above the study desk in my dorm room...as I tried to decide what to do. I dearly wanted to rescue them from the open shelves and was surprised they had survived for as long as they had, still in good condition decades after Frost had inscribed them.... A few days [after returning them] the books were back on the open shelves.

In one memorable chapter with the fun title “Short. Vast. Tippy.” Meyer remarks, “I’ve always been intrigued by oddball books.... Strange, peculiar, unique, unusual... the list of appropriate adjectives goes on without actually defining such books.” Indeed, anecdotes about strange books and stranger people inform *‘With All Faults’* at every turn. Such book “puppies,” to use the description applied to damaged books by our mutual friend, the much-missed Chicago bookseller Terry Tanner, lies at the heart of *‘With All Faults’*. The above-mentioned chapter simply profiles three self-published titles that captured Meyer’s fancy. “Short” describes 4’8” Chicagoan Daniel Y. McMullen, whose *The Experiences of a “Little” Man* (1900) discusses the challenges of being a short person and how to handle them. “Vast” describes *Celestia* (1958) by Chicago suburbanite James Thomas Magnan, who (tongue in cheek?) formed his own “sovereign power,” named it the Nation of Celestial Space, proclaimed its territory as outer space and attempted to legitimize it with this book. “Tippy” describes a leatherbound 1910 facsimile edition of the 1723 title *Ebrietatis Encomium; or, the Praise of Drunkenness*, which celebrated inebriation in several languages.

Autograph aficionados will find fodder galore throughout *‘With All Faults’*. In two central chapters, “Signed & Inscribed” and “Signed & Inscribed, Revisited,” Meyer visits a hodgepodge

of bookish enthusiasms he has undergone. There was British novelist and essayist Richard Le Gallienne, whose once popular and now wildly uncollected romances he collected for years in signed copies. (Apparently I share his penchant for the quirky, as the Le Gallienne titles in my collection were inscribed to me by his daughter, actress Eva Le Gallienne.) There are nice memories of Meyer's brief friendship with famed poet Tillie Olsen, which began at



New Hampshire's notable MacDowell Colony writer's retreat in 1968 when he was a budding young writer. A quaint note from her including a map she drew directing him to her cabin there is pictured. Also illustrated is her inscription in his copy of Olsen's best-known book, *Tell Me a Riddle*, in which she writes out Herman Melville's poem "Art." He recalls, "She made 16 changes in my copy of the book, inking out, inserting, and transposing words and correcting typographical errors. One sentence in the text was obliterated by erasing."

Meandering essays on other motley topics include "Mysteries of Pulp Revealed" – not the lurid detective and sci-fi magazines on the 1930s and '40s so avidly collected, but the late 19th century nonfiction pamphlets on every arcane topic imaginable cheaply printed by a confusing maze of obscure, interchangeable publishers. It's a category that defies description and is seldom collected, so slapdash, illogical, contradictory, and outrageously inconsistent is their presentation. Pirated portions abound, copyright data is practically nonexistent, huge textual anomalies aren't the exception but the rule... that only scratches the surface of making sense of

nonfiction pulps, but somehow Meyer manages to make some order from this often-overlooked category.

In “Generations of Books” he surveys the many herbal and other books owned by the father he clearly adored, an artist and printer who continued the family’s mail order herb and herbal remedy business. It’s entertaining to learn when and where such a fellow acquired his many books, how he used them, how he sometimes repaired them – with forays into the father’s passing fancy for early 20th century Florida travel guides, 19th century self-help medical manuals and a wallful of early cookbooks. The beloved father is also much the focus of the chapter “Book Bills,” in which his proclivity for keeping receipts for every book he purchased – a habit Meyer continued – becomes an interesting method for describing a collection. It’s a congenial stroll through his father’s and his book buying, and reveals Meyer’s major interest in antiquarian magic books such as Reginald Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), Henry Dean’s *The Whole Art of Legerdemain; or, Hocus Pocus in Perfection* (1781) and other rarities.

Like any collection of assorted essays, readers’ interest will vary considerably from essay to essay in *‘With All Faults’: Essays About Old Books*. Some are stronger than others. One of the longest chapters, “Private Ballantine’s Views of the Great War,” takes three fine and worthwhile photograph albums covering this soldier’s World War One service and reconstructs his story, using many of these worthwhile images – but it simply did not resonate with this reviewer, who frankly struggled to slog through it. But such is the nature of essay collections and there are a number of other much-enjoyed chapters that I gloss over for sake of brevity. *‘With All Faults’* is a refreshingly offbeat look into one book person’s lifelong, idiosyncratic interaction with paper, books and book people.