

## The Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists

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*While completing entries and headnotes for various sections of the expanded catalog of the Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Alexander Wainwright gathered clippings, articles, and unpublished notes about the collection as a whole into one file. Found there was the following speech, signed by him but with none of his characteristic notations as to date and other circumstances of creation or publication. Internal evidence—a reference to a recent edition of the letters of Anthony Trollope—allows us to assign a date of 1951. Where Alec gave this speech is less certain, but hints come from the mention of names in a form so brief that his audience must have known in full who was meant. Those hints suggest that he gave this speech on the Princeton campus. Leading Library staff spoke regularly about the collections under their care at the monthly meeting of the Division Heads and Departmental Librarians or in the regular lecture series arranged by the Program Committee of the Staff Association of the Princeton University Library. For us today, the talk provides a remarkable testament of Alec's regard for Morris Parrish as a collector, for his Collection of Victorian Novelists as an unsurpassed achievement, and—something of a novelty in university libraries at the time—for the role of the collection in the research work of a modern American university.*

—STEPHEN FERGUSON  
*Curator of Rare Books*

Those responsible for arranging the agenda for these meetings have long been after me for an account of the Parrish Collection and I have always shied away from their requests. Not that I wished to create of the collection a sort of sanctum sanctorum about which one could obtain only misinformation. It was rather that I half felt that the unusual character of the collection is such that it could too easily lead to a lengthy and involved discussion of various theories

of collecting and of Mr. Parrish's accomplishment as a collector. I take it, however, that such a discussion is not called for here and that a reasonably brief description of the collection, its scope, its importance, its usefulness, and a few of its problems will suffice.



The Parrish Collection—or, to give it its full name, the Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists—is located, as you know, in its own room in the special collections area on the main floor of the Library, between the Princetoniana room and the Rare Book room. The Parrish room itself is a reproduction of the library in Mr. Parrish's home, Dormy House, Pine Valley, New Jersey. The furniture, rugs, lamps, and such ornaments as are in evidence, all came from Dormy House. The portrait over the mantel is of Mr. Parrish's great-niece, by the girl's mother, Mrs. Hugh Parrish, the wife of Mr. Parrish's nephew. It too came from the library at Dormy House. Of the portrait's artistic merit, I say nothing. The fireplace is an artificial one: it has no chimney. If it stands as a somewhat surprising symbol in—of all places—a university library, it is perhaps not inappropriate in a room from which one looks out at a chapel through bars. And it serves a useful purpose, for it acts as a front to an area which apparently did not rank very high with the architects of this building—I mean, a closet—a most necessary area for the collection since its shelves provide space for the books and other items which cannot be accommodated behind the glass and wooden doors of the Parrish room itself.

The facts concerning Mr. Parrish's life may be briefly summarized. Morris Longstreth Parrish, a member of a family of some considerable prominence in Philadelphia, was born in 1867 and died in 1944. He entered Princeton in the fall of 1884 as a member of the Class of 1888; his stay here was a brief one, for he left college in April 1885. In 1939—who was it who first said that the Library was being built by degrees?—the University awarded him an honorary master of arts degree. He was a stockbroker in Philadelphia and a prominent figure in the social life of the city.

He began collecting in the early 1890s. His first major step as a collector was an attempt to complete his family's set of Dickens,



The library at Dormy House, from Morris L. Parrish's Christmas card for 1936. Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Parrish Correspondence, box 25, folder 2, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

many of whose books had been purchased by his parents as they were published. Naturally the volumes were uniformly bound in leather, and as each missing book was obtained by Mr. Parrish, he had it rebound in a similar binding. A copy of *Great Expectations* cost him \$250, a considerable amount for him in those days. When the book came back from the binder, neatly rebound in its new leather binding, Mr. Parrish showed it to an experienced collector and asked him if he had paid too much for the book. The collector told him that whatever the book had been worth when he bought it, it was now worth at the most \$25. Thus was Mr. Parrish introduced to one of the facts of book collecting—that nineteenth-century books, unless of tremendous rarity, must be in their original condition, as they were issued by the publisher.

Mr. Parrish did not develop into a really serious collector, I believe, until about the time of the First World War. Then as he started to build his library into something significant, his name gradually became one of the foremost in the collecting world, and his taste and technique as a collector had a wide influence—which, of course, is still operating now. If he was not a self-advertiser as were some of his fellow collectors, he was highly respected by collectors and dealers in this country and England. The latter even seemed to vie with each other in bringing to him, because they knew he would gladly pay the prices and had a keen appreciation for what was right, what they thought he would want for his collection. It is also worth mentioning that he was on terms of friendship with the members of the families of a number of the authors



Morris L. Parrish at Dormy House, n.d. Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Parrish Correspondence, box 25, folder 2, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

whom he collected, and was thus able to acquire items which he would not otherwise have been able to obtain.

Although the English novelists of the nineteenth century were his major concern, he also collected American authors of the same period. But he found that he could not obtain their books in the condition that he required at prices which he considered reasonable, and so he sold at auction in New York in 1938 the whole American section of his library.

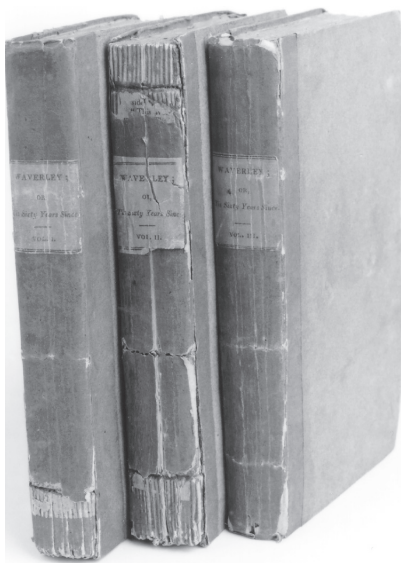
Following his death in the early summer of 1944, his collection was moved from Pine Valley to a basement room of Dickinson Hall, and there it remained until the end of 1948, when it was transferred to the Firestone Library. With the collection, the Library received all the other books in Mr. Parrish's house, perhaps some 750 volumes, and these were treated as an unrestricted gift, so that you may now find in the open stacks or in special collections books with his bookplate.

The Parrish Collection consists primarily of a series of twenty-four author collections. It contains some 6,500 volumes and approximately 1,250 manuscripts, mostly letters—the latter a small figure since Mr. Parrish was not especially interested in manuscript material—and many broadsides, programs, playbills, and other miscellaneous items. The collection includes also Mr. Parrish's correspondence file, an extremely valuable record documenting his career as a collector and providing information concerning the books in the collection. The authors selected for inclusion in the collection were those whose works Mr. Parrish liked to read. Once he had decided to collect an author, he was determined to assemble in both the English and the American first editions—you will remember that, mainly because of a lack of copyright protection, many of the true firsts of these authors were published in this country rather than in England—everything that that author published, every book, every pamphlet, every broadside, and, in the case of an author who wrote for the theater or had his novels adapted for the stage, programs and playbills. Condition was of the greatest importance to him—the *sine qua non*—and he kept improving on the condition of the books in his collection, so that the copies which finally came to Princeton represent in many instances the fourth, seventh, or even tenth copy that went through his hands. His standards of condition were so high, in fact, that the phrase “in Parrish condition” is used by collectors and dealers to describe a book in immaculate condition. Presentation and association copies—the treasures of most collectors—meant little to him and he would not buy such books, no matter how great their interest, unless their physical condition measured up to his exacting standards, and he would replace an association copy with an uninscribed copy if the latter were in better physical condition. His aim, in brief, was to bring together, in original condition, variant texts, bindings, issues, states, et cetera, so that not only would the scholar have the authentic texts but the bibliographer would also have the books as they were actually printed and published.

Anyone who is familiar at all with rare books must be taken by one aspect of the collection and that is that very few of the books, whatever their value—and I can assure you that many are worth

hundreds and even thousands of dollars—are in protective cases. In this connection, I would like to quote from an article Mr. Parrish wrote for *The Colophon*: “I think that dust wrappers should be discarded the moment a book is received; that an unopened book has no place in any library, nor have safes and vaults for the safekeeping of rarities. Cases, in my opinion, should be used only for volumes in wrappers and for pamphlets. A prominent collector, years ago, kept every book in his library in cases of similar color and design. To me, it is inconceivable that any true lover of his books should so hide them. Cases not only prevent one from seeing books in their original state, but when in variant bindings, make it impossible to distinguish them. If the object of the collector is simply to preserve his books for posterity, that is another matter; let us hope, however, that posterity will love the volumes enough to remove the cases. In addition, when a book is acquired, I think it should be carefully examined and all incomplete openings perfected. Some dealers have a habit of marking their prices in pencil in books. I strongly recommend that every pencil mark of this character be erased. Many collectors place too much stress on the prices they pay for their books. Personally, if it were not for making reports to the insurance company as to values, I should destroy all records as to price. A collector who has unopened books is to me an enigma. He cannot, of course, read them, and no one can deny that if a book cannot be read, it loses its purpose of existence.”

It is slightly ironical, therefore, as I sit on public view at my desk—on a chair which I hope was more comfortable to Mr. Parrish than it is to me—that I often hear people say, as they look about the room: “What is so rare about these books?” The books—some of them, at least—look like books they themselves have or might have. I have even heard people say, pointing to a slipcase holding a pamphlet: “What a nice binding.” To them, to the uninitiated, rarity is expressed by elaborately tooled and expensive leather. Like the collector mentioned by Mr. Parrish, they would rather see rows of handsomely rebound books and shelves of slipcases than the books as they were actually issued. How difficult it is to explain to such people that a book—let us say—such as Mr. Parrish’s first edition of Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley*, one of fewer than twenty known copies in the original boards, perhaps the finest copy known, according to Professor Tinker of Yale—and yet not much of a book



The first edition of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since . . .* (Edinburgh and London, 1814). In a letter laid into the volumes' container, dated 18 June 1942 and typed on Dormy House Library stationery, John Carter states: "[I]t is the nicest, freshest and most completely undoctored copy I have ever seen. I implore you not to have it repaired."

to look at—is worth \$7,500, while a rebound copy, no matter how handsome the binding, could be purchased for under \$100. They would do well to remember that in the realm of books all that glitters is not gold.

Lists of names are tedious, but I will be pardoned if I run rapidly over the names of the authors in the collection. Sir Walter Scott is the only author in the collection who did not live in any part of the Victorian period and he is represented by an astonishingly fine—one could even say, famous—run of the Edinburgh edition of the *Waverley* novels. The other authors are: Charles Lever, Bulwer-Lytton, Disraeli, William Harrison Ainsworth, Thackeray, Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, the Brontës, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, Charles Reade, Wilkie Collins, Thomas Hughes, Charles Kingsley, Mrs. Craik, who was the author of *John Halifax, Gentleman* and some sixty other books, George Meredith, Lewis Carroll, Robert Louis Stevenson, Thomas Hardy, and Sir James Matthew Barrie. The collection includes also notable starts on a few other authors: Ouida, Mrs. Henry Wood (of *East Lynne* fame), M. E. Braddon (the author of *Lady Audley's Secret*), William Black, George du Maurier, and Charlotte M. Yonge. Included also are several hundred volumes, consisting of important works or books in unusually fine condition of authors whom Mr. Parrish did not wish to collect in their entirety.



Some of the authors whose works Morris Parrish collected. *Seated:* William Makepeace Thackeray, Thomas Macaulay, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Thomas Carlyle, and Charles Dickens. *Standing:* George MacDonald, James Anthony Froude, Wilkie Collins, and Anthony Trollope. Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Author Portraits, box 33, folder 1, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.



The Trollope, Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley, Reade, Collins, Hughes, Bulwer-Lytton, George Eliot, and Barrie collections are incomparable; while the Stevenson, Thackeray, Dickens, Hardy, and Meredith are among the finest formed. Since my unsupported statement as to the importance of these collections might not be accepted, let me quote from two articles, which were published in the *Library Chronicle*, by two specialists in Victorian bibliography. "Mr. Parrish's library," wrote John Carter, "is unique of its kind. And if it cannot be duplicated elsewhere today, by how much more is it unlikely that it will be matched in the future. This is not so much a matter of mathematical possibility; for, apart from a couple of dozen special items, it is I suppose theoretically possible that an equal determination, an equal judgment and another forty years might, combined, succeed in assembling its like. It is rather that Mr. Parrish represents an attitude to collecting, leisurely but minute, which we are fast losing today. Author-collections are getting fewer and fewer, and even now are almost restricted to one- or two-author men. Libraries which reflect a devotion to a period, plus the perseverance necessary for a thorough-going coverage of the authors involved, plus a rigorous adherence to modern technical standards—these have always been uncommon, and may soon be extinct. Mr. Parrish's will surely be quoted by the Dibdins of the future as a practically perfect example of the *genre*."

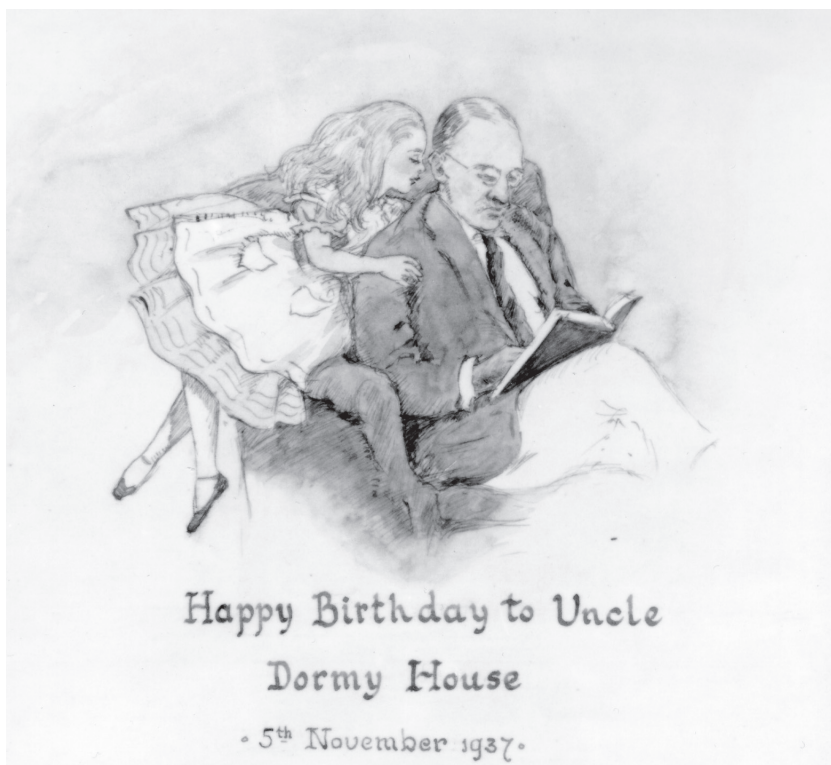
And David A. Randall had this to say: "Many, indeed most, renowned libraries fail completely to live up to advance billing when they eventually come on the market or are placed in institutions to become subject to critical analysis. The Parrish library is a notable exception. One's respect and admiration for the skill, determination, and knowledge of its founder grows with each viewing, for it is only from experience with the rarity in any condition (let alone 'Parrish condition') of the scores upon scores of titles which it contains, that a proper appreciation of Mr. Parrish's accomplishments in assembling it gradually dawns upon one."

Mr. Parrish published four catalogs of parts of his collection, copies of which I have brought with me and at which you may care to glance, and so extensive are these parts that the catalogs serve as virtual bibliographies.

The collection was unfortunately not endowed, but additions are made to it by purchases on general and special library funds. It has also received several donations of money and a number of gifts of actual books and other items. Intensive though the collection is in the areas which it covers, and despite its astonishing wealth of rarities, there are naturally lacunae, and these we are attempting to fill. For obvious reasons, we are emphasizing manuscript material more than Mr. Parrish did. The most striking gap, and a surprising one considering his interest in Lewis Carroll, and one which people like to harp on, for it is a famous rarity, is the 1865 *Alice in Wonderland*. Mr. Parrish knew that he could obtain the famous rarities whenever he felt like paying for them, the more difficult books to find were those which were not so famous, and it was on these that he concentrated. It is said that the absence of the 1865 *Alice* from his collection pained his friends far more than it pained him. Although I would like to see the book in the collection, I am philosophical about its absence. Without it, we still have the finest Lewis Carroll collection in the world. As a matter of interest, a copy of the book is now for sale in New York—at \$6,500.\*

Although we are attempting to follow to the best of our ability the course plotted by Mr. Parrish, we cannot do it with the same success which he enjoyed. For one thing, we do not have at our disposal the funds which he had; nor are we able to give to the collection the time that he and his librarian gave to it; nor do the dealers, who invariably give the preference to the private collector rather than to the institutional, submit items for our consideration with the same alacrity and frequency with which they submitted them to Mr. Parrish. Furthermore, there is considerable competition in the Victorians—we are by no means alone in the field. And institutions are purchasing at a steadily increasing rate. I need mention only the University of Illinois, UCLA, Yale, the Morgan Library, and the New York Public Library with its handsomely endowed Berg Collection. The interest of these libraries—and of others—in

\* William H. Scheide later made a gift to the Library of a "Parrish condition" first edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, inscribed by Lewis Carroll to another Parrish author, Dinah Craik. —*Editor*



Watercolor presented to Morris Parrish on his seventieth birthday. Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Bound Manuscripts Series, shelf 7, box 1, folder 3, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

the Victorians is such that they do not hesitate to make it impossible for us to acquire items which we ourselves not unreasonably covet.

As curator, I have assumed the responsibility for the cataloging of the collection, but, despite frequent proddings by Mr. Heyl, I have not been able to do much during the past few years. At present seventeen of the authors have been cataloged and are represented by cards in the public catalog.



Although there seems to be a revival of interest in the Victorians—not, of course, that they have ever been forgotten—it cannot be said that Princeton is exactly in the van of the movement. And so,

to be frank, no very great use of the Parrish Collection has been made by the undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty of the University, but it has been considerably utilized by people elsewhere. I shall give only a few instances of the use to which it has been put. Bradford A. Booth, of UCLA, has just published a collected edition of the letters of Anthony Trollope; of the 932 letters located by Professor Booth, all of which are printed in full or summarized by him, over 300 are in the Parrish Collection. Mr. Parrish himself had intended to publish an edition of Trollope's letters and had made a vigorous campaign to acquire as many of the originals as he could, with the result that we now have by far the largest collection of Trollope letters in existence. This campaign we are continuing. The George Eliot letters are being published by Professor Haight of Yale, the Thackeray letters by Professor Ray of Illinois, the Dickens letters by Professor House of Oxford, and the Wilkie Collins letters were used by Kenneth Robinson in his recently published biography of that author. To Mr. K. J. Fielding, who is publishing an edition of Dickens's speeches, we have furnished microfilms and photostats of many of the speeches in the collection because it has been impossible for him to find copies of all of them in England. According to him, the great Bodleian has none of them and the even greater British Museum no more than two or three. Many more cases of such use by scholars could be cited. If you will examine the current books on the Victorian novelists, you will find in a respectable number of them mention of the collection. Any scholar doing serious work on any of the authors represented by major collections in the Parrish library who fails to consult our holdings, does so at his own peril.

Despite their apparent appreciation of important collections and what we call rare books, it cannot be said that most scholars have any great interest in the physical condition of the books which preserve in their authentic form the texts with which they are so much concerned. And if scholars are rough—or at least careless—with books and manuscripts, how much rougher, how much more careless, are undergraduates. The Parrish Collection is well known to collectors and scholars throughout the English-speaking world for the condition of its books. It is established as a sort of criterion. And the actual monetary value of the books is to a very consider-

able extent based on their condition. The difference between the value of a Parrish copy and a copy in average or rebound state, as I have already indicated, is astonishing. I have mentioned the *Waverley*. Our copy of Trollope's first book, to bring forward another example, *The Macdermots of Ballycloran*, one of only three known copies in the original cloth—I might add parenthetically that the other copy, which was also at one time in the collection, is now owned by a Princeton graduate—is worth at least \$3,000. Rebound, a copy could be purchased for about \$250. In other words, the condition alone makes a difference of \$2,750. And the rebound copy is worth as much as it is only because the book is rare in any form. In most cases, the degree of difference between the Parrish copy and an average or rebound copy is far, far greater than that. If the Parrish Collection had been dispersed at auction, literally hundreds of record prices would have been established.

The Parrish books are fragile: the cloth bindings can be easily damaged; the paper wrappers easily torn, the hinges easily cracked. In accepting the collection, the Library assumed the responsibility of protecting it as much as it assumed the responsibility of housing it. It is for us to see that the collection is properly used and not misused. It is unfortunate that the rarities and unique items which can be seen in few or no other places, attract to the collection scholars who wish to use also other books in the collection which can be seen elsewhere. But the copies of these books which we hand them are superlatively fine, and in many cases of considerable monetary value, whereas they would be satisfied with a first-class rat of a copy in any other library, a copy with a negligible monetary value. In the case of fragile and tightly bound books, microfilming and photostating can also cause severe damage.

People who visited Mr. Parrish at Dormy House remember his friendliness, his perfection as a host, his liberality in allowing them to browse in his library. This liberality we cannot allow in Princeton except in the most exceptional cases. For too few people know how to handle a rare and fragile book—in fact, most people do not even know how properly to take a book from the shelf. Mr. Parrish's books were his own property and he had the right to expect his guests to treat them as carefully as he did. The Parrish Collection is not our property in the same sense and we have no right to

make the same assumption. Human nature being what it is, there is more respect for a privately owned book than for one in an institution.

Since this is a rather dismal note on which to conclude, I would like to rise to a more positive plane. The more I work with rare books, the more I deplore superlatives, for they smack of the publicity director and too often are, to put it mildly, misleading. It seems to me that the tricks of the advertiser should not be employed by a university library which has any standards. I believe, in short, in understatement.

At the risk of seeming to run counter to this belief, I would like to say that I believe that Morris Longstreth Parrish was unquestionably one of the greatest book collectors that this country has produced, and that the Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, the foremost collection of its sort in its field, "this marvelous collection," in the words of Michael Sadleir, is without a doubt the finest collection in the Princeton Library. Its presence here has added a luster and an importance to the Library immensely out of proportion to its own mere physical size.

*Alexander Wainwright and Julian Boyd knew that there was something very different about the Parrish Collection. Wainwright emphasizes that it did not fit the orthodox categories of rare book collections of its time. In fact, the popular misunderstandings of it that he mentions did not stop with "lay" people. When, for example, Morris Parrish offered the Lewis Carroll portion of his collection to Oxford University, the dons of Carroll's college eventually decided that the items constituted a shrine rather than a comprehensive collection of original artifacts. They turned him down, declaring that theirs was an educational institution rather than a museum.*

*Back in the United States, rare books did function in many instances as the furnishings of a shrine. What sorts of shrines? It is possible to view nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American collecting of classic English literature as a shoring up of ethnicity at the very moment when a large number of non-English immigrants were entering the country and challenging the dominance of the native-born. The same may be true for "Americana" as well—collected in such a way as to exclude as well as include. Concurrently, it was commonplace, even expected, that early editions of Greek and Latin classics were collected so that they could be refurbished in luxury bindings, often of a haute French taste. At a time when the ancient tongues were ceasing to be*

*central to a modern American university curriculum, such treatment may be regarded as exalting vanishing memories, perhaps even as escapist.*

*Against this background, Princeton acquired the Parrish Collection in 1944. It was a liminal event, marking the decline of an era of collecting that reflected the need to recover lost glory and the beginning of academic and institutional recognition of the value of “Parrish condition”—almost a metaphor for a new fascination with originality and pristine authenticity in an era of mechanical reproduction.*

—S.F.