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The Peal Collection: An Overview

*John Clubbe*

During the past two decades W. Hugh Peal, Class of 1922 and one of the university’s first Rhodes Scholars, has given to the University of Kentucky Library many of the valuable books and manuscripts he has acquired in over half a century of collecting. In October 1981 the great bulk of his magnificent collection arrived on campus, and for the past year the library staff has been processing it. The seminar held in the King Library on 15 October 1982 is intended to celebrate both this extraordinary gift and the man who made it.

Numbering over fifteen thousand items, the Peal Collection contains not only books by an impressive list of authors—English and American chiefly, but with significant strength in French—but also extremely rich holdings of literary manuscripts and autograph letters. The main focus of the collection falls in the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth. Though strongest in literary figures, it also has impressive holdings of figures important in the political and artistic worlds. Most of the several thousand letters in the collection are unpublished. Many of them are of exceptional biographical and critical interest. The acquisition of these materials puts the University of Kentucky among the top schools in the country in holdings of nineteenth-century manuscripts. Whatever monetary value one may wish to attach to the Peal Collection, it is fair to say that a comparable collection could not be assembled today at any price. Books and manuscripts together will provide a virtually inexhaustible resource for faculty and students in the humanities at the University of Kentucky and a magnet for researchers from elsewhere.

The single greatest strength of the collection lies in its holdings of manuscripts and books of the first generation of English Romantic writers: William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Robert Southey (1774-1843), and Charles Lamb (1775-1834). There are over a hundred letters, many unpublished, of each of these four writers, in addition to excellent supporting book collections, including first and early editions, and a number of manuscripts of poems, essays, and unpublished drafts. There are
also large numbers of letters to each author. Any one of these four collections may well be the largest private collection of that author in the world. The library’s acquisition of one of them by itself would have been an exceptional coup. But that there are four—as well as God’s plenty of related materials—is a stroke of exceptional good fortune. A manuscript letter by Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Lamb now sells for many hundreds of dollars. Today it would be virtually impossible for a research library, or even a well-endowed private collector, to assemble comparable holdings of just one of these authors. For example, most of Wordsworth’s surviving manuscripts have drifted into the Wordsworth Museum at Dove Cottage in Grasmere, England. Kentucky’s collection is now one of the largest in this country, along with those at Cornell, Indiana, and Amherst, all of which have collected Wordsworth manuscripts for decades.

The catalog that comprises this issue of *The Kentucky Review* gives greatest scope to the English Romantics. Pride of place goes of course to the four figures on whom Mr. Peal has concentrated. The holdings here are truly extraordinary. Since individual entries in the catalog detail a few of the major items, I will largely forego such consideration here. But the magnificent holdings of the first generation of English Romantic writers do not begin to delimit Mr. Peal’s interests. Even though the second generation of Romantics is less well represented than the first, we may note here two Byron letters and one by Shelley. In the collection we find also manuscript letters and poems by virtually every significant author who wrote during the period 1790-1830—with the exception of William Blake and John Keats—as well as by a number of less significant authors. Among the writers represented are Bernard Barton, William Lisle Bowles, Thomas Campbell, Joseph Cottle, George Crabbe, Allan Cunningham, Thomas De Quincey, Maria Edgeworth, Leigh Hunt, Charles Lloyd, Thomas Moore, Hannah More, Bryan Waller Procter (“Barry Cornwall”), Henry Crabb Robinson, Samuel Rogers, Walter Scott, Mary Shelley, and Sidney Smith. Unsatisfactory as a mere alphabetical list of names is in suggesting the cornucopia of treasures in the collection, it can at least give an idea of its range, if not of its depth. Materials by one figure often nicely complement materials by other figures. For example, several long and interesting letters by Crabb Robinson add valuable detail to our knowledge of his relationship with Wordsworth.

Of the Romantics, Mr. Peal seems to prize most Charles Lamb.
His interest in Lamb began as a boy when his family, to keep him away from horses (of which he was very fond), gave him a copy of Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespear*. That gift was soon followed by Lamb’s *Essays of Elia* and then by *Last Essays of Elia*. (‘Elia’ was a pen name used by Lamb.) Over the decades Mr. Peal’s Lamb collection grew but not until 1953 did it grow spectacularly. In that year, at the William Warren Carman sale at the Parke-Bernet Galleries, he bid successfully on a number of important Lamb letters formerly in the collection of the noted Lamb collector, Ernest Dressel North. Among those now at Kentucky are key letters to Coleridge and others, several of which are on display. Also in the collection are many letters to Lamb, the prize being an important series of thirty-one letters by his close friend of the 1790s, Thomas Manning (‘my friend M.’ referred to at the beginning of “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig”). Invaluable to the serious student of Lamb is a great mass of related material (“Lambiana”), which includes extensive correspondence about Lamb by noted Lamb scholars Alfred Ainger, E.V. Lucas, North, and others. As Mr. Peal developed his Lamb holdings, so, inevitably, did his holdings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey grow. These writers knew each other well, learned from each other, and followed each other’s careers with absorbed interest. Mr. Peal is particularly pleased that his collection reflects the fruitful interchanges, personal as well as literary, that characterize this generation of writers.

The threat of tuberculosis kept Mr. Peal out of school for a year. Like Walter Scott, whose childhood lameness had similarly incapacitated him, young Hugh turned to the world of books. Fortunately, his kin on both sides were great readers. Books were everywhere. Family traditions drew him to English rather than to Yankee literature, to nineteenth-century rather than to contemporary authors. By the age of twelve he had read every one of the over one million words in Scott’s nine-volume *Life of Napoleon*. He may be the youngest person ever to have finished a work that few adults have seen to the end. About this time he also read Edward Gibbon’s equally massive *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—a work that, thanks to him, the Univeristy of Kentucky Library now has in its six-volume first edition.

Upon finishing high school, Hugh Peal decided that he wanted to become either another John Marshall or another Charles Dickens. His distinguished legal career and his equally distinguished
collection of books and manuscripts indicate that, to an impressive degree, he became both. At the University of Kentucky Mr. Peal learned to read French, German, and Latin. Many books in his collection reflect his knowledge of these languages. His linguistic skills also helped him to win a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford. Back in the United States by the late 1920s, he began collecting in earnest by frequenting the many secondhand bookshops that then lined New York’s Fourth Avenue. At some point—in the 1940s, I should think—Mr. Peal decided to make a listing of his books and manuscripts. This listing now runs to five large bound volumes, with a sixth in progress. What staggers the imagination as one goes through these volumes is how Mr. Peal, while running a successful law practice, could have found the time to learn so much about so many authors. Building such a magnificent collection took exceptional powers of concentration and discrimination but more than that, it took a surpassing love of books—and of life itself.

Complementing the extensive holdings in English Romantic literature is the other main strength of the Peal Collection—its holdings of major and near-major Victorian authors. These include almost every well-known writer of the period 1830-1900. Among them: George Borrow (many letters, manuscripts, as well as editions of his works), Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Edward Bulwer Lytton, Lewis Carroll, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Edward Fitzgerald, James Anthony Froude, Charles Lever, Thomas Babington Macaulay, George Meredith, Charles Reade, Christina, Dante Gabriel, and William Michael Rossetti, John Ruskin, Herbert Spencer, Robert Louis Stevenson, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and William Makepeace Thackeray. For many of these authors, there are between thirty and a hundred letters; for others, first or early editions of virtually their complete works; for a number, both letters and works. For example, the Dickens holdings include first editions of most of his novels and over fifty autograph letters. Several of the novels—including Nicholas Nickleby and David Copperfield—we have not only in their final form but as they first appeared in monthly parts. Supporting these holdings are a number of letters written by the Dickens family and by friends and associates of the novelist. In addition to its holdings of the above authors, the Peal Collection has at least a few letters by (among others) Matthew Arnold, Jeremy Bentham, Charlotte Brontë, Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, Thomas Hood, Cardinal Manning, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson.
Letters by important nineteenth-century British artists also exist in some abundance. Among the artists included are Ford Madox Brown, George Cruikshank (many letters as well as a number of his hard-to-find graphic works), Sir Charles Eastlake, Sir Frederick Leighton, and John Everett Millais. Often these materials interrelate nicely with those of the literary figures; for example, the Ford Madox Brown letters complement those by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was painter as well as poet. Both were members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

The Peal Collection also has strong holdings—books, early editions, and letters—of authors active during the period 1880-1920. Among them: Arnold Bennett, Robert Bridges, Joseph Conrad, John Galsworthy, Thomas Hardy, George Moore, and William Butler Yeats. Kipling and George Bernard Shaw are represented by almost complete runs of first editions. My eye was caught by several interesting unpublished letters by Oscar Wilde and several by the elusive Walter Pater—few of whose letters seem to have survived.

The Peal Collection has extremely rich holdings in lesser-known literary figures from early Victorian times through the 1920s. In the collection are substantial numbers of letters by, among others, Alfred Ainger, William Harrison Ainsworth, Sir James Barrie, E.F. Benson, Max Beerbohm, Lady Blessington, Shirley Brooks, Charles Cowden Clarke, Thomas Dibdin, Austin Dobson, Edmund Gosse, Henry Harland, LaFCADIO Hearn, Maurice Hewlett, Theodore Hook, W.H. Hudson, G.P.R. James, Anna Jameson, William Jerdan, Blanchard Jerrold, Douglas Jerrold, Geraldine Jewsbury, Andrew Lang, Mark Lemon, Frederick Locker-Lampson, Walter de la Mare, Frederick Denison Maurice, Justin McCarthy, Mary Russell Mitford, Max Müller, A.F. Pollard, Clarkson Stanfield, John Addington Symonds, Thomas Noon Talfourd, Eden Phillpotts, Frank Swinnerton, H.M. Tomlinson, John Wilson ("Christopher North"), and Edmund Yates (many letters by him and over one hundred and fifty to him). This listing could be extended considerably. Indeed, almost every writer of the century is represented in some way. Many of the above figures are interesting in themselves and would repay further investigation, while the significance of others today lies chiefly in their relationships with more major figures. We can observe a major author—Dickens, say—from an altered perspective as a result of examining him from the vantage point of someone less known, for example, Clarkson Stanfield. The Peal Collection's holdings of all these writers, major
...and minor, valuably illuminate the literary history of Victorian England.

A number of important British statesmen are represented by books, letters, and other documents. These figures include Arthur James Balfour, Henry Brougham, Joseph Chamberlain, Randolph Churchill, Sir Robert Peel, the third Marquess of Salisbury, and Sir Robert Walpole (one hundred and five letters to him).

The holdings of eighteenth-century manuscripts, while not nearly as impressive as those for the nineteenth century, include some gems. Among them are letters by Edmund Burke, Robert Burns, Samuel Richardson, Richard Steele, Charles Wesley, and a Latin manuscript by Sir Isaac Newton.

Mr. Peal has also collected rare books from earlier centuries as well as the rarest of them all, incunabula, or books printed before 1500. Among the incunabula is a 1497 Aldine edition of Iamblichus (sometimes “Jamblichus”), a Greek author on Neoplatonic subjects. One cannot but suppose that Mr. Peal purchased a copy of this exceedingly obscure writer because of his delightful associations with both Coleridge and Lamb. Lamb, in his meditative essay on his old school, “Christ’s Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago,” recalls the young Coleridge as a schoolboy— already “Logician, Metaphysician, Bard!”—explaining to a passer-by, in his “deep and sweet intonation, the mysteries of Jamblichus, or Plotinus.” That must have been a sight worth seeing.

In the middle of the eighteenth century John Baskerville in Cambridge, England, printed some of the most elegant books ever made. In Mr. Peal’s collection are Baskerville’s Paradise Lost (1757), his Bible (1763), the title page of which is often thought to be the finest of any English book, and a number of others. A curiosity is Mirabeau’s copy of Richardson’s famous novel, Clarissa (1748). Sixty years ago Mr. Peal picked up the duodecimo volumes of this third edition in Toulon for “something like a dollar” while on vacation from Oxford.

Major American authors in significant strength in the Peal Collection include Willa Cather, Bret Harte, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Dean Howells, William James, James Russell Lowell, Edith Wharton, and John Greenleaf Whittier. The Howells holdings are particularly noteworthy, with a number of literary manuscripts, many letters, and what must be close to a complete run of this voluminous author’s books. I have not mentioned Henry James, but the collection has many first editions.
and at least seven letters by him. Of lesser-known American authors, we find good collections of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, John Burroughs, George Washington Cable, John Sullivan Dwight, James T. Fields, Joel Chandler Harris, Julian Hawthorne, Julia Ward Howe, Thomas Nelson Page, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. There are also considerable holdings of popular authors such as Gertrude Atherton, John Kendrick Bangs, and Joseph Hergesheimer.

A major dimension of the Peal Collection is its holdings in French literature from the eighteenth century through the early twentieth. Many French authors, from the significant to the not-so-significant, are represented. Among the authors collected in depth we find Sainte-Beuve, Paul Bourget, Jean Cocteau, Alexis de Tocqueville, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Jules Lemaître, and Marcel Proust. De Tocqueville is represented, inter alia, by a fine series of letters, 1837-1858, to a Professor Bourchitte of Versailles. There are four letters by Proust to Charles Du Bos, and seven to other correspondents. A number of authors, including Voltaire and Rousseau, are represented by single letters; for still others we have first editions or collected editions. Also among the treasures is a large group of French memoirs from the eighteenth century and earlier.

In addition to its author holdings, the collection also contains manuscripts once in the famous Phillipps collection; a superb collection of manuscript materials by well-known British jurists (which will be of particular interest to students of the history of law); a number of hard-to-find bibliographies, including virtually all those put together by Thomas J. Wise, along with numerous bibliographical publications, runs of bibliographical journals, and books on language; many valuable editions in different languages of the Latin classics; numerous private press publications, including a long run of the press of Thomas B. Mosher; many illustrated books, some in mint condition, others superbly bound in leather; and several magnificent extra-illustrated books or sets, including a set of early works on Byron with three hundred and thirty additional illustrations. Useful for students at all levels of their work will be the numerous standard editions and biographies of familiar authors. I mention last what some will consider to be among the greatest treasures of the collection: a number of extremely rare and beautiful books on botanical subjects.

No simple recitation such as this of a few of the books and manuscripts in the Peal Collection, or even the catalog of
"highlights" that follows, can give an adequate sense of the collection's depth, its interrelatedness, the care with which it has been put together. Obviously the work of a lifetime of discriminating buying, the collection has to be examined in detail to be believed. Thanks to Mr. Peal's generosity, the books and manuscripts in it are now at the University of Kentucky Library ready for use by the university community and by the wider public. Readers of The Kentucky Review in years to come can look forward to more than a few essays based upon its riches.