

William Cullen Bryant and American Gift Books

William Cullen Bryant is remembered today for his poetry and for his long career as editor of the New York *Post* newspaper, and either achievement would be enough to justify his reputation as a seminal figure in American culture. Interestingly, Bryant was a magazine editor before he became a newspaperman, and his work with magazines led him to involvement with an almost-forgotten curiosity of 19th-century publishing, the gift book or annual.

Bryant was born in 1794 in the western Massachusetts town of Cummington, and lived in the Berkshires for the first three decades of his life. He attended—but did not graduate from—Williams College, was admitted to the bar in 1814, and was practicing law in Great Barrington in 1817 when his father left a package of his poems at the home of Willard Phillips, one of the editors of the *North American Review*.

Bryant's father had found the poems in the back of a desk, and, since he was traveling to Boston, decided to drop them off in the hope that the *North American* might be interested. The poems were eagerly accepted by the committee that directed the magazine's editorial affairs. Richard Henry Dana said, "Ah! Phillips, you have been imposed upon"; no one on this side of the Atlantic is capable of writing such verses." ("Bryant" in ALB) Phillips himself was confused about the poems' author: he thought the father had written them.

When all this was straightened out it was clear that a young American poet of remarkable talent had arrived. "Thanatopsis," one of the poems that his father delivered, would have been an achievement for a writer of any age, but the fact that Bryant was barely 20 when he composed it was astonishing. Over the next three years, Bryant contributed both poetry and essays to the *North American*, and as his renown spread, his circle of acquaintances expanded.

Bryant formed an enduring friendship with Dana, who was experiencing some upheaval in his own career. A member of the *North American's* founding circle, Dana was assisting editor Edward Tyrrel Channing when Channing stepped down at the end of 1819. Dana had expected to replace Channing, but instead was superseded by Edward Everett, a talented young Harvard professor. (Mott II, 226f) Not everyone was happy that Dana had been passed over. Bryant said that if the *North American* had been placed in Dana's hands, Dana "would have imparted a character of originality and decision to its critical articles which no other man of the country was at that time qualified to give it." (in Mott II, 226) But Everett turned out to be a good choice: he was a prodigious contributor to the *North American*, with 116 articles to his credit, and under his direction between 1820 and 1823 the magazine grew from a circulation of about 600 to 2,500. (Mott II, 227)

Dana resigned from the *North American* in 1820 but remained active in publishing—in 1821 he launched a journal with Channing's assistance, which they named the *Idle Man*. Taking Washington Irving's *Salmagundi* as the model, Dana decided to focus on fiction and poetry and avoid dull subjects.

In such a work as I propose putting out, politics, dry discussions, and scientific articles would neither be expected nor desired. It will consist of stories, now and then criticism, and poetry, when I am furnished any that will do... To sit at home in our easy chair, and send our gay thoughts abroad, as it were on wings, to thousands—to imagine them laughing over the odd fancies and drolleries which had made us vain and happy in secret, multiplies and spreads our sympathies quietly and happily through the world. (Dana, 10f)

The *Idle Man* ran for six months without much financial success, and Dana closed it in 1822 (Mott I, 172). It was a going concern long enough to attract praise and several contributions from Bryant, however, including the poems "Green River," "A Winter Piece," and "The Burial Place." (Godwin, 166) Bryant's reputation was further enhanced when Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa Society invited him to give their annual address in 1821, for which he wrote his epic "The Ages." Later that year Dana, Channing, and Washington Allston sponsored

publication of a small volume of his poems.

The *United States Literary Gazette*, a Boston semimonthly founded in April, 1824 by James G. Carter, invited Bryant to contribute, and he submitted the poem "Rizpah" to the first issue and contributed a number of other poems to subsequent issues. The *Literary Gazette* achieved several milestones in American poetry: more Bryant poems were published by the *Literary Gazette* than by any other magazine, and another contributor, a Bowdoin undergraduate named Henry W. Longfellow, was published for the first time in its pages.

Bryant and the New York Review

Among Bryant's growing number of admirers were several members of the prominent Sedgwick family, including Catherine, a popular and influential writer of novels and short stories, and her brother Henry, a New York lawyer. Henry encouraged Bryant to move to the city, where he might abandon law and earn his living as a magazine writer. He mentioned that the New-York Atheneum was considering a journal. "Besides," he added, "The *Atlantic Magazine*, which has pined until recently, is beginning to revive in the hands of Henry J. Anderson, and he unquestionably needs assistance. Bliss & White, his publishers, are liberal gentlemen; they pay him \$500 a year." (Godwin, 188f) Bryant took the plunge and moved to New York in 1824.

This *Atlantic* had no relationship to the Boston magazine of the same name founded 33 years later. It had been founded in New York in 1824 by Robert C. Sands, a young lawyer with an interest in literature and a gift for writing. Sands stuck by the project for about a year and published some noteworthy material, including "a few really good stories," as Mott wrote. (I, 334) He then turned editorial management over to Henry Anderson, a professor of mathematics and astronomy at Columbia College.

Henry Sedgwick must have been aware of Anderson's plans when he referred Bryant to Anderson: Anderson quickly took on Bryant as a partner, and the two were able to work an arrangement with the Atheneum in which part of the magazine was devoted to content furnished by the lyceum. With its new editorial directors and a new source of material, the *Atlantic* became the *New York Review and Atheneum Magazine*. The last issue of the *Atlantic* was April, 1825, and the first issue of the *New York Review* was June, 1825.

Bryant disliked practicing law but he had hesitated before abandoning it. "I have given up my profession, which was a shabby one," he wrote to Dana. "I am not altogether certain I have got into a better. Bliss & White, however, the publishers of the *New York Review*, employ me, which at present will be a livelihood, and a livelihood is all I ever got from the law." (Godwin, 213)

One of Bryant's primary concerns at the *New York Review* was a shortage of interesting contributions, a common lament of the times. Writing again to Dana in 1826 he said

There is a want of literary entertainment in our journal. But as to the multitude of clever men here who might furnish it, let me say that we have some clever men to be sure, but they are naughtily given to instructing the world, to elucidating the mysteries of political economy and the principles of jurisprudence, etc; they seem to think it is a sort of disgrace to be entertaining. Since the time of *Salmagundi*, the city has grown exceedingly grave and addicted to solid speculations. (in Godwin, 222)

Bryant's biographer and son-in-law, Parke Godwin, called the *Review* "a meagre and dull affair" and said it lacked distinctiveness. (225) This was an indictment not so much of the quality of the content, but of its seriousness. In fact, the magazine covered some topics at least as capably as any other contemporary periodical. Music and science were handled by Anderson, whose father-in-law, Lorenzo DaPonte had been a friend of Mozart, and art and literature were handled by Bryant and Sands, who returned in the fall of 1825 to

pitch in. (Mott I, 335) Coverage of the emerging Hudson River school of painting was noteworthy. Bryant contributed a dozen or so poems and about as many essays ; other contributors included Longfellow, Dana, Fitz-Greene Halleck, George Bancroft, and N. P. Willis. (Chielens, 281f ; Godwin, 226ff) Of course, none of their literary achievements had the slightest effect on the magazine's financial struggles.

In May, 1826 the *Review* was merged with Boston's *United States Literary Gazette*, mentioned above, which was then renamed the *United States Review and Literary Gazette*. Bryant retained a quarter share of the business, working from New York in an awkward arrangement of dual control with Charles Folsom in Boston. (Godwin, 228) This lasted 12 months, and the final issue came in October, 1827. (Mott I, 333) In the same month Bryant was offered an assisting position on the *Post*, and in 1829 he became its editor in chief and part owner. ("Bryant" in ALB)

Coincidentally, Sands's life became a kind of mirror image of Bryant's. After the *Literary Gazette* closed, he joined the staff of one of the *Post's* competitors, the New York *Commercial Advertiser*, ultimately becoming its chief editor. Like Bryant, he continued to write poetry and prose, and in late 1826 he and Bryant, along with their friend Gulian Verplanck, took up an interesting side venture. Publisher Elam Bliss, of Bliss & White, convinced the trio to work on a new project—"a yearly publication which should combine the characteristics of an annual with those of a miscellany from the pens of two or three authors working in conjunction," as Verplanck described it. (in Godwin, 236)

Gift Books

Bliss was responding to the sudden vogue for what were called gift books—literary annuals, often ornately bound, containing stories, poems, and engravings. As a Christmas present, the gift book—"with its sentimental title and its gold and vellum bindings and its elaborate and expensive embellishments"—was designed to impress the recipient and reflect the good taste of the donor. (Patee, 32) Publishers priced them aggressively from \$3.75 or \$4.00 for fine leather binding to as much as \$20.00 for elaborate, oversize volumes. (Thompson, 7)

The idea had originated in Europe. One of the earliest gift books was the *Almanach des Muses*, published in Paris in 1765. In 1771 came the first German *taschenbuch*, the *Musen Almanach*. Among the first British gift books were the *Literary Pocket Book* of 1821 and the *Forget Me Not* of 1822. (Patee, 30 ; Thompson, 3)

In 1825, Philadelphia publishers Carey & Lea produced the first American gift book, the *Atlantic Souvenir* for 1826, and the idea proved as popular in the United States as it had in Europe. (Thompson, 1) Bliss had good reason to jump on the bandwagon: Cary & Lea made a 22 percent margin on the *Atlantic Souvenir* for 1826 (\$733 profits on sales of \$3,333), and they doubled the print run for the next year. (Thompson, 50)

Literary historian Ralph Thompson said that gift books of the early 19th century were an adaptation of the almanac, but the two forms had little in common beyond their annual frequency. (3) The sketches, tales, poetry, and engravings in gift books were intended for female readers, to the extent that gift books were sometimes called "ladies' books." (Thompson, 4) They were certainly expected to be judged by their covers: the quality of their printing and binding was a key selling point.

Gift books provided writers with a market for tales and poems at a time when it was difficult to earn a living as a writer. This rare opportunity to be paid for their work encouraged a number of American authors. Describing the options available to American authors of the early 19th century, critic Fred Lewis Pattee wrote:

Publication channels were limited. It was more profitable for publishers of books to pirate Scott and his English contemporaries than to pay for the crude attempts of their unknown

countrymen.

The young writer who would essay to write fiction had open for him the literary column of the weekly newspaper and to a limited extent the pages of a few struggling magazines... But even this outlet was limited: the papers and magazines of the period could publish only a fraction of what the new group was eager to produce...

Thus, at the moment when the success of Irving in Europe and of Cooper in America was filling young Americans everywhere with the desire also to produce sketches and tales in prose, and when the demand for a vehicle had become imperative, came the annual, a fashion new from Europe, and all at once it became their market place and their book of models. (28f)

During a time when it was uncommon for any publisher to pay anything for poetry, some of the gift books offered \$50 per page. (Pattee FC, 386)

Many prominent writers and other public figures were published in gift books ; a partial list includes Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Horace Greeley, Washington Irving, J. K. Paulding, Catherine Sedgwick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, W. G. Simms, and N.P. Willis. (Pattee, 29 ; Thompson, 102ff) Hawthorne, whose literary career may have been saved by the *Token*, contributed 26 stories to that one title. (Pattee FC, 384) Bryant contributed to 14 annuals, Ralph Waldo Emerson to six, Oliver Wendell Holmes to 12, Longfellow to 16, James Russell Lowell to 16, Edgar Allan Poe to 10, and John Greenleaf Whittier to 18. (Pattee FC, 394)

Among the editors of gift books were a number of well-respected writers, including Park Benjamin, Rufus Griswold, Edward Everett Hale, Sarah J. Hale, Andrews Norton, Simms, and Willis... not to mention the trio of Bryant, Sands, and Verplanck. (Pattee, 33 ; Thompson, 96, 103, 107, 110, 115)

Engravings, or “embellishments” were a feature of the gift books, and were commissioned from popular artists such as John Cheney and John Sartain. (Thompson, 124) Illustration was an expensive commodity (unlike writing), and some publishers paid as much as \$500 per page for engravings. (Pattee, FC, 386) In 1830 a Harvard poet described illustrated gift books,

With pictures so ineffable, you feel
You'd proffer pearls for such returns in steel—
Each leaf of that last daintiness, it seems
For fairy fingers made, which stir our hair in dreams.

(in Pattee FC, 381)

One interesting feature of American gift books was their publishers' commitment to American writers and artists. The literary patriotism of the early 19th century infused the market. Carey & Lea announced in the second edition of the *Atlantic Souvenir*:

“A large portion of the most distinguished writers of the country are included among the contributors ; and no expense or effort has been spared to obtain and produce the best specimens of native genius. (in Pattee FC, 382)

Bibliographer Frederick Faxon referred to the fashion for gift books and annuals as a “craze.” (Pattee FC, 384) Between 1825 and 1865 more than 1,000 different gift book titles appeared in America, so many that a complete index has never been compiled. (Pattee, 32) At least 250 publishing companies produced gift books, including Appleton, Lippincott, Philips & Samson, and Putnam. (Thompson, 9)

A successful gift book sold in quantities that, for the times, were quite large. For example, Carey & Hart's *Gift* was printed in quantities of 7,000 or more between 1840 and 1845. Costs, inclusive of content and manufacturing, averaged about \$1.40 per copy, of which the largest portions went to binding and illustrations. (Thompson, 12) In 1825 the first edition of the *Atlantic Souvenir* cost \$1.30 per copy to produce and sold at wholesale for \$1.67. In the next five years the cost per copy declined to around \$1.15 as the press run grew from 2,000 to 10,000. (Thompson, 50) S. C. Goodrich, publisher of Boston's *Token*, retained a sense of wonder when he wrote his *Recollections* in 1856: "In several of these works the generous public spent fifty thousand dollars a year!" (in Pattee FC, 386)

The titles of many gift books were meant to reflect the donor's warm feelings for the recipient. Flowers and foliage were a common image—"they drew from all the poetic areas of floriculture," according to Pattee. (FC, 385) The garden of gift books included the *Amaranth*, *Autumn Leaves*, the *Bouquet*, the *Chaplet of Roses*, *Christmas Blossoms and New Year's Wreath*, the *Dahlia*, the *Dew-Drop*, the *Evergreen*, the *Floral Offering*, *Flowers of Loveliness*, *Forget Me Not*, the *Garland*, the *Hyacinth*, the *Iris*, the *Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry*, the *Laurel Wreath*, *Leaflets of Memory*, the *Lily*, the *Lily of the Valley*, the *Magnolia*, the *May Flower*, the *Moss-Rose*, the *Rose Bud*, the *Violet*, the *Winter-Bloom*, the *Wintergreen*, the *Woodbine*, and the *Wreath*. (Thompson, 102ff)

Titles were also frequently taken from the names of jewels and gems: a Christmas stocking might contain the *Book of Pearls*, the *Diadem*, the *Gem*, *Gems from the Sacred Mine*, the *Jewel*, the *Literary Gem*, *Lyric Gems*, the *Opal*, the *Pearl*, the *Ruby*, or the *Silver Cup of Sparkling Drops from Many Fountains*. (Thompson, 102ff)

As the phenomenon expanded, publishers began to produce more specialized gift books, aimed at narrower market segments. Children, for example, could receive the *American Comic Annual*, the *American Juvenile Keepsake*, the *Juvenile Gem*, or *Youth's Keepsake*. Various religious denominations and social causes had their own gift books—abolition in particular inspired several titles, among them the *Liberty Bell* and *Freedom's Gift*. In a similar vein, the *Catholic Keepsake*, the *Christian Keepsake and Missionary Annual* and the *National Temperance Offering* each carved its niche. Gift books were also developed for fraternal organizations; examples include the *Masonic Offering* and the *Odd Fellow's Offering*. (Thompson, 102ff)

The high water mark of the gift book came between 1845 and 1850. By 1855 the number of titles had plummeted, and by the end of the Civil War the gift books were all but gone. (Thompson, 167) There were several reasons for the decline and fall. After 40 years the novelty had certainly worn off. Another factor was the growing number of magazines springing to life every year, especially literary magazines. By 1865 these channeled oceans of reading material—both highbrow and lowbrow—into hundreds of thousands of homes on a weekly basis. The appeal of expensive books of stories and engravings declined as inexpensive magazines full of stories and engravings grew commonplace. And some of the gift book publishers contributed to their own demise by shamelessly putting old wine into new bottles, or "counterfeiting," as Pattee described it. He wrote that between 1846 and 1856,

...Some of the annuals went through as many as twelve republications with different names. A doting husband during this racketeering decade might buy for his wife as a wedding-anniversary present in 1849 the *Amaranth*; in 1850, the *Garland*; in 1851, the *Keep-sake of Friendship*; in 1852 the *Magnolia*; in 1853, the *Token of Friendship*; in 1854, the *Casket*; in 1869, *Memory's Gift*, and then discover that all the volumes were but reprintings from the old plates of the 1849 *Amaranth*, with changed titles and changed engravings. (FC, 387f)

Among the most noteworthy of the American gift books:

- *Atlantic Souvenir*, published in Philadelphia by Carey & Lea (1825 - 1832). Considered the first American gift book. Merged with the *Token* in 1832 (see below).
- The *Boston Book*, published by Light & Horton and others (1836 - 1837, 1841, 1850). Original

contributions from Longfellow and Holmes as well as reprints from Emerson, Hawthorne, and Lowell.

- *The Gift*, published in Philadelphia by Carey & Hart (1835 – 1837, 1839 – 1840, 1842 – 1845). Contributors included Emerson, Poe, and Longfellow.
- *The Legendary*, published in Boston by S. G. Goodrich (1827 – 1828). Edited by Willis.
- *Liberty Bell*, published in Boston by the Friends of Freedom for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair (1839- 1858). Remarkable roll of contributors, including E. B. Browning, J. F. Clarke, Emerson, M. Fuller, Garrison, Longfellow, Lowell, T. Parker, and Stowe.
- *Literary Souvenir*, published in Philadelphia by Carey & Hart (1838, 1840, 1844 – 1845). First two editions were edited by W. E. Burton.
- *Magnolia*, published in New York by Monson Bancroft and others (1836 – 1837). Republished under numerous titles.
- *The Memorial*, published in New York in 1851 (republished in 1854) by G.P. Putnam. Sold to raise money for a monument to Francis S. Osgood. Edited by Mary E. Hewitt and Rufus Griswold. Contributions from J.T. Fields, Hawthorne, John Neal, Simms, Willis, and others.
- *The Offering*, published in Cambridge, MA by Hilliard & Brown (1829). Edited by Andrews Norton. Contained what are probably Emerson's first published works.
- *The Token*, published in Boston by S. G. Goodrich and others (1827 – 1842). Published 26 contributions from Hawthorne, including some of his earliest published works.
- *Western Souvenir*, published in Cincinnati by N. & G. Guilford (1829). Edited by James Hall.
- *The Opal*, published in New York (1843 – 1848). Editors included Griswold, Willis, and Hale. Contributors included Longfellow, Paulding, Poe, Simms, and Whittier.

The Talisman

When Bliss approached Bryant, Sands, and Verplanck in 1826, the gift book craze was just getting underway. Bliss first contacted Sands, who then enlisted his friends Bryant and Verplanck. They named their project the *Talisman* and decided to write under the pseudonym of a single imaginary author, taking as their models Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, who, with several other writers, had produced *The History of John Bull* by "Martinus Scriblerus" in the early 18th century.

Godwin wrote, "It would be difficult to conceive of editorship under pleasanter circumstances than those in which the *Talisman* was compiled." (237) He described the trio's rambles in the New Jersey hills above the Hudson and in older sections of New York City, in which their discussions formed the basis for later writings.

All writing in the *Talisman*—and four illustrations—were credited to the imaginary Francis Herbert, and the ruse that Herbert lived was maintained throughout the annual's three-year run beginning in 1828. In the preface to the first edition "Herbert" said that hiding behind a nom de plume was disgusting quackery. "I therefore subscribe my name without reserve." (in Thompson, 58)

The three editors were members of a group called the Sketch Club, which had its origins in weekly lunches organized by James Fennimore Cooper for his friends and associates. The group later renamed itself the Century Association, and is still operating in a New York building designed by Sanford White. (Thompson, 57) Other members of the Sketch Club were Fitz-Greene Halleck and Samuel F. B. Morse. The Sketch Club was closely connected to the National Academy of Design, founded in 1826 (and also still thriving as the National Academy Museum and School of Fine Arts), and members of both organizations were invited to contribute to the *Talisman*.

The majority of the *Talisman's* stories and poems were written by the editors, but other authors included Halleck, Bryant's brother John, and Morse. (Thompson, 59) The editors called on eight of the National Academy's members for contributions, including John Inman, Thomas Cole, and Morse. Art direction eventually ended up in the hands of John Neilson, who contributed some of his own engravings and translated a French poem for the first issue. (Thompson, 59, 63)

Thompson said the *Talisman* had a unique tone,

...quite free from the airs of the average American literary annual, apparently because the oppressive sentimentality of the time was not part of the Sketch Club atmosphere. There appear to have been present instead a gentle masculinity and humor which are gratifyingly reminiscent of the work of Irving and his fellows... and in some respects the *Talisman* is a successor to *Salmagundi*. (61)

Whether Bliss enjoyed being the publisher as much as Bryant, Sands, and Verplanck enjoyed being the editors is less certain. Bryant described Bliss as being "of so generous a temper as often to yield his own rights in order to meet the expectations of authors for whom he published." (in Thompson, 58) Sands said Bliss was sometimes a little obfuscated on everything "except the price of primers." (in Thompson, 59) Bliss must have made money on the first edition and expected to do as well on the second, because the third was contracted before the second went on sale, and 5,000 copies were printed. But the third time didn't charm. Bliss declined to undertake a fourth edition and Sands failed in an attempt to sell the *Talisman* to Carey & Lea for \$2,000. Bliss did collect and reprint the three editions in 1833, and it's possible that Bliss recovered his losses on the collection. (Thompson, 58f)

In 1832, two years after everyone involved had given up on the *Talisman*, Bryant, William Leggett, Paulding, Sands, and Catherine Sedgwick collaborated on a similar anthology named *Tales of Glauber-Spa*. It was introduced to the reader as papers left behind at a briefly-fashionable spa after the clientele had panicked and fled—another jeu d'esprit of pseudonymous authorship. This was Bryant's last fling with annuals, anthologies, and jeux d'esprit, and in the following years his attention was increasingly taken with management of the *Post* and his involvement with various causes.

The gift books and annuals are gone and forgotten today, but they played a role in the development of American literature in four significant ways. First, they encouraged development of the American short story. Second, the gift books were especially instrumental in providing women writers with a venue. Third, they employed some of the country's best artists and engravers and created a larger market for their work. And finally and most importantly, they gave writers a source of income at a time when paying work was very thin on the ground.

In 1925 Pattee called the "gift-book debauch" a curious episode,

... and many of its later phases are almost unbelievable. As one stands today in an alcove filled with these butterfly volumes with their bindings of purple and gold, their exquisite specimens of the now-lost art of steel engraving, their conventional acres of poetry and prose, not one

sentence of which, as a contemporary once boasted, contains an improper suggestion or an unchaste word—not a page that could not be read aloud to the children in a Methodist parsonage—one gets a vision of what the pious, conventionalized mid-nineteenth century really was in America.

No one is fitted to criticize Poe or Hawthorne or Longfellow or Herman Melville or Walt Whitman until one has felt the atmosphere of this amazing jungle in which they were compelled to work, this jungle of the annuals, the gift books, and the anthologies. (FC, 394)

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