



The Thomas Wolfe collection of William B. Wisdom

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The Thomas Wolfe Collection of William B. Wisdom

THOMAS WOLFE was represented in the Harvard College Library by some truly notable items, prior to the addition of the collection made by William B. Wisdom, of New Orleans, Wolfe's friend and foremost collector. With the recent acquisition of the Wisdom collection, Harvard's holdings of Thomas Wolfe become not only a virtually complete assembly of the author's manuscripts, publications, library, and personal papers, but also a concentration of research material which is possibly unsurpassed for a major literary figure.

Confident of Wolfe's ultimate place in American literature, Mr Wisdom wrote to Wolfe a year before his death, declaring the intention of assembling a Thomas Wolfe collection which should be second to none. A few months earlier, in January, 1937, he had been host to the novelist in New Orleans. In a letter to Maxwell E. Perkins, Mr Wisdom has vividly described how Wolfe took relish in the tastes and smells of the famous Antoine's at that time, even dropping to his hands and knees to sniff the cedar shavings on the floor. Afterwards, inscribing the collector's first editions, Wolfe wrote on the fly-leaf of *Of Time and the River*, 'For William B. Wisdom -- who took me to a meal today at Antoine's that was, I think, as good or better than any described in this book.'

Thomas Wolfe died on 15 September 1938, a few weeks before his thirty-eighth birthday. Elsewhere in this issue the late Maxwell Perkins, who was Wolfe's literary executor until his own recent death, tells of his concern that the Wolfe manuscripts be kept intact for the study of the writer's work, rather than dispersed at a possibly greater profit.

Mr Wisdom was at least equally anxious to see this material preserved as a unit, in memory of Tom Wolfe, at a center of scholarship where it could be adequately housed and preserved. After editing of the posthumous works by Edward C. Aswell, therefore, arrangements were made whereby Mr Wisdom acquired the entire, vast accumulation of manuscripts, together with other objects left by Wolfe including books, letters, and other personal papers. Thus it came about that the Wisdom collection, now including everything hoarded by Wolfe

and left at his death, arrived at Harvard last February in thirteen lots, including eleven large crates, some of which were undoubtedly those great cases for storing manuscripts which long ago became a part of the Wolfe legend.

Outstanding among the Wolfe items at Harvard before the arrival of the Wisdom collection was the complete manuscript of his first and best-known novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, written in seventeen large ledgers. This, like other items at Harvard, is originally traceable to the generosity of Mrs Aline Bernstein of New York, to whom Wolfe had dedicated the book and presented the manuscript. In 1939 she gave it to be sold at auction for the benefit of European refugees, and it was purchased by the late Gabriel Wells, who presented it to Harvard in memory of Henry James. Later Mrs Bernstein gave Harvard all her inscribed copies of Wolfe's works, including the unique dedication copy of *Look Homeward, Angel*; a complete typing of the same unedited manuscript; copies of two unpublished plays; and several volumes which Wolfe had given her on various occasions. In addition she made it possible for Mr Wisdom to include in his collection the surviving letters from Thomas Wolfe to herself, letters of the greatest importance in studying one of the chief influences in the writer's life, not to mention their literary value and immense human interest.

Other important material had been received from Thomas Wolfe's friend and dean at New York University, Professor James B. Munn, now of Harvard, who gave several important letters from Wolfe to himself as well as a copy of Wolfe's play, 'Mannerhouse,' which had been presented to him by the author with a warm and interesting inscription. Mr Perkins repeatedly donated correspondence with Wolfe and other items, and from him Mr Wisdom was able to secure the moving letter written by Wolfe in the midst of his fatal illness, his last written words, reproduced in this issue of the BULLETIN. Very recently, Mr Aswell, now Wolfe's literary executor, in succession to Mr Perkins, has secured the addition of the files of Harper and Brothers concerning publication of the posthumous works.

The Wisdom collection now embraces, first, slightly more than one hundred volumes, exclusive of the books owned by Thomas Wolfe, as follows: first editions of Wolfe's works, several inscribed by the author and some of them scarce or rare items; an impressive gathering of other

editions and forms in which Wolfe has appeared, including foreign editions and a complete file of periodicals; books containing critical or biographical material; and books which have any kind of association with Wolfe. An average example of the last might be the biography of Professor Horace Williams, teacher of philosophy at the University of North Carolina, who appears as Professor Vergil Weldon ('Hegel in the Cotton Belt') in *Look Homeward, Angel*, and also presumably as Plato Grant, mentioned briefly in *You Can't Go Home Again*.

The zeal with which Mr Wisdom pursued his collecting is illustrated in his copies of *Thomas Wolfe's Letters to His Mother*, which include first editions inscribed at length by Mrs Julia E. Wolfe, by the book's editor, John S. Terry, and by Maxwell Perkins for the publishers. The collector attaches importance to his inscribed copies of the works of Aline Bernstein, the bearing of which on the works of Wolfe is so little understood that these books may become increasingly difficult to obtain.

The collection includes several complete sets of galley proofs or page proofs, usually showing extensive alterations before reaching the final published versions. These were obtained in part through the unusual cooperation of Wolfe's two editors, Mr Perkins and Mr Aswell. Other Wolfiana are scripts of radio broadcasts dealing with Wolfe, promotional materials for his books, photographs, and even the X-ray negatives from the author's last illness.

In the property left by Wolfe at his death, the Wisdom collection acquired preeminently the manuscripts of his entire lifetime. These are practically complete except for *Look Homeward, Angel*, which was already in the Harvard College Library. Wolfe has written that Eliza Gant was a saver of string and bottles. Seemingly, he, himself, never discarded a scrap of paper on which he had written. As a result his preserved manuscripts are extraordinary for their span over the years, and for the thoroughness with which they reveal his working methods and his successively adopted and discarded plans. Physically, the manuscripts include an amusing variety of stationery, including every kind of notebook, and the freely used letter-heads of many different persons and organizations. One early play was even finished on pages torn from a notebook with Mrs Wolfe's boarding-house accounts on the reverse side.

The legend relates that Wolfe could reach deep into his great boxes of manuscript and fish out any desired passage. The state of the manuscripts as received at Harvard makes this story the more amazing. Thrown together in the greatest confusion were notes and outlines, manuscript drafts from all periods, variant versions, typescripts with copious revisions by Wolfe, fragments of many duplicate typings, unfinished letters, random paragraphs on whatever subject was uppermost in his mind at the time, telephone numbers, lists of his friends, trips, publications, and other categories, and incidentally a shirt collar which he may have missed. In the identification and sorting of this material, weeks often elapsed before the scattered pages of a given piece could be assembled, and years will pass before scholars will have imposed final order on the last group of sheets.

Probably the earliest Wolfe manuscripts in existence are two school copy-books, inscribed in unsteady pen and ink as the property of Tom Wolfe in Grades 3a and 4a of the Orange Street School, Asheville, North Carolina. After these chronologically come speeches and other extra-curricular papers from his University of North Carolina days, and class notes and papers from his graduate studies at Harvard in 1920-23. Typical of these is a paper on Robert Greene, marked A — by Professor Lowes, with the following characteristic and prophetic comment:

This paper shows both insight and a gift for expression. The last, in particular, needs (as Coleridge says) to be 'curbed and ruddered.' The story sprawls a little — yet you can be terse and telling, as you show again and again.

Now available is the record of his early play-writing at the University of North Carolina for Frederick H. Koch, and at Harvard in George P. Baker's 47 Workshop, and later. The plays deserve to be studied for the development they show within themselves, and for occasional germs of the later prose writings as well. The three major plays, 'The Mountains,' 'Welcome to Our City,' and 'Mannerhouse,' exist in interesting successive stages of rewriting, and the first proves to have at least four complete versions. One particular version was known to have been written, but was not thought to be extant, until it transpired accidentally that an uncatalogued copy is owned by the Harvard Dramatic Club, on deposit in the Theatre Collection of the Harvard College Library. A play fragment of interest consists of a few pages of manuscript entitled 'The House of Bateson,' based on members of

the Wolfe family, written several years before the inception of *Look Homeward, Angel*.

A later group of manuscripts, the incunabula of Wolfe's non-dramatic writing, is a series of cheerful, rambling sketches, partly under the title, 'Passage to England.' Reference to these may be found in Wolfe's letters to his mother and to his famed early teacher, Mrs Roberts. They were written on his first trip to Europe, the period described in *Of Time and the River*, and some are almost contemporary accounts of episodes that later appeared in that book, such as the idyll of the peasants on the train to Orléans, and the absurd adventures there with the Countess. Except for play fragments, these sketches may be taken to be the earliest drafts of any scenes which later appeared in the published works.

In preparation for *Look Homeward, Angel*, and from that point throughout the rest of Wolfe's literary career, a parade of outlines, synopses, working notes, and memoranda between the author and his editors reveals his methods and the changing plans for his current works in progress. Of special note is a manuscript filling two dissimilar European notebooks, consisting of a detailed, elliptically phrased narrative of about the first twenty-five years of his life. In an outline with five headings, a pencil mark has been drawn between 'College (III)' and 'The World (IV),' establishing the scope of his first novel; and throughout the account lines have been struck out, apparently as their substance was incorporated into some part of the seventeen ledgers of the novel. Other biographical details were not used, and were not struck out. All this must prove to be extremely valuable source material for students of Wolfe's life and of his selection of literary subject matter.

The general history of Wolfe's manuscripts after *Look Homeward, Angel*, and the epic labors of the writer and his first editor in shaping up the next book for publication almost six years later, are known from Wolfe's little book, *The Story of a Novel*, and from wide retelling. For the first time, however, the complete record of experiments adopted, abandoned, and merged begins to stand reasonably clear. For instance, there is almost an entire ledger of manuscript for a book to be titled 'The River People,' for which the opening scene was laid on the Widener Library steps, and two of whose characters reappear later as Francis Starwick and Joel Pierce in *Of Time and the River*. From the evidence of a letter to Professor Munn, this work was started as

early as the spring of 1928, close upon the completion of *Look Homeward, Angel*, and many months before its publication.

Again, there are four ledgers filled with manuscript about the early life and family of the character, Esther, which were to form a book or a section of a book with the title, 'The Good Child's River'; and for this project Mrs Bernstein entered some autobiographical data at the end of one ledger. Of the unpublished book, 'K-19,' portions exist which were never worked into the later books. There are widely differing plans for molding the story of the family named Hawke into the book to be called 'The October Fair,' before the author fell back upon the Gant family and the simple device of a sequel to his first publication. In contrast to the ledgers which contain the manuscripts for *Look Homeward, Angel* and the subsequent notes and experiments, the final manuscript draft of *Of Time and the River* is almost entirely written on several dozen reams of ordinary yellow paper.

A study of these works, including the manuscripts intended for use in 'The Hills beyond Pentland,' reveals the source and original context of many of the pieces collected and published as short stories. For the later novels, which were woven together after Wolfe's death by his last editor, Edward C. Aswell, there are a number of early and late variant versions side by side, as described by Mr Aswell in the note appended to *The Hills Beyond*.

There are no manuscript drafts at all for some passages in the last books, and these were evidently dictated directly to a typist. For these passages the first drafts are taken to be pages of rapid, single-spaced typing with copious revisions by the author. His last manuscript of a literary nature closes the record of his creative work — a plain, black notebook which would fit into a large pocket, entitled 'A Western Journal,' but published as 'A Western Journey,' in a periodical, after his death in 1938.

Accompanying all this manuscript material are great quantities of typed drafts, and also the final typescripts from which type was set for the books.

Thomas Wolfe's library and letters are characterized by the same lifetime span displayed in his manuscripts. Among his eight hundred books are not only those of his later years, but grammars and texts of all kinds from his earliest school days and his courses at the University of North Carolina and Harvard. In addition there are books from which

he taught as an English instructor at New York University between 1924 and 1930. Nearly half of his books are in French and German, and show an appetite for the best and the worthless alike, in that independent search for quality outside the established classics which he has described in his writings.

There are books which were inscribed to him by his fellow authors and friends, there are books of no imaginable importance, and there are the great works that meant so much to him. Included are his Shakespeare, Coleridge, Donne, Burton, *War and Peace*, his well-used *World Almanacs*, and two copies of *Ulysses*, the only book by which Wolfe admitted being influenced in his own writing. He has written interesting notes in some of these.

Many times, a quoted title or a passage used in dedicating one of his own works can be traced to a marked passage in some book in his library. One of the most interesting examples is the odd quotation on the title page of *Look Homeward, Angel*, 'At one time the earth was probably a white-hot sphere like the sun,' ascribed to Tarr and McMurray. Wolfe has written of the fascination which geography books had for the young George Webber; and his own library proved to contain a battered geography from his own school days, by Tarr and McMurray, in which the very line, quoted above, had been marked and underlined.

Another interesting item is a book inscribed to him by his German publisher, Ernst Rowohlt, which was described in detail as the parting gift of the character, Lewald, in *You Can't Go Home Again*. Along with Wolfe's books might be mentioned the wide assortment of tourist brochures from his trips abroad, other mementos such as souvenir menus, and a large number of art reproductions in postcard form.

There are many hundreds of letters addressed to Wolfe from the time he first left home for college, including both personal correspondence of importance and large quantities of ordinary fan mail. In addition to letters addressed to himself, it is interesting to find that he possessed letters addressed by his family to his brother Ben on at least one occasion. Of letters written by Wolfe, mention has been made of the letters to Aline Bernstein. In addition, the Wisdom collection has Wolfe's letters to his last agent, Miss Elizabeth Nowell, and some of his letters to Maxwell Perkins on both personal and business matters. Other collections of his letters are to be added to the collection through the kindness of members of Thomas Wolfe's family, who have con-

tinually given their interest and active cooperation to Mr Wisdom in the achievement of his purposes.

Many drafts of letters by Wolfe were found scattered through his literary manuscripts, some of which are of the greatest interest. Demonstrably they fall into at least four categories: some were simply never finished; some were finished and never sent; some finished and then rewritten, even twice; and some, in the later years, were simply scrawled out in longhand, to be transcribed by a typist for mailing. During the time when he had the services of a stenographer, carbon copies of his letters were kept, making his files pleasingly complete for that period. In addition to letters, there are checks and check-books, bank statements, royalty reports, legal documents, and other personal papers.

Two letters of special interest in Wolfe's publishing career are the early letter rejecting *Look Homeward, Angel*, in 1928, fiercely parodied by him in *The Web and the Rock*; and, later that year, the first letter from Maxwell Perkins, written at about the time of Wolfe's Oktoberfest injuries, in which Mr Perkins expressed interest in the book and a desire to meet the young author.

Such, briefly described, are some of the materials gathered in the Thomas Wolfe Collection of William B. Wisdom for use by the biographers, critics, psychologists, and literary historians of the future.¹

THOMAS LITTLE

¹ Under present arrangements concluded between the donor, the literary executor Mr Aswell, and the Harvard College Library, material in the Thomas Wolfe archive will be available to accredited scholars on the following terms. Access may be had to the printed material and to the drafts of any of Wolfe's published works for the study of Wolfe's life, his literary methods, and the editorial treatment of his writings. However, no quotations may be made from any unpublished writing of Thomas Wolfe without written permission from the literary executor of the Wolfe estate, Edward C. Aswell, and from the Harvard College Library; while certain sections of the unpublished manuscripts have been specifically reserved for publication by the literary executor. Although scholars may be permitted to examine the unpublished manuscripts, it is unlikely that they will, at present, be permitted to make extracts for publication from the reserved sections.

CONTENTS

HAMILTON VAUGHAN BAIL, Views of Harvard to 1860: An Iconographic Study — Parts I-III	11, 185, 339
WILLIAM BERRIEN, The Modern Language Center	396
JOHN H. BIRSS, <i>The Story of Toby</i> , a Sequel to <i>Typee</i>	118
WILLIAM H. BOND, <i>Nance Oldfield</i> : An Unrecorded Printed Play by Charles Reade	386
WILLIAM H. BOND, Wordsworth's Thanksgiving Ode: An Unpublished Postscript	115
EDWIN G. BORING, The Library of the Psychological Laboratories	394
ETHEL B. CLARK, A Manuscript of John Keats at Dumbarton Oaks	90
I. BERNARD COHEN, A Lost Letter from Hobbes to Mersenne Found	112
ARTHUR H. COLE, The Business School Library and Its Setting	332
C. LESLIE CRAIG, The Earliest Little Gidding Concordance Exhibitions, 1946	311 123
REGINALD FITZ, President Eliot and Dr Holmes Leap Forward	212
EVA FLEISCHNER, Napoleon to His Mother: The First Draft of a Letter Written from School	244
LOUISE B. GRAVES, The Likeness of Emily Dickinson	248
ELMER M. GRIEDER, The Collecting of War Agency Material at Harvard	121
<i>Guides to the Harvard Libraries</i>	123
<i>The Harvard Keats Memorial Studies</i>	123
<i>The Harvard-Newberry Calligraphic Series</i>	262
PHILIP HOFER, The Graphic Arts Department: An Experiment in Specialization	252
PHILIP HOFER, A Newly Discovered Book with Painted Decorations from Willibald Pirckheimer's Library	66
WILLIAM A. JACKSON, The Carl T. Keller Collection of <i>Don Quixote</i>	306
WILLIAM A. JACKSON, The First Separately Printed English Translation of Horace	238
WILLIAM A. JACKSON, Humphrey Dyson and His Collections of Elizabethan Proclamations	76
HAROLD S. JANTZ, A Funeral Elegy for Thomas Danforth, Treasurer of Harvard	113
FRANK N. JONES, Harvard's Importation of Foreign Books since the War	256
OTTO KINKELDEY, Franchino Gafori and Marsilio Ficino	379
RUPERT B. LILLIE, The Historical Series of Harvard Dioramas	391
List of Contributors	127, 264, 399

THOMAS LITTLE, The Thomas Wolfe Collection of William B. Wisdom	280
ROBERT W. LOVETT, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1877- 1937	221
DAVID MCCORB, The Farnsworth Room, 1916-1946	109
PHILIP J. MCNIFF, Reading Room Problems in the Harvard College Library, 1942-1947	254
FRANCIS P. MAGOUN, JR, Photostats of the <i>Historia de Preliis Alexandri Magni</i> (1 ^o)	377
KEYES D. METCALF, Foreword	5
KEYES D. METCALF, Spatial Growth in University Libraries	133
KEYES D. METCALF, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1765-1877	29
KEYES D. METCALF, The Undergraduate and the Harvard Library, 1937-1947	288
AGNES MONGAN, A Group of Newly Discovered Sixteenth-Century French Portrait Drawings	155
AGNES MONGAN, A Group of French Portrait Drawings — Addendum	397
NEW Catalogues of the Library of Congress	262
NATALIE N. NICHOLSON, The Engineering Library at Harvard University	387
MAXWELL E. PERKINS, Thomas Wolfe	269
FRED N. ROBINSON, Celtic Books at Harvard: The History of a Depart- mental Collection	52
HYDER E. ROLLINS, An O. Henry Cocktail	119
ADRIANA R. SALEM, The Purchases of a Seventeenth-Century Librarian	241
Sales of Duplicate Books	261
CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON, The Collections of the Harvard University Archives	176
CLIFFORD K. SHIPTON, The Harvard University Archives: Goal and Function	101
Staff Activities	260
The Theatre Collection in New Quarters	261
WILLIAM VAN LENNEP, The Earliest Known English Playbill	382
WILLIAM VAN LENNEP, John Adams to a Young Playwright	117
THOMAS WOLFE and MAXWELL E. PERKINS, The Last Letter of Thomas Wolfe, and the Reply to It	278