1994

The William F. Charters Collection: An Introduction

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It is still easy to sense the appeal that White Shadows exerted. It was a tale of what reviewers aptly termed "lotus-land," a stylized and detailed report of the conditions and the daily life of a South Pacific island populated with innocent savages. O'Brien filled his pages with descriptions of the natural wonders of the Marquesas. Whether one cared to learn of the virtues of the coconut palm, the soaring flights of the frigate-bird, or the wisdom of the land crab, O'Brien offered a ready account. At even greater length he offered long, approving descriptions of the simple life and customs and of the poetic myths and legends of Polynesia. Reports on topics as varied as cave-dweller legends, ancient soldier ants, beautiful native women, and tapa cloth manufacture appear throughout. Uniting it all was the sense of wonder and mystery with which he first introduced the reader to the islands:

"Where is the boy who has not dreamed of the cannibal isles, those strange fantastic places over the rim of the world, where naked brown men move like shadows through unimagined jungles, and horrid foams are celebrated to the "boom, boom, boom!" of the twelve foot drums?"

O'Brien's love for native culture was matched only by his distaste for western civilization. Mixed with his idyllic visions of primitive life were long passages in which he attributed virtually every undesirable feature of the islands to self-seeking, unthinking Europeans.

"The history of the Marquesans is written in blood, a black spot on the white race. It is a history of evil wrought by civilization, of curses heaped on a strange, simple people by men who sought to exploit them or to mould them to another pattern, who destroyed their customs and their happiness and left them to die, apathetic, unearthed, hardly knowing their own miserable plight."

Even missionaries, whom O'Brien as a Catholic might have been expected to except, emerged as people whose labor and goodness had brought many losses.

"The efforts of missionaries have killed the joy the living as they have crushed out the old barbarities, uprooting everything together, good and bad, that religion meant to the natives. They have given him instead rites that mystify him, dogmas he can hardly understand, and a little comfort in the mysteries bought upon him by trade."

But the final impression which O'Brien sought to leave with the reader was not one of protest. Instead, his unifying theme was a nostalgia for a past that he felt was dying, a noble savagery lost beyond repair.

"Today, insignificant in numbers, unsung in history, they go to the abode of their dark spirits, calmly and without protest. A race goes out in wretchedness, a race worth saving, a race superb in manhood when the whites came. Nothing will remain of them but their ruined monuments, the police, the policy, the remains of the mysterious past of one of the strangest people of time... Some day when deeper poverty falls on Asia or the fortunes of war give all the South Seas to the Samoans, these islands will again be peopled. But never will they know such beautiful children of nature, passionate and brave, as have been destroyed here. They shall have passed as did the old Greeks, but they will have left no written record save the jeers and misunderstanding observations of a few alien observers."

William F. Charters

O'Brien's call to preserve a record of South Seas culture gained its most significant response from William F. Charters, an Indianapolis accountant who, on the surface, was the antithesis of O'Brien. Charters spent all his adult working years in Indianapolis, where he listed himself from 1905 onward as a "tax adjuster." In practice Charters was a "tax ferret" who made his living by exposing unreported taxable holdings of Marion County residents to the Indiana State Treasurer. Under Indiana law of that time, securities holders were annually required to report and pay a tax upon intangibles. Unreported holdings were subject to heavy fines, and a person who reported such holdings was entitled to twenty-five percent of any taxes and fines subsequently collected by the state. It proved a lucrative occupation for Charters. In his most successful...
investigation, for example, he documented that a local resident had failed to report some $800,000 in
mortgages on Texas real estate. The discovery ultimately resulted in a judgement for the state of over $400,000
and a reward for Charters of over $100,000 in the gold dollars of the 1920s.

Charters' investigative activities were conducted more effectively when he shunned public attention,
and this may help to explain why book collecting held a particular appeal for him. It was a fashionable
activity in his age, when some of America's finest collections — including those of Huntington, Folger, and
Widener — were formed, and when such noted book dealers as A. S. W. Rosenbach achieved prominence.
Whatever the appeal, when Charters purchased a copy of White Shadows in 1924 he was deeply moved
by the descriptions of the passing native civilization of the South Seas. He promptly resolved to follow
O'Brien's suggestion and build a collection that recorded the societies and cultures whose passing they
ascertained.

The Collection is Created

Charters left a rather meager record of his collecting activities. All that survives are a copy of his card
file, and his book plate in the front of each volume (on which he wrote in pen each price and purchase date),
a few gummed address labels inserted by the dealers from whom Charters obtained his books, and two short
reminiscences in the files of the Irwin Library of Butler University. One of these is in the form of a short
bookplate once inserted in each volume by a Butler librarian, the other is a transcript of an interview with
Charters' attorney (and Butler trustee), Emsley Johnson, Sr., at the time of the collector's death in 1931.

Even these few items offer a remarkable picture of Charters at work as a collector. They show that the
collection was built at the rate of almost a book a day, 2070 volumes in six and one-half years. They show
that Charters wrote many places in search of his books, purchasing from dealers as far apart as E. Herrick
Brown of Honolulu, Hawaii, and George Gregory of Bath, England. The prices Charters paid were modest
by modern standards. Many were in the $5 to $10 range; one of his most valuable volumes — a 1622 edition of Sir
John Hawkins's account of his 1595 privateering venture in the South Seas — cost just $30. Charters' interest
was clearly in content, and he often accepted used volumes with little regard for the condition of their
binding. By November, 1930, when the collection was given to Butler University, many bindings were
already in need of extensive restoration.

Charters' Approach to Collecting

In line with O'Brien's emphasis, Charters limited his acquisitions to books whose primary purpose to
describe or explain the pre-European native cultures of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. In particular
he attempted to secure the full range of works on the Hawaiian islands, containing their culture disappeared so early as to offer little meaningful for
study. And, while he included dictionaries of the languages of the indigenous peoples, he generally excluded
works in European languages other than English (it appears that he wished to read what he acquired). The
collection was devoid of periodicals other than Transactions, Journals, and miscellaneous papers of various
Royal Societies and Royal Geographic Societies, and early issues of the Journal of Polynesian Studies. Also
lacking, with the single exception of a nineteenth-century facsimile of Tasman's journals, are any studies
published by the French or Dutch governments.

As a further consequence of limiting himself to English language works, Charters' collection placed its
strongest emphasis upon British and English. New Zealand and the Fiji Islands became the areas treated in
greatest detail, with the Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute one of the largest blocs of volumes in the
collection. The French islands, the particular area of O'Brien's interest, received less representation.
The English language emphasis points to one of the greatest strengths of the collection, its comprehensive
set of original editions describing the eighteenth century exploration of the Pacific. Charters avoided the
early recorded works on Spanish and Dutch involvement to the north and west in favor of the French and English
activities that concentrated on the south and east of the Pacific basin. It was a natural choice. Many of these
observers brought an enlightened interest in scientific and cultural knowledge, and several were intrigued
by the idea of the "polite savage" so admired in their century. Their accounts, readily available in English
editions or translations, provided detailed descriptions of the pre-contact South Seas cultures that fascinated
Charters.

Accordingly, each of the major explorers who charted the South Seas for Enlightened Europe is
represented in original eighteenth century editions that include William Dampier, John Byron, Philip
Carteret, and James Cook. So, too, are the eighteenth and nineteenth century editors, including Robert Kerr,
John Pinkerton, James Burney and Alexander Dalrymple. Present also are a wide range of later expedition
reports of such figures as William Bligh and George Vancouver for Britain, Jean La Perouse for France, Ivan
Kruzenshtern for Russia, and Charles Wilkes for the United States.

Finally, travel accounts, particularly in the romantic tradition of Halliburton and O'Brien, were well
represented. In addition to all of O'Brien's works the collection included such titles as The Cannibal Nights by H.
E. Raabe, South Sea Idylls by Charles Warren Stoddard, The Remain of the South Seas by Clement
Wrage, and Life and Laughter midst the Cannibals by Clifford Collins. Authors such as Herman Melville
and Joseph Conrad were also well represented.

In short, by the time he ceased active collecting in 1930, Charters had achieved his goal of a
comprehensive collection of English language books available in the 1920s that were descriptive of the
romantic pre-European native culture of the South Seas. In size the collection remains the largest publicly
available holding on the South Seas to be found on the North American mainland.

The Collection At Butler University

Charters died unexpectedly in 1931. Through the influence of his attorney, he gave his collection shortly
before his death to Butler University, where it has remained for the past sixty years. Unfortunately,
Charters did not also provide an endowment to maintain or expand his holdings, and this has proved for
many years to be a challenge to succeeding University librarians. Initially the books were simply stemmed.
From the mid-1940s on, many were incorporated into the general collection. Books were superficially
cataloged according to a simplified Dewey decimal system then in use at Butler, and housed in the main
library stacks which were located until 1961 in the main classroom building, Jordan Hall. By the mid-1950s
deterioration of some older books and space demands of a growing undergraduate collection caused the
collection to be reevaluated. The University's Board of Trustees acknowledged the collector's wish that the
books not be circulated, and all books were withdrawn and boxed in storage for about fifteen years.

The collection emerged from storage after two major changes in library activity. The first was the
completion of the new Irwin Library building in 1962. The second was the decision in 1968 to create the Hugh
Thomas Miller Rare Book Room at Irwin to house the university's special collections, of which the Charters
Collection was the largest. By 1980, a professional rare books librarian was appointed. Finally, the
collection was fully accessible to the public while safeguarded against further abuse through circulation and
inadequate storage.
I. Significant Voyages

Circumnavigations; Scientific, Whaling, and Missionary Voyages; Military and Buccaneering Expeditions

In 1970, Butler University published a preliminary pamphlet about the William F. Charters South Seas Collection: a lengthy introduction followed by a very modest short-title list. There were sixty-one titles separating scientific explorations from buccaneering expeditions, divorcing successful circumnavigations from shipwrecks, missionary ventures from military excursions. The listing followed the conventional scholarly device of dividing the history of Pacific exploration into three national and chronological periods: Spanish in the sixteenth century, Dutch in the seventeenth, English and French in the eighteenth. Similarly, there was the conventional distinction between explorers’ motives: the Spaniards in search of wealth, adventure, and religious converts; the Dutch in search of trade; the English and French in search of scientific knowledge.

In this catalogue, these divisions have been abandoned. Many of the buccaneering enterprises brought back not only gold and spices and harrowing tales but also maps, detailed observations of climates, flora, and fauna, even vocabularies; missionary voyages generated not always converts but often geographical and anthropological studies; expeditions undertaken in pursuit of natural science prompted new trade and missionary outposts.

Of course, there is no denying or understating the tremendous impact of explorers’ and voyagers’ original intent. Alan Moorehead has set it forth in The Fatal Impact (1966), Bernard Smith has analyzed it in European Vision and the South Pacific (1969), to name but a few of the works that have been added to the Charters Collection.

When pondering the enduring importance of early records, one may wish to remember that a great expedition of the nineteenth century had aboard the records of preceding explorers: Captain Fitzroy had at his disposal the journals and studies of natural phenomena, to observe and study anew. The impact of Darwin’s observations during that voyage need not be belabored here.

Early recorded observations — originally prompted by whatever motive — enable today’s scholars to understand and describe social and physical phenomena and processes. While an astute observer might accurately describe a place and people at a given time, different understanding stems from the observation and assessment of changes, be they noticed through the emergence of new social strata or new trade economics. One might hope that new understanding would also kindle the appreciation of art, music, myths, communal values, and other aspects of diverse cultures that through their very existence enrich the lives not only of those who have inherited them but also of those who observe and describe.

In this first chapter, early voyages are listed merely alphabetically, regardless of national origin or main intent. For more than one voyage, original purpose gave way to other considerations during the course of the expedition. For some, original goals have waned in importance, especially so since we cannot turn back the historical clock. What remains from all early accounts, are the invaluable detailed descriptions of peoples, customs, languages, mythologies, places, climates — the pottery shards of history to be interpreted, the fragments from which we can generate new understanding and appreciation, new insights into worlds that are inextricably intertwined.

Please note:
Throughout the following catalogue, transcription of title-pages follows standard English with respect to capitalization, to allow for easy reading. Quite often, the lengthy titles of early works provide at least a hint towards a work’s contents, to greater extent than body words or sub-titles. In the collection line, short-forms are stated only for works printed up to 1800. Bibliographical data are either part of the Charters Collection or within the Irwin Library. Classification numbers (shelf-numbers) have been given at the end of each descriptive entry; asterixed numbers (•) denote works that have been added to the original Charters Collection.