

The Stuff of Culture

PHYLLIS REEVE dives beneath the covers of an unusual collection of “padded books” handed down in her family since the early 1900s.

During the [19th] century trade-printing, both in England and America, steadily improved, and the work done by William Morris at his Kelmscott Press (1891–1896), and by other amateur printers who imitated him, set a new standard of beauty of type and ornament, and of richness of general effect. On the other hand the demand for cheap reprints of famous works induced by the immense extension of the reading public was supplied by scores of pretty if flimsy editions . . .

—A.W. Pollard, *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1911)

ON THE DAY OF Ella Foss’s wedding to Fred Hall in November 1895, his brother Landon presented her with *The Casquet of Gems*: not the ancestral jewels, but a book of *Choice Selections from the Poets* quasi-opulently bound to suggest casquets such as those that challenged Shakespeare’s Portia and her suitors. Ella was not “a lady richly left” like Portia but a farmer’s daughter in anglophone Quebec, marrying another farmer.

She and Fred lived with his mother and brother on the family’s farm in East Farnham in the Eastern Townships, a few miles from the U.S. border. Landon was a musician, a composer, and the organist at Trinity Anglican Church in nearby Cowansville. A sticker inside the book indicates that he purchased it from H.C. Harvey, druggist. Ella and Fred had four children, among them Dorothy, my mother-in-law.

Meanwhile, a few miles southwest of the townships, in Franklin Centre, Ralph Parham grew up on another farm, in another anglophone family, one of eight sons and six daughters (including my mother). By 1906 Ralph and two of his brothers had left the farm to become shopkeepers, first in Manitoba, then in British Columbia.

Ralph took his books with him. When my own family moved to Vancouver in 1962, three years after his death, his wife Mabel gave me

some of his treasures, gift volumes even more elaborate than Ella’s *Casquet*: Matthew Arnold, Oliver Goldsmith, a Whittier inscribed by his parents, and some less richly presented, including a nine-volume *Ridpath’s History of the World*.

VOLUMES BINDING KITH AND KIN

The Halls and the Parhams were among the many Americans who came to Canada in the first decade of the 19th century, but they maintained ties with their relatives and friends in New England. Books were exchanged on every suitable occasion—mostly poetry and belles lettres. These books were much read and show the signs of use; they’re unlikely of any monetary value, but cherished as outward and visible signs of the inward and spiritual culture that bound kith and kin.

It’s these connections that make them the copies I choose to read even if more recent editions of the works are at hand. Of these, nine command special attention because of what I call their stuffing, which adds to their “personality” like the stuffing of toys or a comfortable and well-worn chair. I might more respectfully refer to them as “padded books,” defined by Joan M. Reitz in her admirable *Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science* as:

book[s] with one or more layers of compressible material, such as cotton batting, added to the surface of the boards before the outer covering is applied, to make the binding soft to the touch. . . . The style was used in the late 19th and early 20th centuries on albums, diaries, volumes of poetry, etc.¹

Reitz is helpful, but I feel she dismisses “the style” too easily, with little additional information on their context. Although a search of other online sources yields very little about the origins and

history of such padded books, I find a great deal more than I want to know about how to make my own padded covers, within which I can preserve not only photographs but also my own thoughts and poetry. I can even readily purchase ready-made padded books with blank pages, if I wish to avoid personal effort.

Today's trade publishers seem to save padded covers for practical and inexpensive books for very young children or, surprisingly—not to mention impractically and more expensively—for cookbooks. A discussion thread hosted on the site of the Society for Culinary Arts and Letters, "That padded cover? What's the point?" concludes that padded covers are designed to entice us to purchase such books as gifts, for which we are willing to pay more than the going price of a utilitarian edition.²

Alas, none of our stuffed books bears a price tag. Our families were not wealthy, so I assume these books were closer to a gift edition of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (which Amazon sells for \$10 more than the regular hardcover) than a volume from the Folio Society.

NOT EXPENSIVE NOW OR THEN

Current antiquarian sites do not list original prices, but the top price I found for my stuffed books was \$25 for a copy of *The Casquet of Gems*, which may not be the edition I own. Similar books, in better condition than mine, are offered for no more than \$10.

We inherited another edition of the Goldsmith, with content identical to that in the padded book described in this article. It was published by Frederick Warne & Co. as part of its Chandos Classics series, and this book does carry a price mark: two shillings sixpence, or about \$16 in today's coin.

Of other Warne series, the most luxurious is The Landsdowne Poets, "carefully Edited, well-printed, with Oxford Redline Border, Original

Notes, Steel Portraits, and full-page Illustrations. Large crown 8vo, cloth, extra gilt, gilt edges, price 3s.6d each; or in morocco elegant, 6s." Our stuffed books are in this size range, approximately 5 by 7 inches, and some might have cost three shillings sixpence, or about \$20 today, but would not have aspired to the six-shilling mark.

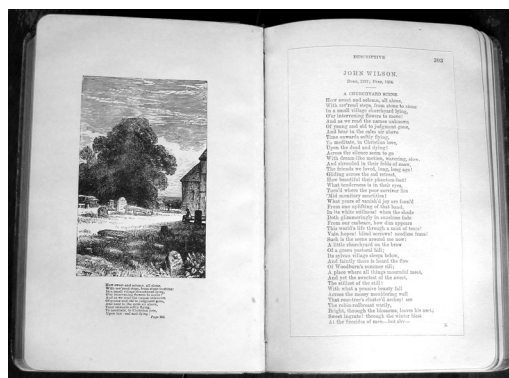
AN AGE WHEN POETRY WAS VALUED

Why select these authors for stuffing? Were they special? These books happened to be in our families' libraries, but antiquarian lists turn up many more poets, major and minor, with padded-cover editions. Four of our poets—Milton, Goldsmith, Burns and Byron—were established classics, but Arnold, Browning, Longfellow and Whittier were older contemporaries of my grandparents in an age when poetry was read, recited and valued as a part of life. Herewith a bit more detail about each of the nine volumes.

The Casquet of Gems: Choice Selections from the Poets

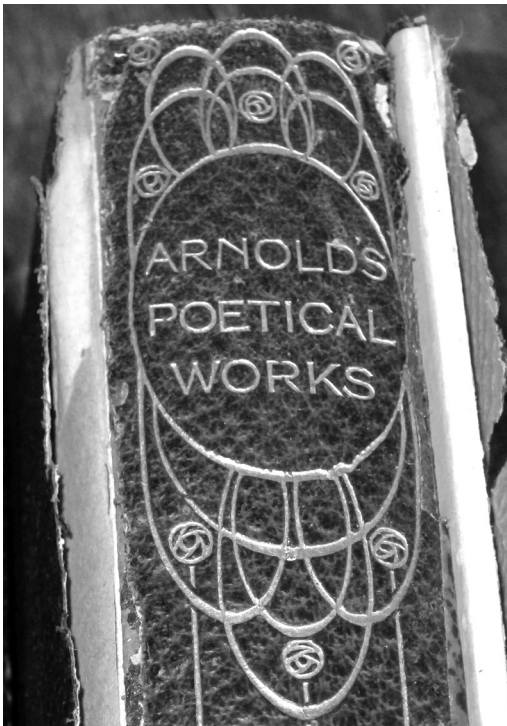
Edinburgh: W.P. Nimmo, Hay & Mitchell; printed by Ballantyne, Hanson & Co. Undated but probably an 1894 edition of a more elaborate 1877 volume, inscribed "Ella from Landon Nov. 27th 1895."

This book was destined less to be read than to be guarded as a keepsake. Its gilt-stamped burgundy cover and gilt edges open to reveal an emblemed title page blemished by foxing, pages slightly discoloured, but the print legible and still elegant within red borders.



The Casquet of Gems: Choice Selections from the Poets. (Phyllis Reeve photo)

- 1 S.v. "padded binding" (ABC-CLIO, 2004–13), http://www.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis_p.aspx.
- 2 eG Forums (discussion started December 1, 2012), <http://forums.egullet.org/topic/144012-that-padded-cover-whats-the-point/>.



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 The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold.
 (Phyllis Reeve photo)

A few black and white drawings illustrate some of the sections: “Characters” is represented by a verse from Oliver Goldsmith’s “Village Preacher” and an artist’s sketch of the title character; the selection of “Descriptive” poems is prefaced by John Wilson’s poem “A Churchyard Scene” and an apposite illustration; and in “Sacred,” the devout figures of Childhood, Age and Buoyant Youth illustrate lines from William Howitt’s “Sabbath.”

The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold
 London & Glasgow: Collins’ Clear-Type Press
 Undated but after 1883, the probable date of the frontispiece photograph of Arnold by the studio of Elliot and Fry.

This volume is also in burgundy and gold, but with more stuffing and pebbled fabric, and with an art nouveau spine and title page. *Arnold* is my favourite of Uncle Ralph’s books. Its covers have parted from the spine so that now one opens and closes the volume like a precious gift box.

The type is indeed clear and the pages uncrowded, each poem centred and provided with

its own space. A dozen illustrations, in a greyscale wash with borders like narrow drapery, are scattered through the volume. The illustrations don’t match the text on the facing pages, but at least there are page references. Tristram and Iseult face “Resignation,” and the Scholar Gypsy battles snow across the gutter from “A Summer Night.”

The Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier, with life, notes, index, etc.
 London, Edinburgh, Glasgow,
 Melbourne, Sydney & New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode, His Majesty’s Printers.
 Undated but the inscription reads, “To our Dear Ralph from Father and Mother, Xmas 1906.”

Uncle Ralph checked off chosen poems in the table of contents: “Snow-bound” and “The Red-River Voyageur” seem obvious choices for the farm boy crossing Canada, “The Poor Voter on Election Day” reminiscent of kitchen political discussions and his father’s involvement in local issues, “The Khan’s Devil” (wine) acknowledging the temperance streak in his upbringing, plus several sentimental poems on religious and romantic themes. He would also have felt at home with the three photographs of Whittier’s New England milieu that accompany the “Prefatory Notice.”

The Poems and Plays of Oliver Goldsmith, with the addition of The Vicar of Wakefield, Memoir, etc.
 London & New York: Frederick Warne & Co.
 Undated but identified on the flyleaf as belonging to Ralph N. Parham, Vancouver, 1909.

Black pebbled gilt-stamped covers open to green endpapers with a gold leafy pattern. Each poem begins with a decorative initial capital.

The Poetical Works of Robert Browning
 London, Melbourne & Toronto:
 Ward, Lock & Co.
 1911, no inscription.

This volume is black-covered, with green and gilt, leaf-edged endpapers. Browning looks distinguished in a familiar frontispiece photo. The biographical note is by James Alexander Manson (1851–1921), who also wrote about Landseer, Tennyson, art and travel, and—under the pseudonym “Jack High”—an authoritative series on lawn bowling.



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 The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, edited by Henry Frowde. (Phyllis Reeve photo)

The Poetical Works of Robert Burns, with Explanatory Glossary, Notes, Memoir, etc.
 London & New York: Frederick Warne & Co.;
 printed by Morrison & Gibb, Edinburgh.
 Undated, no inscription.

This book comes, as the subtitle suggests, generously annotated. The volume suffers from having come into my over-eager schoolgirl hands before I knew better than to tape relevant clippings to blank pages. Some years later, deeply chagrined, I removed the offending items, but of course the tape left traces.

The Poetical Works of Lord Byron,
 edited by Henry Frowde
 London, New York, Toronto & Melbourne:
 Oxford University Press; printed at Oxford
 by Horace Hart, Printer to the University.
 1912, no inscription.

This Oxford Edition reveals through a convenient tear in the burgundy cover a stuffing of brown material—most of the others have white cotton batting—and newsprint (on one fragment, I can make out a snippet from *King Lear*). Lord Byron is honoured with a gilt monogram on the cover and frontispiece engraving by W.G. Edwards of a dashing painting by Thomas Phillips. The double-columned but legible text is followed by detailed notes and index.

The Poetical Works of John Milton, edited after the original texts by the Rev. H.C. Beeching, M.A. [Dean of Norwich]
 London, New York, Toronto & Melbourne:
 Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press.
 1914, no inscription.

Another Oxford Edition, this has binding, stuffing and cover decoration similar to *Byron* and a frontispiece engraved portrait after the painting by William Faithorne. *Milton* ambitiously reproduces title pages from early editions of the major poems and claims historical and critical authority. I find the volume rather splendid.

Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; with biographical note
 McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart,
 266–268 King Street West, Toronto.
 Undated, but the book was a gift to Dorothy Hall from her sister Helen and her best friend Evelyn when she turned 16 on November 23, 1919.

The newest volume and the only Canadian imprint in the collection, we can guess it was issued shortly before Frederick Goodchild left M&S in 1918. We have Dorothy’s journal for 1917, wherein she notes giving Evelyn a hair ribbon for her birthday, but her gift appears to have been handsomely returned in the form of the *Longfellow*.

Unfortunately, this volume also comes closest to justifying Pollard’s description of such reprints as “flimsy.” While other books have broken through their covers to some degree, only here is the cover fabric itself flaking away to leave the cotton stuffing embarrassingly bare. Yet the spine and text block are intact and the inscription testifies to three teenage girls cherishing poetry and fine books, at the end of the Great War and the beginning of their lives.

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