

“Still a physical possibility”

The life and collecting of Norman Colbeck has left a rich legacy,
JUSTIN O’HEARN discovers.

NORMAN COLBECK and his collection of books made their way to the University of British Columbia Library in the summer of 1967. His books, however, had arrived months before Colbeck himself and thus sat in wait at the port of Vancouver as only he could release the precious cargo. Even Dr. William E. (Dick) Fredeman, who had convinced Colbeck to bring his collection to UBC, had to endure knowing it had arrived yet being unable to see it. Fredeman’s research interest in the Pre-Raphaelites and his own collecting meant that Norman Colbeck’s name was a familiar one to him. Fredeman had had occasion to meet Colbeck and see his collection in England in 1966. Colbeck had informed Fredeman that he was nearing retirement from the book trade and would like to complete the work he had not been able to do in his some 40 years of collecting: make a proper descriptive catalogue of his books and finally to “work with his books.”

Colbeck then informed Fredeman that the British Museum had shown some interest in obtaining his collection. That said, neither he nor Fredeman could see much use in the museum housing the collection, as the bulk of the titles would be duplicated, and the British Museum certainly would not be willing to create a curatorial position for Colbeck so that he could complete his catalogue. Fredeman wasted no time in making Colbeck an offer to move his collection and his person to UBC, where he would be free to complete his work. In negotiation with university librarian Basil Stuart-Stubbs, Fredeman arranged for an all-expenses-paid trip to Vancouver for Colbeck to consider the offer. Colbeck recalls this period in the preface of his catalogue, remarking, “Before many weeks had passed I had deserted England, for the first time in my life, to enjoy a holiday abroad, luxuriously vacationing in Vancouver with the object of assessing the problems of residence there.”

The following year Colbeck would leave his native England for good to live in a penthouse apartment at UBC, diligently working on his catalogue and giving the odd lecture. He would be awarded an honorary doctor of letters in 1987, the same year UBC Press published the two-volume bibliography *A Bookman’s Catalogue*.

BOOKMAN TURNED SCHOLAR

Colbeck’s 20-odd years in Vancouver would prove to be some of the most eventful of his life. Within two years of his residence at UBC as curator of the Colbeck Room—where the bulk of his collection was situated in the main library—he had married Dr. Mabel Mackenzie, an associate professor emerita in UBC’s English department, and inherited an instant extended family. He travelled annually either back home to England or to his wife’s Spanish resort. By all accounts, Colbeck’s life in Vancouver was markedly different from the quiet life he had led as the bachelor bookseller who shared a house with his mother in Bournemouth.

In the preface to *A Bookman’s Catalogue*, Fredeman summarized Colbeck’s career as a bookman. Fredeman referred to fellow collector George Sims’s observation that Colbeck “never tried to sell a book” and made the case that this facet of Colbeck is “central to an understanding of his career as a bookseller, for he was a collector by instinct, a dealer by expedience.” Fredeman goes on to describe Colbeck’s reputation in the book world as one who always possessed “an enormous stock of quality books at moderate to ridiculously cheap prices” and who was, at his core, a collector of the finest editions of books that interested him.

A cursory glance at the Colbeck collection quickly bears out this description. On any one of the shelves containing Colbeck’s books there are dedication copies, rare first editions, incredible bindings, and, often, multiple editions of the same book that vary in slight but

remarkable ways. Nearly every major 19th- and early-20th-century English and Anglo-Irish poet is thoroughly represented, with the notable exception of William Wordsworth, “who was excluded for personal reasons.”

Wordsworth’s conspicuous absence aside, Colbeck’s collection is an excellent tool for researchers in literature, history, print culture, and even biography. In addition to the robust suite of rare editions, the number of association copies and inscriptions is large enough to warrant its own body of research. Colbeck was also an avid collector of letters and ephemera, and the collection includes letters, diaries, notebooks, and miscellaneous items belonging to authors related to their works. One notable example of the latter is a set of original engraved steel plates by poet William Bell Scott that were used to illustrate his *Poems* (1875).

ONE PRECIOUS VOLUME

Every item in the Colbeck collection is described in some detail in his *Bookman’s Catalogue* and, throughout the two volumes, Colbeck maintains a professional demeanour in describing what is really a very personal collection. After all, he spent over half his life building the collection to what it now is. There was one edition in his collection that Colbeck retained as his personal possession even after the rest of the collection was on “indefinite Loan Exhibition” to UBC. Colbeck describes a manuscript copy of a book of Thomas Hardy’s poetry that was personally chosen by Colbeck and released in 1963. This book alone, “of all the thousands described herein . . . whilst it is still a physical possibility, remains in my ‘possession.’” The description of this manuscript is one of the few times Colbeck offers a slight glimpse past the inveterate professional bookman and into the person behind the collection.

In other catalogue entries, Colbeck’s use of effusive descriptors is the closest he comes to letting his personal love of books overshadow the task at hand. And even then, his project is never in any danger of being misrepresented as anything but that of a studious expert.

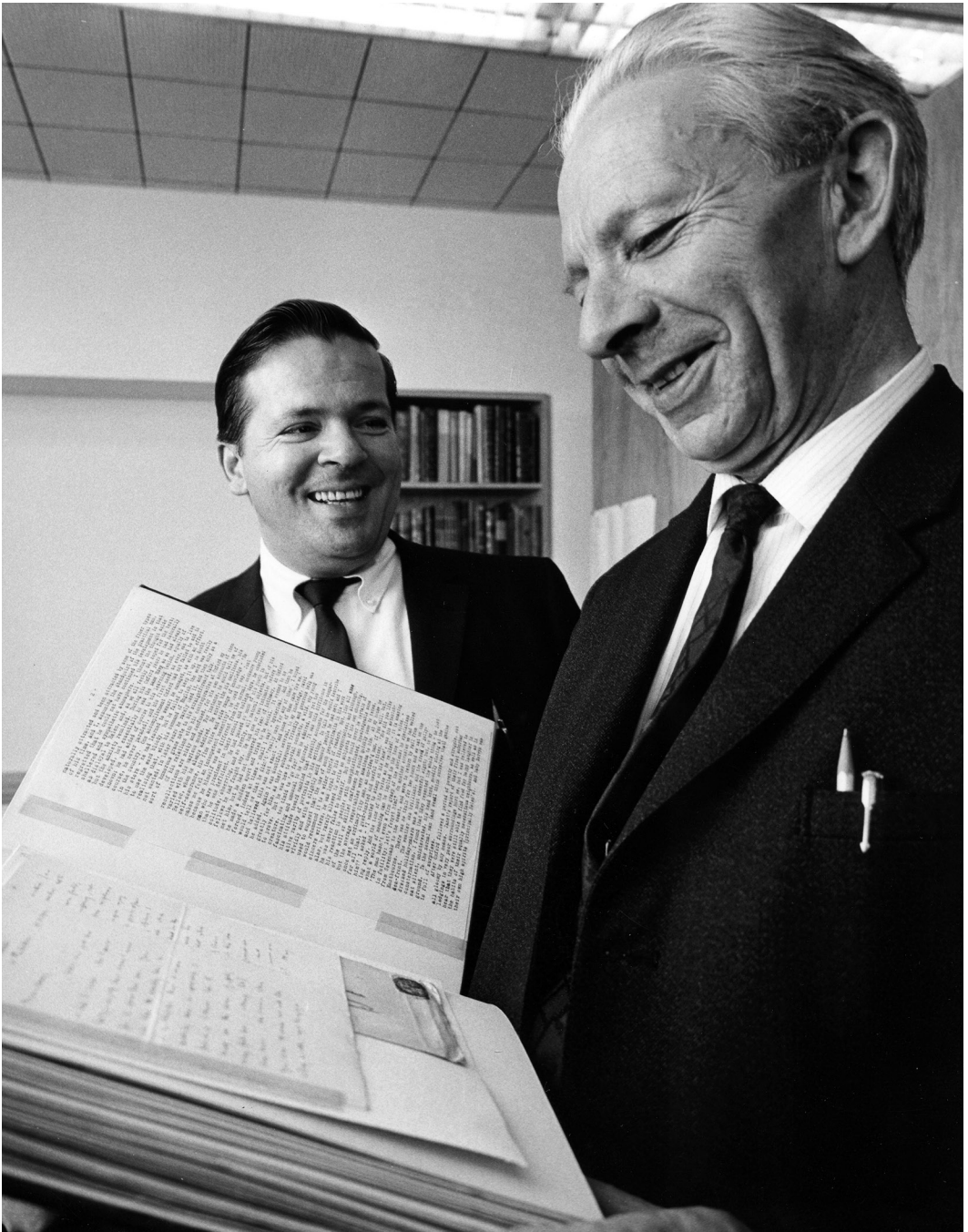
There is good evidence that Colbeck never really retired from the book trade after moving to Vancouver. Fellow collector George Sims remarked that Colbeck’s “omniscient knowledge of literary families and their involved relationships guided him” in his collecting, and this was no different when he was at UBC. This “omniscient knowledge of literary families” proved useful to Colbeck in acquiring some editions from poet G.K. Chesterton. The collection includes some 23 editions that were inscribed to the Kidd family of Vancouver, which Colbeck must have obtained after his move to Vancouver since Anne Kidd, the original owner of the books and co-founder and president of Overwitea Foods, died in 1967.

The Colbeck collection speaks volumes about the man who compiled it and his personal love for the art of collecting. Being housed now at UBC Library’s Rare Books and Special Collections, where every edition, volume, letter and piece of ephemera is openly available to the public, is an important part of the legacy Colbeck wanted for his collection.

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~ Justin O’Hearn is a PhD candidate at UBC and curatorial assistant for the exhibition *An Unmatched Devotion*.

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William Fredeman with Norman Colbeck. (Courtesy of UBC Archives Photograph Collection)