

Fire the Bastards!

We are all familiar with the story of the unrecognized masterpiece: A work of art, or a body of work, which goes unacknowledged at the time of its creation and which lies dormant for decades or even centuries before receiving critical if not commercial acclaim. Such works usually have their champions all along, but they go unheeded or dismissed, to use the words of William Gass in his introduction to the 1993 Penguin edition of William Gaddis' *The Recognitions*, as "wacko."

The Recognitions is a prime example of the undiscovered masterpiece in the world of collecting modern first editions. Originally published in 1955 by Harcourt Brace and Company, this first novel weighed in at 956 pages. No doubt aware of the challenges inherent in marketing such a novel, Harcourt Brace used a prominent dust-jacket blurb from Stuart Gilbert, which cites both Eliot's *Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses*:

Mr. Eliot's *Waste Land* was only a small corner of the wilderness so observantly and successfully explored by Mr Gaddis... long though it is, even longer than 'Ulysses,' the interest, like that of Joyce's masterpiece and for very similar reasons, is brilliantly maintained throughout.

The reference to *Ulysses* may even have been 1950's code for "a difficult read but with naughty bits" and indeed, some reviewers did focus on the presence of "language current only in the jail yard" and the plot focus on "a series of bohemian women who go to parties to get bed companions."

Lack of reviews on publication was not an issue as *The Recognitions* received 55 notices in newspapers and magazines, an unimaginably high number today for a first novel. Such a level of detail about the reception of the novel is due to one man, Jack Green. As Gass points out in his Penguin introduction, "a cult following is not the finest one to have" and no one could epitomize a cult leader better than Jack Green (a pseudonym). A resident of Greenwich Village, Green published a mimeographed magazine, *newspaper*, between

1957 and 1965. In 1962, three issues of the magazine carried a series under the title *Fire the Bastards!* that championed Gaddis' novel, largely through discrediting the critical reception it had received. The series was recognized as the first detailed examination of a great 20th-century novel and was subsequently published in 1992 as a book by Dalky Archive Press.

In his idiosyncratic style, including limited use of capitals and punctuation, Green obsessively records the errors, misinterpretations and laziness reflected in the reviews of the novel. An ad he paid for in 1962 to champion the paperback release of the book states, "The *Recognitions* sold like cold cakes in hardcover because of stupid reviews by incompetent, amateurish critics." In *Fire the Bastards!* he starts off by stating, "2 of 55 reviews were adequate the others were amateurish & incompetent." He then proceeds to name names and to deconstruct the failings of the reviewers and their reading of the novel.

Whether it was the novel's critical reception, or as Gass speculates, Gaddis' total shunning of the literary world following its publication, *The Recognitions* remained largely unnoticed and Gaddis was not heard from for 20 years. Then everything changed. Gaddis's next novel, *JR*, appeared in 1975 (the year he turned 53) and despite being "less read than *The Recognitions*, less enjoyed" according to Gass, it won the National Book Award. The acclaim accorded *JR* may in part be attributed to recognition of the importance of his preceding book; making amends if you will. Gaddis quickly moved from being obscure to being acclaimed, if still reclusive. No book tours for him! As a result, signed copies of his books are exceedingly scarce. Gaddis ended up publishing four novels over four decades until his death in 1998 (a fifth was published in 2002, adding a fifth decade to his record).

Given the two National Book Awards and the MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant Gaddis received throughout his career, it is not surprising that he became heavily collected. The prescient and lucky got there early, securing copies of *The Recognitions* at bargain prices. Today, a decent copy is likely to be priced in the range of \$1,000 and up, although it's of interest to note that none of the copies currently listed on ABE note the two variant states of the dust jacket. The first-state jacket has

a \$7.50 price and the publisher's address as 383 Madison Ave. with a second-state jacket having an \$8.50 price and a 3rd Avenue address. Questions would need to be asked before purchasing any of these copies advertising themselves as having a jacket.

I still remember being in the back room of a modern firsts dealer at the time *JR* appeared and seeing not one but two proof copies of *The Recognitions*. Not for sale I was told. A smart dealer (and collector) knows when a literary career is taking off and stockpiling is in order. Wacko or not, paying attention to outliers like Jack Green informs these decisions.

~ *Paul Whitney is city librarian at the Vancouver Public Library.*

EX LIBRIS



Here is a bookplate one cannot but help admire. One is immediately struck by its depth and the movement it captures; a remarkable achievement since wood engraving makes use of only positive and negative space. This print is elegant in its simplicity yet—somehow all at once—it features a delicate fineness of line and a striking graphic boldness.

Canadian artist Walter J. Phillips (1884-1963) is the expert hand behind this print, one of over 70 black and white wood engravings Phillips produced in and around the 1930s. Of these, only three are documented as bookplates in an index of the artist's graphic works compiled by Roger Boulet in 1981. Only one other bookplate specimen

is known to be in existence, held in a private collection.

Walter J. Phillips is most well known for his pioneering of the colour woodblock form, though he also produced works in watercolours and etchings. Among many other locations, Phillips lived in Winnipeg, Banff and Victoria. His artwork often features scenes of the Canadian landscape, primarily of Western Canada and its residents, along with First Nation subjects and scenes. Notable works include the colour woodcuts "Karlukwees, B.C." (1929), "Norman Bay, Lake of the Woods" (1920), "April in the Cotswolds" (1930) and "Leaf of Gold," (1941). Biographer Duncan Campbell Scott insists, "no one has depicted more faithfully or lovingly the [Canadian] landscape and its human associations."

In this bookplate for Ellen A. Hoffman, Phillips offers an impressive specimen of the wood engraving form flavoured with that unique Canadiana element that characterizes the work of Thoreau MacDonald, where a preoccupation with capturing the vigour and beauty of the Canadian landscape is also present.

This bookplate's capture of the wilderness through graphic lines and high contrast lends to a sort of stark organic elegance, juxtaposing it with those in the much older British bookplate tradition. Though Canada's tradition of bookplates owes its origin to its British parent, Phillips departs from the British wood engraving tradition as represented by the pastoral vignettes of Thomas Bewick (the nineteenth-century English artist credited with reviving the wood engraving). Phillips' other prints and artwork feature elements of Japanese prints, art nouveau, modernism, and naturalism; this bookplate is no exception. The move away from a heraldic British tradition to a graphic pictorialism makes bookplates such as this distinct from the older tradition, and worthy of notice as a small, but not insignificant, work of Canadian art.

~ *Kelsey Jang is a student in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia. She is a student volunteer at Rare Books and Special Collections at the University of British Columbia Library, which includes the Thomas Murray Bookplate Collection that includes this bookplate.*