

The Baron in Iowa

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His birth is officially recorded in this Latin phrase: *Fredericus Gulielmus Rolfe, diocesis Westmonasteriensis, Jacobe et Helena Pilcher, A catholicis legitime natus Londini*.

But, somewhat in the fashion of English royalty, he was given a much longer name: Frederick William Serafino Austin Lewis Mary Rolfe. Later, as this Protestant-born son of a London piano maker of moderate means became in turn a tutor, an artist, a photographer, a rejected candidate for the Roman Catholic priesthood, and an author, he took on other names: Fr. Austin, Fr. Rolfe (if one took the "Fr." to mean "Father" or "Friar" rather than Frederick, one was not likely to be corrected), Frank English, Frederick Austin, Nicholas Crabbe, A. Crab Maid, Uriele de' Ricordi, Fradulph Authades—and, most prominently, Baron Corvo, or Frederick Baron Corvo, or Frederick Rolfe, Baron Corvo. Although there are no extant documents to attest such a barony, Rolfe often assumed this identity in both his personal affairs and in his writing.

At age 20, in 1880, he published a 12-page *Tale of Tarcissus: The Boy Martyr of Rome* ("suitable for choir boys") and in 1895 and 1896 he published several short stories in the English *Yellow Book* (a monthly periodical). But he first attracted attention with republication of the *Yellow Book* stories in *Stories Toto Told Me* (1898), and with publication of these stories and a number of others in both English and American editions of *In His Own Image* (1901).

From then until his death in Venice, Sunday morning October 26, 1913, Rolfe/Corvo published three more books: *Chronicles of the House of Borgia* (New York and London, 1901); *Hadrian the Seventh* (his best and best-known book, London, 1904); and *Don Tarquinio / A Kataleptic Phantastic Romance* (London, 1905). A fourth book, *Don Renato / An Ideal Content*, was printed and bound in 1909, but because Rolfe, in a typical paranoid mood, quarreled with the publisher, Francis Griffiths, the book was never issued. Only four copies of this book exist.

Rolfe/Corvo expended a great deal of his energy during the 33 years from 1880 to 1913 on correspondence that is colored by an intensifying

paranoiac antagonism toward friends, would-be and reluctant benefactors, potential coauthors, publishers (including Henry Harland and Grant Richards), and members of the Catholic hierarchy in England and in Italy.

Neither the quantity nor the quality of these six books or of his other posthumously published titles suggest any status for Rolfe/Corvo among either his English or American literary peers of the same time. He would long since have been forgotten if it had not been for A. J. A. Symons, and a small host of readers, critics, scholars, librarians, bibliophiles, and sellers of rare books who, in due time, began calling themselves “Corvines.”

Symons was 33 when he wrote *The Quest for Corvo* (1934) and 41 when he died. He was, says his nephew, English novelist Julian Symons, “a dandy, a gourmet, a bibliophile, one of the founders of the Wine and Food Society and of the First Edition Club, a collector of Victoriana, [who] skated throughout his life on thin financial ice; [and who, despite] rising from modest origins” dreamed of attaining “social position and literary fame.” He achieved the former only in a modest way; the latter came posthumously with the sale of over a quarter million copies of his book in both English and American editions, including, in 1955, an edition that was the first publication of the Michigan State University Press—a rather unexpected choice, one might think.

Symons’s interest in Rolfe/Corvo, both as author and as “saint or madman” (as another Corvine once described him) began in 1925 when Christopher Millard, an English dealer in rare books with tastes similar to Symons, sold him a copy of the first edition of *Hadrian the Seventh*. Fascinated by this fictional account of a rejected candidate for the Catholic priesthood (a projection of Rolfe’s paranoia), who, in a most unlikely course of affairs, is chosen to replace Pope Leo XIII (d. 1903), and who is martyred by an “enemy’s” bullet a year later, Symons began researching Rolfe/Corvo’s career by calling upon all those he could find—coauthors, benefactors, former acquaintances and friends, students, relatives, and the like in England, Italy, and the United States.

One consequence was the formation of the English “Corvine Society” which had its first “Corvine banquet” in 1929. Among the 17 present were a university professor, publisher Grant Richards, English author Shane Leslie, and Symons. A second banquet later that year drew 30 persons, including a Lord Berwick, Wyndham Lewis, and Francis Meynell. All present had had some relationship with Rolfe/Corvo, either in person or in spirit.

A second facet of this developing English (and later American and Italian) interest in Rolfe/Corvo was the realization by English booksellers

that gold could be gained by buying and selling any available artifacts: letters, paintings or drawings, banners done for churches, books, poems and even periodicals containing any of Rolfe/Corvo's published work.

Some of the booksellers' catalogs reprinted segments of Rolfe/Corvo's writings. These catalogs, themselves, became marketable items, and subsequently were listed in Corvo/Rolfe bibliographies. One, published in 1949, listed some hundred items, of which portions were either typescripts or facsimiles. A 1965 catalog listed "some 50 items" at £285 for the lot.

Similarly there came a realization that Rolfe/Corvo's unpublished manuscripts and letters, no matter how slight or unworthy, could be published. From 1924 on, some three dozen volumes, some new, some reprints, appeared in editions in England, the United States, and Scotland. *Hadrian the Seventh* appeared in French and Italian language editions. The most prominent publisher was Cecil Woolf of London, a nephew of novelist Virginia Woolf. Woolf has also produced two bibliographies (1957, revised and enlarged in 1972) as part of the "Soho" series.

An Iowa contribution to Corvoiana came in 1964 with the School of Journalism [and Mass Communication]'s Typographic Laboratory's publication *A Letter to a Small Nephew Named Claud*. The original of this six-page book was a hand-lettered, illustrated letter written by Rolfe on January 26, 1903. For this publication, Professor Harry Duncan set the type, modeling his work as closely as possible on the original. He was assisted by Harold Yahnke. Jon Wilson made accurate half-size pen-and-ink reproductions of Rolfe's five drawings, one of which was a sketch of Rolfe with pen in hand.

One hundred and thirty-four copies of this booklet were printed, thus automatically but unintentionally producing a rare Rolfe/Corvo item. Some additional rarity was caused by the use of a variety of bright paper covers. The University of Iowa Library Special Collections has three copies of the book, each with a different cover.

The Private Libraries Association of England listed this book in its 1964 *Private Press Books*—a listing awarded to only 175 small press books from around the world. A second book which was described was Donald Weeks's *The Angel That Didn't Fly*. Donald Weeks, then a magazine editor in Detroit, was the owner of the original copy of Rolfe's letter to his nephew.

Weeks was one of two major American collectors of Rolfe/Corvo materials. The other was the Reverend Doctor [Rabbi] Bertram W. Korn

FROM THE COLLECTION OF DONALD WEEKS

Fr. Rolfe, Frederick Baron Corvo

A LETTER TO A SMALL NEPHEW NAMED CLAUD

PRINTED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY CLARENCE ANDREWS

ON THE OCCASION OF AN EXHIBITION OF ROLFE MISCELLANEA

HELD MAY 4 TO MAY 15, 1964, AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA LIBRARY

Clarence Andrews 5/9/64

Donald Weeks

TYPOGRAPHIC LABORATORY

THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM/ IOWA CITY 1964

Title page of *A Letter to a Small Nephew Named Claud* signed by Clarence Andrews and Donald Weeks.

of Philadelphia. Rabbi Korn's collection is now held by the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas.

Another aspect of interest in Rolfe/Corvo was the appearance of three book-length biographies: *Corvo* (1971) by Donald Weeks; *Corvo: "Saint" or "Madman"* (1971), also by Weeks; and *Frederick Rolfe, Baron Corvo* (1977) by Miriam J. Benkovitz, an American scholar who had earlier written a biography of Ronald Firbank, another minor English author of this period.

All three of these had been preceded by this author's master's thesis, *The Raven Called Rolfe* (1960) and doctoral dissertation, *Raging in the Dark* (1963), both done at The University of Iowa. Both combine biography and criticism of Rolfe/Corvo.

There were also two literary works that in one way or another were offsprings of the widespread interest in Rolfe/Corvo. First came Pamela Hansford Johnson's (Mrs. C. P. Snow) *The Unspeakable Skipton* (1959), a humorous novel whose title character is based on Rolfe/Corvo. Two years later Johnson contributed a rationale of sorts for her interest in her subject, "The Fascination of the Paranoid Personality" to *Corvo/1860-1960*, a collection of essays by several hands.

The other literary work was Peter Luke's *Hadrian the Seventh* (1967), a play first performed in May 1967. Luke was the son of a man once tutored by Rolfe. This play ran for almost 1,000 consecutive performances in London. It ran for over 350 performances at the Helen Hayes Theatre in New York and then toured the United States with Hume Cronyn playing Hadrian.

Alfred A. Knopf published the play in both hard and soft covers in 1969 and later editions. The University of Iowa library has a 1977 Knopf edition—its introduction is by Herbert Weinstock, a Rolfe/Corvo scholar—and, in facsimile, Luke's play typescript with penciled notes by the author.

Although the film rights to this play were reported to have been purchased by Columbia Pictures for £208,000 in January 1969, the motion picture version has apparently not been produced.

Finally, there were formal exhibitions of Rolfe/Corvo books, manuscripts (some patiently hand-lettered on Japanese paper in bright ink colors), photographs, and other Corviniana. The first such exhibit was the Rolfe Centenary Exhibition, 1860-1960, held at St. Marylebone Library in London. A second exhibit, based on Donald Weeks's collection, took place at Wayne State University that same year. A third exhibit, also based on Weeks's collection, but also featuring items belonging to Cecil Woolf, this author, and The University of Iowa Library, took place May 4 to 15, 1964, at The University of Iowa Library.

That exhibit was described in the first number of *Books at Iowa*, a description noted with dry English humor by the *Times Literary Supplement* for March 25, 1965.

At the time this author was writing his thesis, utilizing books and other materials borrowed through the library's Interlibrary Loan department, Frank Hanlin, then head of acquisitions, began purchasing each title borrowed, either in original editions, reprints, or on film. That practice has resulted in the University Library's regular and Special Collections possession of all of Rolfe/Corvo's publications and supporting materials.

Two of the more interesting items are a unique presentation copy of *Don Tarquinio / A Kataleptic Phantastic Romance* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1905) from the Vatican Library of Pope Pius XI (1922-39) with its inscription to Shane Leslie in Latin, and Cecil Woolf's 1974 production of *The Venice Letters*, copies of letters Rolfe sent in his last days to an Englishman named Masson Fox. Of these letters, A. J. A. Symons wrote that they made his hair begin to rise, for they illustrated, "step by step, the destruction of [Rolfe/Corvo's] soul."

Peter Luke's play seems to have represented the high-water mark of widespread interest in Rolfe/Corvo. Donald Weeks moved to London in the 1960s to continue his research and writing on Rolfe/Corvo and to add to his collection. For some years friends at Iowa received his annual reports and Christmas greetings (the latter printed at a small press in Wales). The most recent publications of Rolfe's letters to various people were in editions of 200 or less. *Hadrian the Seventh* and *The Quest for Corvo* remain in print in Penguin editions.

Yet now and then Rolfe/Corvo surfaces. In the spring of 1986, Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library exhibited more than 140 Rolfe items in a display titled *Baron Corvo—Madman and Genius*. Prior to 1984 Columbia had had a small collection of Rolfe/Corvo items. To these in 1984-85, that university was able to add the most significant collection of Rolfe/Corvo materials, the Martyr Worthy collection, named for the English town in which its assembler, David Roth, lived. United States scholars now have available to them almost anything of any use to future students of Rolfe/Corvo, or of the period in which he lived.

"[Rolfe/Corvo] wrote a lot of books about himself to get back at his enemies," says Kenneth Lohf, Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Librarian, "but because his works were so brilliantly conceived they work as literature." (*AB*, April 14, 1986, pp. 1681-82)