

A Baron Corvo Exhibit

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Frederick William Serafino Austin Lewis Mary Rolfe was born in 1860 in Cheapside, London, the oldest son of a manufacturer of pianos. He attended grammar schools in and around London, and later served as an instructor in several. Anxious to become a Catholic priest he attended a seminary at Oscott, near Birmingham, and later the Scots College in Rome; he seems to have been dismissed from both. Returning to Christchurch, England, he styled himself Baron Corvo, the name by which he is most familiar to moderns. In Christchurch he attempted careers as artist, writer and photographer. Failing, he vagabonded about the British Isles until the late 90's when some minor publishing successes led him to London. Until *ca.* 1905 (at which time he discarded the Barony), he attempted a career as writer, historian and translator; not achieving any considerable success, he spent a year in Wales with a benefactor, then moved on to Venice, Italy, where he died in 1913. His Italian years were marked by extremes of poverty and affluence; some idea of them and of his life as a whole may be found in A. J. A. Symons's *The Quest for Corvo*. Although his books did not enjoy large sales during his lifetime, they have been widely sought by collectors of modern literature in recent years. In 1957 a bibliography of him was published in the series of the *Soho Bibliographies*. The recent announcement of the Dover Press that it is re-issuing in facsimile *The Chronicles of the House of Borgia* (Grant Richards, London, 1901) is one more demonstration of the continuing and apparently expanding interest in Baron Corvo.

Since 1960, the centenary of his birth, there have been three major exhibits which have focused on the Baron. The first was in London, the second at Wayne State University, and the third at the Library of the University of Iowa. The University's exhibit of some 125 items was based



: Farewell :

Goodbye! God speed thee on thy way
Across the waste of waters wide!
Fair winds & seas the ship betide,
With starry night and cloudless day.

Good bye! from sight but not from heart.
Though half the world may intervene,
In love & hope & trust serene,
We nevermore can be apart.

Goodbye
God keep thee in His tender care!
On the firm land or rolling deep
He giveth His beloved sleep,
For His strong Love is every where.

February, 1882.

May 1909.

The earliest holograph poem of Frederick Rolfe, dated 1882 and written on Grantham school stationery. Courtesy of Donald Weeks.



St. George and the Dragon, painted by Frederick Rolfe at Christchurch about 1890. From the collection of Donald Weeks.

in part on its own collections of the Baron's books and in part on the collection of the author. The largest part of the exhibit was drawn from the very fine American collection of Mr. Donald Weeks of Detroit, Michigan, and from materials furnished by Mr. Cecil Woolf of London, England, Corvo's bibliographer, and publisher of the centenary edition of Corvo's letters.

Two features of the University's exhibit (which ran from May 4 to May 15, 1964) were a lecture about his Corvo collection by Mr. Weeks, and the publication of a limited edition of *A Letter to Claud*, a hitherto-unpublished Corvo manuscript. The manuscript, from Mr. Weeks' collection, was hand-set in type by Professor Harry Duncan, assisted by Mr. Harold Yahnke, and illustrated with drawings adapted by Mr. Jon Wilson from pen and ink drawings made by the Baron. The author furnished an introduction to this keepsake, which was distributed to persons attending Mr. Weeks' lecture.

All of the Baron's books were represented in the exhibition. The 1963 reprinting of his *Don Renato* made this possible since only five proof-copies of the proposed 1909 edition of this book survive. In his *The Quest for Corvo* A. J. A. Symons related that an "agent" of Maundy Gregory (an English Bobby Baker) "from the depths of a rat-haunted cellar salved five copies, the only survivors." Says Symons, "No more faithful reflection exists of its extraordinary author; and it could be the work of no other hand. The infallible touches of his fascinating overlaid style . . . are prominent from the first to the last."

Two copies of Corvo's first "book", *Stories Toto Told Me* (London and New York, 1898), were exhibited. This book, No. 6 of John Lane's Bodley Head series, contains the six stories which had appeared in the *Yellow Book* in 1895 and 1896. The story is told that when Corvo came to John Lane's London office to discuss publication of his stories, he infested the chair he sat in with fleas, tangible evidence of his recent stay in a Welsh workhouse.

The six *Toto* stories, and two dozen others reputed to have been told by an Italian peasant boy, were assembled in Corvo's next book, *In His Own Image* (1901). This, "the most amazing, fantastical, whimsical, bizarre, erratic and harebrained of books," according to James Douglas, is set in a framework of the activities of master and servant boy. The stories are parodies of classical and Christian myths in which the two worlds of classical humanism and Christian belief are fused by a literary style which often approaches profanation. Corvo brought together Mt. Zion and Mt. Olympus, the theocracy to which he paid allegiance all

his life. The book is Corvo's first major projection of himself, and his first major literary attack on his "enemies."

The Library's rare first edition of Corvo's other 1901 book *The Chronicles of the House of Borgia* and the Modern Library re-issue *A History of the Borgias*, were also on exhibit. The first edition was a publishing failure despite Henry Harland's hyberbolic garland:

The historic imagination, the big vision, the humour, the irony, the wit, the perverseness, the daring and the tremendously felicitous and effective manner of it! It is like a magnificent series of tapestry pictures of the fifteenth century.

"It was an ambitious and breath-snatching book," wrote Shane Leslie . . .

It offered the reader a vile, violent, myopic, personal and highly-coloured opening to the renaissance, and once read left the memory of a period, with all its characters and beauty, horror, crime and idiosyncrasy, seething in the reader's mind.

In the course of writing and publishing the Borgia book, Corvo, who had been paid a pound a week for seven months for his labors, quarreled bitterly with Grant Richards, the young English publisher who had commissioned the work. The quarrel was conducted largely through correspondence, much of which is reprinted in *Letters to Grant Richards* (Peacocks Press, 1952), a copy of which was shown. The exchange closed with this typical Corvinian conclusion:

I doubt that you have ever made a more ruthless and persequent enemy than

Your obedient servant,
Frederick William Rolfe

Two works, at best curiosa, resulted from Corvo's subsequent attempts to live up to his self-imposed Barony on his meager income from his books, and a concurrent search for his Platonic "other half." These are *The Rubaiyat of Umar Khaiyam*, a not very adequate poetical translation from the French of J. B. Nicholas (London and New York, 1903), and *The Songs of Meleager*, a collaboration with Sholto Douglas in poetical translation from the Greek (not published until 1935). On display with the latter were two original ink drawings which Corvo prepared for the book.

About this time Corvo must have begun his *Nicholas Crabbe, A Romance*. This book is such a thinly disguised and satirical *roman à clef* that it could not be published until 1958. In it Grant Richards is described as a "scorbutic hobbledehoy," "a bumptious young thing [with] a silly noddle." And John Lane is "a tubby little pot-bellied bantam, scrupulously attired and looking as though he had been suckled on bad

beer." It is not a uniformly good book, but it does show Corvo's developing paranoia.

The 1904 book on which Corvo's reputation must be based, *Hadrian the Seventh*, was exhibited in several editions. D. H. Lawrence, reviewing *Hadrian*, wrote that it

. . . remains a clear and definite book of our epoch, not to be swept aside . . . And if some of it is caviare, at least it came out of the belly of a live fish.

And later Graham Greene concurred:

Hadrian the Seventh, a novel of genius, stands in relation to the other novels of its day, much as the *Hound of Heaven* stands in relation to the verse.

On display was Mr. Weeks' first edition copy which once belonged to Corvo's biographer, A. J. A. Symons. The cover design is by Corvo himself; in the words of Shane Leslie it depicts

a Pope in profile and pontificals, with spectacles pendant over the Pallium, giving the blessing *Urbi et Orbi*, surmounted by the sign of Cancer and a crescent moon, a cat (presumably Cheshire) disappearing under his fingers.

Also on display were French and Italian translations of the novel and an unrecorded variant of the 1937 Alblabook edition.

In 1905 Corvo published his Borgia-inspired *Don Tarquinio*, an account of twenty-four hours in the life of Don Tarquinio Giorgio Drakontes Poplica di Santacroce, while moving in The Smart Set of the time of the Borgia, A.D. 1495 . . . The tale, spiced with rare meats, gleaming with precious stones, and tricked with astrological and heraldic suggestions, reads like an essay in the spirit of Boccaccio (Shane Leslie).

The exhibit copy once belonged to Jack Nicholson, a pupil of Corvo's in 1881-1883. In 1891 Corvo and Nicholson quarreled over the editing of a Corvo poem in an anthology of Nicholson's. Echoes of this quarrel were seen in several letters written by Nicholson to Charles Kains-Jackson, and in a volume *A Chaplet of Southernwood* by Nicholson (1896). The latter book, surely one of the strangest presentation copies in existence, has this inscription:

To F. W. R. From J. G. N./F. V. R. intervening

Corvo refused the gift. He crossed out his name and wrote these two lines above:

Things being as they are, F. W. R./refuses consent to intervention.

The *Don Tarquinio* portion of the exhibit contained, during Mr. Weeks' visit, the most memorable item to be shown: Mr. Weeks' unique copy of the manuscript for the book. For his manuscript, Corvo used

a large bound book with blank pages on which he carefully printed, in his Renaissance script, the "fair copy" of his story. On the cloth cover he added the ultimate Corvine touch—a large pen and ink drawing of his hero. The drawing was the model for the first edition cover design.

Corvo published one other book during his lifetime, *The Weird of the Wanderer* (London, 1912). The book's pseudonym, "Prospero and Caliban" represents an actual collaboration between Corvo and Mr. C. H. C. Pirie-Gordon, a young man who befriended Corvo after the writing of *Don Tarquinio*, and who later received his full share of Corvo vituperation) *Letters to Pirie-Gordon*, London, 1959). Col. Gordon, who is still living, bears no malice to the friend and co-author of his youth.

The exhibit copy, from the collection of the Library, has an inscription in Latin which purports to transfer the book to Shane Leslie from a Vatican Secretary, and a pencilled autograph of Christopher Millard, the bookseller who first aroused A. J. A. Symons's interest in Corvo.

Col. Pirie-Gordon was represented in the exhibit by four photographs of both him and Corvo taken at the Pirie-Gordon estate in Gwernvale, Crickhowell, Wales, and by postcards written to him by Rolfe from Venice.

While at Gwernvale, Corvo (who was then calling himself "Hadrian") and Pirie-Gordon founded a secular semi-monastic order, the Order of Sanctissima Sophia,

devoted in the manner of the Middle Ages to God-service in the pursuit of Wisdom by way of the Humane Letters and Arts.

The Grand Master's copy of the *Form of the Ceremonies of the Order of Sanctissima Sophia* as well as the manuscript *Codex Patentorum Apud Cancellariam* (partly in Corvo's hand in a variety of brilliant inks) and other materials of the Order (including some elaborate decorations and badges) were on exhibit.

One product of this interest in medieval orders was the collaboration *Hubert's Arthur* which Symons published in 1935. The book was one fruit of Symons's "experiment" in biography, *The Quest for Corvo* (the 1934 first and all subsequent editions were on display). Another was Corvo's second best (some say his best) book, *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole* (1934). Of this book, Sean O'Faolain has said:

[It is] the most beautiful tribute to Circe ever written, and the truest.

Other items in the exhibit included various letters and documents in Corvo's hand, among them his earliest known holograph poem (see illustration on page 19; an unpublished manifesto summarizing his career and plans; the manuscript of *The Bull Against the Enemy of the Anglican Race*; a sketchbook of drawings and jottings kept by Corvo

during the Venice years described in *The Desire and Pursuit*; the only surviving portion of the failure in collaboration between Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson and Corvo on a proposed life of St. Thomas of Canterbury; and an exchange of arguments with Mrs. Ivy Van Someren, entitled *Nineteen Sayings*. There were a number of photographs of Corvo and of his father, including that remarkable photograph which shows Corvo, in the robes of a Cardinal, sitting for an Italian painter, ca. 1913; a photograph of Ermenegildo Vianello, the model for Zilda, Corvo's heroine in *The Desire and Pursuit*; photographs of several remarkable paintings done by Corvo during his career as an artist (see illustration on page 22; and copies of novels based on Corvo's life, and books in which he is recalled by his contemporaries.

The exhibit, thanks in large part to the unstinting cooperation of Mr. Weeks and Mr. Woolf, did much to bring some of the flavor of the Baron's personality to its viewers. There continues to be a lively interest in Corvo, and we have not yet heard the last of him.