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The exhibition is dedicated to
Nicholas Scheetz



A Swinburne Gallimaufry

Selections from the John S. Mayfield Papers



Special Collections Research Center
Georgetown University Library
Washington, D.C.

October 5, 2009 through January 8, 2010



John S. Mayfield (1904-1983)

Born in Meridian, Texas, John Mayfield was the son of former U.S. Senator Earle B. Mayfield and Ora Lumpkin. He received a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Texas in 1930, a Master of Arts from Southern Methodist University in 1932, and studied for a doctorate at the University of Columbia from 1932 to 1935.

Mayfield’s early career was with the U.S. military and government. From 1935 to 1942, he worked in the General Accounting Office, Washington, D.C., as an auditor and eventually became chief of recruitment, training and placement. During the Second World War he was a lieutenant commander in the Pacific with the U.S. Navy (1942-1946). Afterwards, he spent three years at the War Assets Administration, Washington, D.C. (1946-1949), in various capacities including Congressional liaison, deputy administrator for the Office of Administrative Services, and assistant deputy administrator for the Office of Management. From 1949 to 1950, Mayfield was the director of personnel at the Department of Defense.

During the 1950s, Mayfield worked in the private sector, most notably becoming vice-president of the American Rail and Steel Company, Washington, D.C., in 1951. His primary responsibility was the management of relations and projects with federal agencies, as well as the company’s operations in Asia and Latin America.

By the 1950s, Mayfield had already garnered a reputation as a bibliophile and collector, not only of rare books, but of manuscripts by American and English poets and writers such as Lord Byron, Robinson Jeffers, Sidney Lanier, Amy Lowell, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Booth Tarkington, and Mark Twain, among others. It followed that he became the curator of the division of manuscripts and rare books at the Syracuse University Library (1961-1971). After retirement in 1971, Mayfield served as vice-chairman of trustees, chairman of the program committee, and member of the executive committee of the Georgetown University Library.

Recognized as one of the leading collectors of Swinburne, Mayfield amassed the largest private collection of the poet’s works. In 1929, he bought his first item, *Rosamund, Queen of the Lombards*, published in 1899. A highlight of his career as collector was the discovery, in 1967, of two missing pages for the manuscript of Swinburne’s novel, *Lesbia Brandon*, which had been published with the omission in 1952. Mayfield donated the pages to the British Museum, owner of the rest of the manuscript.

Mayfield’s greatest achievement as a bibliophile was his collection of first editions of Swinburne’s first critically acclaimed published poem, *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865). Goaded by a note by Thomas J. Wise, in his bibliography of Swinburne’s works, asserting that only one hundred copies were issued of the first edition, Mayfield embarked on a more than thirty-year quest, from 1943 to 1976, to collect them all and disprove Wise’s claim. In 1977, he was presented with the one hundred and first copy of the first edition as a gift from his friend, Georgetown University Library’s manuscripts librarian, Nicholas Scheetz.

Algernon Charles Swinburne (April 5, 1837- April 10, 1909)

Swinburne was the son of Lady Jane Henrietta, daughter of the third Earl of Ashburnham of Sussex, and of Admiral Charles Henry Swinburne whose family was one of the oldest in Northumberland. He was the eldest of five other siblings: Alice, Edith, Charlotte Jane, Isabel, and Edward. Although born in London, his childhood was spent on the Isle of Wight where he received his early education at the Brook Rectory preparatory school (1848). Following this he studied at Eton (1849 to 1854), and matriculated at Balliol College, Oxford University in January 1856. To the disappointment of his family, Swinburne did not distinguish himself at university, managing to pass only the Moderations examination in 1858, and failing to take the final (“Greats”) examination necessary for completion of a Bachelor of Arts degree. He left Oxford in June 1860.

The circle of intellectual and artistic friends that Swinburne developed at Oxford continued to flourish in London where he embarked on his career both as poet and young man of independent means partaking of the usual offerings of city life, both refined and otherwise. A slight, delicate man who likely suffered from a degree of epilepsy, Swinburne was more the victim of his own excesses – particularly of liquor – than the commonly promulgated image of the cavalier “bad boy” of the Victorian era. In fact, Swinburne’s reputation was largely founded on and cemented by the publication of a single volume of poetry, *Poems and Ballads*, in 1866. In the words of biographer Rikky Rooksby, the book struck “Victorian poetry [and society] with the force of a tidal wave...[and made Swinburne]...into an international figurehead for sexual, religious and political radicalism (Rooksby 135).

Frequently ill throughout the London years, Swinburne’s health crises came to a head in 1879, which prompted his friend and agent Theodore Watts-Dunton to remove him from the iniquities of the city to the house known as The Pines in Putney, where he lived the remainder of his days. Watts-Dunton was criticized, most notably by Victorian biographer Edmund Gosse, for isolating Swinburne and destroying his artistic spirit. However, Watts-Dunton’s wife Clara asserted that seclusion was Swinburne’s own choice, and that “It is as well to say here that Swinburne’s intense love of privacy has given rise to a vast amount of foolish and sometimes spiteful talk about his inaccessibility at The Pines” (Clara Watts-Dunton 95). Whatever the truth, Swinburne remained aloof from his former London connections for thirty years!

Swinburne died of pneumonia at The Pines, just a few days after his seventy-second birthday. His entire estate was left to Watts-Dunton, his sole executor. Swinburne was buried in Bonchurch on the Isle of Wight. Contrary to his wishes, but in keeping with family tradition, and with protests from the clergy, the funeral was Anglican. Later, the vice dean of Canterbury Cathedral pronounced that “much lustral water and the most precious of all precious blood were needed to do away with the pollution which Swinburne’s poetry introduced into English literature” (Rooksby 286).

A hundred years after his death, the moderate aspect of his character notwithstanding, Swinburne’s reputation is still that of a rebel.

Foreword



This exhibition marks the centenary of the death of the great Victorian lyric poet, Algernon Charles Swinburne. More exactly, it is a celebration of his work, as well as of the accomplishments of one – if not the – most devoted of his collectors, John S. Mayfield.

The title of the exhibition pays homage to a collection of articles by Mayfield on Swinburne published as *Swinburneiana: A Gallimaufry of Bits and Pieces About Algernon Charles Swinburne* (1974), which incorporates one of Mayfield’s favorite and frequently used words, “gallimaufry.” That is to say, in Old French, “a ragout”; and in modern English, “a motley assortment.”

Arranged thematically, the exhibition highlights some of Swinburne’s major inspirations, works, and relationships. Selections of rare and limited editions of Swinburne’s works are included from Mayfield’s library.

Note: Complete reference citations are provided at the end of this brochure.

Cover image: Algernon Charles Swinburne by William Bell Scott. Oil on canvas, 1860. Courtesy of Balliol College, Oxford.