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The Folio Society: Handsome Books At Minimal Cost

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View of Lockport, New York, drawn about 1840 by W. Wilson.
Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Lyman A. Spalding, The Samuel Pepys of Lockport, New York	
John Janitz	3
Juan DeTorquemada and Antonio Alcedo Two Contributions to Hispanic Historiography	
André Preibish	20
Financial Problems of a Revolutionary: The Memoir of John Wilkins	
Howard L. Applegate	28
The Folio Society: Handsome Books at Minimal Cost	
Susan Rainey	35
Archives in University Libraries	
Robert B. Downs	46
Dorothy Thompson's Role in Sinclair Lewis' Break with Harcourt, Brace	
Helen B. Petruzzo	50
Open for Research . . . Notes on Collections	59
News of the Library and Library Associates	62

The Folio Society: Handsome Books At Minimal Cost

by Susan Rainey

Approximately 225 books of outstanding design and illustration, published by the Folio Society of London, were acquired by the Library with the archives of Charles Ede, founder of the Society.

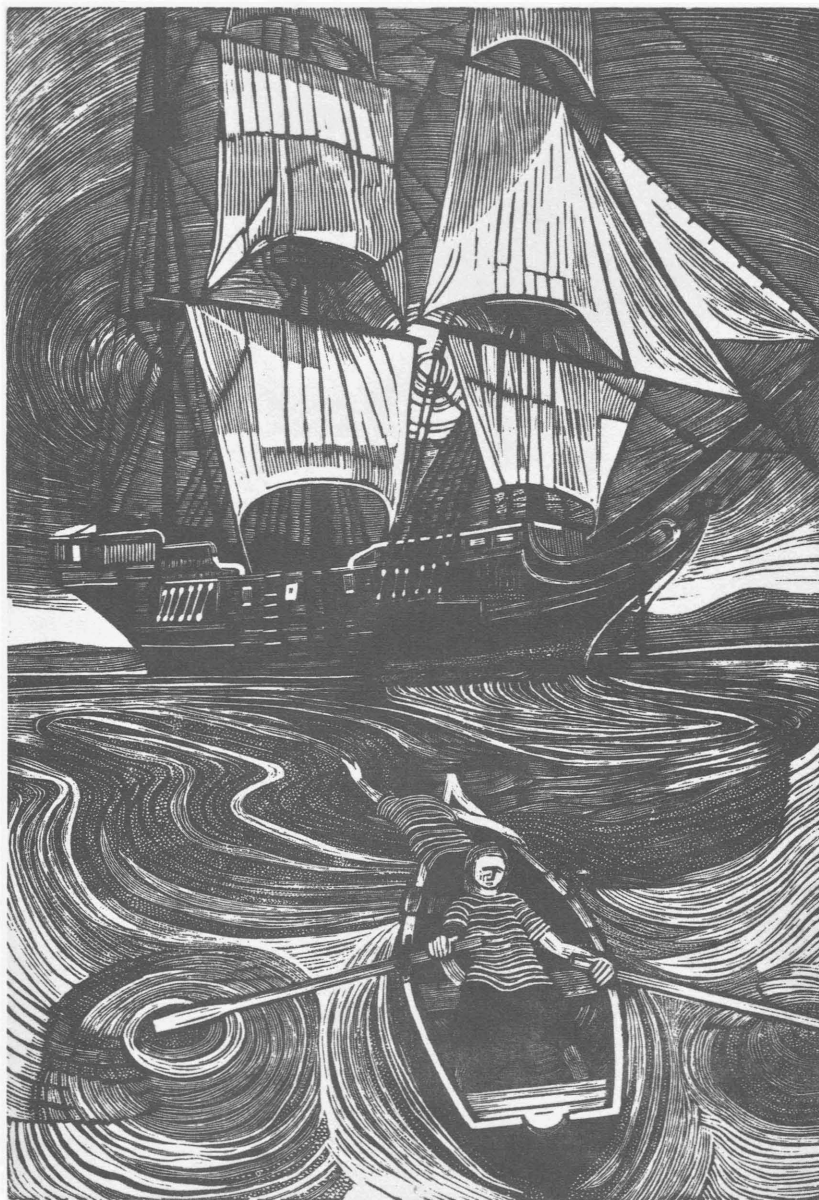
Miss Rainey is a cataloger in the Rare Book Department of the Library. A graduate of Mt. Holyoke College with a major in Medieval Civilization, she spent two years as Assistant in the Art Department, Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts, and taught art appreciation in a private secondary school for a brief period before coming to Syracuse where she received the master's degree in Library Science.

In 1969 the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University acquired the personal archives of Charles Ede, founder and designer of the Folio Society of England. The archives include all the books published by the Society between 1947 and 1967, a complete run of the periodical *The Folio* and some manuscript material.¹

The Folio Society was founded in 1947 to produce well-designed editions of classic texts at minimal cost. Its beginnings in post-war austerity determined its continued production of handsome but not over elaborate books. As the founder of the Society said, "The real challenge, we felt, was to equate good design with the mass production techniques of the machine age."² This is a revolutionary idea in book making. Printing itself, both of texts and of illustrations, was a revolutionary idea; but when machines were created to set type, print and bind books, all jobs formerly done by hand, the aesthetic ideal still looked back to the fifteenth century just as the fifteenth century printed book itself looked backward to manuscripts. According to

¹ Illustrations from Folio Society books are reproduced here by permission of the Folio Society.

² *Folio 21: A Bibliography of the Folio Society 1947-1967*. London, The Folio Press, 1968, p. 11.



Wood engraving by Garrick Palmer for *Three Stories* by Herman Melville.
London, The Folio Society, 1967

William Ivins, the means of making duplicates quickly, cheaply and in great numbers were the greatest inventions of that century: to continue to apply medieval standards to these Renaissance inventions is to ignore their true significance.

The Folio, a quarterly publication of the Society for its members, accomplishes three things. First, it provides publicity for the society's books. Second, articles critical, biographical and expository by leaders in their fields educate the membership: contributors include Michael Sadleir, Richard Warde, E.V. Rieu, Beatrice Warde, Desmond Flower, Christopher Sandford and Ruari McLean among bibliographers and book designers; John Buckland-Wright, Edward Bawden, Lynton Lamb and Joan Hassall among illustrators. Finally, *The Folio*, thanks in large part to the continued excellence of its articles and to the responsiveness of editor Charles Ede to the will of the membership, has engendered a considerable rapport between the producers of Folio Society books and their readers. Thus the Society has flourished and developed into new areas, among them the sale of recordings, original art and documents.

Books are the most significant product of the Folio Society. It is difficult to generalize about the kinds of titles published. Most would be considered literature, both non-fiction and fiction, with poetry and drama less well represented than novels. The selection is in no way parochial; it contains besides British and American titles Czech, Japanese, French, Greek, Russian and others in English translation. A trend toward publishing contemporary accounts of dramatic historical events has developed especially in the last decade; these range from the *Hundred Years War* (14th century France and England) or *Drake's Raid on the Treasure Trains* (Elizabethan England) to *From Atlanta to the Sea* by William T. Sherman (Civil War America).

The works of a few writers have been printed in series. Shakespeare, Jane Austen and the Brontës are the principal authors thus covered; the works of Robert Surtees, author of *Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities* and other novels of 19th century sporting life, were included at the request of many members. When good texts are not available, new ones are commissioned. Abridgements are held to a minimum. Occasionally original titles such as *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, from a manuscript containing a complete account of her trial including the actual words of her replies to her inquisitors, and which was discovered only after World War II, are published.

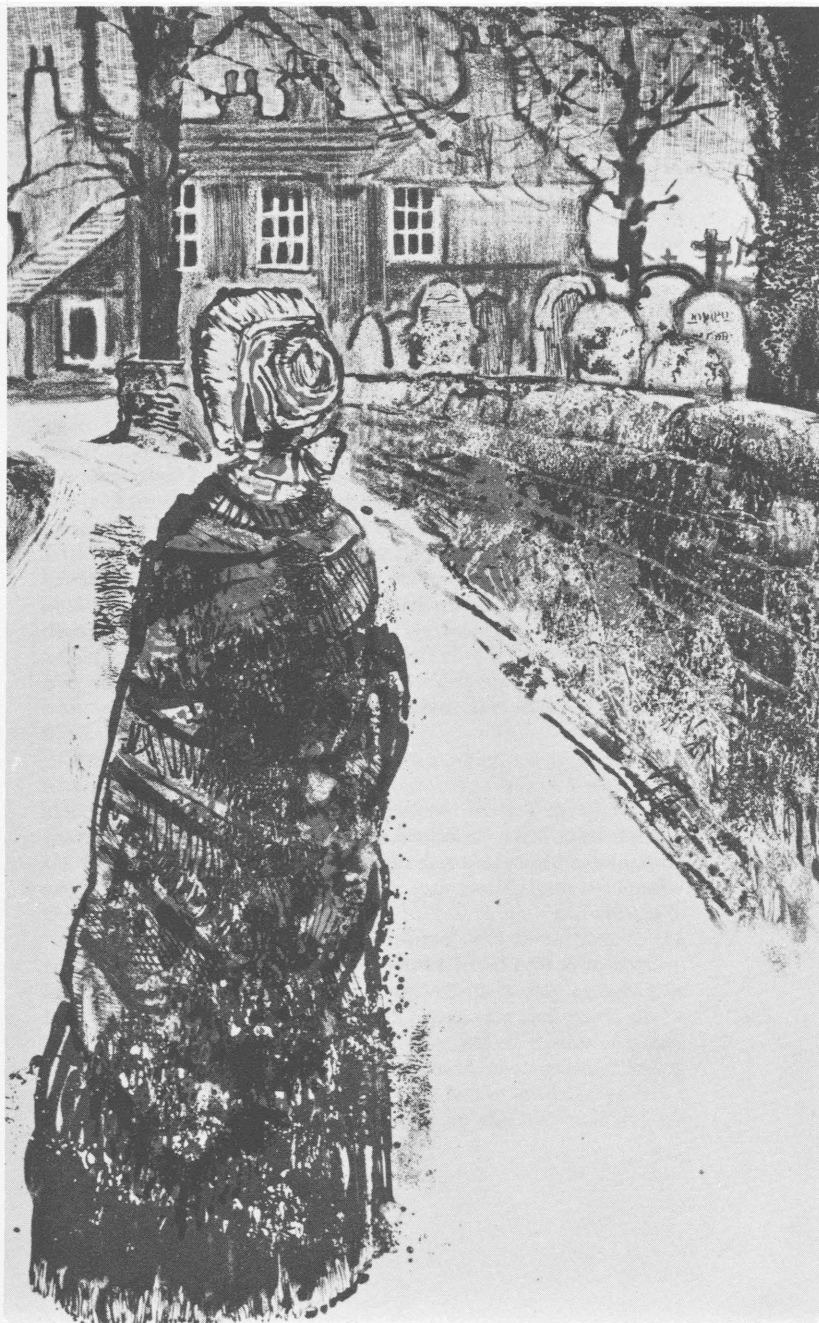
The principal emphasis of the manuscript material in the Ede archives is book illustration, as it contains many letters from illustrators as well as prints and drawings of their work for the Folio Society. No record is included of Ede's decisions on a book's size and proportions, typeface, color and style of binding during the design and publication processes. The Society's bibliography, *Folio 21*, contains some of Ede's wry perceptions of problems and errors in judgment but our information is no more complete than that. The

artists were given considerable latitude in choosing what they wanted to illustrate, but Ede had to make some essential economic decisions about how many illustrations could be afforded. None of these financial matters are documented in Ede's archives.

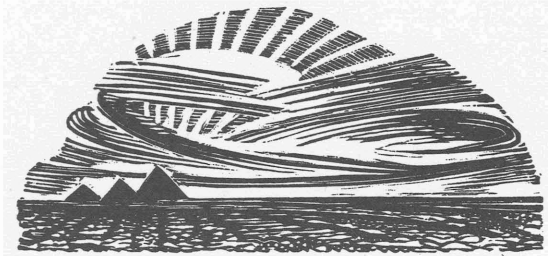
Since large editions were to be printed, illustrations were sought in media which would need a minimum of tinkering to prepare for printing in quantity. Wood engravings, because they can be printed at the same time as the text, and lithographs, because large editions can be printed, are particularly valuable in this respect. Joan Hassall's wood engravings for works by Trollope and Jane Austen are often mentioned as a brilliant combination of artist and medium. *Three Stories* by Herman Melville reflects worlds filled with individuals who are uncompromisingly real, yet also images within allegories—worlds quite different from the small town societies of Austen and Trollope. Garrick Palmer's wood engravings show Melville's world as contours and textures from which faces emerge and figures move as if in a dream. The delicacy of Blair Hughes-Stanton's illustrations for *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* survive the rigors of printing in a large edition, a testimony to the skill and care exercised by the printer since the first edition, 1948, was printed on rough laid paper. The second edition, in 1963, was printed on smooth paper with even better results. The woodcuts of Zoltan Perei for Kálmán Mikszáth's *St. Peter's Umbrella* communicate very simply and directly without affectation the world of the nineteenth century Hungarian peasant. *Tom Jones*, *Joseph Andrews* and *Humphrey Clinker* are wittily illustrated on wood by Derrick Harris; unfortunately he killed himself before he could finish *Tristram Shandy*.



Woodcut by Zoltan Perei for *St. Peter's Umbrella* by Kálmán Mikszáth.
London, The Folio Society, 1966



Lithograph by Anthony Colbert for Charlotte Bonté's *Jane Eyre*.
London, The Folio Society, 1965



OZYMANDIAS

I MET a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The lithographic process provides the artist with great freedom of expression; he may make what he will of a lithograph, leaving on it his unmistakable personal stamp. The texture of Anthony Colbert's two-color lithographs for *Jane Eyre* brings the artist very close to the reader; always the sweep of his tools are evident. Some of the prints seem to focus on an area, perhaps a face, carefully drawn in crayon; surrounding areas are very freely sketched in with brush-strokes and blots of ink. Charles Keeping's lithographs for *Wuthering Heights* are based, more than Colbert's work, on solid areas of color, with the textures produced by drips and blots used for shadows or, most significantly, for the embodiment of Cathy's spirit. A purer use of crayon without contrasting brushstrokes is found in Nigel Lambourne's lithographs for Liam O'Flaherty's *The Informer*. Their rough granular quality is carried through the printed texture of the endpapers to the linen binding. However, the granularity of H. Hope-Read's lithographs for *The Crime of Sylvestre Bonnard* is soft and misty, showing the variety possible solely through use of the crayon.

The monotype, deriving its name from the fact that only one print can be made from the artist's plate, is rarely used for book illustration. The monotype process, however, offers the artist even more opportunity than lithography to create his own textures by scraping and dabbing with a variety of tools. Michael Ayrton's monotypes for Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* show the resulting close relationship of the artist to his medium.

In some cases photographs have been effectively used. For *Dove Cottage*, which includes Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journal* and a selection of the correspondence of Dorothy and William Wordsworth, photographs by John Preston-Bell probably show more clearly than any other form of illustration could the special qualities of the Lake Country which contributed so much to Wordsworth's poetry. A selection of Mathew Brady's Civil War photographs gives substance to Stephen Crane's fictional *Red Badge of Courage*; photographs and text interact to make painfully clear the nature of war. Kafka's *Trial* is illustrated with photographic abstractions by Nigel Lambourne which, in their lack of identifiable subjects, match the arbitrariness in the world Kafka has created.

Intaglio prints such as etchings and drypoint must be reproduced by yet another step. The most successful to date is the highly sophisticated collotype process, but its dependence on photography to transfer the image of the artist's print onto a prepared plate results in the loss of much of the richness and depth characteristic of the intaglio print. The brilliance of Phillippe Jullian's etchings illustrating Colette's *Cheri* and Sir Harold Nicolson's *Some People* is particularly diminished: the drypoint lines and dots which in the original print twinkle like black stars are smudged and flat in reproduction. Dodie Masterman's softground etchings for *Eugénie Grandet* survive reproduction somewhat better because the technique of softground etching has been used to produce gradations of gray tones, not to emphasize the contrast

between black ink and white paper; mirroring gradations of tones is one of the strengths of colotype. While Ede could be criticized for allowing processes to interfere with the communication between artist and reader, he could equally justly be praised for permitting an artist his choice of medium with which to communicate.

Previously published illustrations are included in some editions. Tenniel has not been bettered at illustrating *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* nor John Leech in his work for the Surtees series. Goya's drawings complement *Carmen*, and no one but Michelangelo could have illustrated his own sonnets. The *Rose and the Ring* is illustrated by Thackeray's drawings, not the wood engravings he made from them: he was a much better draftsman than engraver. Portraits of Richard III, Henry VII and contemporaries add valuable evidence to *Richard III: The Great Debate* by Sir Thomas More and Horace Walpole. Likewise other publications of "eyewitness history" are enriched by pertinent illustrations. Plays illustrated by drawings of costumes and sets for an actual production, as are all plays in the collection except *The Importance of Being Earnest*, continually remind the reader that the printed text is just the skeleton of a play: the play must be seen on a stage, or at least imagined there, to become whole.

Although many publishers seek to find the artist best suited to illustrate a literary work, few achieve it with the consistent success of the Folio Society. It does not look for great artists as did the French art dealer and publisher Ambroise Vollard. Using the best book illustrators available, the Folio Society has secured works that are in themselves interesting, although not all have an existence independent of their books. For example, John Buckland-Wright's decorations for *Poems* of Shelley are more dependent on the text than his illustrations of the *English Opium Eater* which can stand alone as artistic expression. In the majority of books, these artists are able to create worlds as powerful as those of the authors without intruding on the reader's mental images. Thus the publications are not sent forth fossilized as concrete pictures which the reader must accept or reject, but as a series of ideas in word and image which can act upon each other. This is a great achievement at any price, and at the prices these books sold for, tribute must be paid to Mr. Ede's knowledge and skill.

His books present themselves to the world in various bindings, additional evidence of his inventiveness. Although the first publications tended to be issued in plain cloth bindings and printed paper wrappers, later titles show the realization of the virtues of printed and stamped cloth without wrappers. The illustrator was then usually responsible for the exterior image as well as those inside the covers and this is a great unifier of the total design: colors and textures of bindings become vivid and expressive of their contents. Wilde's *Salomé* is in electric blue and green brocade; *Nana* is in mauve moiré. *From Atlanta to the Sea* is in blue and gray, a gold arrow connecting the two. Wells' *The History of Mr. Polly*, a draper, is in houndstooth.



Monotype by Michael Ayrton for "The Gold Bug" in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* by Edgar Allen Poe. London, The Folio Society, 1959.



Drypoint etching by Philippe Jullian for *Cherie* by Colette.
London, The Folio Society, 1963

The achievement of Charles Ede is expressed in the growth, development and continuing success of the Folio Society. He has proved beyond question that handsome books can be produced at a minimal price, and that there is a large audience eager to receive them. The printed books in his archives are a very valuable addition to the George Arents Research Library's collection of fine press books; the additional materials increase the research potential in the field of book illustration and in the role of the Folio Society as intermediary between the concept of a book and its reception among the subscribers.

The Folio Society editions are available for research in the Lena R. Arents Rare Book Room of Carnegie Library from 8:30 to 5:00 each Monday through Friday and on Saturdays by appointment. Folio books are published for members only. Inquiries may be addressed to the Folio Society, Ltd., 6 Stratford Place, London W1NoBH.

