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Arsiné Schmavonian

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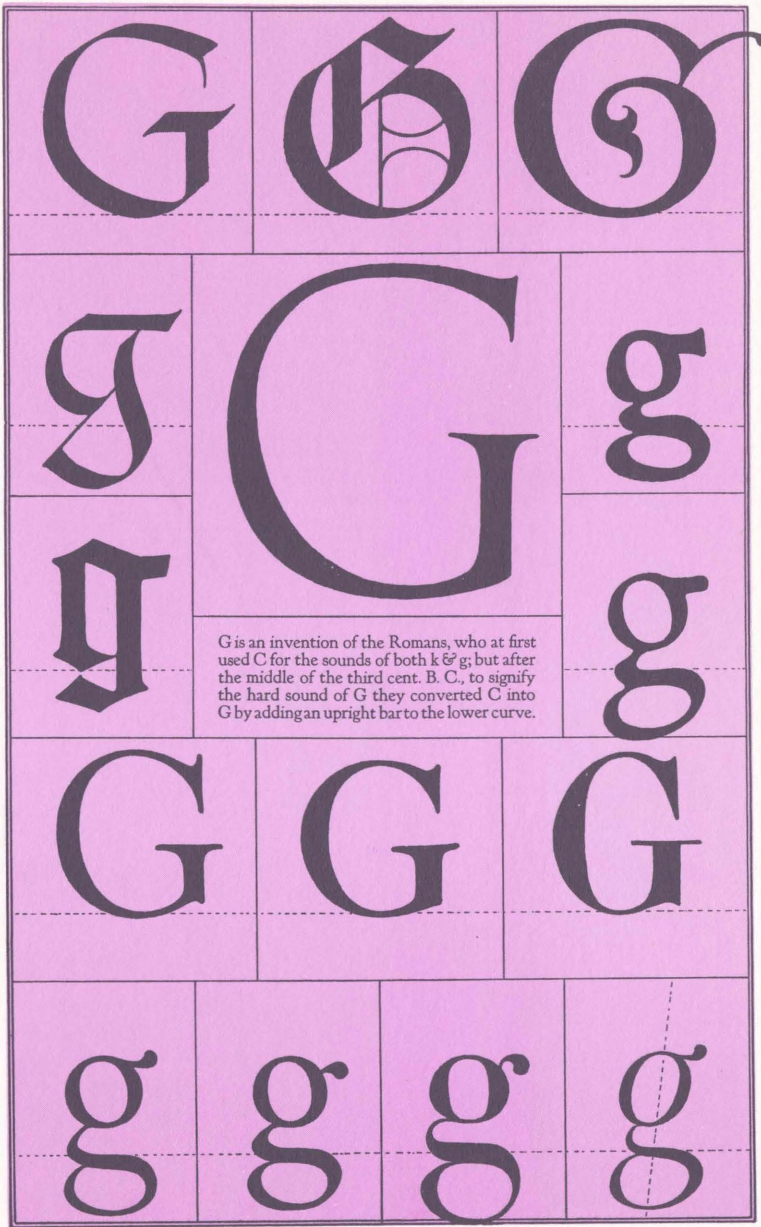


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The "G" page from Frederic W. Goudy's *The Alphabet*, 1936.

THE COURIER

The A.E. Coppard Papers at Syracuse

by Arsiné Schmavonian

Some of the most choice collections in the Manuscript Department of Syracuse University Libraries are also among the most modest in extent. The papers of English author and poet A.E. Coppard fit into both categories. Housed comfortably in a single box, fifty-five letters, three short stories in holograph and one speech provide a close look at Coppard's literary theories, criticism, opinions of his own work and that of a few others, reaction to approaches regarding dramatizing, filming or televising his prose works, dealings with publishers, and his activities on behalf of world peace through the Authors' World Peace Appeal in the early 1950's.

Alfred Edgar Coppard was born of humble parents in Folkestone, Kent, in 1878. His formal education was ended by an extended illness when he was nine years old; once recovered, he went to work in London instead of returning to school. Until 1919 he was a shop boy, office boy, clerk and accountant in a variety of businesses, educating himself through constant study and the reading of poetry. He began writing in 1907 while employed as an accountant in an engineering firm at Oxford, but met with considerable difficulty in getting his work published during the early years. In 1919 he resigned his job and took to writing full time, living in real poverty for two years until the publication of *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me*.

The earliest letter in the collection, dated September 9, 1921, refers to this first book, which also was the first publication of the Golden Cockerel Press, a private press established by Harold Midgely Taylor at Waltham, St. Lawrence, with which Coppard maintained a relationship for many years. A few of his short stories had been published previously but in speaking of his first full book, he wrote, "I have not published any other volumes, indeed it is amazing that I am printed at all for the MS was rejected by all the leading publishers." Between 1922 and 1954, twenty-four more books followed, most of them collections of short stories, four of them volumes of poetry.¹

Twenty letters in the collection are addressed to Coppard's publishers or relate in some way to the publication of his books. While their major

¹ *Clorinda Walks in Heaven*, 1922, *The Black Dog*, 1923, *Fishmonger's Fiddle*, 1925, *The Field of Mustard*, 1926, *Count Stefan*, 1928, *Silver Circus*, 1928, *The Gollan*, 1929, *Pink Furniture* (a juvenile), 1930, *Nixey's Harlequin*, 1931, *Rummy*, 1932, *Dunky Fitlow*, 1933, *Polly Oliver*, 1935, *Ninepenny Flute*, 1937, *You Never Know, Do You?* 1939, *Tapster's Tapestry*, 1939, *Ugly Anna and Other Tales*, 1944, *Fearful Pleasures*, 1946, *The Dark-Eyed Lady: Fourteen Tales*, 1947, *Collected Tales*, 1948, and *Lucy in Her Pink Jacket*, 1954. The four volumes of poetry are *Hips and Haws*, 1922, *Pelegea*, 1926, *Yokohama Garland*, 1926, and *Collected Poems*, 1928.

The three stores in the Manuscript Department, in the original corrected holograph form, are "Silver Circus," "Ugly Anna," and "You Never Know, Do You?"

subject is the transaction of business, paragraphs of personal opinion, taste, philosophy or criticism appear frequently:

It is a far cry back to Sarah Grand. I never read one of her books, tho I can remember their vogue. Her contention that life is lived more intensely in villages than in cities is arguable. It depends on what you get in either place. Experience may be anywhere. You can set the Brontes and Hardy against Maupassant and James Joyce. It seems that it is rather your capacity for living than your setting that counts.²

This is fairly typical of the simple profundities and profound simplicities that appear in the Coppard correspondence.

A handful of the letters have as subject the projected dramatization, filming or televising of some of Coppard's tales. One acerbic note tells a would-be collaborator on a dramatization:

I do not care at all for your version. Forgive me, but it has not the faintest chance of being produced and if it were it would be received with laughter. I can't go into all the points against it, — there is *no* dramatic tension, no *preparation* for the second scene, the dialogue is lacerating, and the final scene is awful. And it is clear you have never been into a court and witnessed a big trial. I am being quite frank, brutally frank, about this as it is obvious there is no common ground between us for a play.

May I add that your 3 acts would not take an hour to play, and that you have utterly and entirely missed the reason for the schoolmaster's silence at the trial, a reason which is the *only* conceivable justification for so highly improbable a story.³

Apparently Frederic Prokosch, as early as 1933, when he was a very young poet at the threshold of his career, sent some of his work to Coppard. There is no record in the Syracuse collection of whether or not Prokosch asked for evaluation and criticism of his work, but Coppard gave it to him in a letter of exceptional interest for its revelation of Coppard's own standards and concepts of poetry and criticism:⁴

I should admire that very fine piece *Andromeda* without any sort of qualification if I were not perturbed a little by the phrase

² July 2, 1930 to "Blackshaw."

³ September 26, 1929, to "Bason."

⁴ July 18, 1933.

Humble Wood. Shermett Hawley - a Thame,

2.7.29

Dear Mr Bason

Here are the 2 books signed as you wished.

The first book I wrote was "Adam Eve & Punch Me", & it is now published in the Travellers Library at 3/6. A first edition of it now fetches several pounds. The Golden Cockerel Press is a small expensive press & as they are personal friends of mine they occasionally publish something by me at an extravagant figure. I don't like being expensive, but I happen to be one of the authors whose books are "collected" & so it goes, but my ideal would be a 6th paper covered book that any one kind of people could afford.

In the autumn I have a book coming out called "Pink Furniture". It is supposed to be a book for children but it is the kind of children's book that grown-ups will like. At least I think so!

Always glad to hear from a reader

Yours sincerely

Charles Cope

“decayed to purity”, my mind does not *leap* to recognition of such a paradox – it is artificial rather than spontaneous.

Of *The Last Volume* the *first three stanzas* seem to me very fine indeed. There is an original idea very beautifully expressed, but the other verses of that poem are rather like scraps of paper thrown after the foregoing. Clever, I grant you, but truly I shrink from seeing other most lovely lines *wrested* into alien forms. . . . A pastiche, however well done, means lowering your own flag from its topmost height. . . .

I know the great desire a poet has to consolidate his pictures into a whole that shall express some universal idea, to communize his personal vision. . . .

I realize the enormous difficulty, but a conquered difficulty *is* poetry. . . .

Octoeon I like, but do not care for *Toothed* by the silver of his hounds. That verb isn't *inevitable*, it is capricious. . . .

In England *bough* is pronounced with the sound of *cow*, trough is pronounced *trawf*. . . .

Despite your fondness for words and phrases your poetry seems to me to be informed by a general atmosphere which is peculiar to you, and rich and rare; it does not *seem* to be *dependent* on the words, and is marmoreal in its effect rather than pictorial in its essence. I fancy I have mentioned before how greatly I admire your handling of what I can only call “delayed” rhythms, such as you use in *The Wave*

“It moves, and blows into the inner ocean
The thinner flood.”

or

“Strewing the broken bones of men; and moving
Again, again.”

Only a very fine ear could catch such music.

Thank you and thanks again for the book; it is a lovely thing in every way, and if I have seemed to carp a little it is only because I believe in you and enjoy the beauty of your poetry so much that I want to drop a hint when I think it may be useful. And I do it in all humility, for I know that no two people think alike about aesthetics, and though one may have pretensions to a standard one's ideas are after all merely one's own.

The majority of the score of letters concerned with world peace, dated in 1951 and 1952, are written on the letterhead of the Authors' World Peace Appeal, which bears this statement:

We writers believe that our civilization is unlikely to survive another world war. We believe that differing political and economic systems can exist side by side on the basis of peacefully negotiated settlements. As writers we want peace and through our work will try and get it; and pledge ourselves to encourage an international settlement through peaceful negotiation. We condemn writing liable to sharpen existing dangers and hatred. As signatories we are associated with no political movement, party or religious belief, but are solely concerned with trying to stop the drift to war.

On June 20, 1951, Coppard wrote to Robert Greacen, asking him to join "a small working Committee with the limited aim of circulating the Appeal and issuing a Bulletin. . . ." Seventeen subsequent letters about the work of the Committee are addressed to Greacen. Another, employing strong language and bristling with indignation, addressed to the editor of *The Observer* under the date of November 20, 1951, begins, "Will you allow me space to say that your reference to the Authors' World Peace Appeal is the sort of misleading and malicious journalism that authors throughout the world are pledging themselves to deny." After making it very clear that the AWPA "bears not the slightest resemblance to the Stockholm Peace Appeal" and spelling out his resentment over other specific statements in an *Observer* editorial regarding the AWPA, Coppard ends his letter with, "May I suggest that the next time you feel an urge to comment on the activities of the AWPA you get your reporter to ring me up . . . and I will engage to enchant his ear — the one on the Right, the long one — with some authentic information." The single speech in the collection is an eleven-page typed "Statement for 1951 Conference Opening," read by Coppard at the start of the Authors' World Peace Appeal conference of that year, with his frequent corrections made in red ink.

Kunitz and Haycraft, in the 1942 edition of *Twentieth Century Authors*, say "Mr. Coppard is primarily a poet — he has written and published much verse, both in conventional and irregular forms — and his prose stories have a definitely poetic quality. . . . Ford Madox Ford has said of him: 'He is almost the first English prose writer to get into English prose the peculiar quality of English lyric poetry. I do not mean that he is metrical; I mean that hitherto no English prose writer has had the fancy, the turn of imagination, the wisdom, the as it were piety, and the beauty of the great seventeenth-century lyricists like Donne or Herbert — or even Herrick. And that particular quality is the best thing that England has to show.'"

“That particular quality” is evident in even such a small collection of fifty-five letters, three short stories and one speech as Syracuse boasts in the A.E. Coppard Papers.

