"With These Philistines We Have No Quarrel": William Andrews Clark, Jr. as Collector and Public Benefactor

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In 1922, William Andrews Clark, Jr. paid to have printed the first two volumes of what would eventually be a five-volume catalogue of his private collection of the works of Oscar Wilde. Given the relatively few occasions when Clark allowed something of his own to see print, he clearly did not much like to write himself. But he composed an eight-page preface to his catalogue, dated the first day of July, and it began thus:

> The collector of first and of early editions of books has often been made the object of ridicule and derision by those who in themselves have never felt the thrill of the book-hunter, nor known the inherent pleasure that the mere possession of a rare and curious literary item of one of the world's greatest writers affords its owner. These critics are of a too materialistic nature, incapable of seeing and feeling the aesthetic, or of loving beauty for beauty's sake alone; they for the most part measure everything by its pecuniary value only; they derive their pleasures from alien pursuits, entirely foreign from those of the bibliophile. They are as far removed from the world in which the latter dwells as is the average man from the field of thought and of exploration that occupies the mind and the research of the astronomer.
>
> With these Philistines we have no quarrel; we are satisfied to leave them to their own enjoyments without let or hindrance and without envy of their occupation.[1]

The bibliophilic literature is thickly strewn with sentiments like these, and I suspect that there are parallels in the literature of collecting tea bag envelopes and barbed wire, if those people in

1 Robert Ernest Cowan and William Andrews Clark, Jr., *The Library of William Andrews Clark, Jr.: Wilde and Wildeana:* Vol. 1: *Poems, Plays, and Wildeana* (San Francisco: John Henry Nash, 1922), p. vii.

fact have a literature. Clark stood by his word and did not go on to a defense of book collecting as a whole. He did, however, continue with a reasoned explanation for the particular object of his catalogue, Oscar Wilde. He clearly felt that the collecting of "modern" authors needed some justification, and that his focus on Wilde in particular wanted a special apologia in light of the "somber *débâcle*"[2] that ended Wilde's career. Clark was not the pioneer Wilde collector in the United States, but when he began his collection in earnest in the late teens of the last century, it was still something of a brave and unusual choice.[3]

William Andrews Clark, Jr. was forty years old before he started to collect books in a serious way. He came from a collecting family. His elder brother, Charles W. Clark, was a dedicated collector of early English literature, and his father, William Andrews Clark, Sr., known as Senator Clark, was one of a group of legendary American millionaire collectors of art of the early twentieth century. Senator Clark's pictures, ceramics, and other *objets d'art* were left to the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., where they remain to this day. Clark's brother's collection was unfortunately dispersed at auction. Both brothers turn up frequently in the pages of that most wonderful of all bookseller biographies, Wolf and Flemings's *Rosenbach: A Biography*. Charles is the main character in a particularly fine tobacco- and bourbon-scented story involving the Ellsworth copy of the Gutenberg Bible (now at Princeton), a volume of four Caxton imprints in a fifteenth-century binding, some Shakespeare quartos, and a check for over $100,000 which Charles Clark, more sober literally and figuratively the following day, had to send his valet to recover, as it threatened to be stopped by his bank. The Clark Library is fortunate in having most of William Andrews Clark, Jr.'s book invoic-

2 Ibid., p. xi.

3 See Bruce Whiteman, " 'Some sell and others buy': Early Collectors of Oscar Wilde," in *The Importance of Being Misunderstood: Homage to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Giovanna Franci and Giovanna Silvani (Bologna: Pàtron Editore, 2003), pp. 375–77.

es; and although a few of them can demonstrably be shown to go back as far as 1911, it was in 1917 that Clark seems to have turned determinately to bibliophily.

Before giving an outline of William Andrews Clark, Jr.'s rather short life – he was only fifty-seven when he died – I should say that there exists no biography of Junior, and much of the limited information in print about him must be drawn from a highly unreliable source. This is William D. Mangam's *The Clarks: An American Phenomenon* (1941), a muckraking page-turner so full of quotations from documents and narratives of intimate occasions that it is never easy to determine where truth leaves off and vengeful fantasy picks up. Mangam was a boyhood friend of Will Clark's[4] and later a business associate of both Senior and Junior. Something clearly poisoned their relationship, for the book, decked out with blurbs from professors but a vanity press production all the same, is unmistakably the work of a person bent on revenge. Both Clarks were dead when it was published, and of course in American law you cannot be sued for libeling the departed.

Mangam nevertheless does help us to put together the facts of Clark's life, even if his interpretation of those facts is often mean-spirited, when it is not vile. Clark was born on March 29, 1877, in Deer Lodge, Montana, twelve years before the Montana Territory became a state. (A current website for Deer Lodge notes underwhelmingly that "the downtown area is clean, and only a few buildings on Main Street are empty.") His early childhood was spent in France, where his mother lived, and he spoke French before he spoke English, a curious part of his personal history which is reflected in his book collecting. He was educated in Paris, New York, and Los Angeles, and at the age of twenty-two he graduated from the law school at the University of Virginia. Among famous Americans associated with that university were Thomas Jefferson and Edgar Allan Poe, and Clark became interested in both of

4 Stanley Thomas Pitts, "An Unjust Legacy: A Critical Study of the Political Campaigns of William Andrews Clark, 1888–1901," (master's thesis, University of North Texas, 2006), p. 11.

them. He later gave Virginia a number of Jefferson letters and documents, and he acquired in 1923 the fourth known copy of Poe's first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827) for the huge sum of $9,500. (With his copy of the Shakespeare First Folio, some Shakespearean quartos, and a Byron pamphlet, it was among the most expensive individual books he ever bought.)[5] Clark practiced law in Butte, Montana, where his father's copper-mining business was headquartered, but if Mangam is correct – and on this point there is no reason to impugn his accuracy – he did not remain a lawyer for long. His active law career more or less ceased in 1907 when he moved to Los Angeles with his second wife, Alice. His first wife, Mabel, had died in 1902 giving birth to Clark's only child, William Andrews Clark, III, whose nickname was Tertius. The Clarks settled in a fine house on Adams Boulevard, as the address then was, in what was at that time a district of wealth and prestige, long before Bel-Air and Beverly Hills and other expensive residential neighborhoods existed.

Clark's early Los Angeles years are not well documented. He was essentially a businessman, with interests that focused on mining and milling. With his father and his brother, he worked to develop a number of properties, most famously the Anaconda mine in Montana and the United Verde mine in Arizona, but other mines as well, and eventually newspapers and other interests. Clearly these ventures were highly successful for the Clarks, as their wealth was extraordinary even by the standards of post-Reconstruction, pre-Depression America. Over the course of two decades, Clark acquired other residential properties contiguous to his own, so that eventually his house stood on a full city block of almost five acres. He built an observatory on the north side of his property (the reference to astronomy in the quotation with which I began was not a casual one); he planned an elaborate English-

5 The Shakespeare First Folio cost Clark $14,500, the first quarto of *The Merchant of Venice* (1600) was $12,925, the first quarto of *Much Ado About Nothing* (also 1600) was $11,000, and the *The Lamentable Tragedie of Locrine*, 1595, included in the Third Folio but now considered non-Shakespearean, cost $10,250. Byron's *Poems on Various Occasions* (1807) cost just slightly more than the Poe, at $9,850.