

Dr. Bruce Graver on the Whittier Collection

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Bruce Graver, Dr. D. Russell Bailey

Dr. D. Russell Bailey 00:08

Welcome to a conversation with Dr. Bruce Graver, Professor of English at Providence College. Conversation about the John Greenleaf Whittier collection donated to the Providence College Library by Professor Graver in 2009. Professor Graver, would you speak to us please about the John Greenleaf Whittier collection and how and why you gathered this collection?

Dr. Bruce Graver 00:43

The how is, the how is, probably genetic. Or the why is probably genetic. That is I come from a family of collectors. I've collected things. My parents house is like a museum. And, and I have, and I was in the process about 10 years ago of doing some work on a man by the name of Ticknor, an American scholar by the name of Ticknor, who happens to share a last name with the, with the prominent 19th century American publishing firm of Ticknor and Fields. And in doing some searches on eBay for Ticknor material I found a lot of Whittier first editions showing up for very little money, like \$5 apiece. I floated a few bids. They they were successful. And that's how the and that's how the collection began.

Dr. Bruce Graver 01:42

Now, after that, I started worrying about why is this happening? That is why is this Whittier material coming up so cheaply at this time? And there are a couple of different things to say about that. First of all, in the 19th century and throughout the first half of the 20th century Whittier, Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell. They were the great figures of 19th century American poetry. After 1950, though, their reputations collapsed. Partly because, especially in Whittier's case, he didn't write obscure poems that freshman English majors can write a five page analysis, analyses of. He wrote poems which are meant to be able to be understood by people who read newspapers. And consequently, he stopped being interesting to the scholarly community. And people stopped reading it almost all together.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 02:41

Now this particular created sort of an interesting situation in the 1990s. Through the first half of the 20th century, people who were serious readers of poetry, and popular readers of poetry collected Whittiers' stuff. They all did. And they started to pass away in the late 20th century. And those collections wound up not in dealers' shops, book dealers' shops; they wound up on eBay, in flea markets, essentially. And so I started pulling stuff up. Now, at the same time, Whittier has had some of the best bibliographical work done on him of any American writer from the 19th century. So you have a way of going to books, and going to various bibliographical resources and finding stuff out: what's rare? how many copies there are? where they're located? things of that sort. And it became very easy to pick and choose carefully on eBay, of a wide variety of from a wide variety of different things, such as manuscript letters.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 03:57

Whittier wrote thousands of letters, many of them are just thank you notes. He was a he was a public figure. He had people writing him, thank you notes for poems. He had people writing, sending him little poems that they wanted him to evaluate. And most of the time he answered these things by hand. So there are thousands and thousands of his letters out there. Three volumes have been published. But in those three volumes, even the editor says, he isn't publishing a third of what's out there. So these letters were showing up: \$10, \$50, \$100 sometimes. I think I might have paid as much as 250 for one letter. And the valuation on those things is considerably higher than that when you when you look at it from a kind of historical, and literary historical especially, point of view. So that's kind of how things happened. Things kind of fell together a little bit by accident.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 04:56

I was drawn to Whittier I think because I do have some Quaker heritage myself. And I was also drawn to Whittier because I remember my grandmother saying that well, I'm a Wordsworth scholar primarily. And she says, "Well, I like Wordsworth, but my favorite poet is John Greenleaf Whittier." My grandmother was one of these small town Indiana literary ladies who, who belonged to the, to the Literary Society. And that is kind of a anyway, that's kind of touching a little bit of my of my past and probably helped promote this.

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Dr. D. Russell Bailey 05:32

Who in the scholarly community might be interested in these, these items, these collections, both students and more senior scholars here at Providence College and elsewhere?

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Dr. Bruce Graver 05:46

Well, the first thing and this is the most important, important thing to know about Whittier as a political figure. He regarded himself as a kind of political poet for the first 60 years of his life in the '60s, until the end of the Civil War. Beginning in 1830, in the early 1830s, he was devoted to the abolition movement. He signed the original charter of the abolitionist movement in this

country. He said that that was the thing he was proudest of in his whole life. That signature, he said, was worth all of his poems. From that point on, he established himself as the poetic voice of the abolition movement. And he not only edited abolitionist papers, and newspapers, he also ghost wrote slave narratives. He also wrote protest poems about various kinds of slave abuses. He, and he, he almost got stoned once in New Hampshire. He was, his offices were burnt to the ground in Philadelphia. And in fact, there's a funny story about him having to disguise himself as a rioter in order to sneak into his office while it was being set ablaze in order to, in order to sneak out with all of these papers. So he's a major figure in the abolition movement.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 07:24

He was also, as part of his place in the abolition movement, a major figure in the formation of a new political party in opposition to the Democratic Republican Party that was largely agrarian, Southern and proslavery. Whittier tried to assemble out of the ruins of the old Whig Party, first of all, some kind of party that would be specifically anti-slavery. And eventually, he was one of the backroom movers and shakers that put together what became the Republican Party in 1856. He was instrumental in convincing Charles Sumner to run for the US Senate, I believe, to succeed Daniel Webster. He was instrumental in the Fremont campaign in 1856, the unsuccessful Fremont campaign. His poem "The Panorama" was actually read at Fremont political rallies. And since it's a several hundred line poem, you kind of, kind of wonder what these rallies were like. But you know, back in those days, a seven, apparently 500 line poem, read to open up a rally was something like, I don't know bringing in the Grateful Dead to get people riled up. I don't, I don't really know. But, so politically, he was extremely important. He also got, especially after the war, was more involved in the women's suffrage movement, and was I believe, nominated in '72 as the vice presidential candidate for the suffrage movement. But he did not. I think he told them thanks, but no thanks. That was kind of the long and short of it. But so politically, extremely important.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 09:22

Poetically. And I have in the in the collection, a number of items that are associated with this, including one of the slave narratives. I've got this wonderful thing, The Branded Hand, which has to do with someone in Florida, who was, who had helped a slave to escape, was helping slaves to escape on his boat. And he got caught and they branded the the letters S S into his hand for 'Slave Stealer.' And this guy was, he ran this abolition circuit in the North, giving all kinds of speeches and things and people wrote poems about him. And this little pamphlet here was, it published his poem, The Branded Hand. But it also was actually published in Ohio. So that Whittier's got this sort of abolition coverage that's spreading really all over this all over the country, even though he's just living up in New England.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 10:30

The other thing about Whittier as a poet, and I think this is the part that really needs far more attention than it's been given since he's kind of fallen off the literary map. Whittier was a poet of American rural life, the primary poet of American rural life from throughout the 19th century. He was well loved because he spoke to the people with the people's language, and in language they understood. And he mixed a kind of view of rural life. He was brought up on a farm; he

worked on a farm till he was almost 20. So he knew what he knew what farm life was like. And he wrote about it honestly. And he wrote about local customs with a kind of an almost a kind of antiquarian historian's knowledge that allowed him to preserve a kind of view of rural life, particularly rural life as it existed before the Civil War, in rural New England. That became an important part of the cultural memory for people in towns like Haverhill and Amesbury that used to be all farms before the war, and after the war became Industrial Revolution centers, centers of the Industrial Revolution. And you have then a kind of an appeal to Americans who remember their rural past, but are moving into cities, and moving and remember, working on farms as children but are now working in factories. And he's a poet that speaks to them with a clarity that maybe a lot of contemporary poets would like to find, you know, if they want to sell their books, which nobody buys poetry anymore, right, and nobody reads it, except college professors. Nobody writes it, except college professors. Whittier would have found that a very, very strange state of affairs.

D Dr. D. Russell Bailey 12:42

You've stated in other earlier conversations that he was important for a lot of struggling women writers of the time,

D Dr. Bruce Graver 12:51

Well, Whittier, you know, came up as a newspaper man. For the most part, he did not have an advanced education. And he he probably had an education that was more in line with what many of the women, aspiring women writers had had, that is not so much formal education, no college education. And therefore, he he had a certain kind of, I think, cultural sympathy with people who who weren't, you know, of the privileged classes or of the privileged ranks. So what he would often do, partly, this would be in his abolitionist publications and the women were the spirit, spearheads of the abolition movement, really.

D Dr. Bruce Graver 13:40

In fact, one of the great arguments in the abolition movement was whether women's suffrage constituted a similar kind of slavery. Whittier, Whittier believed that it was not as bad as real slavery. So he used to put it sort of secondary, but his newspapers that he edited, he would very often solicit poems especially and other kinds of writing from from women writers. He collaborated, sometimes silently, with women writers in order to produce collections of poems and prose, especially for children, that he would then divide. He'd use his name to sell the book, but then he would split, he would split the royalties with them. And I actually, there's one of those royalty checks I think in this collection. There certainly is a letter that he wrote to Lucy Larcom where he enclosed a royalty check.

D Dr. Bruce Graver 14:39

And Lucy Larcom was one of these people like him who had worked in factories. He worked in a shoe factory. She worked in a textile mill. She fought her way through to become self educated and was one of the founders of Wheaton College up in Norton, Mass. And and Larcom and

Whittier were collaborators on at least three volumes. He published her works in The National Era before she anybody knew who she was. And and he split royalty checks almost literally up to the day he died. So that she always had that stream of income that he helped helped generate.

D Dr. Bruce Graver 15:22

There are other women that that he was close to too. He was very close with Annie Fields, the widow of his publisher James Fields at Ticknor and Fields. He was very close with the Cary sisters who were abolitionist poets. He was very close with, oh her name has skipped my mind, the woman who lived out on, who ran the Appledore Hotel out on the Isles of Shoals, and [Celia] Thaxter. And they were actually he'd go out to see her out on the Isles of Shoals. But the here his his relations with women writers were probably more comfortable, and much more close than I think he was with the men, because he didn't drink. He didn't smoke cigars. He didn't like to sit around in rooms and do those kinds of boys stuff and those kinds of boys things. He was much more comfortable with the tea with the women and with and with matters of that sort, even though he was never married.

D Dr. D. Russell Bailey 16:21

You also mentioned in earlier conversations that his the flow of his work somehow reflects movements in US publishing.

D Dr. Bruce Graver 16:32

Yes, well, I would say that, that probably has more to do with his publishing firms than anything else. But if you look at his earlier books, they're really not very attractive. These are the ones from the '30s, you might have a very small format little book like this, like Mogg Megone, from I think it was 1835-36. There's a little bitty book like this, that you could, that's really very delicate. It could fall apart. And it's not remarkable, remarkable except for its small size. His earlier books were put in very plain paper, paperboard, paper wrappers or just plain old board wrappers with a little label pasted on the front, on the front. By the 1840s, when he hooks up with Ticknor and Fields, then you start seeing American publishing adapt itself to to new markets.

D Dr. Bruce Graver 17:33

Ticknor and Fields originally used their covers, I think as a kind of a brand. That is that had a kind of brown, I don't have an example of it here, but they had a kind of brown, chocolate brown cloth that they used on all their publications. All their publications had gilt titles on and they had the Ticknor and Fields, the TF lozenge usually on them, on the spine. And they established a kind of look. Hawthorne published with them. Whittier published with them. Longfellow published with them. If you look at their books from the '40s, the late '40s, and '50s, they all look alike. It's the Ticknor and Fields brand that they sort of participate in. Well, Ticknor and Fields kind of likes establishing that brand. But then by the about the late '50s and '60s, especially when James Fields starts taking over the marketing more and more. He starts

experimenting with different kinds of publications, rather than just single volumes of new poems, for instance. Fields will instituted the so called "Diamond Editions." These would be really cheap. Smaller print, but they would be so cheap that anybody almost could buy them if you, if you read at all. And then he also started publishing, experimenting with different different formats. If you were rich in the 1830s or 1920s, and you bought a book, it probably came in paper wrappers or just plain gray cardboard with pasted on label the way early Whittier did. If you were rich, you would take that to a binder. It might be the same bookstore you bought, bookstore you bought it from you take it to a binder and have it bound usually in some kind of leather.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 19:27

What Fields did was he tried to break that market by marketing the same book in different formats. For example, this is the first edition of Whittier's most famous poem, Snow-Bound. You can see it's not in a brown chocolate wrapper. It's in blue. I've got first editions of Snow-Bound in blue, in red, in green. I mean I've seen them in green. I've seen them in brown. But clearly what Fields is doing there very simply is varying the color of the cloth in order to give a kind of, you know you can choose what color you know you wanted your books to be so you'd have a kind of aesthetic appeal of the book. Two years later, he brings out Snow-Bound in an illustrated edition. Now, this edition of Snow-Bound is the one that was bound in full Morocco, Morocco leather with a full tooled cover and all the, you know, the bands on the spine and all of this stuff, trying to look like one of those books that you would normally in the old days have had had paid somebody extra to bind for you. But what Fields did is he brought this book out in three different formats, three different bindings at three different prices. You could buy it for as cheap as a dollar and a half. This volume would have cost \$10 in 1867. And \$10 in 1867 would be like buying, I assume something like a \$250 or \$300 book today.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 21:12

So you're marketing to different levels of the public with the same basic, you know, type-block. And that's that's kind of a neat thing that he does. Later on, this develops pretty steadily through the 1860s and the 1870s. And then in the 1880s, you have in England and in different parts of United States, the so called Book Arts Movement, where you start experimenting with old style, type fonts, typefaces. You start experimenting with a richer kind of lush paper to look like something like a Renaissance or a medieval publication. You start trying to make your books look more like manuscripts. These are extremely expensive. This is the stuff that William Morris was doing in England. But the Ticknor and Fields folks, and here I think is Henry Houghton, who later became, who later took over the company and renamed it Houghton Mifflin. Henry Houghton starts looking, gets really interested in these Book Arts Movement things and starts trying to do American mass market publications in the same kind of, in ways that look like Book Art stuff, but actually are fairly inexpensive.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 22:26

The first time he does that with Whittier is with this little book called St. Gregory's Guest and Recent Poems. It's kind of an odd poem for Whittier to be writing as a Quaker about St. Gregory, but he does. And he puts it into this volume that looks like this is how a Morris volume

would have looked, except instead of the kind of slicky paper wrapper, it would have been for Morris it would have been vellum, that is it would have been sheep skin. But this looks like vellum. It's got the same kind of gold decoration that you'd see on a Morris book. But you could sell it for you know a dollar and a half, two dollars because the the actual materials look like it without being it. He's even got the kind of look of the uncut pages here that you would have in one of these sort of Morris books. Then he does it. He goes one step further by about [1890] or so and he, he develops these, he starts putting it, gluing it onto boards, like this.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 23:40

This is a copy of Snow-Bound also, an illustrated copy of Snow-Bound. It's got the gild. it's got the, the font that looks like manuscript calligraphy. And, and it comes out. This came out in large and small paper format. The large paper format was limited to I think 250 copies. So it would have been very rare and expensive. And yet you had a small paper format that was about this size, which they used the same type-block. But they didn't. It wasn't quite so big. This actual volume was given by Whittier to his niece, Elizabeth Whittier Pickard, who was in fact, for all intents and purposes, his adopted daughter. His brother Matthew was something of a ne'er-do-well and beginning in the 1860s, Lizzie Pickard lived, Lizzie Whittier pretty much lived with Whittier and he paid for her education. This is signed by him: Elizabeth W. Pickard from the uncle, from, from her uncle, John G. Whittier, October 2, 1891. So it's, it's a fairly special volume. And it includes a portrait of Whittier that, what I would call this extra illustrated, in that it doesn't really show up anywhere. It isn't supposed to be in the volume.

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Dr. D. Russell Bailey 25:19

Thank you, Professor Graver, for giving us this introduction to the John Greenleaf Whittier collection at Providence College. We hope that you will return for another visit and further discussions on this collection. Thank you.

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Dr. Bruce Graver 25:33

Thank you