A Collector Reflects on Provenance

Mark Samuels Lasner, University of Delaware Library
Four Kinds of Provenance, Four Books

- **Associational provenance**
  LEON EDEL, *Henry James: The Untried Years, 1843–1870* (1953). Max Beerbohm’s copy, later given by Rupert Hart-Davis to Leon Edel

- **Collector provenance**

- **Obscure provenance**
  MAXWELL GRAY, *Westminster Chimes: And Other Poems* (1890). The author’s copy, later presented to J. Robertson Trowbridge

- **Spurious provenance**
  OSCAR WILDE, *The Sphinx* (1894). With forged inscription
The Ideal Book
Associational Provenance

“Provenance is interesting in proportion to the interest of the previous owners, whether contemporary with its publication, or as persons of importance in their own right, or because they were book-collectors of note.”

—John Carter

• The book has an intellectual or sentimental connection with its creator or creators, with its original owner, or with a subsequent owner
Dream, meaning of.
"Two of a kind"
Joseph Conrad, Ender
mess
1st Journal
No 7 Story
Shorelands

Liberarn
Canaan, and succeeded.
Scientific, et cetera.
"Dove of Peace"
11th Jan, 1911
Roosevelt
Berry

164
At Mrs. Cusack's

Rumpled
"Fרוטaded"

Poor
Poor Howells"
A “Value Added Tax”? Collector Provenance

There is a satisfaction, not easily expressed in words, of owning a book which the cataloguer describes as ‘the James Bindley-Upcott-Utterson-Daniel-Title-Beckford-Wadhul-Ashburnham-Huth-Huntington-Jones” copy . . . Some day the provenance of a book will play a much greater part than it does now in determining value.” —George H. Sargent

- The book belonged to one or more collectors (or institutions) we can identify
Obscure Provenance

“It is the general ambition of the [book collector] class to find value where there seems to be none.”

–John Hill Burton

• Significance is discovered through research

• Almost all provenance is of interest—to someone

• Ease of provenance research online: no owner left behind
A SONG OF REST.

Oh, were I at rest in the quiet ground,
With the daisies dancing o'er me,
Within the sweet bells' pleasant sound,
With lindens grouped before me!

My sleep would be so calm, so deep,
With never a dream to fear me;
While the breezes in the leaves would softly sweep,
And the warm rains rustle near me.

The Sunday bells would bring a crowd
Of bright-eyed lads and lasses;
Their voices blent with the organ loud
Would stir the quivering grasses.

Fathers and mothers would pass along,
In life's meridian glory;
Children go by with a laugh and a song,
And grandfathers bent and hoary.

And I should lie so still the while,
Till the wedding-bells came pealing;
Ah! then I should stir, and remember the smile
That stirred youth's deepest feeling.
Spurious Provenance

"The whole thing proves one more that, easy as it appears to be to fabricate reprints of rare books, it is in actual practice impossible to do so in such a matter that detection cannot follow the result."

—Thomas J. Wise

- Provenance is a tool for determining authenticity
- Not all provenance is honest
- What are dealers and collectors to do with pieces with false provenance?
For an arthur clinton
from
my affectionate
friend
the author

Oscar Wilde

TO
MARCEL SCHWOS
IN FRIENDSHIP
AND
IN ADMIRATION

I made my life a lie
on which all wise should play

Walter in Eugene
with my warmest regards.

Dear Wilde
15-5-57

Oscar Wilde
Conclusion: Current Provenance

- Collectors, the book trade, and librarians should pay attention to provenance
- Indications of ownership should never be removed
- *We* are caretakers of tomorrow’s provenance