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## Introduction to "The Uncollected Letters of Algernon Charles Swinburne Vol 1"

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## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps not everyone would agree with Henry James's claim that 'everything about such a being as S. [Swinburne] becomes and remains interesting'.<sup>1</sup> But the great collector and student of Swinburne John Mayfield and his wife Edith emphatically did. And so do I.

My own fascination with Swinburne began at the University of Chicago, where in the late 1960s I had the electric experience of studying Swinburne with Jerome McGann<sup>2</sup> and of doing research on Swinburne in Cecil Lang's magisterial edition of *The Swinburne Letters* (1959–62). That semester in the classroom and in the stacks of Harper Library, when I discovered both Swinburne and the fascination of scholarly editing, started me down the road that culminates in this edition of letters to and from one of the great English poets.

It is a road that led me in 1970, when I was writing my doctoral dissertation at Chicago on 'Swinburne and Shelley', to write to Sotheby's, seeking the recent purchaser of a letter by Swinburne that mentioned Shelley. Within weeks I received an enthusiastic letter from John Mayfield, in which he promised to look further into the matter.<sup>3</sup> He enclosed an unknown early poem by Swinburne, 'Shelley', which he thought I might be interested in. I was. From then until John died, 26 April 1983, I was in correspondence with him virtually every week, sharing his delight and despair in his pursuit of Swinburneiana – whether in the realm of manuscripts and books or the realm of knowledge and understanding. My experiences with John Mayfield, I realise now, along with my studies with Jerry McGann and my work with Cecil Lang's edition, constituted an academic apprenticeship that I am privileged to acknowledge. The

1. Leon Edel (ed.), *Letters: Henry James*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1974–1984), vol. IV, p. 628.

2. Two works by McGann are central to understanding the poet: Jerome J. McGann, *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) and the introduction to Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh, *Swinburne: Major Poems and Selected Prose* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

3. John Mayfield has to have been one of the extraordinary personalities of book collecting, with a depth of passion and enthusiasm almost impossible to convey. I remember talking to the Friends of the Library at Georgetown University, with John in the audience, and ending with an evocation of an island in New York's harbour. I closed with a periodic sentence that didn't give away the name of the island until I concluded with something along the lines of 'but you can't go there now, because Swinburne Island is no more'. At that, John leapt from his chair, threw up his arms, and bellowed, 'I tried to buy that island!!'



allusions that are mentioned; and so on. Because I assume that the reader of these volumes will also be working with *The Swinburne Letters* I do not always repeat, for example, all the details in the biographical sketches available there. However, I try to anticipate what a student new to Swinburne might need to know, and I seek to provide that information where I think it will be useful. I am aware of what may at times be lacking here; there are people, events, incidents, works and allusions that I have not been able to identify. I trust that other scholars will fill those gaps. I try to be thorough and inclusive in my annotations to Swinburne's letters, but I give myself more license with those written to Swinburne.

The letters in this edition flesh out the shape and nature of Swinburne's life, much of which is already familiar to scholars and students. But in a number of areas there are significant revelations, as in the letters to Joseph Knight on the publication of *Poems and Ballads* (1866). Perhaps the most striking letters included here are those between Swinburne and Mary Gordon Leith. The relationship between the cousins has been explored to some depth in the fifty years since Cecil Lang and John Mayfield began to cast light on the identity of Swinburne's innominata. Scholars such as F. A. C. Wilson, Jean Overton Fuller, and Rikky Rooksby have helped clarify our understanding of that relationship, and some of the letters printed here have been summarised and commented on by James D. Birchfield.<sup>1</sup> But the letters themselves<sup>2</sup> elaborate the complex psychological tones that drove the affection between the two. The sheer playfulness of these letters should not be overlooked, though I have no doubt that readers will be more fascinated by the sometimes overt, sometimes covert, and always curious sexuality manifest in both sides of the correspondence. The code they are written in is transparent, a transposition for comic and other effect of the initial (and now and again, internal) letters of words, a practice that Swinburne is known to have used earlier in letters to Simeon Solomon.<sup>3</sup>

That one motivation for the coded letters is playful is manifested by another series of letters in these volumes. These, to and from members of Swinburne's family, including his mother, sisters and aunt, Lady Mary Gordon, continue over several decades, elaborating on a running family joke about clergymen and young boys and the misbehaviour of both. I include in 'Appendix A' a list of those letters and fragmentary documents that provide some background for this joke.

In a mild way, these family letters may fit the pattern of 'one class' of letters defined by William Michael Rossetti: 'a lot of wildly chaffy indecencies that Swinburne used to pen – strings of punning banter ringing the changes on any

1. James D. Birchfield, 'New Light on the Swinburne-Leith Correspondence', *Kentucky Review*, 1(1980), pp. 52–63.

2. John Mayfield was confident that still others will one day appear, and he may well be proven right; certainly more family material has come on the market in recent years.

3. *Letters*, vol. II, p. 142.

impropriety that he could start'. Rossetti, no prude, noted that one such letter he discovered had 'found its way to the fire at once'.<sup>1</sup> Despite such bonfires, surely other letters of the sort were saved by someone and may turn up for the next editor of Swinburne's correspondence.

I include many letters from Swinburne's friends, especially his closest friend from Oxford, John Nichol, as well as a number from Simeon Solomon, Thomas Purnell, George Powell, Charles Augustus Howell and others. These letters help vivify a part of Swinburne's world at once aesthetic and, in some of their intimations, other than aesthetic. The letters exchanged with Edward Burne-Jones have a delight all of their own.<sup>2</sup> Still other letters expand our knowledge of the social and intellectual world Swinburne moved in, even after his move in 1879 to The Pines, Putney.

Of the letters in this edition that Cecil Lang regretted not finding, not all will fulfil the hopes held for them. For example, the letters I have discovered that Benjamin Jowett sent Swinburne may not have the resonance or significance one might wish. Several letters from Mathilde Blind to Swinburne suggest nothing more than a professional and scholarly relationship (not that it was reasonable to anticipate anything else). On the other hand, among the letters fleshing out the relationship Swinburne had with John Thomson, one (17 July 1870) offers a glimpse into the world where, as Edmund Gosse described it, 'golden-haired and rouge-cheeked ladies received, in luxuriously furnished rooms, gentlemen whom they consented to chastise for large sums'.<sup>3</sup>

The letters to Swinburne from Emilie A. Venturi included here are delightful in themselves and are also interesting for their glimpses of Mazzini and of Swinburne's relation to Mazzini. And they intrigue too because they show that Swinburne wrote many letters to Venturi, though few have so far turned up. The tone of Venturi's side of the correspondence suggests a rich and amusing trove of Swinburne letters still to be discovered.

A number of the letters to Swinburne are of a professional nature and show him to have been both astute and meticulous – though often difficult – in what today would be called career management. This correspondence is with the magazine editors who published his work, with his several publishers, including Chatto & Windus, and with Walter Theodore Watts-Dunton, the friend who, even before rescuing him from a life of dissipation, moved to take his business affairs in hand. These letters may not always fascinate, but they document the nature and conditions of publishing literary works in England in

1. Peattie, p. 442.

2. John Christian has made some use of these in 'Speaking of Kisses in Paradise: Burne-Jones's Friendship with Swinburne', *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, 13:1 (Autumn 1998), pp. 14–24.

3. *Letters*, vol. VI, p. 245.



Swinburne's time. Several of them reveal attempts to bring *Bothwell* (1874)<sup>1</sup> into shape for the stage, a goal never realised.

My debts are enormous and confirm how accretive scholarship is. I owe much to past scholars and writers of all kinds of works – dictionaries, handbooks, indexes, encyclopædias, directories, bibliographies and the like. I have plundered those works, as their authors or compilers anticipated, without acknowledgment, but always with care and appreciation for their labours. Similarly I owe debts to those who have already advanced our knowledge of Swinburne's life, works and milieu. I have tried to indicate those specifically, as appropriate.

For almost two decades my work on these volumes has at times taken on the nature of a family enterprise. My daughter, Deborah Alison Boyle, interrupted her studies at Somerville College to do work for me at the Bodleian and other Oxford libraries and at the British Library; my son, Blake Colin Meyers, checked materials at the Regenstein Library, the University of Chicago, on my behalf; my daughter-in-law, Graziana Taramino, checked quotations in Italian; my brother Steven Meyers, having worked on William Morris's letters, transferred his skills of transcription, translation, and research to Swinburne's; my wife, Sheila Ann Meyers, who has made all that is best in my life happen, checked my transcriptions of French; my parents-in-law, John and Enid Bunker, were always supportive and gave me a home for my research trips to England; my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, Ian and Sue Bunker, made a necessary trip to Eton College possible; and my parents, Jean and Burt Meyers, spent weeks and months of their time editing footnotes, checking transcriptions and copy-editing.

I owe debts to my colleagues and students at the College of William and Mary as well: to the Faculty Research Committee for a series of Summer Research Grants as well as a semester long Faculty Research Assignment; to the chairs of my department, Chris MacGowan, Ann Reed, Jack Willis, and John Conlee, for support from the department's perennially inadequate budget; to Nat Elliott, Bob Maccubbin, Franco Triolo, Ron St Onge, Jim Baron, Lew Leadbetter, Peter Wiggins, Naama Zahavi-Ely, Rob Nelson and Pablo Yanez; to the administrative staff of the English Department, especially Bonnie Chandler, Kathy O'Brien, and Amy Scherdin; to my student assistants Greg Huteson, Christopher Vitiello and Callie Kimball, who did most of the initial transcriptions, and especially to Krista Ikenberry, who stepped in as a volunteer when financing from William and Mary unexpectedly evaporated. Other students worked hard on a variety of assignments, not the least of which was checking and correcting transcriptions, especially Katie Squibb, Cathy Poulet, Elizabeth Butler, Kate Norako, Stephanie Insley, Kerry McGrath, Rebecca

Spivey, Roxane Pickens and Faye Buckalew. Their work saved me from many errors (the ones remaining I alone am responsible for).

In the Earl Gregg Swem Library of the College, I am especially indebted to Carol Linton, John Lawrence, and Cathy Reed for their help with Inter-Library Loans and to staff members from the Reference Department and others, especially Bettina Manzo, Katherine McKenzie, Don Welsh, Mary Molineux, Carol McAllister, Hope Yelich and Merle Kimball.

Beyond the College, I am indebted to literally hundreds of people who undertook tasks in support of these volumes, especially librarians and curators all over the world, the unsung heroes of scholarship. I name many of them in particular notes to the letters, but want to mention especially Diana Chardin, Roberto Ferrari, Jack Kolb, Jim Birchfield, Michael Meredith, Tim Burnett, Michael Bott, Bill Hines, George Brandak, Rikky Rooksby, Bruno Svindborg, Barry Chandler, Nicholas Sheetz, Christopher D. W. Sheppard, Raymond V. Turley, Marty Barringer, Frank Sharp, Ernest Mehew, Cathy Henderson, John Browne-Swinburne, Mrs Lucy Dynevor, Mrs Michael Rothenstein, Nicholas Rossetti, Charles Rossetti, Roger Peattie, Jean Overton Fuller, Sara S. Hodson, Arthur Freeman, Francis J. Sypher, Benjamin Franklin Fisher, IV, J. O. Baylen, Tony Harrison, Rodney G. Dennis, Frank Walker, Julie Anne Byars, Peter Freund, Gwendolyn J. Canada, Charles Sligh, Jane Cowan, Dick Fredeman and Catherine Trippett. At Pickering & Chatto, I have been vastly aided by everyone I have dealt with, especially Mark Pollard, Paul Boland and Michael Middeke.

My work on this edition was benefited by a Travel to Collections Grant and a summer grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. A grant many years ago from the American Council of Learned Societies allowed me for the first time to explore Swinburne collections and Swinburne haunts in England.

I am grateful to the holders of Swinburne's copyright, Random House UK, for allowing me to publish Swinburne's letters and to all those individuals and institutions who gave me permission to print their letters. Owners of copyrights or holographs who asked for a formal acknowledgement beyond the citation of the source for each letter are listed below.

Finally, let me simply record that my work on Swinburne would have been easier in any state other than Virginia, whose legislative attenuation of First Amendment rights and of academic freedom at times interfered with my ability to write and to do research on Swinburne on the Internet.<sup>1</sup>

1. How Virginia has sought to hamstring research on matters involving sexuality, including Swinburne studies, may be gleaned from my article 'Recently Deceased: The First Amendment in Virginia', *Academe* (September–October 2002), pp. 28–32 (readily available on-line – except to faculty in their offices at Virginia's state universities – through the AAUP [American Association of University Professors] homepage).

1. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Bothwell: A Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1874).



# Editorial Principles

I have sought to reproduce the texts of all the letters as precisely as possible and have left out nothing I could read. I trust that my transcriptions are accurate, but one of the discoveries any editor makes, I am sure, is that in sometimes crucial ways, human handwriting is not as clear as it should be and my readings of someone's handwriting may well vary from another reader's – as a comparison of my texts against those printed by other editors may from time to time show. Nevertheless, I am confident of my transcriptions; where I had reason to believe the holograph might clarify ambiguity in microfilm, photocopy or digital scan, I have looked at the manuscript myself or, more often, asked for help from the owners or others.

Where neither I nor those who have helped could read a word, I record it as '[illeg.]'. Where they and I think we know the word but are not certain, I insert '[?]' after it. I have tried to transcribe words and phrases the writer cancelled, surrounding those with angled brackets (<thusly>). Words or phrases interlined above or below the writer's usual line I indicate with superscript and subscript, recording any carets the writer provided (not always done). I have tried to record even the errors each writer has made. Contractions and possessives without apostrophes, misspellings, shortened words, punctuation marks, and the like I have left as in the original, unnoted, except that where I think clarity is served I have inserted corrections within square brackets. But when John Nichol writes 'peice' or John Morley signs himself 'Your's', I try to avoid inserting '[sic]'. With such a variety of writers and such a range of idiosyncratic spellings and punctuation, trying to reassure the reader at each deviation from modern or usual practice would in the end distract even more than the apparent error. In one or two instances quotations in the holograph have each line opening and closing with quotation marks; I have adopted the modern convention of quotation marks at the beginning and end only of the quotation as a whole. I try to record precisely the relationship of punctuation marks to quotation marks, which is sometimes inconsistent within a single letter (but usually, and perhaps surprisingly, conforms more to American than British practice).

In presenting each letter, I have for the sake of clarity and emphasis regularised the relation of the date to any return address (inserting a blank line between them whether one exists in the original or not), the spacing of the salutation as well as paragraph indentations (writers indicate a paragraph break in ways that are open to interpretation – in some instances a different editor might read the indications differently). I have left out page numbers, catchwords and directions such as 'P. T. O.', except in one or two instances where they have a substantive effect. In instances where the writer has added a last thought atop the greeting of the letter, I have usually and silently moved it to the end of the letter as a PS.

I use 'c'. with some dates to indicate that I believe the date is within a range close to the date I assign. I insert '?' to indicate that I have reason to believe the date I assign is correct, but am not absolutely certain. In some instances I use the indications together to indicate a likely range that I am not certain of.

Swinburne signed his name in several different ways, but most often just 'AC Swinburne'. On more formal occasions, he might add a space between his initials and in the most formal situations might even use full stops. When he (or his correspondents) adds a special flourish beneath the signature, I use italics.

I cannot conceive of a student's using the present work without Cecil Lang's *The Swinburne Letters* immediately to hand. To ease movement from one text to the other, I have numbered the letters in these volumes in relation to his. The numbers for letters in this edition start with the number of the nearest preceding letter in *The Swinburne Letters*. Following Lang's own practice *passim* and in his appendix to volume VI, 'Additional Letters', I then add letters, e.g., A, B, C. In several instances where material I have discovered completes a fragmentary letter found in Lang, I assign his identical number, with no letter. Because of some anomalies in Lang's numbering and some unusual clustering of new letters, the numbers here in conjunction with Lang's do not so much assign a literal chronology as they indicate approximately where in the sequence they come.

I include in Appendix B information supplemental to *The Swinburne Letters*, recording holographs and readings that were not available to Lang, correcting or clarifying some dates, identifying correspondents, allusions, incidents, and so on.

## Permissions

For permission to publish I am grateful to the owners of the materials as noted in each headnote. Some of those have asked for formal acknowledgement, and I am pleased to thank: the Society of Antiquaries of London; the Provost and Fellows of Eton College; the Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University; Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; Special Collections Department, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University; Randolph Hughes Papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales; Department of Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas; Torquay Museum; McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library; Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine; Haverford College Library, Haverford, PA; Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN; the Director of Information Services, University of Bristol; Manchester Archives, Manchester Central Library; Manuscripts Division, National Library of Scotland; the Gloucestershire Record Office; the John Murray Archive; the Syndics of



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