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Building the House of Books

CAROL Z. ROTHKOPF

WHEN House of Books opened on October 10, 1930, at 52 East 56th Street, it seemed unlikely that it would survive very long, let alone that it would in time become one of the world's foremost sources of modern British and American first editions. After all, neither the year 1930 nor the decade that followed are remembered for such luxuries as book collecting.

Nevertheless, fifty-five years after the opening of House of Books, it is easy to pinpoint why the shop survived the vast economic problems of its early years. The reason, of course, was the absolute dedication of its founder owners, Marguerite ("Margie") and Louis Henry Cohn, to their work, and above all, to their customers. Catering to the needs of that most exigent species, book collectors, was never a nine-to-five job for the Cohns. It was their life.

It is hard to imagine, however, that even the most perceptive fortuneteller would have forecast in 1888, when Louis was born, or in 1897, the year of Margie's birth, that they would someday be known respectively as "the scholarly bookseller" and "the doyenne of the rare book business."

As a young man, Louis was anything but scholarly and, in fact, seems to have spent an inordinate amount of time in trouble with his school teachers. By the time that World War I was threatening, Louis seized the opportunity for real adventure by offering his services to Jules Jusserand, the French ambassador in Washington. His initial services for the French government were in counter-
Carol Z. Rothkopf

Espionage in the United States. But, he had enough time left over to spend weekends visiting boyhood friends at Harvard where, between bridge games, these better-educated friends gave Louis their required reading list. The list was carefully saved, suggesting that Louis did do this extensive “homework.”

By the time World War I began, Louis was in France and asked to be transferred to active duty with the Foreign Legion. His service in the artillery and, later, in the Army of Occupation as an aide to General Mangin, won him a case full of medals, including the Légion d’honneur—a lifelong source of pride.

If, as Margie always claimed, the Harvard reading list was the seed from which House of Books sprouted, it was Louis’s meeting with Hilaire Belloc while he was still in the army that directly led to his transformation into a collector. Strange as it may seem, the Jewish lieutenant from Brooklyn was fascinated by the notoriously anti-Semitic Belloc’s writing. The two men corresponded and, again according to Margie’s recollections (in speeches she gave in the 1970s), it was one of these letters from Belloc that changed the direction of Louis’s life:

In 1921, Belloc mentioned his new book . . . and Louis went to his Fourth Avenue bookdealer, as a reader and not as a collector, to purchase the book. He was informed that it had not been published in this country and that he should go to James F. Drake and Co., who would have a copy. [Louis] was appalled at the idea of going to a rare book dealer—rare books meant Rosenbach and Gutenberg Bibles, but he went. . . . That day, he purchased not only the Belloc but a copy of Galsworthy’s latest book, I think it was To Let [1921], in the correct English edition, after it was explained to him why the English edition was priced at $2.75 instead of the usual $2.50 for a Scribner edition. From this start, he built up in a few years, one of the great Galsworthy collections of the time. The first time he paid $35.00 for a then rare Galsworthy, he knew he was hooked as a collector. . . .

It was just a short step from collecting to learning the art of bibliography. Self-taught, Louis first began to work on a supplement to
H. V. Marrot's Galsworthy bibliography, but he soon turned his full attention to the works of a young writer named Ernest Hemingway, on whom Louis was to become an acknowledged authority with the publication by Random House in 1931 of his bibliography of Hemingway's work.

Of the two future owners of House of Books, Margie was the one who seemed more naturally destined toward her future occupation. Although she always claimed to know less about "literature" than anyone to whom she was speaking, this was typical self-deprecation. The truth is that from the time she learned to read, Margie did so with joy and discrimination. In fact, a notebook survives in which she listed all the books that she read each year up to the time when she married Louis. Perhaps as significantly, she was a collector from childhood on, beginning with paper dolls she meticulously cut out of ladies magazines (and saved ever after) to cigar bands that she carefully mounted in a special album. With the zeal and tenacity for which she was to become famous, she wrote cigar smokers of the time to ask for a band for her collection. The greatest prize was a response, with enclosure, from J. P. Morgan.

Unlike Louis, Margie was a good student, a prize-winning essayist, and even had an early "literary" effort (a puzzle) published in St. Nicholas. After graduating with honors from the private school she attended in New York City, she went to the Parsons School of Design. Then, for a time, she worked as a designer of costumes for Broadway plays, including one that starred Helen Hayes. To supplement this erratic income, she made and sold silk lampshades and elegant closet fittings. In retrospect, it seems obvious that Margie's talents were a major reason that all the publications of House of Books were as handsome as they were. Her attention to detail, down to the precisely right color for a catalogue cover, are familiar to everyone who knew her.

Since it was bridge that perhaps put Louis on the first step toward the book business, it was appropriately yet another bridge
game in June 1928 that provided the setting in which he met his lifetime partner in that work. The momentousness of the meeting was obvious as Margie almost immediately telegraphed her sister, who was then on her wedding trip, “No time to write, new boyfriend, stayed till 2 A.M.”

HOUSE OF BOOKS, LTD.
52 EAST 56TH STREET
NEW YORK CITY

House of Books, Ltd. will open on October 10, 1930, under the direction of Capt. Louis Henry Cohn. The shop will specialize in Modern First Editions and Current Books. Telephone Wickersham 5218.

The firm opened the month after the Cohns were married.

Margie and “new boyfriend,” who were both ardent Franco-philes, soon began to plan their life “at leisure” in Paris. But, as Margie said years later, “Nineteen twenty-nine burst that bubble and finally we decided that Louis’s avocation must become our vocation.” They were married in September 1930, dashed off to Bermuda on their honeymoon (where they managed to squeeze in a visit with Hervey Allen and his wife), returned to New York, and opened House of Books.

Among the most important connections the Cohns had in the book world was Maxwell Perkins, whom Louis had met on his frequent trips to Scribner’s, first on behalf of Galsworthy, whose American liaison with the firm he was, and then, of course, in pursuit of his interest in Hemingway. It was through Perkins that Louis met Thomas Wolfe. Perkins asked Louis to introduce Wolfe
to various book dealers in New York. Margie’s kindest memories of this tumultuous relationship included these recollections:

Tom was about six foot four and Louis six foot two and a half. Once when they went out together, a couple of little boys ran after them calling out, “Look at the giants! Look at the giants!” We used to take Wolfe out for dinner and when the waiter asked him what he wished to order, he would reply, “Whatever is the largest portion.” Early, we invited him to dinner with Bennett Cerf and Harry Hansen and he called up the following day, roaring, why did people always invite him with men instead of some girls!

Louis and Perkins, who were regular luncheon companions, had a far more serene relationship than the Cohns had with the often drunk and always demanding Wolfe. However, Perkins seems to have been somewhat reluctant to put his imprimatur on Louis’s choice of bride and partner in the book business. When he met Margie, Perkins asked her where she had gone to college:

I replied that I had gone to art school. He just gazed at me and said, “You mean you are going to work in a bookshop and you did not go to college?” This did not seem possible to him. Well, it might have been a good idea. I remember that then Millay did not mean Edna St. Vincent to me but Millet who had painted “The Angelus.”

For years to come, Margie continued to play the role of the innocent who had somehow strayed into the book business. Even by the time she was approaching her fiftieth year in the book business, she told an audience of collectors, “I always said I became a specialist before I became a general practitioner.” Of course, in the early days of House of Books, it was the dashing war hero and bibliographer that was at center stage. Carlos Baker, in *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* describes the Cohns as they were in 1931 when they first met Hemingway, who had refused to write something for Louis’s bibliography (and, in fact, rather distanced himself from the whole effort). Even so, the noted author
The firm's first catalog issued in 1934 reveals the modest prices of contemporary first editions.
Building the House of Books

... invited Captain Louis Cohn, the scholarly bookseller, to bring his bride Marguerite to dinner in the Hemingway's suite at the Brevoort. It was their first meeting after months of sporadic correspondence. Hemingway's latent distrust fell away as he talked with Cohn, a strapping six-footer with a neatly trimmed mustache and a record of distinguished service with the French army.

The petite, chic, but seemingly invisible "bride" had her own special memory of that particular meeting, which she loved to recall, as in this excerpt from a speech she first gave at the University of Tulsa in the 1970s:

Of course we knew Hemingway and sometimes we were on good terms and sometimes not, depending on his mood ... my favorite memory is of when we had dinner with him and his wife, Pauline, at the Brevoort Hotel a few days before they left for Kansas City for the birth of their younger son, Gregory. Patrick was then a few years old and at ten o'clock Hemingway took him out of his crib, put him on the potty, and crooned a French lullaby to him.

Such interludes, however pleasant to recall, did not pay the rent. Making House of Books a money-making enterprise, at the same time that it developed a reputation for excellence, was the work of years. The Cohns, in addition to the usual devices of advertising, issuing catalogues and sending out book announcements, published their own limited editions, the Crown Octavos series, but above all made a fine art of caring for their customers and catering to their desires. No matter where the shop was located (and it moved six times as commanded by the twin banes of New York life, rent increases and building demolitions), it seemed to become a second home for collectors, writers, and publishers. The atmosphere of House of Books was conducive to good talk and long stays. These sometimes led to the sale of what Margie liked to call "treasures" and sometimes not, but in any case seemed always to leave people eager to return again and again. Margie meant it when she said, "Our customers are our friends and our friends are our customers."
In time that list of friends grew increasingly large and included many of the most distinguished individual and institutional collectors of twentieth-century literature. The list of these good friends of House of Books would fill so many pages that they could not possibly be enumerated in this small space. Among these collectors, those for whom the Cohns reserved a special affection were the writer-collectors. A devoted friend was Stephen Vincent Benét, who shared the Cohns’ passion for France and all things French, and whom they both considered the gentlest man they had ever known. Another cherished friend was Robert Frost who often stayed with the Cohns when he was in the city for a reading and whose photograph, inscribed “For Margie in the old friendship,” always hung proudly in the bedroom he used at their apartment.

Sadly, just as House of Books’ reputation and its vast network of friends was growing, Louis became ill. His first heart attack seemed to have been brought on by the fall of France in the early days of World War II. While illness forced him to spend more and more time at home, Margie carried on the business. She never complained then or later at the burden of work or worry she carried. It seemed to be enough for her that Louis somehow came through attack after attack to remain at her side for a little longer.

In 1948, to celebrate the end of yet another war and Louis’s survival, the Cohns finally made their long dreamt of trip to Europe together. It was a landmark in both their lives for the lasting contact they established with rare book dealers in London and, most significantly, for their first meeting with T. S. Eliot, which as Margie recalled

... took place at the flat he and John Hayward shared. There was an instant rapport. But I knew him for many years after when I was alone and he was married to Valerie. I have the cable sent to me, “Married T. S. this morning. Letter follows. Love Valerie.” Valerie and I had also become good friends over the years before their marriage ... and Valerie and Tom stayed with me a number of times and, as I have a
three-room flat, you can imagine it was all very informal. I was also with them in London, Jamaica, and Nassau. Tom loved to play gin and dinner was no sooner over than the cards came out, wherever we might be together. Valerie and I... happily, stayed the best friends... 

When Louis died in 1953, Margie's family thought she might close House of Books and settle into graceful retirement. The thought never occurred to her and, for the next thirty-one years, Margie single-handedly not only carried on the business (no one was even allowed to help her wrap a book), but carried it forward into the front ranks of the antiquarian book world. As Anthony Rota summed it up, Margie... resolutely carried on the business alone. In the late 'fifties and early 'sixties this was still a relatively brave thing for a woman to do in what was, in bookselling terms, essentially a man's world. She nurtured several generations of young collectors, saving good things until they could afford them, buying them lunch when they had spent their allowance on books, teaching them the importance of fine condition, and generally and genuinely becoming their friend.

In addition to the individual customers whose special collections she worked so tirelessly to build, there were now the fast-growing university collections, notably at the University of Texas, Austin, to preoccupy her. Another of Margie's delightful stories tells something of the flavor of these days:

Cyril Connolly came into my life quite late, and although I had always heard he was difficult, we became close friends. While he was working on his book, The Modern Movement, he sent me a set of annotated galleys to dispose of. ... I finally disposed of them to Texas. The Library [at Austin] found they were only missing one each of the American and English books but many of the French titles [listed in Connolly's book]. They became so interested in building up the one hundred books, they asked me to try and fill in the collection. When this was accomplished, they planned an exhibition and Cyril came over for the event. We both stopped at a motel [that had] no room service and even Cyril's request could not get me breakfast in my room. Next
morning Cyril was at my door with the morning paper and my breakfast tray. And this continued each morning while we were in Austin. The books he inscribed to me are among my most precious possessions.

Small wonder that Valerie Eliot twitted Margie about her new "boyfriend"! But there were still other writers to enter her life when she was in her seventies—among them the actor and D. H. Lawrence expert, Roy Spencer; the novelist Larry Woiwoide; the collector and novelist Michael Thomas; and the man who Margie described as "one of the most thoughtful persons I have ever known," Tom Stoppard. It is Stoppard who has provided what is surely the finest description of Margie as she was in her later years:

I knew of House of Books before I knew of Margie. In fact, the abstract idea of a House of Books was enough for me because one of the attractions of writing was not merely creating a particular sequence
of thought in particular words, I actually wanted to be responsible for that physical object known as a book. I associated my love of literature with these objects, with leaves and hard covers and, with luck, dust wrappers.

I knew there was this place in New York. I had got the address. I wasn’t prepared for the proprietor at all. This was on the ninth floor up on Madison, and there I found this wonderful, bird-like lady who was neat, with an acute eye, a very busy, competent, attractive way of addressing one, looking at one, and I was enchanted by her and I kept going back. But it was very difficult to buy a book off her. I hardly ever succeeded because one didn’t feel one could very often sneak a surreptitious look at the shelves. It was like being in somebody’s house and finding oneself in the library; it seemed rather rude to examine the person’s books. And the idea that one might open some kind of negotiation about buying a book was absolutely impossible. And, in the end, actually quite soon, I realised I wasn’t really a customer, I was one of her friends, and that is where I went to see her. . . . Margie was there and you came to find her, and I shall always think it a privilege to have found her.

Stoppard and many of Margie’s good friends shared in her joy at the gala parties that were held at the University of Virginia Library and elsewhere in Charlottesville to celebrate her gift of the typescript of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* to the library and the opening of the splendid exhibition of which it was a centerpiece.

Buoyed by this event and, subsequently, by her admission to the Grolier Club, Margie’s zest for life and her amazing energy seemed those of a far younger person. In fact, younger people walking on the street with her panted trying to keep up with the pace she set. And, of course, she continued to be a familiar visitor in book shops across the country and in London, to which she traveled almost every year. One of the California book dealers, Ralph Sipper of Joseph the Provider in Santa Barbara, has written that on her last trip to his shop in 1981, “she divided her time in the office between climbing the highest rung of our library ladder
and sitting on the floor with the pile of books she had pulled from the shelves."

In the summer of 1984, despite her now diminished energy and failing health, Margie decided that she must go to London to replenish the stock of House of Books, which had been forced to move again just a few months earlier. Her good friends in London, Valerie Eliot, Bernard Stone, Anthony Rota, and the late Winnie Myers, did all they could to make this gallant voyage a little more comfortable and easier for her. Alone briefly on an errand, Margie was struck and killed by a truck. The horror of the ending was mitigated by the knowledge that Margie had carried on right to the last doing what she loved best—selecting books in a city that was virtually her second home.

In a moving obituary, Anthony Rota described Margie as... the doyenne of the United States first edition market. She and her husband... had founded the House of Books in 1930, in the depths of the Depression. Together they made it synonymous with the best standards of condition and with service to the young collectors who gathered around them... Hemingway... Thomas Wolfe, T.S. Eliot, and Robert Frost were among the authors the Cohns specialised in, and some of the finest and most comprehensive collections of their works in existence today were built almost exclusively by House of Books.

The House of Books that Marguerite and Louis Cohn built has moved for the last time. Margie picked the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia as the permanent home for their shop because of its location in the city where her business had flourished and because of her many affectionate ties with several generations of Columbia faculty and students. Looking ahead, as Margie always did, she hoped that booklovers would always be learning something about the unique world of rare books from this very special collection spanning fifty-four years of the twentieth century.
The Crown Octavos and Their Authors

J. HOWARD WOOLMER

HOUSE of Books Ltd. was founded in 1930 out of necessity by Captain Louis Henry Cohn and his wife Marguerite (always called Margie with a hard ‘g’). They had been married only a short while and had planned on living a life of ease in Paris where they had both spent a considerable amount of time, but the stock market crash changed all this, and they had to find a way of earning a living. They decided that, to use Margie’s words, “Louis’s avocation for collecting books should become his vocation,” so they became booksellers, specializing in first editions of contemporary writers because they couldn’t afford to stock the older writers such as Dickens and Kipling whose work was commanding high prices.

Most of the modern authors prized by collectors during the 1920s had had some, at least, of their books published in limited, signed editions, and the Captain felt that issuing a series of limited editions of his own would not only prove profitable but would also attract attention to the newly established firm. He envisaged a series of books by well-known writers issued in small editions, each signed and each printed by a fine press. The books would measure approximately 7½ x 5 inches, and the series would be called the Crown Octavos, the British term for books of this size.

As the Captain already had the manuscript for L.A.G. Strong’s essay A Defense of Ignorance in his collection, this seemed like a good place to start. Strong, an author much collected at the time but one whose name is not often encountered today, agreed to let House of Books publish it, and it came out in 1932 in an edition of 200 numbered copies, each signed by Strong, and priced at $2.00, the first of the Crown Octavos.
During the next thirty-seven years the Cohns together, and Margie alone after the Captain's death in 1953, published sixteen volumes in the series, all in limitations ranging between 200 and 300 copies and at prices that rose from the $2.00 charged for the Strong book to $8.50 for the last book published in the series in 1969. Each book in the series also had an extra twenty-six lettered copies that were for the use of the author, for copyright, and for review; these lettered copies were never sold. Many of the leading authors of the past half century were included in the series, and all but three of the books were signed by the authors; the Galsworthy and the Wolfe volumes were issued posthumously, and Hemingway refused to sign his for reasons that are noted below. Following is a complete list of the books published in the series; readers desiring more information should consult George Bixby's checklist in the September/October 1980 issue of American Book Collector:

1. 1932: L.A.G. Strong, *A Defense of Ignorance*
2. 1933: Ernest Hemingway, *God Rest You Merry Gentlemen*
3. 1933: John Galsworthy, *Author and Critic*
5. 1939: Thomas Wolfe, *A Note on Experts: Dexter Vespasian Joyner*
6. 1940: Robert Nathan, *The Concert*
7. 1940: William Saroyan, *A Special Announcement*
8. 1944: W. Somerset Maugham, *The Unconquered*
9. 1945: Booth Tarkington, *Lady Hamilton and Her Nelson*
10. 1949: James Farrell, *A Misunderstanding*
11. 1951: Robert Frost, *Hard Not to Be King*
13. 1957: Eudora Welty, *A Place in Fiction*
14. 1962: Marianne Moore, *The Absentee*
15. 1964: Tennessee Williams, *Grand*
The second volume in the series was by Ernest Hemingway whose classic of bullfighting, Death in the Afternoon, had recently been published by Charles Scribner’s Sons. Captain Cohn had been one of the early collectors of Hemingway’s work, and he compiled the first Hemingway bibliography in 1931, only eight years after the publication of Hemingway’s first book. As Hemingway didn’t approve of bibliographies of living authors, he refused to provide a foreword to the book, even though the Captain had offered him $350 in payment, and he seems to have pretty much ignored its publication. The two eventually met, however, and they got on so well together that Hemingway promised to give the Captain a story for the Crown Octavos series, although things didn’t work out quite as the Captain expected.

One day in 1933 Hemingway showed up at House of Books and, explaining that he had just lost a gun and had to have money
to replace it, offered the Captain his short story *God Rest You Merry Gentlemen* for the series, but at a price. He claimed that he could sell it to a magazine and get much more money for it, but that, as he'd promised a story to the Captain, he felt an obligation to let him have it. As Captain Cohn later pointed out, Hemingway couldn't have sold the story to a magazine because in one place the boy masturbates, and in 1933 no magazine would have dared to print that. Margie remembered paying Hemingway $100 for the story, a not inconsiderable sum at that time, and one the Cohns could ill afford. Amusingly, but not for Hemingway, President Roosevelt closed the banks at that moment, and Hemingway couldn't cash the check.

Hemingway felt that he had been unjustly treated by being paid only $10 by the publisher Paul Romaine for his poem “Ultimately,” which was printed on the back cover of William Faulkner's recently published *Salmagundi*, and he let this unhappiness, together with his anger over the uncashable check, carry over to the publication of *God Rest You Merry Gentlemen*. He refused to sign the book or to let the Cohns charge more than $2.75 for it, a price which just about covered their expenses. Even without a profit, however, the book added a certain luster to the young Crown Octavos series. Interestingly, it was at this meeting at House of Books that Captain Cohn introduced Hemingway to Arnold Gingrich who was at that time preparing the first issue of *Esquire*, a magazine that published a great deal of Hemingway's writing in the 1930s and later.

Next in the series was John Galsworthy's *Author and Critic*. Long before becoming a bookseller Captain Cohn had built an important Galsworthy collection and had been involved in revising and updating H.V. Marrot's Galsworthy bibliography. His work on this bibliography involved the Captain in visits to Scribner's, Galsworthy’s American publishers, and when difficulties arose between author and publisher, Galsworthy appointed the Captain as his liaison with the firm. (It was at Scribner’s that the
Captain met and became close friends with the noted editor Max Perkins.) Galsworthy died in January 1933, but his widow gave the Cohns permission to publish her husband’s essay, and it was issued in October 1933.

Margie Cohn regarded Stephen Vincent Benét’s *Ballad*, 1939, to be the handsomest of the *Crown Octavos*.

In the mid-1930s Captain Cohn, with his bent for things bibliographical, was investigating John Dos Passos’s novel *Three Soldiers*, published by Doran in 1921. It was Doran’s practice to place their GHD monogram on the copyright page of their books to indicate a first printing, but the Captain suspected that they had neglected to do this on the earliest copies of *Three Soldiers*. John Farrar, Dos Passos’s editor at Doran, couldn’t remember whether or not this was so, but he recalled that he had sent one of the first copies to his friend Stephen Vincent Benét and suggested that the
Captain get in touch with Benét in an attempt to examine his copy. The Captain's letter to Benét, however, went unanswered. Then one day a stooped, very unimpressive looking man, walked into House of Books with a small package under his arm and announced “I'm Steve Benét and I understand you want to see my copy of Three Soldiers. Here it is.”

Benét and the Cohns became close friends. Margie Cohn described him as “the mildest, gentlest, most wonderful person—he wouldn’t speak badly about anyone. He was such a gentle person, just so gentle…” When Captain Cohn suffered his first heart attack at the time of the fall of France and had to spend a great deal of time at home in bed, Benét used to send him gifts, boxes of candy and other things, and one time he sent yellow primroses with a note saying “they used to have these in Paris and of course they will have them again.” In due course Benét gave the Cohns a poem, Ballad of the Duke's Mercy, which was published in May 1939 as number four of the Crown Octavos. Margie always felt that this was the handsomest book in the series. “It was printed by Hawthorn House with specially cut type. There were too few ‘H’s available so whenever the printer had done a page or so he had to stop and move the ‘H’s so he could do a few more pages.” This is still one of the scarcest of the Crown Octavos, probably because it is collected both as a first edition and as an example of fine printing. Benét was paid a flat fee of $100 for the poem, but he refused a check, preferring to have a credit against which he could buy books.

The Cohns also published another work by Benét, a poem called Tuesday November 5, 1942, which was written in reply to a scurrilous anti-Roosevelt poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay that had appeared in a New York newspaper. Benét's poem appeared in The New York Times on Election Day and then had separate publication by House of Books, but it was not part of the Crown Octavos series. The manuscript and copy #1 were donated to the Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park, New York.
The Captain, incidentally, was right about Three Soldiers. Doran had neglected to put their monogram on the copyright page of the earliest copies issued. The story is told of book forgers, not knowing this, meticulously removing monograms from other Doran books and pasting them into Three Soldiers, thereby creating instant second issues.

Max Perkins had introduced Captain Cohn to Thomas Wolfe in the late 1920s, when he was editing Wolfe’s first novel, Look Homeward, Angel, for Scribner’s. The Captain had been asked to introduce Wolfe to various booksellers in New York City, and the two had become quite friendly. Wolfe, however, had a strain of anti-Semitism, always resenting the fact that his name, Wolfe, might be construed to be Jewish. He could also be a very obnoxious drunk. One summer evening, Margie couldn’t remember the exact date, Wolfe turned up smashed at the Cohns apartment on East 56th Street after attending a baseball game. He demanded more to drink and became more and more difficult as the evening wore on. The Captain tried to placate him because, as he later said, he didn’t want the furniture to get broken (both he and Wolfe were well over six feet tall). Wolfe kept eyeing the Cohns collection of inscribed first editions, apparently trying to determine if they had sold any of his, and finally the Captain, in disgust, handed him one of them, saying, “Here, take this Tom, this is the only book you ever gave me. I paid for all the rest of them and I don’t want anything that you gave me.” Wolfe stalked out, throwing the book into the hallway outside the apartment, where it was retrieved by the Captain once Wolfe had left the building. Wolfe telephoned his apologies the next morning, but they weren’t accepted, and this seems to have been their last meeting.

Wolfe had earlier promised to give the Cohns something for the Crown Octavos series, but when he brought them a manuscript it was found to be too long and each revision only made it longer, till it began to seem like another Look Homeward, Angel. They never got anything during his lifetime (he died in 1938), but Per-
kins later gave them an essay, *A Note on Experts: Dexter Vespasian Joyner*, and it was published in June 1939, only one month after their Benét volume.

Robert Nathan who had been introduced to the Cohns by Benét, provided them with *The Concert*, an excerpt from an early unpublished novel, which the Cohns published in March 1940. Nathan always said that he was honored at being included as one of the Crown Octavos authors, but that after signing his name 276 times he'd never sign a book again. "I feel like a little boy who's kept after school and has to write lines." He kept his word and never again had a limited, signed edition.

I've found no record of how the Cohns met William Saroyan, but they published his *A Special Announcement* in September 1940. It was a radio play that Saroyan wanted published in book form, but as it didn't fit into any of his collections, the Cohns were asked to publish it.

Nothing else appeared in the series until December 1944 when W. Somerset Maugham's short story *The Unconquered* was published. It had originally been printed in expurgated form in *Collier's* in April 1943. There's an amusing anecdote about this book, but I'll let Margie tell it in her own words: "Only once did I try to edit one of the sixteen volumes we published but the results made me never try again. When we did Somerset Maugham's *The Unconquered*, a story of World War II, where a German soldier billeted with a French family rapes the daughter of the house, she realizes her plight when she misses her period. Books were not quite so frank in the forties and I was rather squeamish about that description. When Louis next saw Maugham he mentioned this to him whereupon Maugham replied 'Tell Mrs. Cohn if she knows a better way to describe this I will gladly put her name on the title page as co-author!' I was properly put in my place ... but I thought that it was rather amusing."

Booth Tarkington had the same problem with his play *Lady Hamilton and Her Nelson* that Saroyan had had with his; he want-
ed it in a book, but it didn't fit into any of his collections, so he asked House of Books to publish it. They did, in December 1945. Tarkington was so taken with the finished book that he wanted to buy the whole edition and use it as a Christmas greeting, but the Cohns had their own obligations and restricted him to a small quantity.

The only failure in the whole Crown Octavos series was James Farrell's short story *A Misunderstanding*, published in 1949. Margie felt that it may have been issued at a bad time but, whatever the reason, copies were still available at the list price of $3.50 until late in the 1970s.

The Cohns had been close friends of Robert Frost for a number of years before he gave them his play *Hard Not to Be King* for the series. They had wanted a small collection of poems, but Frost's publisher objected so they had to settle for a play. It was published in June 1951. Margie told the story of the time she and Louis were visiting Frost in his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Frost, getting on in years at this time, sent Margie out of the room on a made-up errand so that he could ask the Captain, "I sent Margie out of the room because I wanted to ask you something; do you still have sexual urges?" She also said that whenever Frost left anyone alone in his study he would put them on their honor not to retrieve anything from the wastepaper basket. She had never known anyone, she said, who liked the good things in life the way that Frost did but made believe what a simple person he was.

The next book in the series was T.S. Eliot's *Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern*, published in May 1954. The Cohns had met Eliot on a trip to England in the early 1950s, and he had promised at that time to send them something for the series. In 1953, however, Captain Cohn died, and Margie wrote to Eliot asking if he would allow her to publish something on her own. Eliot agreed and sent the typescript of this lecture, which had been delivered to the Friends of Rochester Cathedral in 1937. Margie was upset because there was no return address on the package, and she chided
Eliot for his secretary's carelessness. "I would never have had the nerve to ask for another copy if this one had got lost," she complained. The secretary, Valerie Fletcher, later became Mrs. T.S. Eliot and provided him with what Eliot called the happiest years of his life. The Eliots became close friends of Margie's in later years and often stayed with her when visiting New York.

Marianne Moore's publishers refused permission to House of Books to publish a selection of her poems, so her play The Absentee became the fourteenth of the Crown Octavos.

The most disastrous of the Crown Octavos was the thirteenth, Eudora Welty's A Place in Fiction. Margie, who had met Welty several years earlier, attended one of her readings at the YMHA on upper Lexington Avenue and afterwards asked her if she would contribute something to the series. The result was this essay, which
The Crown Octavos and Their Authors

was published in October 1957. Margie sent the typescript off to the printer and immediately departed on a visit to Japan. When she returned she was horrified at the appearance of the book awaiting her. It was printed on white paper and had cream endpapers which Margie felt looked terrible. Not only that, but many of the books were ink smudged, and she refused to accept a number of them, returning them to the printer. She had no idea what happened to these returned copies, but they were never replaced. Some time later a water pipe in her office broke, and a number of the remaining copies were dampstained and had to be discarded. Small wonder then that this is one of the scarcer books in the series. Margie had no records of how many copies were actually signed and sold.

Marianne Moore's publisher, like Robert Frost's, objected to letting House of Books have a selection of poems as it would have taken too much out of her next book, so once again a play was published, The Absentee. It was issued in May 1962, almost five years after the Welty volume. Margie said that she enjoyed working with Miss Moore, “but she always acted as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, and I never knew anyone as astute about finances in my life, never. It was all right, though, and I liked her tremendously; she was a great person.” Miss Moore took a large part of the edition herself, to be used as place markers at a luncheon given for her in Rochester.

The fifteenth book in the series wasn’t solicited by House of Books at all, but was offered to them by a friend of Tennessee Williams who had at one time been his literary agent. Again, it didn’t fit into any collection that Williams planned, and he was looking for a suitable place for permanent publication. It was a memoir of Williams’s grandmother in the guise of a short story called Grand, and Margie published it in December 1964. Williams was the only one of the Crown Octavos authors that Margie never met, and she said she hadn’t the slightest desire to do so.

The sixteenth and last of the Crown Octavos was Robert Duncan's essay The Truth & Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential
Autobiography. Margie had met Lawrence Durrell at a cocktail party some time before and had asked him to let her publish a piece on Provence that had appeared in Holiday Magazine. He couldn’t give it to her as it was to appear as part of a series in a book of travel essays, but he did promise to send her something else. While she was waiting for Durrell’s piece (it never arrived), Duncan dropped into her office on his way to England, and she asked him if he was ever going to have anything for her. He handed her this essay. She read it, couldn’t make head nor tail of it, but decided to publish it anyway. It came out in January 1969.

Someone once said that House of Books had the best list of authors that any publisher had ever had with the possible exception of Horace Liveright. Margie Cohn was proud of the books that she published, and she had good reason to be proud of them.
Photographs Inscribed to Marguerite and Louis Cohn

Hilaire Belloc
Stephen Vincent Benét
Rhys Davies
T.S. Eliot
Robert Frost
John Galsworthy
W. Somerset Maugham
Marianne Moore
For Louis and Marguerite Colin
with all the best from
Stephen Vincent Benét
For Louis Henry Cohn
from Ray's Ladies

21. 4. 32.
from Laurence Scott and Melvina Moore
for kind, vigorous assistance
April 1, 1964

(Verso)
Our Growing Collections

KENNETH A. LOHF

Anderson Gift. Mr. Lewis N. Anderson, Jr., (A.B., 1926) has presented three letters written to his grandfather Samuel Cowdrey Anderson by Charles Francis Adams; dated February 2, March 18, and April 23, 1876, the letters were written at the time Adams was editing and publishing Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, and they concern his views of public life, Republican party politics, and his friends, notably Carl Schurz. Also donated by Mr. Anderson are two manuscript items relating to his great-grandfather Peter Anderson (1800–1881): his commission as Captain in the New York State 97th Infantry, signed by DeWitt Clinton, dated January 8, 1828; and a handwritten copy of an 1857 letter which he wrote to the Hungarian patriot Louis Kossuth, at the time visiting in New York, in which he presented to Kossuth a sword crafted by his father, James Anderson.

Andrews (Mildred) Fund gift. The Mildred Andrews Fund, through the courtesy of Mr. Peter Putnam, has presented the bronze maquette of the statue of Hart Crane, done by the American sculptor William M. McVey in 1984. Measuring approximately 16 inches in height, the statue depicts the poet in three-quarters length in the same stance as he appears in the now-famous photograph of him on the roof of his apartment house in Brooklyn Heights with the Bridge in the background.

Butcher gift. An album containing seventy-eight manuscript and printed items relating to George Washington Cable and Adelene Moffat has been presented by Professor Philip Butcher (Ph.D., 1956). Included are four letters and a manuscript written by Cable, seventeen letters and manuscripts by and relating to Moffat,
Our Growing Collections

Our Gronxing Collections

eight photographs, and forty-eight printed items, such as leaflets, brochures, and clippings, documenting their various activities.

Clarke bequest. The papers of the landscape architect Gilmore D. Clarke, received by bequest, include more than two thousand pieces of correspondence, manuscripts, photographs, and memorabilia. There are files relating to Clarke’s works on city planning, the 1964–1965 New York World’s Fair, and parkways and gardens in the New York City area. There are letters in the collection from Dwight D. Eisenhower, Herbert Hoover, Archibald MacLeish, Paul Manship, Robert Moses, Lewis Mumford, Richard M. Nixon, Nelson A. Rockefeller, Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt, and Harry S. Truman.

Curtis Brown, Ltd., gift. The papers of Curtis Brown, Ltd., have been considerably enriched with the recent gift from the literary agency of approximately 110,000 letters, manuscripts, and publishing documents, dating from the 1950s through the 1970s. The author files contain extensive correspondence with numerous American and English writers, including, among others, Michael J. Arlen, W.H. Auden, Saul Bellow, Elizabeth Bowen, John Cheever, Frederic Dannay, Lawrence Durrell, Erle Stanley Gardner, Christopher Isherwood, Robert Graves, Ogden Nash, Julian Symons, and Eudora Welty.

Dannay gift. Messrs. Richard and Douglas Dannay have presented a collection of 2,681 volumes from the library of their late father, Frederic Dannay, co-creator and co-author of the Ellery Queen mystery stories, a gift which establishes at the Libraries a resource for the study of the modern detective story. There is a unique file of 159 volumes of Frederic Dannay’s own copies of the Queen books which he signed with his two pseudonyms, Ellery Queen and Barnaby Ross. Also included among the collection are: 223 books by Queen, comprising primarily first American and English editions; 302 detective story anthologies edited by Queen; 113 first and early foreign editions of Queen’s books; and a set of Ellery
Henry Hudson Parkway, the Conservatory Garden in Central Park, and a bridge over the Saw Mill River Parkway; work by the landscape architect, Gilmore D. Clarke, in the New York metropolitan area. (Clarke bequest)
Queen's Mystery Magazine in 51 volumes, dating from 1947 to 1975. More than one thousand volumes of twentieth century books in the field of detective fiction by various other authors, nearly all first editions, published in England and America from the 1920s to the 1970s, form another important component of the collection; included are works by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Phoebe Atwood Taylor, Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham, and Dashiell Hammett, among numerous others. Finally, there are 151 volumes of reference works, bibliography, and critical works in the field of detective literature, as well as several hundred volumes of general literature.

Fuld gift. More than two thousand letters and other materials were recently added by Judge Stanley Howells Fuld (LL.B.,
Growing Collections

1926) to the collection of his papers. Among the gift are letters from Warren E. Burger, Thomas E. Dewey, William O. Douglas, John Foster Dulles, Felix Frankfurter, Herbert H. Lehman, Nelson A. Rockefeller, and other jurists and public figures.

Halper gift. The papers and library of the writer and James Joyce authority, Nathan Halper (A.B., 1927; Ph.D., 1973), have been presented by his widow, Mrs. Marjorie Windust Halper. There are correspondence files and manuscripts for his numerous books and articles on Joyce, translations from Yiddish poetry and fiction, writings on chess, short stories and essays on literary topics, and research files on Jewish family names, local history, and Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he had his summer home. The library contains works in the same fields, and most notable among the nearly three hundred volumes are Halper’s heavily annotated copies of *Finnegan’s Wake* and other works by and about Joyce.

Higginbotham gift. Mr. Hal Ford Higginbotham and Mrs. Barbra Buckner Higginbotham (M.S. in L.S., 1969) have presented funds in memory of Mrs. Higginbotham’s father, Professor Zeak Monroe Buckner, for the purchase of the 1554 edition of John Gower’s *De confessione amantis*, printed in London by Thomas Berthelette. The memorial book, reflecting Professor Buckner’s special interest in the literature of the age of Chaucer, is the third edition of one of the classics of Middle English, and it is the first sixteenth century edition of the work to enter the rare book collection. One of the renowned treasures of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library is the late fourteenth century manuscript of Gower’s work in the George Arthur Plimpton Collection, and the presence of an early printed edition will assist the researches of scholars in this period of English literature. The distinguished copy presented by Mr. and Mrs. Higginbotham bears bookplates and ownership marks of George Daniel, Mark Masterman Sykes, Robert Hoe, and Beverly Chew.
Corliss Lamont (left) with John and Constance Masefield, ca. 1938. (Lamont gift)
Our Growing Collections

Lamont gift. Among the several gifts recently received from Dr. Corliss Lamont (Ph.D., 1932) are two photographs relating to John Masefield, one of which depicts the poet’s home at Pinbury Park, Cirencester, and the other a group portrait of the donor with John and Constance Masefield, ca. 1938, taken at the same location.

Marquart gift. Ms. Phyllis Marquart (formerly Phyllis Yuill; M.S., 1973) has presented a collection of fifty-four editions of The Story of Little Black Sambo, written in 1898 by Helen Bannerman, who described a darkskinned child’s adventures with four tigers. Written while the author lived in India, the book became phenomenally popular in both England and the United States. The editions in Ms. Marquart’s gift, dating from one published by Frederick A. Stokes in New York early in the century to one published in the early 1980s, include reprints, foreign editions, adaptations, and stories by other authors using characters from the original work.

Nachmansohn gift. The papers of the late Professor David Nachmansohn have been presented by his widow, Mrs. Edith Nachmansohn. There are more than 1,300 letters, manuscripts, photographs, and printed materials spanning his entire professional career as a professor of biochemistry at Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin, 1926–30, the Sorbonne, 1933–39, Yale University, 1939–42, and Columbia University, 1942–82. Primarily concerned with biochemistry, the collection includes correspondence from some twenty Nobel Prize winners, foremost among them, Otto Meyerhof, director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute, Archibald Vivian Hill, Feodor Lynen, and Severo Ochoa. Professor Nachmansohn’s concern with the Jewish question appears throughout the collection, especially in material concerning the Weizmann Institute and other academic institutions in Israel.

Rothkopf gift. Mrs. Carol Z. Rothkopf (A.M., 1952) has recently presented for addition to the House of Books Collection the files
This seventeenth century bookplate, among the largest in the collection, is over thirteen inches tall. (Schaeffer gift)
of inscribed books, manuscripts, and autograph letters which the playwright Tom Stoppard had sent to Marguerite A. Cohn, the co-founder of the firm. There are inscribed copies of both limited and trade editions of *Dogg’s Hamlet, Cabbot’s Macbeth*, 1979, the mimeographed playscript of *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*, 1977, and twenty-one folio pages of holograph drafts of the 1981 play *On the Razzle*, along with an autograph letter relating to the manuscript. Mrs. Rothkopf’s gift also included a series of snapshots of T.S. and Valerie Eliot at a dinner party which the donor gave at her apartment in March 1959.

**Schaefler gift.** The holdings of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library have been considerably enriched by the recent gift made by Mr. and Mrs. Sam Schaefler of a collection of more than ten thousand bookplates, ranging from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries and including extensive holdings of examples printed in America, England, France, Germany, and other European countries. There are also special files of bookplates of libraries, members of royalty, ecclesiastical figures, Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and authors, as well as the work of notable engravers, such as John Pyne, Alexander Anderson, Edwin Davis French, Joseph Callender, and Peter Maverick. The Schaeffers have also donated a number of other notable items: a group of eleven manuscripts relating to the French Revolution, among which is a letter of October 23, 1789, signed by the commander of the National Guard at Versailles in which he explains the behavior of the Guard during the attack on the palace; a group of thirteen letters written by members of the French court in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; the manuscript of a poem by the noted Danish scientist, H.C. Oersted, addressed to the English astronomer Sir Frederic Herschel; a late eighteenth century pen and ink portrait of Jonathan Swift; three eighteenth century Burmese palm leaf manuscripts; important single autograph letters written by Romain Rolland and Henry W. Longfellow, the latter with a
contemporary photographic portrait; the 1940 poster printed in London, "A tous les Français," containing quotations from General Charles de Gaulle's famous radio address; a manuscript resolution of the Artist's Society, Philadelphia, 1846, on the death of the painter Henry Inman; and Henry Ward Beecher's copy of James A. Shearman's *Illustrations of a Ramble Abroad*, 1884, inscribed to Beecher with a watercolor drawing by the author.

*Scott gift.* Barbara Howe's *Wild Geese Flying*, a poem privately issued as a Christmas greeting in 1966, has been donated by Mr. Barry Scott; the four page leaflet, printed in red, is inscribed by the poet on the verso of the title leaf. Mr. Scott also donated Melville Cane's copy of the first edition of *Annie Allen* by Gwendolyn Brooks, autographed by Cane on the inside front cover.

*Starr gift.* Mrs. Mary Belle Starr has presented a group of papers of her late husband, Professor Louis M. Starr (A.M., 1953; Ph.D., 1954), relating to his researches on Joseph Pulitzer. The more than two thousand items in the gift include annotated photocopies of Pulitzer letters and transcriptions of the publisher's shorthand notebooks which Professor Starr had gathered in connection with his proposed biography.

*Swanberg gift.* The biographer and historian William Andrew Swanberg has presented papers, manuscripts, and correspondence pertaining to his notable and award-winning books, *Citizen Hearst*, *Jim Fisk: The Career of an Improbable Rascal*, *Luce and His Empire*, *Norman Thomas: The Last Idealist*, *Pulitzer*, *The Rector and the Rogue*, *Sickles the Incredible*, and *Whitney Father, Whitney Heiress*. There is extensive correspondence with publishers and agents, as well as with numerous authors and public figures, including William Benton, James M. Cain, Bruce Catton, John Hersey, Margaret Leech, Archibald MacLeish, Carey McWilliams, Reinhold Niebuhr, Mrs. Fremont Older, Dick Powell, Adela Rogers St. Johns, Thornton Wilder, and members of the Whitney family.
Van Doren gift. In memory of George Van Doren, Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Van Doren and Miss Mary Van Doren have presented the Van Doren family bible. Printed in Dordrecht, Holland, in 1730 by Pieter and Jacob Keur, the volume, illustrated with handsome engravings of Biblical scenes, contains genealogical records of the Van Doren family for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
Activities of the Friends

Finances. General purpose contributions during the twelve month period ended on June 30, 1985, totaled $31,044. Special purpose gifts, primarily designated for the Rare Book and Manuscript Library building fund, totaled $194,403. Gifts in kind reached the all time high of $511,768. The total of all gifts and contributions since the establishment of the association in 1951 now stands at $5,747,736. The Council also approved a transfer of $10,000 to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library furnishings fund, the fifth annual gift made by the Friends to this project.

New Council Members. Mrs. Pearl London and Mr. George Lowry have been elected to serve on the Council of the Friends.

Fall reception. A reception to open the exhibition “The House of Books that Marguerite and Louis Cohn Built” will be held on Thursday afternoon, December 5, in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library. On display will be a selection of first editions, photographs, manuscripts, autograph letters, and memorabilia received by bequest from the late Marguerite A. Cohn.

Future Meetings. The winter exhibition, “Genius and Madman Baron Corvo,” will open with a member’s preview on Thursday, March 6, 1986, in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library; and the annual Bancroft Awards Dinner will be held in the Rotunda of Low Memorial Library on Thursday evening, April 3, 1986.

Note: In the May issue of Columns, p. 37, the donor of the James G. Phelps Stokes papers should have been given as Mrs. Lettice S. Phelps Stokes.
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