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# A GREAT PATRON OF LITERATURE

*Sir Louis Sterling, who came from America fifty years ago to seek his fortune, has presented his magnificent library to London University*

By H. E. BATES



Sir Louis Sterling at a party chatting to the late Revd. Sir Herbert Dunningo.

**A**MONG the many books published in this country during 1954 there is one which has not been on sale to the general public. It is a big book, more than 600 pages long. It is a very handsome book, with many illustrations. It is also, I think, a remarkable and important book. Yet I have never heard it discussed; nor, so far as I know, has it been reviewed. Perhaps this is because it is in reality a catalogue, the contents of which are unique and, although very valuable, have just been given away by their owner.

The volume is the catalogue of rare books, first editions and manuscripts contained in the library of Sir Louis Sterling, and the body that has benefited from Sir Louis's munificence is the University of London, to which he has bequeathed this extraordinary collection while he is, happily, still alive.

The catalogue, excellently planned by Mr. John Haywood and compiled by Miss Margaret Cannery of the library of the University of London, contains more than 2,500 items, many of them original manuscripts, and has in it something representing almost every English author of importance from William Langland, author of *Piers Plowman*, down to the present day, including such unexpected oddities as first editions of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *The Young Visitors*, as well as a considerable section of Napoleonic and some manuscripts of Mozart.

It is, however, not simply its size and the extent of its contents that, to me at any rate, make this book important. It is more because it is the record of a whole life and a man that I take it down from my shelves with both admiration and a thrill. It is possible that a few of the authors represented in it will seem of less importance than yesterday's newspaper by the time we have reached the end of the present century, and time will no doubt deal harshly, as it always does, with other reputations represented here. But what will not change are the reflected characteristics and qualities of the man who, throughout fifty years, gathered this collection together.

Where other wealthy men collected yachts and race-horses, Louis Sterling collected books and their authors. He made himself a literary patron and—the economic future of these islands being what it is—is more than likely the last of his kind.

**L**OUIS STERLING came to this country in the winter of 1903. It is typical of him, I think, that he reversed what was then the popular mode of emigration and came from the United States to seek his fortune in England instead of *vice versa*. He was inspired to do so by the City of London, which he now modestly says "has been good to me." In his luggage were about thirty books.

His first job in this country was that of commercial traveller and it took him up and down England into towns where he often found it impossible to do business because of early-closing days. On these spare afternoons he began to

browse over bookstalls in market places, over barrows and in second-hand furniture shops.

His initiation into the world of first editions came through finding a ragged set of Dickens's *Christmas Books*. He expected to buy them for a shilling or two and was greatly surprised when the dealer asked him thirty shillings, "because they were first editions." Thirty shillings must have been a good deal of money in those days to a commercial traveller in his early twenties, but Sterling bought the books "with wonderment, decided to explore the mystery further, and thus became a book-collector."

After that his interest in book collecting grew rapidly into what he calls both a passion and a consolation and it continued on lines that are again, I think, characteristic of the man. For Sterling found that he could not, even when wealthy, collect first editions merely for their own sake. "I found myself unable to approve of collecting first editions I could not read," he says, and for that reason his collection is only of books in the English language.

**I**T was also characteristic of him that he became interested not merely in dead authors. He was very aware of living ones. He was passionately—and often compassionately—interested in very young, unknown and struggling writers, many of whom can thank Louis Sterling for stopping up a gap to keep an economic wind away.

While he was collecting, no doubt at great expense, rarities from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth, Dickens and almost every other English classical writer, he was also acquiring first editions and manuscripts of modern writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, T. F. Powys, Richard Aldington, W. H. Davies, T. S. Eliot, Compton Mackenzie, Rhys Davies, Liam O'Flaherty, Evelyn Waugh and the Sitwells.

This section alone contains over 600 items and when we remember that the entire collection of books and manuscripts bequeathed by Hugh Walpole to the Kings School at Canterbury contains only about 150 items altogether we are able to get a fair idea of Louis Sterling's range, taste and munificence as a collector.

It has always seemed to me remarkable that

## PUBLISHERS' ANNOUNCEMENT

The publishers regret to announce that costs of production have risen so steeply in recent years that it is no longer possible to publish JOHN O' LONDON'S WEEKLY on an economic basis. As a result, publication ceases with this issue.

collectors of books should find satisfaction in first editions for their own sake, happy in the possession of a work of which there are in existence perhaps hundreds of other identical copies, while at the same time showing indifference to an author's original manuscript.

Louis Sterling thought otherwise, and there are consequently more than eighty original MSS. in his collection, representing authors from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. Burns and Boswell are represented here; there are ninety-seven folio leaves from *Piers Plowman*; Dickens, Tennyson, Byron, Carlyle, Emerson, Ruskin are represented by items of great interest, one Byron MS. being accompanied by a charming note from Sir Henry Lushington to Miss Talbot which says: "I cannot remember how it came into my possession. I do not think I stole it, but at all events you were not responsible for my sins."

It is probable, I think, that the recreation of private book-collecting will never again quite offer the opportunities that it did in Louis Sterling's day. He was fortunate not only in being able to acquire a personal fortune in days when taxation and the cost of living comfortably were low, but also in being able to acquire the greater part of his collection during three decades of this century when the fruits of contemporary literature, and of book production itself, were at their richest. The day of the Private Press has probably vanished for ever, but while it lasted Louis Sterling bought no fewer than 532 items from that vanished world of vellum, pigskin, gilt and hand-made paper.

**N**OT all of those Private Presses belonged to the period when limited editions were appearing by the hundreds, as it seemed, every week. The great and lesser nineteenth-century Presses—the Ashendene, the De La More, the Daniel, the Essex House and the Kelmscott—are all handsomely represented; the famous Presses of the 'twenties are here almost in full.

Louis Sterling—it is a small source of pleasure to me that our birthdays fall on the same day—is now seventy. Collections, as he well knows, begin by being possessed and end, inevitably, by possessing, but it seems to me an unusually wise and intelligent gesture of his to have presented his collection to London, his beloved city, while he was still alive. Modestly he calls it making "some useful disposition of my library," but I like to think that London, as I do, will find it much more than a collection. I hope it will regard it for all time as being splendidly representative of a species that will, I fear, grow rarer in the world's uneasy futures: the patron of authors and their art.