

ALICE IN THE LAND OF SUNSHINE

## Tour Day 1 – Selby Library

*Featured Speaker –*

**Maureen E. Mulvihill – Rare Books by Early Women Writers: The Formation & Utility of a Private Collection**



FABS SPEAKER, MAUREEN E. MULVIHILL, WITH SOME SPECIAL OLD FRIENDS

**Gary Simons:** Beginning with your specific title: Who are the women writers in your collection? Why are their books important to you? Give us some context.

**Maureen E. Mulvihill:** The Mulvihill Collection is a small, dedicated collection of rare books by early women writers (English, Irish, Dutch), mostly pre-1800. The best of my rarities includes Aphra Behn, Maria Edgeworth, ‘Ephelia’, Ann Fanshawe, Anne Finch, Lucy Hutchinson, Mary de la Rivière Manley, Mary Wortley Montagu, Katherine Philips, Hester Thrale, Mary Tighe (Lytton Strachey copy), and Dutch prodigy Anna Maria Van Schurman. Later figures include Mary Shackleton Leadbeater, Sarah Hale, Anna Jameson, Vita Sackville-West, Mary Somerville, and Virginia Woolf (Hogarth Press, jacket art Vanessa Bell).

The collection’s ‘special’ items include deluxe facsimiles of Besler’s *Florilegium*, Muffet’s *Insectorum*, Maria Sybilla Merian’s *Blumenbuch*, and Samuel Johnson’s

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*Dictionary*. And then handcrafted Irish books by Malachi McCormick (Stone Street Press, NY) and four editions of the *Rubaiyat* (FitzGerald's to Richardson's).

Also some modern cult classics: Nancy Drews, *Portrait of Jennie*, *Odd Man Out*, *Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Book*. My letterpress broadsheets include Shakespeare's *Sonnet XI* (Old School Press, UK) and the iconic *Irish Proclamation* (Dublin, 1916).

The Conservator of the Mulvihill Collection is David H. Barry (Griffin Bookbinding, St. Petersburg, FL), trained in Wales: a valued associate.

These old timers are important to me for historical and scholarly reasons. I also value their contribution to my development as a student of women writers, dating from the 1970s, and I continue to use them in my continuing research. Imagine where these old books have traveled over the centuries! Imagine the many readers and booksellers and auctioneers who held and admired them. Each book comes into our hands with its own history and ownership; it also has achieved a record of commercial value over time. But first and last, the book is an expressive form, a material artifact of its own century. A book has much to tell us if we know to *look*.

**GS:** Back to your title: How did you form your collection? What is its utility? And how is it a private collection, as you say?

**MEM:** Dating from childhood days in ol' Detroit, I enjoyed reading and collecting particular books, for their content and physical beauty (binding, typography, book arts, illustration). Then as a student of mostly pre-1800 literary cultures, I was exposed to authentic copies of these old books in university libraries. I began forming my own collection in the 1980s when I relocated to New York City from Wisconsin (PhD, '82). I had secure employment in the financial sector as the first staff writer at Gruntal Financial Corp., 14 Wall St.; and that income, along with post-doctoral training at Columbia University's Rare Book School, gave me the means and the grounding to move forward with my collecting interests. In the rarified world of antiquarian book specialists, I intersected with many distinguished bibliophiles, such as Leona Rostenberg and John Fleming. Their early direction and access were invaluable. The books in my collection were (mostly) found through direct contacts with booksellers in the States and the U.K.; a few copies I spotted in sale catalogues.

As for utility, I use the books in my collection for my own research; I also display them at public presentations and conferences. If I am teaching a course, as a visiting professor, I enjoy bringing in a few rare books. Students are always fascinated by the age of the items, their unusual physical properties (page design, type, binding), and always the stylized frontispiece portraits of the women authors. My collection doesn't gather much dust: I am an active steward and caretaker.

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Now this you will find interesting, if not perhaps eccentric: Anytime I am doing deep work on a particular author, I must have a copy of the author's book on my desk. Not a library copy, not a facsimile, but a first, or early, edition. This is inspiration, this adds mightily to the ethos of the entire experience. It validates and authenticates the entire process.

My collection is "a private collection" in that it was formed and maintained independently by this individual (this buyer, this owner); and it is not accessible at a local public library or university library. There are many great private collections throughout book history, but most of these collectors seldom display, or even loan, what they have. (The Mark Samuels Lasner Collection of Victoriana, recently donated to the University of Delaware, is an exception.) It is often during public auctions that scholars, librarians, and collectors learn of unrecorded copies of rare books; e.g., the Brett-Smith *Ephelia* (1679; provenance, Sir Edmund Gosse), Sotheby's, May 2004, Lot 219, GBP3360. The Gosse-Brett-Smith *Ephelia* is now happily preserved at Chawton House Library, Hampshire, U.K.

**GS:** You're on record as an established collector since the 1980s: are you still collecting?

**MEM:** Well ... what I don't need here, Gary, is another book! Yet if I see something special on offer, I take notice. Collectors, incidentally, are often obsessive, addictive personalities: they must have what they love and value (they are driven by ownership *desire*). And collectors come in many stripes and colors: the unsophisticated accumulator, the discriminating collector, and the elite connoisseur collector who follows the book market as a serious business, nearly a science. Each of these different strata of collector makes a contribution to the preservation of the book. Now in reply to your question: My recent acquisitions are a Mary Somerville, three Hogarth Press imprints by Virginia and Leonard Woolf, two Swift items, and an uncommon copy of the 1798 *Rules & Statutes of the Royal Irish Academy*, completely restored as a deluxe edition with marbled endpapers, gold lettering, and book box, by my collection's conservator (2011–): David H. Barry.

**GS:** As we bibliophiles age (sigh!), we are burdened by the sad task of moving our collection into other hands. Have you made any such plans?

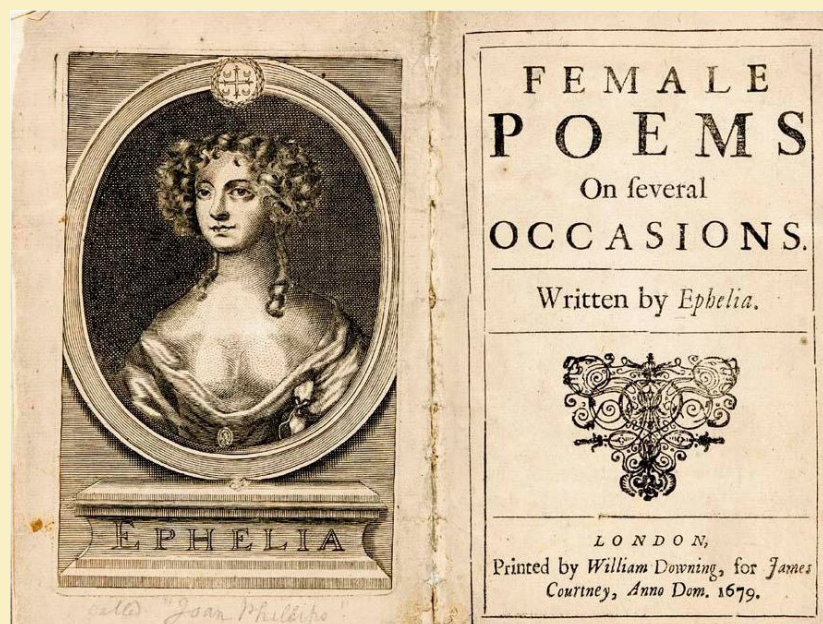
**MEM:** Not yet, but soon. Here's my plan: First, I must assemble a lovely sale catalogue of the collection. Each book would have its own page, with images, full description of the copy, brief statement of the book's historical importance, sales history, and approximate present valuation. The catalogue would be distributed as a bound document to the major libraries and private collectors. There will be terms of sale: to insure the integrity and character of the collection, it must not be dispersed, but rather purchased as a dedicated collection. And then with

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guidance from licensed specialists (appraisers), I will set a price range for the entire collection. Then the fun begins. (Most of the pre-1700 books in my collection would bring close to US\$5000 on the public market. A few have a distinguished provenance, such as my Lytton Strachey *Mary Tighe*.)

**GS:** Leave us with some words and directions for up-&-coming new collectors:

**MEM:** Dear New Collector: If you find yourself utterly captured by a particular author, a particular genre, or, say, a particular style of binding, and you wish to form a collection ... do it! But do it with direction from established specialists: not hobbyists, not enthusiasts, but credentialed colleagues. And save your pennies. If your collecting tastes incline to rare books, you will soon find that this is a serious, expensive business ~ no country for amateurs. Those caveats aside, I happily promise you this: you will meet extraordinary people, people whose financial investment, taste, and judgment help assure the history and the future of the book.



*Female Poems...by Ephelia* (London, 1679), the rarest and most commercially valuable item in the Mulvihill Collection. Last at auction, Sotheby's 2004, Edmund Gosse-Brett Smith copy; buyer, Chawton House UK, GBP3360. 2020 valuation, US5000+. In the mid-1990s, Mulvihill identified Lady Mary Villiers, later Stuart, Duchess of Richmond, as the ingenious hand behind the 'Ephelia' texts; Lady Mary was known as "the Butterfly", and a butterfly-shaped vignette appears on the very title-page of her book, which she dedicates to herself (the perfect cover).

See "[Ephelia](#)," Orlando Project. Also [ephelia.com](#).