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W. Hugh Peal: A Reminiscence

Lawrence S. Thompson
University of Kentucky

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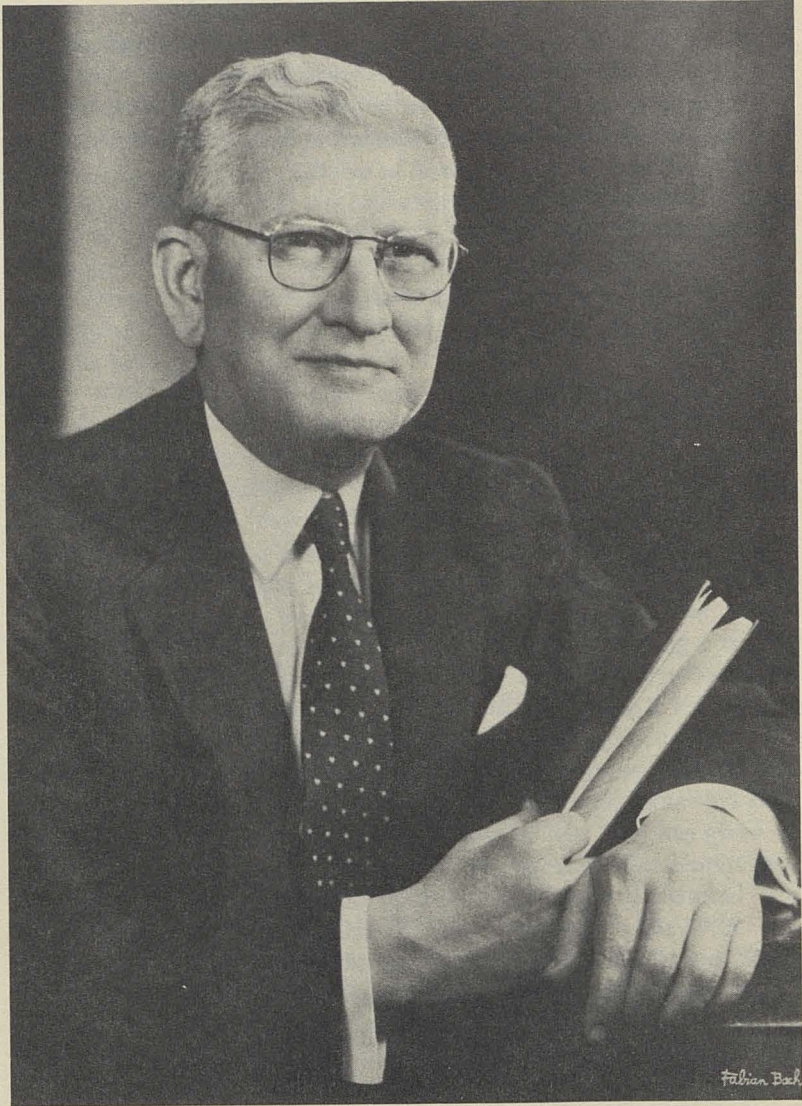
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W. Hugh Peal

Portrait by Fabian Bachrach

W. Hugh Peal: A Reminiscence

Lawrence S. Thompson

One day back in the early 1950s our head cataloger, the late Ellen Butler Stutsman, came to my office and told me she wanted to introduce an old friend. Ellen and Margaret Tuttle, then supervisor of department libraries, were the only survivors of the library staff of the early 1920s when the University of Kentucky was beginning to develop solid collections for undergraduate study and for research by faculty, graduate students, and visiting scholars.

Ellen's old friend was Hugh Peal. I had seen his name in the Grolier Club rotulum and heard of him as a perceptive collector. I did not know at the time that he was a Kentuckian (born in Bandana, Ballard County, 27 March 1898) and one of the first Rhodes Scholars from our university. Our rapport soon came out. Both of us were book collectors and dyed-in-the-wool Kentuckians.

After a most delightful initial visit, I went the next day to *Who's Who in America* to get the basic facts on Hugh Peal. He graduated here in 1922, with a distinguished undergraduate record, a year or so before President Frank L. McVey was able to establish Alpha of Kentucky of Phi Beta Kappa. (Hugh Peal was the first retrospective member when we discovered the situation.) As a Rhodes Scholar he received law degrees from Oxford in 1924 and 1925, M.A. in 1954 (not his last degree, for there was an LL.D. from Kentucky in 1959). From 1925 on he went up steadily in the legal profession in Manhattan and became one of the most respected members of the bar in a metropolis of lawyers. President Herman L. Donovan tried to lure him back to Lexington as dean of our Law School, and I suspect it was very difficult for him to decline it. He has contributed significant articles to legal journals, and one can only hope that his personal law office papers may some day be available to students in this area. But perhaps our major regret is that he did not write on literary history. He did keep a diary that is a significant record of a distinguished attorney and a perceptive bibliophile, traveller, and observer of all manner of people and places.

There are all sorts of things that can be said about Hugh Peal—

gentleman, eminent attorney, collector, scholar, benefactor. As a benefactor, probably the least expensive but among the most significant gifts to our library were the "give-away" books. It is pleasant to think of what he did to stimulate book collecting by students. He would pick up miscellaneous collections, "cats and dogs" as the booksellers say, but with many good texts by good authors, to be offered free to students on a regulated basis, no more than ten each, to be listed by the recipient in proper bibliographical form, and with the provision that the student enter the Samuel M. Wilson Book Collecting Contest before graduation. At least two former students are developing significant collections, with the palaeogenesis from things they chose from the "give-away" books.

What more can one ask from a bibliophile than to start a bibliological epidemic? Hugh Peal started one, and ultimate results might conceivably approach the importance of his own tremendous gift to our library.

The personal friendship with Margaret and Hugh Peal is enduring. I have visited them at their beautiful home in Loudoun County, Virginia, near Leesburg, "Woodburn," which they reluctantly gave up last year for a more convenient place in town. Many of the good books were there, and we enjoyed prowling through them. It was always pleasant to accept the gift of a good reading copy to put me to sleep on the old George Washington (Chesapeake and Ohio) out of Charlottesville.

I did not see the original development of the Peal Collection in the 1930s and 1940s, but I did see how it has been rounded out over the last three decades. Many a collector in major financial circumstances could have acquired some tens of millions of dollars worth of rare books and manuscripts through an agent. However, Hugh Peal acquired his collection for his own pleasure and intellectual stimulation. He has read a good portion of his books, often reread them. I must confess that I don't read from cover to cover most of my own books: bibliographies that are useful but not reading items, early printed items acquired for the imprint but better reading in modern editions, and Kentuckiana, of which ninety-five percent is trash today but, as a collection, archaeological monuments in the future. This sort of thing has not attracted Hugh Peal, although he appreciates fully the importance of bibliography and has acquired some fine books for their value as monuments of printing and illustration. He has had a special penchant for the great works with botanical illustration.

His interest in botany is partially hereditary. A maternal great-grandfather, Jermyn J. Wingo, was a highly respected horticulturalist and general farmer in the Jackson Purchase, also a long-time correspondent of other horticulturalists. Although there is no evidence to support it, Hugh likes to think that Wingo's correspondents may have included William Bartram. As for Hugh's family, there must be all sorts of bibliological genes, to judge from gifts of books and encouragement to read at a tender age.

No collector can thrive without firm allies in the antiquarian book business. Hugh Peal never simply gave a commission to a dealer, "Build me a collection," for he knew what he wanted and watched carefully the antiquarian and auction catalogs. Still he knew that dealers and their scouts had lines on things about which a collector might never hear. A good example is the relatively inexpensive "give-away" books. A busy attorney could hardly have time to look around for small, even though good, reading collections. He chose his associates in the book trade felicitously. Above all there was David Kirschenbaum in the Carnegie Book Shop on Fifty-ninth Street opposite Bloomingdale's, and Winifred A. Myers, then on New Bond Street, some three or four flights up a tough staircase, but well worth the climb, now still active and helpful to collectors at 35 Dover Street. It might be noted that it was in large measure the result of Hugh Peal's association with Dave Kirschenbaum that the latter suggested to other collectors he served that they make valuable gifts to the University of Kentucky Libraries.

Until Hugh Peal moved from his Gramercy Park apartment to Virginia, one of the most enjoyable aspects of the "bibliographical weekend" at the end of January (Grolier Club annual dinner on the last Thursday, Bibliographical Society on Friday, Grolier Club tea on Saturday afternoon) was to visit with the Peals. (Margaret, a most gracious hostess, is not a professional bibliophile, but the important thing is that she understands and is sympathetic with all book interests, has never fussed at her husband for cluttering up homes with books.) In the interims between bookish functions Hugh Peal and I would have the most delightful conversations about books, their solace for dedicated professional men and schoolteachers, and their value for readers, students, and scholars.

It was almost a ritual to leave Gramercy Park on Saturday about 10 A.M. and go to the Carnegie Book Shop. There Dave Kirschenbaum would regale us with bibliophilic and bibliopolic

anecdotes. He won't write about his rich experience, but somebody must talk him into an interview on the basic history of the antiquarian book trade. It is most likely that as many significant manuscripts and rare books passed through his hands as Doctor Rosenbach ever saw. The place was not quite as elegantly accoutered as some of the offices of snobbier antiquarian dealers in Manhattan, but it was comfortable and bibliographically attractive. Among several other habitués of these Saturday morning conventicles were the late Albert Boni and James Schoff, then president of Bloomingdale's. Albert's great collection on the history of photography went to UCLA, and I am not sure what happened to Jim's fine collection of Civil War regimental histories. There was never a nibble from either about veiled hints there could be a good home for both collections in Lexington. Still there is abundant compensation in memories of the three-hour bibliophilic luncheon at Gino's opposite Bloomingdale's on Lexington Avenue, one of the best Italian restaurants in a city that has more good Italian bistros than Naples.

Hugh Peal is a man of many interests. He knows that books are not absolutely dead things, but one of his major pleasures has been in biologically living things, including animals and plants. I suspect that one of many reasons why he went to Virginia in retirement was to enjoy them more completely than he could in a Gramercy Park apartment. Yet I do not trust Hugh Peal on one point: I would never let him loose on my land to plant. It would cost a small fortune to hire a gardener and a forester to take care of all of the beautiful things he put out at Woodburn. His successor as squire of the estate must be grateful, but Hugh Peal surely had as much pleasure from his plantings as he has had from some of his noble illustrated botanical works. However, Woodburn was always kept immaculate and orderly, inside and out, so I observed it and so report many people who went on the Northern Virginia Garden Tour.

In connection with the acceptance of the Peal Collection there should be special recognition of dedicated members of the University of Kentucky Library staff such as Ellen Stutsman, Margaret Tuttle, Jacqueline Bull (head of Special Collections from 1945 to 1976), and others who created a system and an atmosphere in a major research library that is consistent with the importance and worth of the Peal Collection. Hugh Peal is likely to be satisfied that his collections are housed and serviced in a library with a staff

that understands how they can be used effectively, in physical facilities that will give adequate protection.