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Aubrey Beardsley, H. S. Nichols, and the Decadent Archive

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The exhibition of forty-three drawings by Aubrey Beardsley at the Anderson Galleries has an altogether exceptional significance. It rolls up the years like a scroll, takes us back in a trice to what has been called the renaissance of the nineties, and in the process wakes reflections on matters having to do not only with that period but with the present time.¹

The spring of 1919 in New York must have been an exciting time and place for devotees of the work of the decadent British artist Aubrey Beardsley. On 20th March of that year, the Anderson Galleries, a prominent auction house, held a sale of original Beardsley drawings formerly in the collection of Frederick H. Evans. Evans, a British photographer, had been Beardsley's friend, and the artist responsible for the famous portrait photograph of Beardsley posing with his head held in his long, tapering fingers [fig. 1]. The sale, which had been preceded by an exhibition, proved that the appetite for Beardsley's work had only grown in the 21 years since the artist's death; one drawing was reported to have sold for the tidy sum of \$630 – an unequivocal sign that, among art collectors at least, 'nineties decadence could still command a robust market.

Scarcely a month had passed, however, before another altogether larger and more surprising 'treasure-trove' of Beardsley drawings was exhibited to New York audiences.² Not held at an auction house (indeed, the drawings were not intended for sale), this second Beardsley exhibition was mounted by publisher and bookseller H. S. Nichols at his bookshop on East 33rd Street, near Fifth Avenue. Harry Sidney Nichols (1865-1941) was an expatriate Englishman, and the former business partner of Leonard Smithers, the flamboyant 'Publisher to the Decadents' who had brought out several books by Oscar Wilde in the late 1890s.³ Smithers had also employed Beardsley in the artist's final years: for instance, he published the Beardsley-illustrated decadent periodical the *Savoy* after the artist was fired by *The Yellow Book's* publisher John Lane during the Wilde trials. By 1919, however, these fin-de-siècle figures were all long dead: Beardsley had died in 1898; Wilde in 1900; and Smithers in 1907. Nichols lived on, and his background, however

selectively presented,⁴ thus supplied an attractive provenance narrative to what were enthusiastically described in the press as ‘new Beardsley originals’.⁵ And if the Anderson Galleries exhibition could turn back time, ‘roll[ing] up the years like a scroll’ by transporting its attendees back to the 1890s with familiar images from Beardsley’s career-making *Morte D’Arthur* series of illustrations, the Nichols display of ‘new originals’ seemed a veritable time capsule. For these 70 drawings apparently comprised a lost archive of decadent artworks previously unseen by the public. ‘Most of these originals have never been reproduced’, the New York *Evening Post* enthused, ‘and all estimates and accounts of Beardsley’s art will therefore have to be reconsidered and amplified’.⁶

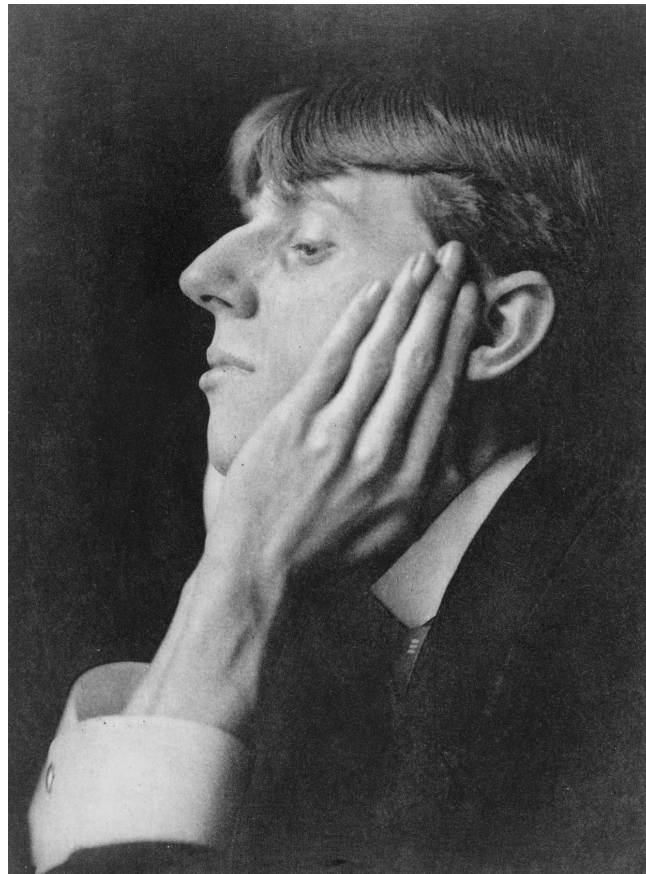


Fig. 1: Aubrey Beardsley by Frederick H. Evans, 1894.
Source: Wikimedia Commons; public domain image.

Collectors and critics in New York and beyond were indeed unprepared for the display of the Nichols hoard. In a printed invitation to his exhibition, Nichols announced that ‘the peculiar

and compelling charm of this collection is that none of these drawings have ever been published, none of them were even known to be in existence; they are consequently a complete and startling surprise.⁷ Because its contents ranged from early sketches, to book designs, to unpublished illustrations related to well-known commissions (such as *The Rape of the Lock*), to portraits of literary and artistic luminaries, the Nichols collection encompassed images that appeared to represent every phase and aspect of Beardsley's career. They constituted a Beardsley retrospective comprised entirely of unknown artworks. The emergence of the Nichols collection brings into focus the place in twentieth-century cultural memory occupied by 1890s decadence, and particular images, as we shall see, also make up miniature archives of decadent meaning and associations in themselves.

Connoisseurs of the artist's distinctive black-and-white aesthetic were certainly startled by what they saw at the exhibition, so much so that they quickly cast doubt on the authenticity of Nichols's 'peculiar' Beardsleys and caused 'no little stir in [New York] art circles', according to *Vanity Fair*.⁸ Indeed, a lengthy and acrimonious correspondence involving Nichols himself, his critics, and his defenders seethed for several months in the pages of the *Evening Post*, with the combative Nichols declaring his 'utter indifference' to the opinion of a 'plague of experts'.⁹ This debate positioned connoisseurship of collectors and scholars in contention with provenance and ostensible first-hand knowledge of Beardsley and his work. For Nichols's 'peculiar' Beardsleys turned out not to be the 'new originals' touted by the press: instead they were outright fakes.

Although Nichols's critics stopped short of directly accusing him of forgery, they were convinced that the drawings were bogus, and badly done at that. Writing in the *Evening Post* in May 1919, for example, the British art journalist C. Lewis Hind archly remarked that the drawings Nichols displayed 'are a travesty of [Beardsley's] work; they are an insult to his memory. I went to the Nichols exhibition with high hopes. I stayed fifteen minutes. Five minutes, one minute would have sufficed. These feeble, pretentious things by Beardsley? Pooh!¹⁰ Hind had been the co-founder, in 1893, of the art periodical *The Studio*, the cover of whose inaugural issue had been decorated by Beardsley, so he spoke with some authority on matters related to the artist's output.

He was a relatively late entrant into the contretemps, however, as several other Beardsley experts had already aired their decidedly disparaging views of the Nichols collection. In high dudgeon, Nichols publicly replied to his earlier critics in the press. Responding in the *Evening Post* to Joseph Pennell and A. E. Gallatin, for instance, the publisher indignantly countered their veiled allegations of fraud: ‘I know a great deal more about Beardsley than either Mr. Pennell or Mr. Gallatin’, he wrote, ‘but I absolutely decline to make known to the world what I do know’.¹¹ Nichols claimed access to privileged knowledge about his subject, apparently hard-won by years in the publishing and bookselling business. He set this expertise against the opinion of the wealthy American art collector and critic Gallatin, who was an early and prolific scholar of Beardsley and whose first publication on the artist had appeared in 1900, and Pennell, whose 1893 article ‘A New Illustrator: Aubrey Beardsley’ had announced the artist’s ‘discovery’ in *The Studio*.¹² Nichols’s protestations did not succeed in authenticating the drawings, however, and as the controversy dragged on, a consensus emerged among the contributing critics that they were most definitely forgeries. According to these experts, the Nichols images contained easily-identifiable errors inconsistent with Beardsley’s genuine work: all of the drawings were signed in full, something that Beardsley rarely did; they were quite large in size, and indeed much larger than any known authentic Beardsley drawings; and they were all executed on Bristol board, a medium that the artist was not known to have used. Despite his personal connections and memories of 1890s London, these were hard material facts for Nichols to dispute.

If we ask whether or not Nichols *knew* that his ‘startling’ Beardsleys were fakes, it is difficult to come up with a definitive answer. On the one hand, the *Evening Post* quoted him making numerous flimsy, self-credentializing claims to bolster his collection’s disputed credibility. For instance, Nichols stated that he was with Wilde in Paris after Wilde was released from prison, and that he played a significant role in the 1898 publication of the Smithers-issued *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Neither of these assertions is accurate. On the other hand, he also complained of being misquoted in the press, and his brazen follow-up to the 1919 exhibition in his New York bookshop

hardly seems like the action of a shadowy forger. Nichols was foremost a publisher, and it was in the realm of book-making that he most abundantly (if ultimately unsuccessfully) pressed his case as memorialiser of 1890s decadence. In 1920 he published a visually arresting compilation of black-and-white drawings boldly entitled *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* [fig. 2]. It is a sumptuously produced, large-format tome in an edition limited to 500 copies, each signed – and thus authenticated – with Nichols’s florid autograph [fig. 3]. The title itself contains a misleading statement, since those eponymous fifty drawings are reproductions of fakes exhibited in April 1919. It is hard to imagine a more audacious riposte to the critics who assailed the publisher in the press. Nichols’s book made a brash argument: his *Fifty Drawings* were the real thing because *he said so*.

Even if Nichols declined ‘to make known to the world’ what he did know, the publisher’s secret is perhaps less an insider’s expertise about Beardsley’s art than it is a canny attempt at marketing the afterlife of 1890s decadence for twentieth-century audiences – especially in the United States. For Nichols’s compendium of ‘new originals’ had the potential not only to disrupt the still-amorphous canon of Beardsley’s artwork, as the *Evening Post*’s Joseph Gollomb had observed, but also to assert their publisher’s role as an important archivist – and curator – of late-Victorian decadence itself. As Kristin Mahoney has observed in relation to the 1920s Beardsley-inspired work of artist Beresford Egan, ‘Decadence persisted beyond the turn of the century as it was received, revised, and practiced by authors and artists around the globe.’¹³ Unlike Egan’s pointedly contemporary and satirical work, however, the forged images in Nichols’s book are distinctly backward-looking in their attempt to channel Beardsley and decadence more broadly. They retail a commercial future for the 1890s by inventing a past for it that never existed, and they offer a reading of decadence that, I want to argue, can be understood as particularly *archival* in nature. I explore this idea by examining two of Nichols’s images, one that appeared only in the archive of newsprint, and one that appears in the book: they are portraits of Beardsley and Wilde, respectively.

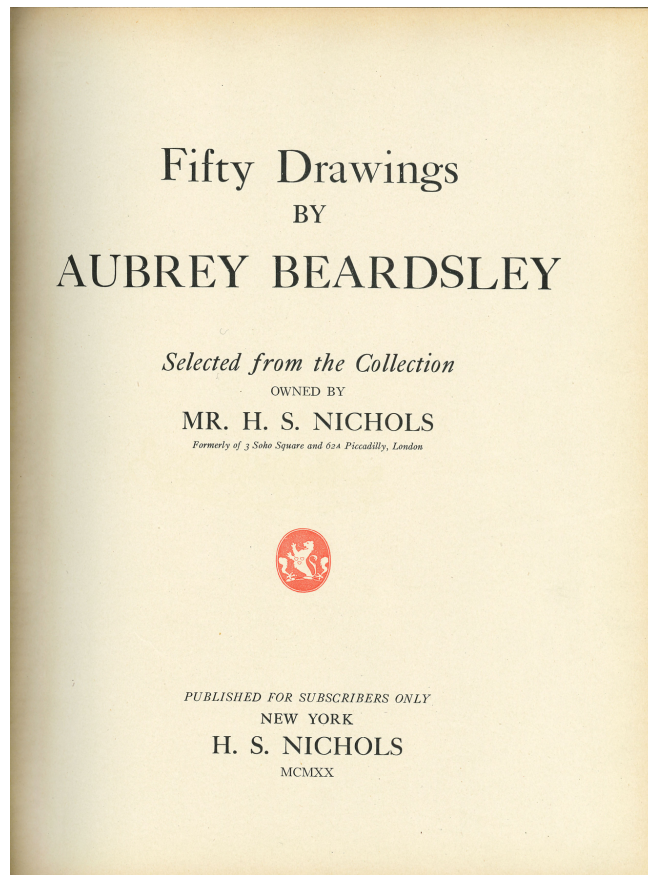


Fig. 2: Title page of *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author's collection.

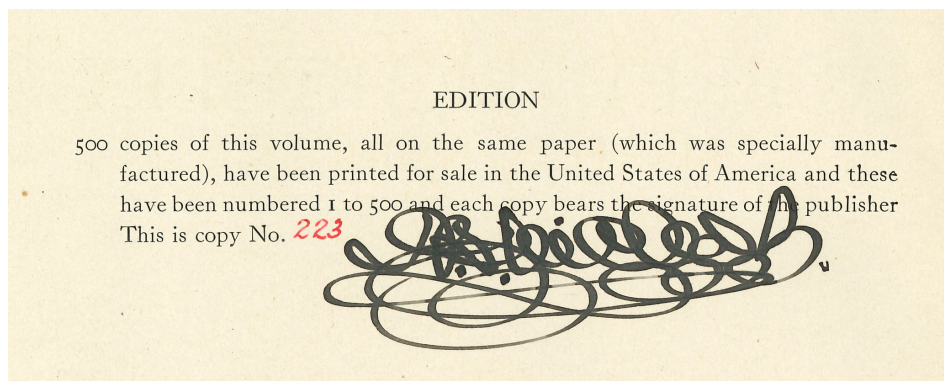


Fig. 3: Signature of H. S. Nichols in *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author's collection.

New Beardsleys in Print

In an article entitled 'New Beardsley Originals', which appeared in the New York *Evening Post* on 12 April 1919, Joseph Gollomb directly links the announcement of Nichols's collection and

exhibition to recent developments in the art market, coming as it did so swiftly after the Anderson Galleries sale the previous month. In that article, Gollomb discusses the drawings' provenance – especially the partnership between Nichols and Smithers – at some length. Beardsley, we are told, was apparently in the habit of settling debts to Nichols with drawings, and over time, Nichols's holdings grew with such payments. Gollomb further quotes Nichols's reminiscences of that period, although some of these, as we have seen, are less than entirely factual. Nichols, for instance, is quoted as describing himself as the 'patron and paymaster' of Beardsley and Wilde – an appellation that could more plausibly be attached to his former business partner Smithers. He also indulges in some rather predictable mythologizing descriptions about the decadent group of 'improvident geniuses' 'avid for every sensation' whose work Nichols printed and Smithers published. 'To know Beardsley and his group was a remarkable experience', according to Nichols, establishing himself as a first-hand witness. 'It was like watching the flight of meteors. They burned themselves up, in their work as well as in their pleasures.'¹⁴ By describing the famous dead burning with such hard, gemlike, Paterian flames, Nichols confirms what *Evening Post* readers might think they already know about such figures as Beardsley and Wilde, or indeed what they could plausibly believe. Such is certainly the case in Nichols's reminiscence of 'a little scene in Paris where Smithers, Wilde, Beardsley and myself were together [and] Smithers persisted in trying to talk French'.¹⁵ The only problem with this appealing recollection is that it did not occur in real life: Nichols was in South Africa at the time,¹⁶ and so he could not have witnessed Wilde quipping 'Isn't Smithers wonderful! He can make himself incoherent in two languages.'¹⁷ This anecdote is akin to the fake Beardsley drawings themselves: plausible in style and content, and attractive in its capacity to evoke 1890s nostalgia. But also like those drawings, it represents a strategic misrepresentation of the past.

A prominent feature of that first *Evening Post* article was an arresting image placed in the centre of the page. It depicted the extinction of one of those 'meteors', and was captioned 'Beardsley's Portrait of Himself Dying'¹⁸ [fig. 4]. In this interior scene, a robed male figure with

shoulder-length hair sits sternly upright in a wingback chair, directly facing the viewer. It is night-time, and the floor beside him is littered with discarded books or papers. Behind him to one side, on a table adorned with an oil lamp, sits a glass of absinthe and a small jug of the water used to dilute the spirit (the absinthe ritual's slotted sugar spoon is absent). In the background, behind two gathered and parted curtains, we see a full moon through a muntined window partly obscured by some spectral clouds. Most bizarrely, the long tail-feathers of a diaphanous, ghostly peacock perched on the artist's chair cascade down one side of his face. In its composition and its associations it is a decidedly lugubrious image – Beardsley's face is set in grim determination, as if welcoming death on his own terms – but it does reinforce the artist's reputation for eccentricity and unrepentant decadence. Of course, the image is a pure fantasy: although Beardsley depicted himself several times, he never executed a death-bed (death-chair?) self-portrait. Beardsley's authorship notwithstanding, this forged self-portrait does an impressive job of symbolic and archival aggregation, as it successfully conjures up the artist's affiliation with nocturnal scenes, interiors, creative work, and peacocks, whose feathers were a recognizable decorative element in some of his best-known authentic drawings. With the ghost peacock seemingly emerging from the artist's head as if in a dream, perhaps this image also depicts the mind-altering effects of consuming absinthe, the signature drink of the decadents – and a substance whose depraved reputation had, since 1912, led to its prohibition in the United States.

It was less the content of the image than the text caption that attracted attention, however. That caption, 'Beardsley's Portrait of Himself Dying', appeared in close proximity on the page to an anecdote of Nichols's about seeing Beardsley in Brussels. Pennell and Gallatin misinterpreted this detail as an erroneous claim that Beardsley had died in the Belgian capital, when he in fact died in Menton, France. Although Nichols defended himself by claiming (implausibly) that the image had been mislabelled and was intended to illustrate Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'The Raven',¹⁹ his critics thought they had caught him in a fatal mistake. A war of words ensued, which turned on the question of who had the greater knowledge of Beardsley's life and work. Understandably,

perhaps, Nichols did not include 'Beardsley's Portrait of Himself Dying' in the 1920 book. Indeed, he omitted twenty of the seventy drawings shown at his exhibition.



Photo. by Edwin Levick.

Beardsley's Portrait of Himself Dying

Fig. 4: 'Beardsley's Portrait of Himself Dying'.
Source: *New York Evening Post Magazine*, 12 April 1919, p. 1.

'Mr. Nichols very frankly told me [...] that he was a bookseller, not an art dealer', A. E. Gallatin reported in the *Evening Post*,²⁰ and indeed Nichols turned his hoard of 'hitherto unpublished' Beardsleys to account not by selling the individual images, but by going to print. 'I am actively engaged in having reproductions made of the whole of my collection', he announced in June 1919 for *Evening Post* readers still following the controversy, 'and [I] shall publish these reproductions in book form as soon as possible, and when published Mr. Gallatin will be able to have as many copies as he may require'.²¹ Stung by the controversy but inspired by the favourable

market conditions suggested by the recent Anderson sale of Beardsley drawings,²² the publisher, grandly described by one of his defenders as the ‘Quaritch²³ of Book Making’, came out with a suitably opulent volume the following year [fig. 5].²⁴ In a note tipped into British art historian G. C. Williamson’s copy of *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*, and dated 6 June 1929, Williamson praises the totality of the images, regardless of their status as fakes. ‘[A]lthough based upon Aubrey Beardsley’s work, none of them are original drawings by him’, he notes. Nevertheless, ‘the book is a great triumph of skill’.²⁵ The aesthetics of book-making were not Nichols’s only concerns, for he was also careful to assert his ownership of these images, and copyright statements in his name – all dated 1920 – appear throughout *Fifty Drawings*. His production costs have yet to be traced, but if Nichols managed to sell all 500 signed and numbered copies at the considerable price of \$15, he would have grossed an impressive \$7,500 – a suitable yield for a publisher likened by his allies to Victorian London’s most celebrated antiquarian bookseller.

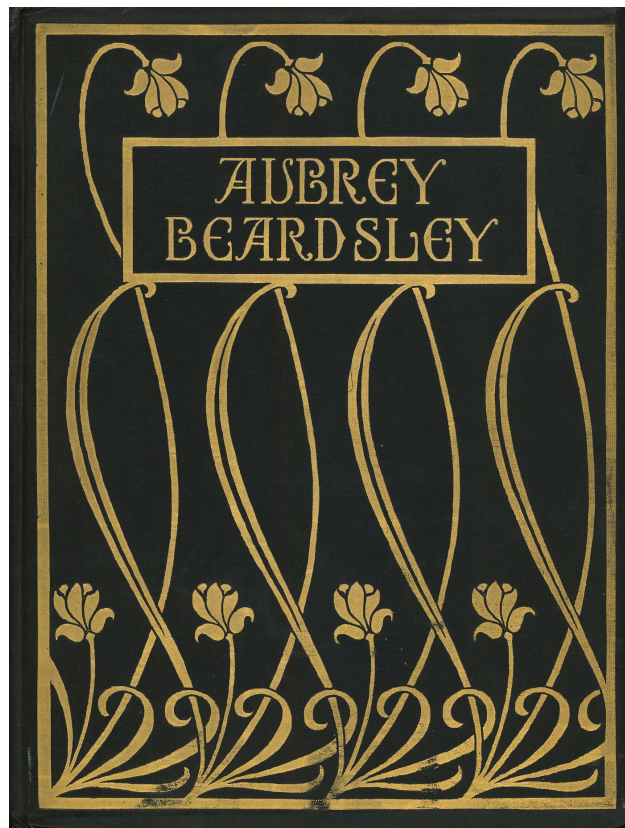


Fig. 5: Binding design for *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author’s collection.

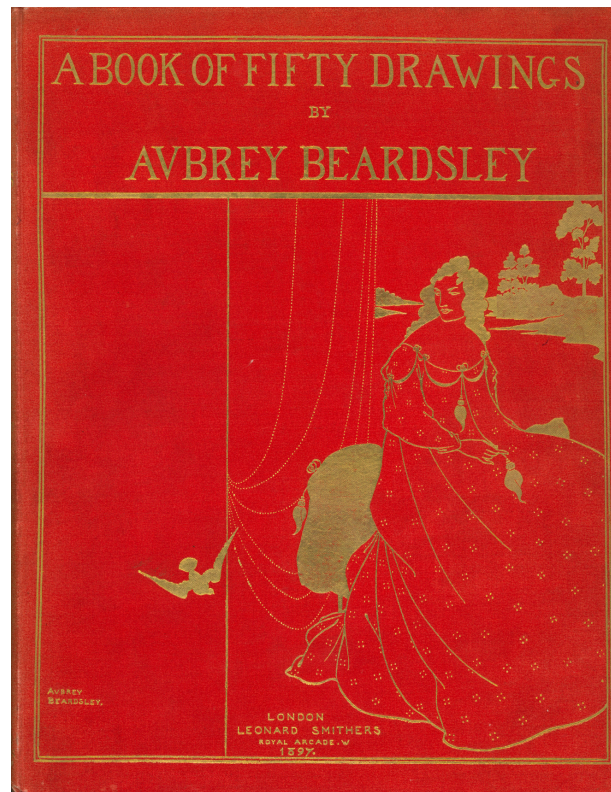


Fig. 6: *A Book of Fifty Drawings*, 1897.
Source: University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.

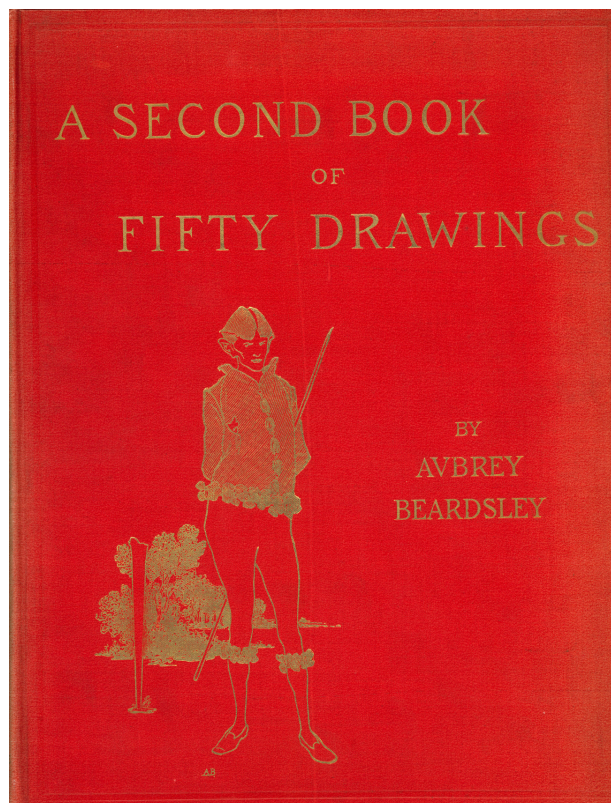


Fig. 7: *A Second Book of Fifty Drawings*, 1899.
Source: University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.

By virtue of its title, *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* promised to carry on a tradition of high-end art publications once supervised by Nichols's former partner: Beardsley's *A Book of Fifty Drawings* had appeared under Smithers's imprint in 1897, and *A Second Book of Fifty Drawings* followed in 1899, shortly after the artist's death [figs 6 & 7]. This second volume included 'twenty-nine hitherto unpublished drawings' which, according to the candid Smithers, 'would not have appeared had Mr. Beardsley been living'.²⁶ Indeed, Beardsley's reputation for erotica and graphic naughtiness 'tend[ed] to keep up the mystery and support the possibility of more authentic drawings being discovered', as even the prolific Beardsley scholar and collector R. A. Walker admitted during the Nichols forgery controversy, some twenty years later.²⁷ The artist's decadent reputation – so fully captured by the fake 'Dying' image – would also seem to have the effect of leaving his canon porous and open-ended. The problem for connoisseurs such as Walker with such additional 'discoveries' (or 'new originals'), of course, is that far from being genuine drawings suppressed out of a sense of shame or delicacy, they could instead be fakes.

In issuing 'hitherto unpublished' drawings that amplified (and traded on) existing Beardsleyan associations, Nichols emulated a format supplied by Smithers's 1890s Beardsley books. As Smithers had done, so too did Nichols: each image in *Fifty Drawings* is presented on the recto side of a full page devoid of text, and the appealing promotional phrase 'hitherto unpublished' is affixed to the title that prefaces each one. But unlike Smithers, Nichols attributes this new set of 'fifty drawings' directly to Beardsley in the book's title, and his cover design, emphasizing the words 'Aubrey Beardsley' in gold, announces the book's subject to be *the artist* as much as his drawings. If these were cues aiming to enhance the volume's credibility, such authenticating gestures nonetheless proved ineffective, for these 'hitherto unpublished' drawings, carefully 'selected from the collection owned by Mr. H. S. Nichols', as the subtitle attests, continued to attract censure and denunciation. In a 1921 review of *Fifty Drawings*, Walker (under the pseudonym Georges Derry) attacked 'the ignorance and effrontery of the publisher' for having issued what he called 'this abominable book'.²⁸ In a piece entitled 'Beardsley Non Redivivus',

Walker insisted that the artist had not been brought back to life by Nichols's tome – it did not accomplish the time-travel feat heralded by the drawings' first appearance in 1919 – but instead it had the effect of posthumously defaming him. Indeed, Walker continually returned to the notion of a 'stolen name', concluding that 'this book is merely an insult to Beardsley's name and reputation'.²⁹ Walker's critique was not entirely disinterested: he had an agenda of his own in promoting himself as *the* Beardsley expert, especially in the realm of unknown images. Two years later, he followed up his intervention into the Nichols furore with some hitherto unpublished Beardsley material of his own when he issued *Some Unknown Drawings of Aubrey Beardsley*, which was itself limited to 500 numbered and signed copies, with a front cover featuring the words 'Aubrey Beardsley' stamped in gold.³⁰ Walker's authoritative archiving of Beardsley's life and work nonetheless had the curious effect of recalling Nichols's 'abominable book'.



Fig. 8: 'Toilette of a Courtesan' from *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author's collection.



Fig. 9: 'Salomé' from *Fifty Drawings* by Aubrey Beardsley.
Source: author's collection.

Despite the technical flaws that had attracted the condemnation of Beardsley experts and collectors, Nichols, as we have seen, was certainly well enough informed about Beardsley's cultural milieu to disseminate a sequence of images purporting to capture the distinctive flavour of the 1890s, or what art critic and biographer Osbert Burdett would, in 1925, come to designate as 'the Beardsley period' [figs 8 & 9].³¹ Nichols's forgeries, in other words, made a timely appearance regardless of the aesthetic shortcomings that had roused experts' suspicion. In resituating the decadent legacy within the cultural project of high modernism, Vincent Sherry also affirms that Beardsley's line drawings represent 'the signature image of his decade'.³² Beardsley was, as Wilde's literary executor Robert Ross put it with arch delicacy, 'popularly supposed to have given expression to the views and sentiments of a certain school, and his drawings were regarded as the outward artistic sign of inward literary corruption'.³³ The artist's reputation for depicting sinister

sexuality, moreover, was eagerly exploited by forgers, who, according to Linda Gertner Zatlín, were ‘intent on capitalizing on Beardsley’s supposedly wicked work’.³⁴ If Beardsley could be understood to represent 1890s decadence, then the threat his work may once have exemplified seems largely to have faded by 1920, although it could prove ripe for commercial exploitation in the rarefied world of limited-edition art books.

The identity of the forger (or forgers) who produced these images remains the subject of speculation. Making the task of forgery-detection more difficult is the fact that a great many Beardsley forgeries were already in circulation when *Fifty Drawings* appeared. According to *Vanity Fair*, as early as 1919 Beardsley had already become ‘one of the most “faked” of all masters. That, certainly, is true fame’.³⁵ Mark Samuels Lasner suggests that ‘the most likely culprits [are] three of [Leonard] Smithers’s associates – John Black, Alfred Cooper, and H. S. Nichols – as well as possibly Smithers himself’.³⁶ The case for identifying John A. Black as the forger is an intriguing one, since it recalls the old partnership between Nichols and Smithers – a business relationship that even Nichols cited, albeit in a roundabout way, to explain the drawings’ origins. According to bookseller Dan Rider, the roguish Smithers employed Black as a Beardsley copyist who ‘would even work under a magnifying glass to ensure absolute accuracy. And frequently he would produce an entirely new Beardsley drawing that Beardsley had never seen or thought of’.³⁷ Peter Mendes explicitly identifies the *Fifty Drawings* images as ‘John Black forgeries, given by Smithers to Nichols, sometime after [Smithers’s] bankruptcy [in 1900], to cover a debt’.³⁸ The logic of provenance invigorates this theory: if Black contrived the forgeries for Smithers, then Nichols obtained them from his onetime business partner, at which point they became his exclusive property. This conjecture, of course, requires the forgeries to have been executed in the late 1890s and so to have lain dormant for some twenty years under Nichols’s custodianship, and it amplifies the stories Nichols himself gave to the *New York Press* when announcing his exhibition in 1919. He told such a story of art-for-debt exchanges to the *New York Times*, for example, when recalling that he had

‘supplied Beardsley with funds during the latter’s periods of stress, and took what drawings the artist had to offer.’³⁹

The ‘who’ and the ‘why’ behind the creation of the *Fifty Drawings* forgeries perhaps matters less than the ‘when’ in the timing of their release to the public in 1919 and 1920 – once enough time had elapsed for Beardsley’s style to have assumed the place of a ‘signature image’ in the popular imagination of the ‘Beardsley period’. And if the drawings’ status as fakes confirms the lasting impact of Beardsley’s artistic legacy, Nichols’s recovery of such ‘hitherto unpublished’ artworks (however phony) suggests that decadence could already be apprehended as an archive – a layered collection of associated artifacts, such as the assembled elements in ‘Beardsley’s Portrait of Himself Dying’ that both emanate from and represent the past. *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* is thus an archive of fakes, a collection of images whose familiarly suggestive style (or its approximation) promises viewers a trip to the 1890s between the covers of a paper time machine.

In this way, Nichols’s book again follows the established models provided not only by Smithers’s earlier publications of authentic drawings, but also by John Lane’s two volumes *The Early Work of Aubrey Beardsley* (1899) and *The Later Work of Aubrey Beardsley* (1901), the first of which was reprinted in 1920, and which similarly aggregated Beardsley’s graphic work from different periods and for different occasions. Although some of the forgeries in *Fifty Drawings* appear to be pitifully crude neo-Beardsley simulacra, others evince distinctly archival characteristics in their composition. If the entire collection constitutes an archive (albeit a misleading and deceptive one), then the organizing principle behind many of the individual drawings can also be apprehended as archival: such images are visual compilations of references derived from graphic and literary sources, which are then clustered and re-packaged into discrete units that purport to represent ‘Beardsley’ or ‘decadence’. In *Vanity Fair*, A. E. Gallatin (writing as ‘Oliver Brenning’) described the fake Beardsleys displayed by Nichols as ‘a new form of picture puzzle’.⁴⁰ By analysing the puzzle pieces that comprise the book’s forged portrait of Wilde, we get an even fuller sense of the

forger's (or forgers') representational strategy in arranging visual units of meaning to generate an image-as-archive.

A New Portrait of Oscar Wilde

In *How to Detect Beardsley Forgeries* (1950), R. A. Walker describes the stylistic technique employed in the *Fifty Drawings* forgeries as 'synthetic'. This description is particularly appealing because it captures the forgeries' artificiality and inauthenticity as much as their integration of disparate components. Although they range widely in subject and theme, the most persuasive of the forgeries share an important commonality: they tend to synthesize familiar graphic elements from Beardsley's repertoire with new material into images in which 'parts of drawings by Beardsley have been copied into the forgery while other parts are [newly] imagined.'⁴¹ The book's image number 13, entitled 'Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat' stands out as especially noteworthy in this connection [fig. 10].⁴² It depicts Wilde in a long, double-breasted black frock coat, gazing thoughtfully – we could even say knowingly – at the viewer from the foreground. When the drawings were on display at Nichols's bookstore, a critic for the *New York Times* described this image as 'Oscar Wilde, looking like a white pigeon boned for the kitchen in his soft plumpness'.⁴³ In the background on the right sit several rows of books arranged on shelves partially hidden by a curtain. On the left, mounted on the wall above Wilde's head, hangs a picture of a woman, both nude and draped, who is being leered at by a masked and goateed figure derived from Beardsley's *Salome* illustration work. The wallpaper in the background is filigreed with minutely executed, curling dotted lines, in careful approximation of Beardsley's delicate art-nouveau tracery. 'Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat' thus synthesizes, recombines, and arranges information about the Irish writer into a composite image comprised of visual quotations in a notably Beardsleyesque style. This 'hitherto unpublished' image exemplifying the well-known association between the author and the illustrator of *Salome* purports to embroider literary and art history by expanding decadence's pictorial archive.



Oscar Wilde.

Fig. 10: 'Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat' from *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author's collection.

The frock-coated depiction trades on many aspects of Wilde's posthumous mythology, not least of which is his reputation as a metonym for decadence. Moreover, as Zatin has recently shown, the disreputable London publishers and booksellers who distributed forged Beardsley drawings often sold these items along with pirated editions of Wilde.⁴⁴ In New York, Nichols himself issued several lavishly produced – and entirely unauthorized – editions of various Wilde titles in the 1910s and 20s. The *Evening Post* article that accompanied the announcement of Nichols's 'treasure-trove' Beardsley exhibition also touted 'what is considered to be the most thorough and beautiful edition of Wilde's works in America, the lavender colored flexible leather Cosmopolitan Library.'⁴⁵ Nichols reprinted a great majority of Wilde's writings, and in each 'Cosmopolitan Library' edition, he personally endorses the contents (with a facsimile signature) and signals his own role as scholar, archivist, and keeper of the Wildean flame. In Nichols's 1915

volume *Novels and Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, for instance, a prefatory ‘Indorsement’ assures readers that:

This is a genuine copy of the integral edition of the *Novels and Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*, as well as some of his other writings, all of which are complete in this one volume, as published by me in the Cosmopolitan Library; they have all been printed from very rare and almost unobtainable editions, the texts of which have been scrupulously followed word by word with absolute accuracy.⁴⁶

His 1924 edition of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, part of Nichols’s ‘Precious Tomes’ series, quite literally archives decadence in a package: Wilde’s leather-bound ballad is presented in a decorative box, and the poem itself is surrounded by a lengthy paratextual apparatus that legitimizes Nichols as a custodian of the Irish writer’s memory [figs 11 & 12].

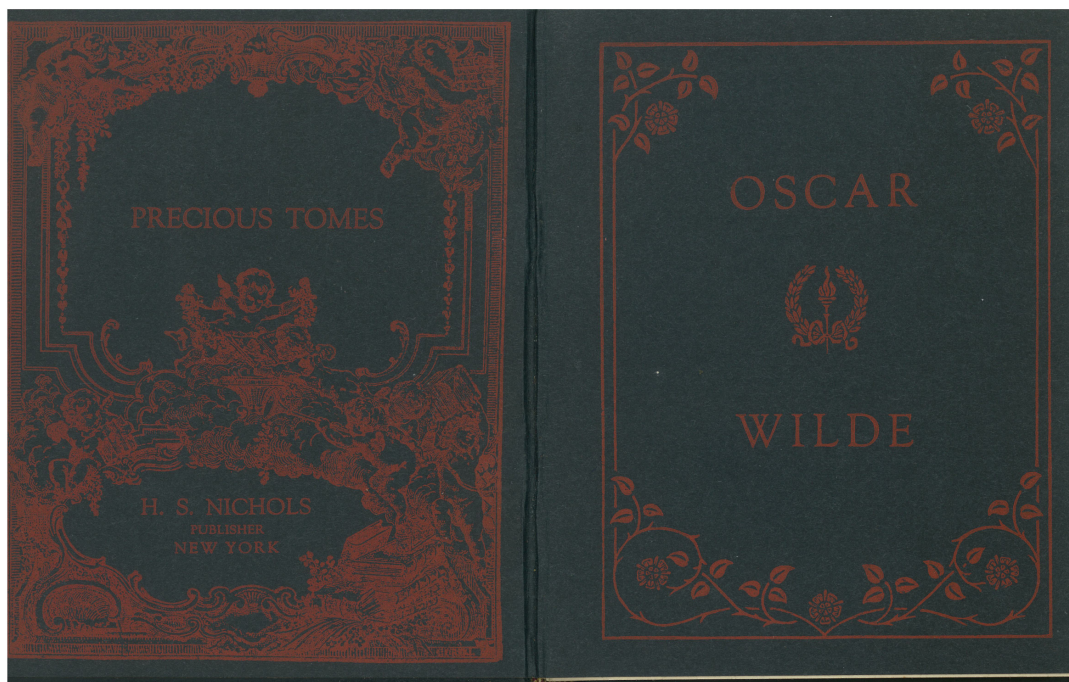


Fig. 11: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1924) in H. S. Nichols’s ‘Precious Tomes’ series.
Source: author’s collection.

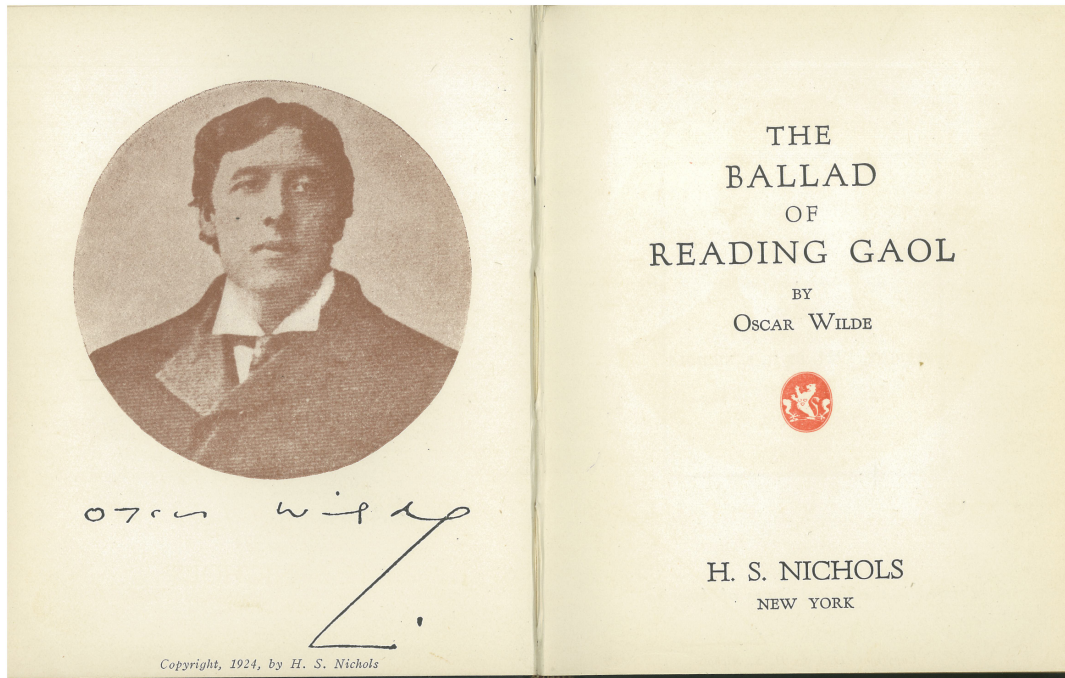


Fig. 12: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1924) title page.
Source: author's collection.

As he had done in *Fifty Drawings*, Nichols personally inserts himself into the larger 1890s story with his ostentatious signature, only to follow that self-aggrandizing gesture with a frontispiece image of Wilde (complete with autograph) and a 'Foreword', credited to himself, twinned with Alfred Douglas' memorably grief-stricken poem 'The Dead Poet'. Perhaps the Beardsley debacle made Nichols more cautious in 1924, since this 'Foreword' carefully omits the false claim he made to the *New York Evening Post* in 1919 that the choice to credit the first printing of the poem to Wilde's prison identity, C.3.3., was jointly made by Smithers and himself.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Nichols remains eager to associate himself with that era in this edition of the *Ballad*, as he describes Wilde's literary executor Robert Ross as someone 'whom I knew in London in the eighteen-nineties'.⁴⁸ With his Wilde books, as with the Beardsley forgeries, the publisher and maker of 'precious tomes' asserts his claim to being the 1890s principal survivor; in republishing the period's writers and artists, he also becomes their exponent, archivist, and loyalist.



Fig. 13: Oscar Wilde by Ellis and Walery, 1892.
Source: Wikimedia Commons; public domain image.



Fig. 14: Detail from 'Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat' from *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*.
Source: author's collection.

In ‘Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat’, Wilde serenely faces the viewer with one hand on his hip, the other at his temple, in a position that could only be described as posing. Wilde posed for many photographs throughout his life, including those shot in 1892 at London’s Ellis and Walery photography studio, which likely provided the template for this particular portrait [fig. 13]. The glossy sheen on the lapel, the collar, and the tie-pin are all there.⁴⁹ Deliberately foregrounded in the Nichols forgery, the very act of ‘posing’ may also work to remind viewers of the extra-literary narrative of Wilde’s downfall in a sex scandal that began with the misspelled accusation on a calling card that he had been ‘posing as a sodomite [*sic*]’.⁵⁰ More immediately, the forgery refers to – and amalgamates – imagery associated with Wilde’s notoriety and literary career with the Beardsleyesque designs in its background. On one side, a theatrical curtain half conceals and half reveals several tiers of (unidentified) books, at once suggesting dramatic authorship and a corpus of writings filled with veiled meanings. Wilde’s published writings emerge here as the site of an open secret of which the viewer is presumably aware. The picture on the other side of the background’s wall [fig. 14] reinforces the suturing of Wilde, Beardsley, and decadence that (much to Beardsley’s irritation) had defined the artist’s reputation since the publication of his illustrations for the English version of Wilde’s play *Salome* in 1894. Indeed, *Salome*-style images had been a focal point of critical ire in responses to the Nichols exhibition and *Fifty Drawings*. This picture-within-a-picture comes across as nothing less than a cropped imitation of Beardsley’s *Toilette of Salome (I)* [fig. 15], an image so sexually provocative that it was not included in the first edition of the play, although it did appear in later versions.⁵¹ Indeed, it was not published until 1907,⁵² which, assuming that the forgers did not have access to unpublished images, might explain the forgeries after the 1890s. According to Walker, ‘the Salome set [of drawings], whence so many forgeries are derived’ proved a popular template for forgers of Beardsley, probably because those Wilde illustrations were some of his best-known works.⁵³ The *Salome* illustrations are also, of course, replete with unflattering caricatures of Wilde [fig. 16]. Nichols’s ‘Portrait’ forgery, however, is not a caricature, but a fantasy. Its purpose is not to mock, but to encapsulate.

If I were to categorize it, I would label it a self-referential pastiche. It not only brings together Wilde and Beardsley, but also clusters 1890s literature, visual art, and photography into a ‘picture puzzle’ that invites the viewer to see (and purchase) decadence as a package deal. And so convincing is this suturing of the writer and the illustrator that as recently as 1998 the frock-coat portrait was still being attributed to Beardsley in a collection of his drawings published by Taschen.⁵⁴



Fig. 15: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Toilette of Salomé (I)*.
Source: University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.



Fig. 16: Aubrey Beardsley, *Enter Herodias*.
Source: University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections.

Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley situates decadence firmly in the (recent) past, as an archive of texts, images, attributes, and lore to be exhumed as much as revived. But it also forges that past in both senses of that word by ‘making’ (or inventing) it and ‘faking’ (or misrepresenting) it. That said, the fact that forgeries traffic in illusions, and that they tell lies (Beardsley did not draw the Nichols portraits of himself and Wilde, for example) does not mean that they cannot exercise an interpretive function. ‘Beardsley’s Portrait of Himself Dying’ and ‘Full length portrait of Oscar Wilde in frock-coat’ may fail to persuade us of their genuineness, but the attempt that these forgeries represent merits scrutiny. By conjuring an elusive concept such as ‘decadence’ with an aggregation of personality, stylization, and lore, these forgeries do much the same thing as other (legitimate) 1920s compilations of Beardsley’s work in marketing a twentieth-century future for the 1890s ever-captivating past.

- ¹ Royal Cortissoz, 'Aubrey Beardsley and Some Others', *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 March 1919, p. 7.
- ² This description comes from Joseph Gollomb, 'New Beardsley Originals', *Evening Post* [Book Section], 12 April 1919, pp. 1, 6 (p. 6).
- ³ I borrow this phrase from James G. Nelson's *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).
- ⁴ As a New York publisher and bookseller, Nichols touted the more reputable aspects of his 1890s past, such as the West End addresses of his London bookstores, rather than his published output or inventory, which included, according to Peter Mendes, 'some of the most interesting erotic publications of the period' ('Smithers', p. 289). Relatively little is known about Nichols, and what information is obtainable in published sources tends to emphasize Nichols's partnership with Leonard Smithers in the clandestine business of publishing erotica. The two began to publish erotic works under the 'Erotika Biblion Society' imprint in Sheffield in 1888 before moving to London, where for a time each maintained a bookshop. Their partnership dissolved in 1894-95, with Smithers moving into more high-end publishing ventures. Nichols went bankrupt in 1898, and after a stint in Paris he moved to the United States in 1908, where he remained for the rest of his life. See Mendes, 'Smithers and the Erotic Book Trade', in James G. Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents*, pp. 287-90; Mendes, *Clandestine Erotic Fiction in English: A Bibliographical Study* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), pp. 15-19; Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents*, pp. 27-47; and Colette Colligan, *The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley: Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 71-72.
- ⁵ Gollomb, pp. 1, 6.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ⁷ 'An Exhibition of a Portion of H. S. Nichols' Collection of Original Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley', [p. 4]. 'Scrapbook of clippings relating to the Nichols forgeries, containing also the announcement of the exhibition of the forgeries, New York, April 14-19, 1919', Princeton University Library Special Collections, 2005-2080N. On the Nichols exhibition, see A. E. Gallatin, *Aubrey Beardsley: Catalogue of Drawings and Bibliography* (New York: Grolier Club, 1945), p. 139.
- ⁸ Oliver Brenning [A. E. Gallatin], 'Aubrey Beardsley: Vintage of 1919', *Vanity Fair* (September 1919), 44.
- ⁹ H. S. Nichols, 'Beardsley Experts', *Evening Post*, 25 April 1919, p. 10.
- ¹⁰ C. Lewis Hind, 'Aubrey Beardsley', *Evening Post*, 31 May 1919, p. 13.
- ¹¹ H. S. Nichols, 'Critics Question New Beardsleys', *Evening Post*, 18 April 1919, p. 9.
- ¹² Joseph Pennell, 'A New Illustrator: Aubrey Beardsley', *The Studio* (April 1893), 14-19.
- ¹³ Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 156.
- ¹⁴ Gollomb, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ¹⁶ For this information I thank Steven Halliwell of Rivendale Press, who granted me a Skype interview on 9 November 2019. Mr. Halliwell's bibliography of Nichols is in preparation.
- ¹⁷ Gollomb, p. 6.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ¹⁹ Nichols, 'Critics Question', p. 9.
- ²⁰ A. E. Gallatin, 'Beardsley Art to be Passed Upon', *Evening Post*, 28 May 1919, p. 9.
- ²¹ H. S. Nichols, 'The Beardsley Drawings', *Evening Post*, 6 June 1919, p. 8.
- ²² Nichols admitted as much when he wrote that it 'was the recent sale at the Anderson Galleries of the Frederick H. Evans collection of Aubrey Beardsley's drawings that caused me to make the announcement that I possessed a collection also, and of later exhibiting them.' H. S. Nichols, 'The Beardsley Controversy', *Evening Post*, 24 May 1919, p. 8.
- ²³ Bernard Quaritch (1819-1899), prolific bookseller and collector.
- ²⁴ Charles F. Rideal, 'Beardsley Critics', *Evening Post*, 23 April 1919, p. 10.
- ²⁵ G. C. Williamson's copy of Aubrey Beardsley, *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: H. S. Nichols, 1920), Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
- ²⁶ Leonard Smithers, 'Prefatory Note', in Aubrey Beardsley, *A Second Book of Fifty Drawings* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1899), [p. 7].
- ²⁷ Georges Derry [R. A. Walker], 'An English Authority on Beardsley', *Evening Post*, 28 April 1919, p. 8.
R[ainforth] A[rmitage] Walker was a vigorous and longstanding defender of Beardsley's reputation, having published multiple books on the artist, thus establishing himself as a pre-eminent expert. His Beardsley books, many of which were self-published, include *Some Unknown Drawings of Aubrey Beardsley* (1923); an edition of *Letters from Aubrey Beardsley to Leonard Smithers* (1937); and *How to Detect Beardsley Forgeries* (1950).
- ²⁸ Georges Derry [R. A. Walker], 'Beardsley Non Redivivus', *Literary Review* [*New York Evening Post*], 5 March 1921, p. 5.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ R. A. Walker, *Some Unknown Drawings of Aubrey Beardsley* (London: R. A. Walker, 1923).

- ³¹ Osbert Burdett, *The Beardsley Period: An Essay in Perspective* (London: John Lane, 1925).
- ³² Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 103.
- ³³ Robert Ross, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: John Lane, 1909), p. 25.
- ³⁴ Linda Gertner Zatin, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), II, p. 447.
- ³⁵ Brenning [Gallatin], p. 44.
- ³⁶ Mark Samuels Lasner, *A Selective Checklist of the Published Work of Aubrey Beardsley* (Boston: Thomas G. Boss, 1995), p. 108.
- ³⁷ Rider quoted in Mendes, *Clandestine Erotic Fiction*, p. 451.
- ³⁸ Mendes, p. 19.
- ³⁹ 'Owns Seventy Beardsleys: H. S. Nichols to Exhibit His Collection of Original Drawings', *New York Times*, 30 March 1919, p. 14.
- ⁴⁰ Brenning [Gallatin], p. 44.
- ⁴¹ R. A. Walker, *How to Detect Beardsley Forgeries* (Bedford: R. A. Walker, 1950), p. 15.
- ⁴² Beardsley, *Fifty Drawings*, [n.p.].
- ⁴³ 'Aubrey Beardsley in a Representative Exhibition', *New York Times*, 13 April 1919, p. 4.
- ⁴⁴ Zatin names Alfred Cooper, a onetime bookselling associate of Smithers's, as a source for both types of items. See Zatin, II, p. 447.
- ⁴⁵ Gollomb, p. 6.
- ⁴⁶ H. S. Nichols, 'Indorsement', *Novels and Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (New York: H. S. Nichols [Cosmopolitan Library Series], 1915), [n.p.].
- ⁴⁷ C.3.3. [Oscar Wilde], *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1898).
- ⁴⁸ H. S. Nichols, 'Foreword', in Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (New York: H. S. Nichols, 1924), p. 10.
- ⁴⁹ On the Wilde photographic archive, see Daniel A. Novak, 'Sexuality in the Age of Technological Reproducibility: Oscar Wilde, Photography and Identity', in *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), pp. 63-95, and 'Picturing Wilde: Christopher Millard's "Iconography of Oscar Wilde"', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 32 (2010), 305-35.
- ⁵⁰ The insulting calling card, left at Wilde's club by the Marquess of Queensberry, prompted Wilde to sue Queensberry for libel. The failure of that lawsuit led in turn to Wilde's prosecution and eventual imprisonment for gross indecency. On the card and its interpretation, see Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 412.
- ⁵¹ On publisher John Lane's suppression of this image 'because of the sexual details', see Zatin, II, pp 33-35.
- ⁵² Aubrey Beardsley, *A Portfolio of Aubrey Beardsley's Drawings Illustrating Salome by Oscar Wilde* (London: The Bodley Head, 1907).
- ⁵³ Walker, *How to Detect Beardsley Forgeries*, p. 15.
- ⁵⁴ Gilles Néret, *Aubrey Beardsley* (Cologne: Taschen, 1998), p. 30.