

American Literary Anecdotes

A Compendium of 1,200 Stories and Bon Mots

About Writers and Writing, Books and

Publishers from the United States



Robert Hendrickson

American Literary Anecdotes

Robert Hendrickson



Facts On File

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American Literary Anecdotes

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For my grandson, Ross

INTRODUCTION

I have tried to collect in these pages more American literary witticisms and curiosities than have ever been assembled before, reading over the past 10 years hundreds of books and hundreds of millions of words in order to do so. While I believe this is the widest-ranging book on the subject, it wouldn't be accurate to call it "complete" by any means. Though America is a young country she has a literary history old and vigorous enough to have yielded an abundance of literary anecdotes that can not possibly be covered in one book, or even in a set of encyclopedias. I'm sure, too, that the reader will agree that these thousands of bon mots, stories and curiosities are no less interesting than those of any other literature. Regarding witticisms, for example: Although America doesn't have the long tradition of literary wit justifiably associated with Great Britain (where it seems almost essential that every author and editor and publisher and critic be quick with the quip), the *best* American authorial wits compare favorably with the greatest literary wits in the world. In fact, Mark Twain and Dorothy Parker would be high up on my list of the 10 most formidable wits of all time, and Robert Benchley wouldn't be much further down.

The basic ground rules for this collection are the same as for its companion volumes, *British Literary Anecdotes* (which covers writers from Commonwealth nations) and *World Literary Anecdotes*. First, I've scrupulously tried to exclude anecdotes of living writers and anecdotes about deceased writers that could hurt anyone remaining behind. Writers and their relatives have troubles enough, and John Aubrey is generally right, I think, when he says of his marvelous "rude and hastie collection," *Brief Lives*, that before literary anecdotes are "fitt to lett flie abroad" the "author and the Persons...ought to be rotten first." Second, I should say that my collection too is "rude and hastie," though I hope hastier than rude; in any case I tried to be as brief as possible with each entry so that there would be space for more entries. This sometimes meant condensing or paraphrasing what I would have preferred to quote at length, but I hope that in most cases I've managed to get the essence of the author and

anecdote. Third, I've tried to indicate when a story is doubtful or when it has been told about several writers, though I have doubtless missed some anecdotes I should have labeled apocryphal (despite checking one or more biographies for most stories). Finally, I've tried to include sketches and brief sketches of all the major American literary figures and refer to the noted literary wits among them with an ample selection of the wits. But I haven't hesitated to include literary anecdotes concerning people who weren't authors, or to include authors noteworthy, or remembered today, solely for one good anecdote, sometimes just for their last words or epitaphs. I hope in this last case that the stories may lead readers to the forgotten work of some very deserving writers.

It should be added that this book, which ranges from Colonial to present times, is arranged alphabetically by author, but has a place and name index, which includes writers who haven't an entry to themselves but are mentioned in other entries; as well as a topic index enabling readers to find one or more anecdotes about certain subjects, such as accidentally destroyed manuscripts, literary hoaxes, love affairs, hard-drinking authors, strange deaths etc. etc.

A number of writers represented here could have been included in the British or World literary anecdotes volumes, which forced me to adopt the rather arbitrary rule that a writer's last citizenship be the price of admission to a collection. The U.S. lost Henry James and T.S. Eliot this way, but gained Auden and Einstein, among others. (The only exception here was P.G. Wodehouse, an American citizen in his late years, who, along with his butler Jeeves, is so quintessentially British that I hadn't the heart to put him anywhere but in England.)

My thanks to my editor, Gerry Helferich, and copy editor, Paul A. Scaramazza, both of whom made valuable contributions to this work. I would also like to thank the many people, too numerous to mention here, who suggested anecdotes to me through the years, particularly those correspondents who wrote from all over the world (including one from Saudi Arabia whose address I've lost and whom I can't write to thank), providing me with more literary hors d'oeuvres after my *Literary Life and Other Curiosities* was published in 1980. But, of course, all of the errors herein are my responsibility. I can't even blame them on my wife, Marilyn, who worked as hard on this book as I did but who would be "she who hung the moon and stars" to me if she neither worked upon nor even read a word of my deathless prose.

Robert Hendrickson
Far Rockaway, New York

Dean Acheson (1893–1973)

It is said that the statesman and prominent writer on foreign affairs was asked by a distraught Lyndon Johnson why he wasn't popular. "Let's face it, Mr. Acheson replied, "you're not a very likeable man."

▽ ▽ ▽

Abigail Adams (1744–1818)

Her famous letters to her husband, published in several volumes, range from before John Adams became the second president of the United States to her death eight years preceding him. They are charming, wise and witty letters that illuminate the early years of the Republic, but can be gossipy and venomous, too. One time Abigail observed that the marriage of a certain young woman to a much older man was a union of "the Torrid and the Frigid Zones." John Adams, sixtyish himself, wrote back testily: "But how dare you hint or lisp a Word about Sixty Years of Age? If I were near, I would soon convince you that I am not above forty."

▽ ▽ ▽

Brooks Adams (1848–1927)

Henry Adams' brother, also an historian, accurately predicted in 1900 that within 50 years there would be only two world powers, the Soviet Union and the United States, with the latter possessing economic supremacy. The very shy Adams, an agnostic most of his life, in his last years both found religion and overcame his lifelong shyness, when he stood up at the Congregational church in Quincy, Massachusetts, and made a public confession of his faith.

▽ ▽ ▽

Franklin Pierce Adams (1881–1960)

F.P.A., as the humorist and Algonquin Round Table habitué was known, professed to dislike writing and considered it hard work. One time an interviewer told him of an author who was "terribly eager" to begin writing every day. Replied F.P.A.: "The only people who like to write terribly are those that do."

Adams was a punctual man. "Promptness is a worthy cause," he once told an editor, "but costly. You call the doctor and he says he'll be at your home between three and four to have a look at your wife. You wait. He arrives at seven. You have an appointment with the dentist for 3 P.M. sharp. At 3 P.M. sharp you are waiting in his reception room. So are six other patients waiting their turn. You buy tickets for the theater. The

curtain will rise on the dot of eight, or so the announcements say. Fifteen minutes earlier you are in your seat and already have memorized the pages of program notes. You also have read all the ads and decided on which sandwich you'll order later at Sardi's. At 8:17 the curtain rises. Slowly. I have wasted a year and a half of my life waiting for curtains to rise, and seven years waiting for people who were late."

Alexander Woollcott asked that his friends give him a shower when he moved into his new apartment. "I'd actually appreciate your bringing china, linen and silver," he made it known. Accordingly, F.P.A. brought him a moustache cup, a handkerchief and a dime.

"Ah what is so rare as a Woollcott first edition?" The impossibly vain Woollcott enthused while signing a first edition copy of his *Shouts and Murmurs*. F.P.A., standing next to him, replied: "A Woollcott second edition."

New York World editor Herbert Bayard Swope was questioning a foreign visitor at his home about German poetry when the name of Henrich von Kleist came up. "Who's Kleist?" Swope demanded. F.P.A., seated nearby, answered, "The Chinese messiah."

Adams wasn't noted for his good looks. One morning humorist Irvin Cobb entered a room where a moosehead was mounted over the mantel. "My God, they've shot F.P.A.!" he cried.

After watching young Helen Hayes play Cleopatra on Broadway in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, F.P.A. remarked to a friend that she appeared to be suffering from "fallen archness."

Adams and his wife doted on their white angora cat Miztah, with whom *New Yorker* editor Harold Ross planned to mate his cat Missus—until she mysteriously disappeared one spring night. The two Adams often went so far as to spell out words in front of their cat to keep him from becoming conceited: "See how H-A-N-D-S-O-M-E he is!"

Adams, Harpo Marx and other members of the Thanatopsis Poker Playing and Inside Straight Club were playing in a hotel room when a waiter entered in the middle of a big hand, tripped, and fell, spilling a mess of food all over the table. Nobody stopped cursing until Harpo Marx quipped, "Well, the waiter drops out," and F.P.A. added, "Yeah, he only had a tray."

An interminable bore went on and on with a story until he came to the inevitable point where he said, "Well, to cut a long story short..."

"Too late," F.P.A. advised.



Hannah Adams (1755–1831)

Hannah Adams was forced through family misfortune to make a living for herself from the time she was 17. Though her mainly historical works yielded a meager income, they provided Adams with enough to support herself and become the first professional woman author in America.



Henry Brooks Adams (1838–1918)

Unlike many writers, Adams was always enchanted by his art and craft. In one letter he wrote: "The fascination of the silent midnight, the veiled lamp, the smouldering fire, the white paper asking to be covered with elusive words; the thoughts grouping themselves into architectural forms, and slowly rising into dreamy structures, constantly changing, shifting, beautifying their outlines—this is the subtlest of solitary temptations, and the loftiest of the intoxications of genius."

The eminent historian's little nephew was told that his uncle was a brilliant man who knew everything. All through lunch the boy sat silent, in awe of the distinguished man of letters, until finally, during a lull in the adult conversation, he could bear it no longer and blurted out, "Uncle Henry, how do you feed a chameleon?"

Adams was one of the few authors who privately printed his books before allowing his publisher to print and sell them to the general public. He would have several copies of a book printed and distribute them to friends whose literary opinions he valued, making changes whenever he found their criticisms valid.

He said of himself in his later years: "I want to look like an American Voltaire or Gibbon, but am settling down to be a third-rate Boswell hunting for a Dr. Johnson."

In his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, which he wrote in the third person, Adams describes his formal education as useless and even harmful. Sending a copy to Henry James, he claimed in his letter that it was better for a writer to reveal everything about himself than have someone else

do it. Better to commit suicide by writing your own autobiography, he said, than to be murdered by someone writing your biography.



John Quincy Adams (1767–1848)

A prolific author, the sixth president of the United States produced over 10 large volumes of work, not including his diaries and correspondence. He is the only U.S. president who might be considered a professional poet, having published a 108-page book of poetry in 1832.



Louisa Catherine Adams (1775–1852)

President John Quincy Adams's wife was a talented woman whose autobiographical books *Record of a Life, or My Story* and *Adventures of a Nobody* are filled with sharp, amusing observations. An early feminist, she was well aware of the dangers of marriage for a woman in her day, once remarking that "hanging and marriage...[are] strongly assimilated."



George Ade (1866–1944)

One afternoon the Indiana humorist was sitting with a little girl of eight at a friend's house.

"Mr. Ade," she said, looking up from her storybook, "does m-i-r-a-g-e spell marriage?"

"Yes, my child," Ade softly replied.

A prominent attorney tried to match wits with Ade after the author had given a hilarious speech. Hands in his pockets, he drawled, "Doesn't it strike the company as a little unusual that a professional humorist should be funny?" When the laughter subsided, Ade replied, "Doesn't it strike the company as a little unusual that a lawyer should have his hands in his own pockets?"



James Agee (1909–1955)

While a struggling young writer the novelist and film critic lived with his wife on a Stockton, New Jersey, farm they rented for \$25 a month. There was no bathroom in the decrepit house and when visitors complained, Agee would tell them, "Why, all God's outdoors is a toilet!"

Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz (1807–1873)

The Swiss-born naturalist, author and educator taught for 25 years at Harvard, and in that time had more offers to give public lectures than he had time for—without detracting from his scientific studies. One lyceum repeatedly asked him to speak and, when he kept refusing, assured him that he would be very well paid for his lecture. “That is no inducement to me,” Agassiz replied. “I cannot afford to waste my time making money.”

At the start of each year at Harvard, Agassiz would tell his classes: “Gentlemen, the world is older than we have been taught to think. Its age is as if one were gently to rub a silk handkerchief across Plymouth Rock once a year until it were reduced to a pebble.”



Conrad Aiken (1889–1973)

The poet, novelist and short story writer lost both his parents when a young boy in Savannah. As he later put it: “... after the desultory early-morning quarrel came the half-stifled scream, and then the sound of his father’s voice counting three, and the two loud pistol shots; and he [the child] had tiptoed into the dark room, where the two bodies lay motionless and apart, and, finding them dead, found himself possessed of them forever.”

Aiken became one of the most masterful and neglected of American writers, in part because he never compromised, as he said on his deathbed, and partly because from the beginning he panicked at being in the limelight. When Aiken was elected Harvard’s class poet in 1911, for example, he refused the honor, leaving school, and he never in his long career appeared in public to read his poems or accept one of his many awards. “He [the poet] had known, instantly,” he later explained, “that this kind of public appearance, and for such an occasion, was precisely what the flaw in his inheritance would not, in all likelihood, be strong enough to bear ... It was his decision that his life was to be lived *off-stage*, behind the scenes, out of view.”

In 1972 Malcolm Cowley wrote him saying he and other friends had celebrated Aiken’s 83rd birthday with a party at which he recited the poet’s sadly neglected poem “Thee.” Aiken replied that Cowley’s letter had arrived in the same mail as a royalty statement advising that “Thee” had been remaindered.

Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888)

Though few of her readers knew it, the author of the warm, gentle *Little Women* (1868) was a manic-depressive who suffered terribly from nightmares and hallucinations and frequently contemplated suicide. Much of her illness can be traced to her years as a nurse during the Civil War, when she contracted typhoid and then mercury poisoning in the treatment of that disease, but she had suffered manic depression as a child, when she was forced to work to help support her family. In her late years her condition improved, though she was never completely free from it.

The author's father, Bronson Alcott, was a venerable Don Quixote, as Carlyle termed him, a thoroughly impractical philosopher who was "all bent on saving the world by a return to acorns and the golden age." Many of his educational theories are accepted today, but in his time his rigid adherence to his principles made more suffering for his wife and four children than for himself, so much so that later in life Louisa May Alcott defined a philosopher as "a man up in a balloon, with his family and friends holding the ropes which confine him to earth and trying to haul him down."

As a lover of all living things—including mosquitoes, which he would brush aside but never kill even if they were gorged on his blood, and potato bugs that he collected and dumped over the fence into the tax collector's garden (he did not like his taxes supporting slavery)—Bronson Alcott believed in helping animals by not eating them. But he was a vegetarian with a sense of humor. Once Emerson was carving a roast for his guests, all the while lecturing them on the barbaric practice of cannibalism. Suppressing a smile, Alcott turned to him and said, "But Mr. Emerson, if we are to eat meat at all why should we not eat the best."

Despite his impractical nature Bronson Alcott remained a good friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson's all his life. Though Emerson recognized Alcott's limitations, he visited his Concord neighbor frequently and Alcott and his family reciprocated. Louisa May Alcott developed a schoolgirl crush on Emerson, writing him long, romantic letters that she never mailed, softly singing love songs at night under his window, and anonymously leaving flowers at his door. In fact, only one magazine article is listed in her journal without an accompanying dollar sign to record the sale—an article on Emerson noted as "a labour of love." As for Emerson, he never learned of her infatuation, not even after she became famous and Bronson Alcott became known as "the grandfather of *Little Women*."

The inscription over the mantel in Alcott House was a couplet by William Ellery Channing:

The hills are reared, the seas are
scooped in vain
If learnings' altar vanish from the
plain.

"Stick to your teaching," publisher James T. Field told her when she submitted a youthful effort, "you can't write."

Alcott once branded *Little Women* "moral pap" and told a friend at another time, "I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style." On still another occasion she confessed to a friend that she intended to write a "blood and thunder tale as they are easier to compose and are better paid than moral and elaborate works." In fact, for 15 years, from 1854 to 1869, she published pseudonymous thrillers and Gothic romances (including "The Abbot's Ghost" and "Pauline's Passion and Punishment") in popular magazines to earn a living. She was an established Gothic writer before turning to her moralistic stories for children.



Thomas Bailey Aldrich (1836–1907)

His novels were never favored by many academics, but then neither did novelist Thomas Bailey Aldrich particularly care for academic prose. In reply to a letter from an erudite professor, he wrote: "It was very pleasant ... to get a letter from you the other day. Perhaps I should have found it pleasanter if I had been able to decipher it. I don't think that I mastered anything beyond the date (which I knew) and the signature (which I guessed at). There's a singular and a perpetual charm in a letter of yours; it never grows old, it never loses novelty... Other letters are read and thrown away and forgotten, but yours are kept forever—unread. One of them will last a reasonable man a lifetime."



Sholom Aleichem (Solomon Rabinowitz; 1859–1916)

The Russian-born Yiddish author took his pen name from the traditional greeting of Jews, meaning "peace unto you." Aleichem suffered from triskaidekaphobia, fear of the number 13, and his manuscripts never had a page 13. Ironically, he died on a May 13, but the date on his headstone in Mount Carmel Cemetery, Glendale, New York, reads "May 12a, 1916." According to one tale, Aleichem, called "the Jewish Mark Twain," chanced to meet Mark Twain in New York. "I am the American *Sholom Aleichem*," Twain modestly told him.

Horatio Alger Jr. (1832–1899)

Before he became the author of his vastly successful rags-to-riches “Horatio Alger” tales, which sold well over twenty million copies, Alger was a Unitarian preacher in Brewster, Massachusetts. Accused of pederasty with at least two of the boys in his parish, the creator of *Ragged Dick* and *Tattered Tom* admitted his guilt and was discharged from the pulpit, fleeing to New York, where he began his writing career.

“Holy Horatio,” as he was known at Harvard Divinity School, lost his virginity to a café singer in Paris in 1855. “I was a fool to have waited so long,” he wrote in his diary. “It was not nearly so vile as I had thought.”



Fred Allen (John Florence Sullivan; 1894–1956)

The American radio comedian and author of *Treadmill to Oblivion* and *Much Ado About Me*, was a morose-looking man who believed that “the world is grindstone and life is your nose.” Allen once saved a little boy from being hit by a truck. Pulling the boy to safety, he shouted, “What’s the matter, son! Don’t you want to grow up and have troubles?”

All of the scripts for Allen’s long-running radio show—39 a year—were bound by the comedian and stacked on 10 feet of shelves beside a one-volume copy of the collected works of Shakespeare, which occupied a mere 3 1/2 inches of space. “I did that as a corrective,” Allen explained, “just in case I start thinking a ton of cobblestone is worth as much as a few diamonds.”

James Thurber said that one of Allen’s off-the-cuff remarks was among the funniest he had ever heard. It was made in the early days when Allen earned his living as a vaudeville comedy juggler. Night after night Allen noticed a musician in the pit who never smiled and always wore a blank expression. Finally one evening he stopped his act, leaned over the pit and asked the man, “How much would you charge to haunt a house?”

“You finally do so well in your career, all you can drink is buttermilk,” Allen told an interviewer toward the end of his life. “When they start feeding me intravenously, I’ll know I’ve made it to the top.”



Maxwell Anderson (1888–1959)

After the critics panned his play *Truckline Cafe*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright took out an ad in the *New York Times* calling the critics the “Jukes

family of journalism, who bring to the theatre nothing but their own hopelessness, recklessness and despair."



Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941)

On November 27, 1912, Anderson, who had been a drifter and served in the Spanish-American War before marrying and settling down, was dictating a letter to his secretary in the paint manufacturing plant he managed in Elyria, Ohio. In the midst of a sentence he stopped, walked quickly from the room, and wasn't seen again for four days, when he was found in a Cleveland drugstore. Neither Anderson nor anyone else was ever able to explain how the apparent victim of amnesia got there or what had happened over the four days. In any case, Anderson was through with the paint business and moved on to Chicago, where he became an advertising copywriter and published his first book, *Windy McPherson's Son*, in 1916. The novel deals with "a boy's life in a drab town, his rise to success as a manufacturer, and his renunciation of this life to 'find truth.'"

Horace Liveright, Anderson's publisher, had a reputation as a philanderer, so Anderson wasn't surprised to see him with still another attractive woman when he bumped into Liveright in New Orleans. "I want you to meet my wife," the publisher said. Anderson sarcastically replied, "Oh, yeah, sure, Horace." After a vast silence he realized that, this time, the lady *was* Mrs. Liveright.

Publisher Liveright decided to subsidize Anderson with \$75 a week while he was writing a novel in Greenwich Village. But the money disrupted Anderson; he found himself with so much security that he was unable to write. Bursting into Liveright's office one morning, he cried, "Horace, Horace, please stop those checks! *Give me back my poverty!*"

The wife of a midwestern banker had once sat beside Anderson at a dinner. Later he received a letter from her advising him that, having read his then daring *Winesburg, Ohio* and having sat next to him, "she felt that she could never, while she lived, be clean."

Anderson was a victim of a 20th-century invention, the literary cocktail party. The American author died of peritonitis and complications after swallowing a toothpick with an hors d'oeuvre at a cocktail party given by his publisher.

On Anderson's death his hometown paper, the *Elyria (Ohio) Chronicle-Telegram* headlined: SHERWOOD ANDERSON, FORMER ELYRIA MANUFACTURER, DIES.

Anonymous

An 18th-century colonial printer with a penchant for puns wrote a punning epitaph for himself:

Here lies a *form*—place no *imposing stone*
To mark the *head*, where weary it is lain;
'Tis *matter dead*!—its mission being done,
To be *distributed* to dust again.
The *body's* but the *type*, at best, of man,
Whose *impress* is the spirit's deathless *page*;
Worn out, the *type* is thrown to *pi* again,
The *impression* lives through an eternal age.

For all his working career the editor of a small-town New England paper had saved an old-fashioned wooden scarehead type of about 60-point size, never using it no matter how much he was implored. But one summer he went off on a fishing trip and while he was gone a terrible cyclone hit the town, nearly devastating it. Figuring that this disaster rated the 60-point scarehead, his assistants got it down and set up a sensational front-page headline. But the editor was hardly happy when he returned and saw the result. "Balls of fire!" he cried. "What d'ye mean by taking down that type for a cyclone! All these years I've been savin' that type for the Second Coming of Christ!"

An old story from the Texas Panhandle tells of a winter so cold that spoken words froze in the air, fell entangled on the ground, and had to be fried up in a skillet before the letters would reform and any sense could be made of them. The idea is an ancient one, used by Rabelais and familiar to the Greek dramatist Antiphanes, who is said to have used it in praising the work of Plato: "As the cold of certain cities is so intense that it freezes the very words we utter, which remain congealed till heat of summer thaws them, so the mind of youth is so thoughtless that the wisdom of Plato lies there frozen, as it were, till it is thawed by the refined judgment of mature age."

Among the most unusually named of all the American magazines published over the last three centuries is *Smith's*. It was some anonymous genius's idea to so name the magazine in the mid-19th century, not in honor of anyone but to attract a readership from among the myriad of Americans named Smith.

Using the wrong punctuation can be costly. In the 1890s a congressional clerk was supposed to write: "All foreign fruit-plants are free from duty" in transcribing a recently passed bill. But he changed the hyphen to a comma and wrote: "All foreign fruit, plants are free from duty." Before Congress

could correct his error with a new law the government lost over \$2 million in taxes.

The most costly grammatical error in history occurred when the American space probe *Mariner I*, bound for Venus, headed off course and had to be destroyed at a cost of \$18.5 million. The rocket had responded erratically because an anonymous flight computer programmer had left out a comma from *Mariner's* computer program.

A newspaper editor in upstate New York at the turn of the century was criticized at a town meeting for his bad grammar and diction. "So I been criticized somewhat for grammar," he replied. "Well, I got three good reasons for it. To begin with, I don't know any better. If I did, none of you would know the difference; and more than that, if I spoke and wrote any better than I do, I'd be managing editor of a big New York paper at a decent salary and you farmers would lose the best damned editor in Herkimer County."

"Punning is the lowest form of wit," an irate critic told an inveterate punster.

"Yes," the punster replied, "for it is the foundation of all wit."

When the *New York Post* and *New York Sun* were feuding early in this century, an editor on the *Post* called the *Sun* "a yellow dog." Answered a *Post* editor, most aloofly, "The *Post* calls the *Sun* 'a yellow dog.' The attitude of the *Sun*, however, will continue to be that of any dog toward any post."

Possibly the most embarrassing modern-day typographical error—due to the slip of the unknown editor or typesetter—appeared in the *Washington Post* in 1915. In a news story it was noted that President Wilson had taken his fiancée Edith Galt to the theater the previous night and, rather than watching the play, "spent most of his time entering [instead of "entertaining"] Mrs. Galt."

As far back as Roman times Seneca laughed at those who brought books for ostentatious display and never read them, but one American millionaire in the 1920s bought almost half a million dollar's worth of books by the yard. "Measure those bookshelves with a yardstick and buy enough books to fill 'em," he told his secretary while furnishing his Chicago apartment on Lake Shore Drive. "Get plenty of snappy red and green books with plenty of gilt lettering. I want a swell showing." At least more original is the advice *Lady Gough's Book of Etiquette* gave library owners in Victorian times: Don't place