

THE CASE OF THE CHARRED MS.

A FEW years ago *The Listener* printed an article about an unusual literary "find"—an 18th Century manuscript which had been unearthed in the Turnbull Library by Professor Ian A. Gordon, of Victoria University College. During the war the rare books in the Turnbull Library were sent to the country for safe-keeping, and just before this occurred the Librarian, C. R. H. Taylor, showed to Professor Gordon a small leather-bound volume which he tentatively identified as a manuscript book of William Shenstone, the contemporary of Samuel Johnson and author of *The Schoolmistress* and other poems, and leader of a circle of literary people centring around the poet's country estate The Leasowes.

Shenstone developed The Leasowes into one of the showplaces of England with the aid of grottoes, rustic seats, inscribed urns, vistas and concealed boundaries. The place attracted many admirers and friends, among them Bishop Percy, editor of *The Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, John Scott Hylton, a wealthy dilettante, the poets Jago, Graves, and Somerville, the printer Baskerville, Dodsley the publisher, and others. Various works by Shenstone were published in his lifetime, and others after his death. One publication he was known to have contemplated for some time was an anthology of unpublished verse collected mainly from the friends who made up The Leasowes circle.

The volume was never printed, and knowledge of it had practically disappeared until the manuscript found its way into the hands of Professor Gordon. The problem of proving the identity and ownership of the volume involved a long and persistent search for evidence, which must rank as one of the most notable pieces of literary detection ever done in this country, working at a distance of 12,000 miles from source materials. How was it done? The fruits

of that search, and something of the story of the work involved, are to be seen in a book just published by the Oxford University Press entitled *Shenstone's Miscellany, 1759-1763*, Now First Edited from the Manuscript by Ian A. Gordon.*

Fire-charred Edges

TO get a fuller story *The Listener* interviewed Professor Gordon. He said that the editing of the *Miscellany* had occupied him intermittently for several years. The greatest problem he had been faced with was that of tracing the history of the ownership of the manuscript. He had decided from the handwriting and the nature of the poems that it must be Shenstone's. It was also known that "according to Percy, Shenstone had a choice collection of poems preparing for the press at the time of his death." The first piece of real evidence was provided by a letter, sewn in with the leather binding, from John Scott Hylton to Percy, hoping that "the herewith included M.S. vol. of Poems will come safe to his Hands." Another clue was provided by the fire-charred edges of the pages and a note on the flyleaf: "This precious (—) of my poor friend Shenstone was thus piteously burnt in the fire which consumed my library at Northumbd. House in 1780. P."

If the manuscript had remained in Percy's possession until his death in 1811, when the greater part of his library was sold, Professor Gordon was faced with the problem of discovering how it came into the hands of Alexander Turnbull in New Zealand. Turnbull was well known to the London booksellers as a collector of rare volumes, first editions and manuscripts (his collection, which forms the basis of the present library in Wellington, was bequeathed to the nation in 1918), and there was likely to be some record of his purchase of the *Miscellany* in his

**Shenstone's Miscellany, 1759-1763*, edited by Ian A. Gordon; Oxford, at the Clarendon Press. English price, 21/-.

correspondence. The literary detective had to spend many hours carefully going through Turnbull's correspondence, which at that time was lying unsorted, without chronology or index, at the library. His persistence was rewarded when he discovered a letter dated 1916 from the firm of Maggs, the London booksellers, offering Turnbull a complete set of first editions of the poet Richard Graves, including a volume in Shenstone's handwriting which contained some of Graves's poems.

Gap in the Records

WHAT had happened to the manuscript between the time of Percy's death in 1811 and its sale to Turnbull in 1916? Professor Gordon said he was completely baffled by this gap in the records and was unable to fill it until he visited England in 1948. He spent some time in the British Museum and the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and was lucky enough to discover at the Museum the book auction records of Sotheby's, among them the actual auctioneer's copy of the catalogue of a sale on April 29, 1884, which had included some of Percy's manuscripts. These volumes had remained in the possession of his family for the past 73 years. One entry ran: "272. Shenstone (W). Collection of Poems transcribed and corrected from original MSS. Autograph MS. damaged at the edges by the fire in Northumberland House."

In pursuing the clue given by the mention of Richard Graves's name in Maggs's letter to Turnbull, Professor Gordon by chance came upon a mention

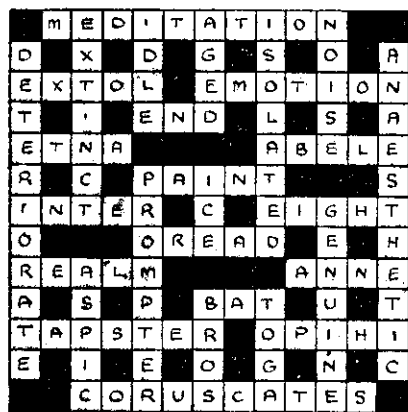


"Carefully going through Turnbull's correspondence"

of the manuscript in an article on Graves in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. This ran as follows: "Mr. Godwin possesses a manuscript collection of poems transcribed and corrected from original sources by Shenstone, which afterwards belonged to Bishop Percy. It includes numerous verses by Graves." This entry was dated 1890. Mr. Godwin was found to be J. G. Godwin, librarian to Lord Bute at Cardiff Castle. Godwin had an excellent collection of first editions of Graves, including the *Miscellany* presumably because it contained unpublished poems by him.

Godwin died in 1896, and his Graves collection was acquired by Robert Drane, of Cardiff. Sotheby's sold Drane's library in February, 1916, and the next owner of the manuscript was the firm of Maggs, who sold it to Turnbull. Turnbull had the *Miscellany* finely cased in green morocco, a special binding-case being made for the frail and charred volume.

(Solution to No. 639)



Clues Across

1. A suitable alliance to strike.
4. A frequent report, largely a matter of 4 down.
8. It's real, but confused, this cross.
9. A canoe is easily upset here.
10. Not a neat arrangement.
11. Concealed by the last owner?
13. Consuming a mixture of gin and tea.
15. He has some strings to pull.
18. This god is mixed up in 21 down.
19. Here we see Mum dally with a view to avoiding duty.
22. Peculiar part of a chic hairstyle.

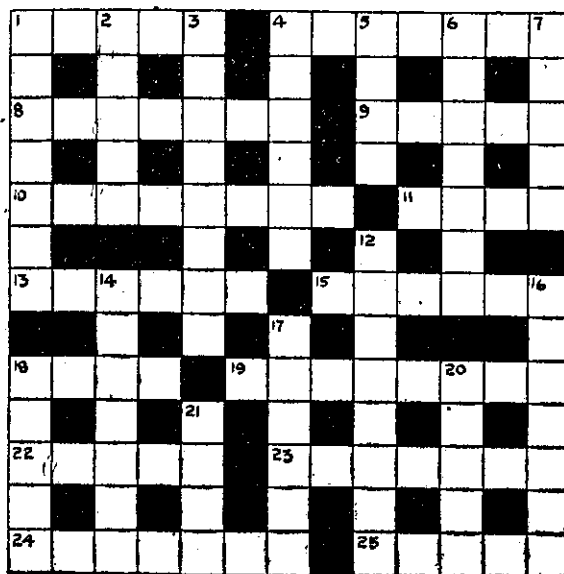
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23. Yield, apparently, in favour of Mussolini.
24. Stirred up.
25. Perfume.
18. Goal of aspiration.
20. Standard measure.
21. They are presented, appropriately enough, by 18 across.

Clues Down

1. "Gently hast thou told Thy —, which might else in telling wound" (Milton, "Paradise Lost").
2. Claw.
3. Elevating.
4. One outcome of the war?
5. Alert.
6. The pale (anag.). It may be found in the bottom of a glass.
7. Regenerate.
12. Lear's Dong had this sort of nose.
14. Storm ending in a fuss.
16. Severe anguish.
17. "The cloud — towers, the gorgeous palaces, The solemn temples . . ." (Prospero, in "The Tempest").

No. 640 (Constructed by R.W.H.)



Songs and Pastorals

PROFESSOR GORDON points out that the *Miscellany* is no mere commonplace book. Shenstone chose the verses to illustrate his theory of poetry. Most important are the verses of The Leasowes circle, ranging from epigram to pastoral, with the emphasis on Shenstone's favourite qualities: simplicity, the pleasures of country life, clear diction, and unaffected imagery. His next choice was songs, with a preference for easy skipping rhythms. Shenstone played an important part in directing contemporary taste. In rejecting the town in favour of the country, in emphasising the poetic qualities mentioned above, and particularly in his selection of a number of ballads, many of which were to appear in print later in Percy's *Reliques*, he indicated his awareness of the growing movement of Romanticism which became prominent with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798. The book should be a valuable contribution, Professor Gordon believes, to the growing body of material which reflects renewed interest in the period of English literature of which Percy and Shenstone are the most representative figures.

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 17, 1953.