

Rescuing Horace Walpole

WILMARTH S. LEWIS



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The Fantasy

Two years ago the Almighty called me into His office and said, "I am going to destroy every object in your house except one, and you have twenty minutes to choose it."

I replied, "Lord, I don't need twenty seconds. I'll take Bentley's Drawings and Designs for Strawberry Hill."

The Almighty nodded solemnly. "For that answer you may save twenty-five more objects." After a pause He added, "You seem a little dazed, but I know you're not very good at arithmetic." In a louder voice He explained, "Twenty-five and one make twenty-six, and what I'm telling you is you may save twenty-six objects." He paused to see if I understood. Then He continued, "I don't care what they are—books, manuscripts, pictures, furniture—anything you like."

I managed to say, "Sir, I hope I may have more time to choose them."

"How much time do you want?"

"At least a year."

"A year!" His voice was very terrible.

"I think, Sir, I can make the choices fairly quickly, but I would like to write them up as I go along."

And that's the end of the fantasy and the beginning of this book.

The Problem: Which Twenty-six Objects?

To understand my problem you must know something about Horace Walpole and my library. An account of both appears in *Collector's Progress*, which was published by Alfred Knopf in 1951. I wrote it to answer the question How did you get started on Horace Walpole? *Collector's Progress* shows that I was a born collector, beginning with house flies at the age of six and moving on to stamps at ten. It also tells how while travelling in England in the summer of 1922 I went into every bookshop I came to and pored over its shelves, buying inexpensive eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editions of the English classics, and learning more about books than I had learned at school and college. The following summer I bought at York for thirty-five shillings the book that is the foundation of my library, John Heneage Jesse's *George Selwyn and His Contemporaries*, 4 volumes, 1843. I had never heard of it, but the avuncular bookseller assured me, "it should be in every gentleman's library, Sir."

Inside the front cover of this copy's first volume is a pocket containing thirty-two pages of manuscript comment on the letters by Lady Louisa Stuart, a lady as unknown to me then as were Jesse and Selwyn themselves, but who I subsequently learned was a daughter of George III's first Prime Minister, Lord Bute. The sort of thing she wrote was, "The Coventry children—Lady Maria was 'marked for life,' and, I think, the ugliest *young* woman I ever beheld. Lady Anne had not the same strong appearance of disease but was scarcely pretty, nor would have been held at all so, if—if—one must speak out—if a modest woman; a part she disdained playing from her first beginning. Both sisters married, and both were divorced." Lady Louisa led me into the great world of the eighteenth century where I found Horace Walpole at its center. By then I had become so engrossed in the period I couldn't wait until the summer of 1924 for my next trip to England and hurried over in February.

On the 28th of that month when walking up Chancery Lane I came to

a gloomy Victorian building in which there was to be a book auction the following day. I stared at it dubiously. Should I go in? I went in and found myself in the sale room of Hodgson's, the modest competitor of Sotheby's and Christie's. The forthcoming sale was of the Milnes Gaskell library in which were a few books printed at Walpole's private press at Strawberry Hill and six of his letters to John Pinkerton, the Scottish historian. Dim as my knowledge of Walpole was, I realized he belonged in my growing library and bought the letters the next day. What, I have often wondered, would my life have been if instead of going into Hodgson's that February morning I had walked on? The collector may reach his specialty by divine direction, as I did, but the great opportunity must present itself in a congenial field. Had I found a roc's egg in Chancery Lane I should not have become an ornithologist, owing to a nasty encounter with a bantam rooster that turned me against birds, but Walpole's six letters fell, so to say, on fertile ground because I had been prepared for the eighteenth century by Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Chauncey Brewster Tinker at Yale, and Lady Louisa Stuart.

One of the six Walpole letters I bought at Hodgson's begins:

Strawberry Hill. July 31, 1789 [when Walpole was in his seventy-second year]. Having had my house full of relations till this evening, I could not answer the favour of your letter sooner; and now I am ashamed of not being able to tell you that I have finished reading your *Essay on the Ancient History of Scotland*. I am so totally unversed in the story of original nations, and I own always find myself so little interested in savage manners, unassisted by individual characters, that though *you* lead me with a firmer hand than any historian through the dark tracts, the clouds close round me the moment I have passed them, and I retain no memory of the ground I have trod. I greatly admire your penetration, and read with wonder your clear discovery of the kingdom of Strathclyde—but though I bow to you as I would to the founder of an empire, I confess I do not care a straw about your subjects, with whom I am no more acquainted than with the ancient inhabitants of Otaheite. Your origin of the Picts is most able; but then I cannot remember them with any precise discrimination from any other hyperborean nation: and all the barbarous names at the end of the first volume and the gibberish in the Appendix was to me as unintelligible as if I repeated abracadabra, and made no impression on me but to raise respect of your patience, and admire a sagacity that could extract meaning and *suite* from what seemed to me the most indigestible of all materials. You rise in my estimation in proportion to the disagreeable mass of your ingredients . . .

and so on for another page and a half. Walpole had come alive.

I bought Mrs Paget Toynbee's edition of his letters and read its seven-

Strawberryhill
July 31. at night
1789.

Dear Sir

July 26 95

having had my house full of relations till this evening, I could not answer the favour of yr letter sooner; & now I am ashamed of not being able to tell you that I have finished reading your Essay on the ancient History of Scotland. I am so totally unversed in the story of original Nations, & I soon always find myself so little interested in savage manners, unassisted by individual characters, that tho you lead me with a firmer hand than any Historian thro the dark tracks, the clouds close round me the moment I have passed them, & I retain no memory of the ground I have trod. I greatly admire yr penetration, & redden with wonder yr clear discovery of the kingdom of Strathclyde. — but tho I bow to you as I would to the Founder of an Empire, I confess I do not care a straw about yr subjects, with whom I am no more acquainted than with the ancient Inhabitants of Otaheite. your Origin of the Picts is most able; but then I cannot remember them with any precise discrimination from any other Hyperborean Nation: And all the barbarous Names at the end of the first Volume & the Gibberish in the Appendix was to me as unintelligible as if I repeated to me a ~~mad~~ madman's impression on me. but to raise respect of yr patience, & admire a sagacity that could extract meaning & suite from what seemed to me the most indigestible of all materials, you rise in my estimation in proportion to the disagreeable mass of yr Ingredients.

teen volumes straight through, discovering long before the end that Macaulay's famous essay on Walpole is a caricature. Macaulay wrote it as a review of Walpole's correspondence with Horace Mann. His manuscript, which I own, was dashed off by a young man flinging untruths about like confetti. Examples of his brilliance, all untrue, are that Walpole "cared about a miniature of Grammont more than about the American Revolution," that "his features were covered by mask within mask," and that he was "a gentleman-usher at heart." Mary Berry who knew Walpole as well as anyone wrote that Macaulay's "hasty and general opinion" was "entirely and offensively unlike the original." As to Macaulay's remark that Walpole "sneered at everybody," she pointed out that "sneering was not his way of showing dislike." She conceded that "he had very strong prejudices, sometimes adopted on very insufficient grounds, and he therefore often made great mistakes in the appreciation of character; but when influenced by such impressions," she went on, "he always expressed his opinions directly, and often too violently. The affections of his heart were bestowed on few," she also conceded, "but they were singularly warm, pure, and constant, characterized not by the ardor of passion, but by the constant preoccupation of real affection." Miss Berry's answer was forgotten and Macaulay's essay still damages Walpole's reputation.

As I read volume after volume of Walpole's letters he became a companion who led me about the great world with wit and wisdom. I shared his love of friends, books, pictures, the theatre, and collecting. I delighted in what he called the "touches of nature" that he discovered in people and in his reading; I sympathized with his dread of the gout, which first attacked him in middle age and reappeared every other year with increasing severity. I was impressed by his determination from the age of eighteen to record the history of his time for people like himself in the future. "Giant Posterity" was a lifelong concern. "I have even begun a treatise or panegyric on the great discoveries made by posterity in all arts and sciences," he wrote, "wherein I shall particularly descant on the delightfulness of having whole groves of hummingbirds, tame tigers taught to fetch and carry, pocket spying-glasses to see all that is doing in China, with a thousand other toys, which we now look upon as impracticable, and which pert posterity would laugh in one's face for staring at, while they are offering rewards for perfecting discoveries, of the principles of which we have not the least conception!" It was flattering to have him say that the next Augustan Age would dawn on our side of the Atlantic. Finally, his devotion to his family and friends was moving, and so was his sym-

pathy with underdogs—blacks, debtors, and Americans. Macaulay made Walpole an underdog whom I grew increasingly eager to defend.

I was encouraged by Byron who said Walpole was ‘the father of the first romance [*The Castle of Otranto*] and of the last tragedy [*The Mysterious Mother*] in our language” and was “surely worthy of a higher place than any living writer, be he who he may.” Walter Scott granted him “the applause due to chastity and precision of style”; Carlyle called him “an irrefragable authority,” and Saintsbury said after dismissing Macaulay’s “cocksure dexterity” that Walpole was the key to the society of his day and that his letters would make an excellent third to the Bible and Shakespeare for one stranded on a desert island. I agreed with Henry Adams that one of the charms of reading him is “that he is so extremely like ourselves.” When Chauncey Tinker confirmed my belief that Walpole was undervalued I began to think of collecting him seriously. Fortunately, I didn’t know how vast a subject he is, for had I known I would have believed it was beyond me. Until I read the letters I had heard only of them and *The Castle of Otranto*, not of *A Catalogue of Royal and Noble Authors*, *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, *The Mysterious Mother*, *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of Richard III*, his verses, essays, and memoirs. Nor had I heard of his private press—the first in England—that began with Gray’s *Odes* in 1757 and ended with Hannah More’s *Bishop Bonner’s Ghost* thirty-two years later. My knowledge of Strawberry Hill and its place in the Gothic Revival was hazy. I knew nothing of its library, pictures, and “curiosities” that made it famous throughout Europe.

In *Collector’s Progress* I tell how in December 1924 I was drawn by divine guidance into Scribner’s Bookstore in New York, just as I had been drawn into Hodgson’s, and how I found there a small collection of the Strawberry Hill Press’s “detached pieces,” how I bought it against the strong advice of a sage elder brother, and how I went ahead as if my life depended on my forming the finest collection of Walpole in existence, which, in fact, it did. The time was propitious because, apart from Dr Johnson and his circle, the eighteenth century was not collected and the books that Walpole wrote, printed, and owned, his letters and manuscripts, were lying about unwanted at a hundredth of what they may fetch today. I went to England nearly every year until the War, made friends with the antiquarian booksellers and read their catalogues from the letter *W*. As their small world became aware of the young American who was collecting Horace Walpole with fanatical zeal more and more of the books

written, printed, and owned by him appeared. Things got easier still when the Depression brought the Golden Age of collecting in this century. Fortunately, I realized from the first that I should collect the books Walpole owned because he read and annotated them. We now have a third of his library, some eighty percent of the original collection that has been located.

After the War, I embarked on what I later called "Lewis's Folly." Donald Wing, the head of the Yale Library Purchasing Department, reported to me all the English books from 1751 to 1800 not at Yale that were offered in booksellers' catalogues. I got several hundred in the next few years before I unfortunately stopped; "unfortunately" because these books have proved to be extraordinarily helpful. The subjects range from how to build chimneys that don't smoke and the Norwich Directory for 1783 to *How to Live for Many weeks, months, or years, Without Eating any Thing Whatever*. Many of these "background books" appear to be the only copies in this country and are the ones most frequently requested from us by readers in the Beinecke Library at Yale. We also have thousands of unpublished eighteenth-century letters and our collection of satirical prints, originals and photostats, from 1740 to 1800 compares favorably with the British Museum's for the same period. Our detailed cross-reference cards number over 60,000.

The local attitude towards my growing library was shown by the Farmington postmistress who observed shrilly while shoveling out the first 302 volumes of the *Gentlemen's Magazine*, "Here you go on, Mr Lewis, buying *books* and all the world crying for *bread!*" Despite this reproof the library has grown like the chambered nautilus, building more stately mansions as the swift seasons roll. In 1928 William Adams Delano designed the first of our additional libraries and when Dr Rosenbach, the greatest of booksellers, stood in its doorway, mouth agape, he said, "This is the most beautiful library in the world." Five other libraries and two stack rooms have been added since with a capacity of upwards of 40,000 books. We have protected them with a fire-alarm system so sensitive that until it was calmed down it brought the local volunteer firemen in their steel helmets, rubber boots, and axes whenever anyone smoked under one of the gadgets that set the whole thing off. Our chief "security" against marauders are two standard French poodles. Although we have opened the house to hundreds of visitors through the years only one object has been stolen, a delightful sketch by Jackie Onassis at the age of sixteen, of her Aunt Annie Burr Lewis.

From 1924 to 1932 I bought only Walpole's unpublished letters, copies of which I sent Paget Toynbee for the supplements that he made to his wife's edition, but in 1932 I had an inspiration that affected the rest of my life. On getting to London that year I hurried round as usual to Maggs Bros. to see what they had put aside for me. For once there was nothing, "No, nothing at all this time, I'm afraid," said Mr Ernest Maggs. Although he was quite ready to have me go I lingered, and then came my inspiration: "It's just occurred to me I ought to have an example of Walpole's hand for every year of his writing life." "Oh, *well!*" said Mr Maggs briskly and ordered up forty letters the firm had been unable to sell since they had bought them eleven years earlier. Mr Maggs and I were equally pleased when I bought all forty for less, as he confided to me, than the firm paid for them. In the next six weeks I got sixty-five more Walpole letters from other booksellers in London and New York, all of whom were thankful to be rid of them at about three pounds apiece. In 1974 Maggs sold one Walpole letter to another bookseller for £350.

When I collated my newly purchased letters with the Toynbees' text of them, feeling rather impertinent to be doing so, I found that they and Walpole's earlier editors had not only been careless in transcription, but had cut out passages they considered "improper," wounding to the descendants of those unflatteringly mentioned, or just plain dull. An untampered text was a third reason why a new edition of the letters was needed. The first reason was to include the letters *to* Walpole, of which few had been printed apart from Mme du Deffand's. The letters to Walpole answer questions that can't be answered in any other way. Without them it is like listening to only one side of a telephone conversation. The second of the three reasons for a new edition was expressed by a reviewer of the letters to Lady Ossory in 1848: "What the reader most indispensably needs," he wrote, "and what registers and magazines cannot supply, is the explanation of small events, slight allusions, obscure anecdotes, traits of individual character, the gossip of the circle, and all the little items and accidents of domestic, social, and political life, which constitute in a most peculiar degree the staple of Walpole's correspondence—the most frequent occasions and chief objects of either his wit or his sagacity, and without some knowledge of which his best letters would be little more than a collection of riddles." The new edition could be done only in a library like Yale's that is especially strong in eighteenth-century newspapers, magazines and collections of contemporary novels, biographies, plays, poems, and pamphlets. The unique material at Farm-

ington would enrich and enlarge the work. My wife and I were ready to finance such an edition if Yale sponsored it. Yale did so and work began 1 July 1933, with one assistant, Dayle Wallace, who had just taken his Ph.D. under Tinker in the Yale Graduate School. I believed naively that the project would be finished by 1950 and not run to more than thirty volumes similar to the small octavos of the Toynbee edition, whereas it will reach forty-eight volumes twice the size of the Toynbee volumes, and will not be finished before 1981. The originals of about half of its seven thousand letters are at Farmington with photostats of the remainder in other hands. Over sixteen hundred letters will be printed for the first time. Lost correspondences may yet turn up—in 1955 two hundred new letters to Walpole appeared out of the blue in Ceylon—but discovery of another large unpublished correspondence is unlikely. Only the keenest Walpolians will read our forty-eight volumes and their million footnotes straight through, yet the Yale Walpole will have to be consulted by all scholars of the period, no matter what their subject is. I once said this in a public talk, stating that you will find in Walpole's letters everything except—I searched for a comic exception—"except bee-keeping," and the next unpublished letter I got was entirely on that subject. As our subscribers live round the world I hope that even a universal cataclysm will spare a set somewhere, perhaps the one at Lima or Oslo, Rondebosch or Osaka, and so enable the study of Walpole and his time to begin anew.

Most of the library was acquired in England, but Walpoliana have been found in Lima, Guernsey, Belfast, The Hague, Geneva, Marburg, Luxor, Cape Town, Colombo, Melbourne, Dunedin, Honolulu, Vancouver, Los Angeles, Chicago, Ann Arbor, and Athens, Georgia. Gifts and bequests have been made by friends and strangers. Thirty-six public institutions in this country, England, Ireland, and Canada, have given or exchanged unique Walpoliana (directly to me or through Yale), for permanent deposit in the Lewis Walpole Library.* They have done so because they

*They are, in the chronological order of their gift or exchange: Yale; Mercantile Library, New York; University of Michigan; Folger Shakespeare Library; University of Chicago; Oriental Institute, Luxor, Egypt; University of Illinois; New York Public Library; Harvard; Library of Congress; Newberry Library, Chicago; Lakeside Press, Chicago; Vancouver Public Library; Century Association, New York; Virginia Historical Society; American Antiquarian Society; College of St Mark and St John, London; University of Liverpool; Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.; Library Company of Philadelphia; Pierpont Morgan Library; Columbia; Wesleyan; Queens University, Belfast; Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation, Del.; University of Virginia; Art Institute of Chicago; National Gallery, Washington; Washington Cathedral; Bryn Mawr; American Philosophical Society; University of Southern California; Cleveland Public Library; Northwestern University; Reform Club, London; Providence Public Library. These names have been painted by the Bensons of Newport, R.I. on five panels in the East Library, with space left for additions.

have known that my house and everything in it will one day be Yale-in-Farmington.

On my death there will be a Curator and a twelve-man Board of Managers, half of whom will be ex-officio members of the University and half "Successor Members" by analogy with the Successor Fellows of the Corporation who founded Yale in 1701 by giving their books. I have named the first six Lewis Walpole Successor Fellows in my will. They are in full accord with my views of the Library's future use and I trust and pray that they and their successors will not be thwarted by any misguided functionary of the University who would like to use the Library's income for purposes he believes are more important. It is a great comfort to think of these friends protecting the Library throughout the ages against Philistines who have little sympathy with the Library's reason for being. As one who has sat on many similar boards, including the Yale Corporation, I know how effective such a lobby of devoted and solvent persons can be.

It has taken more than a year to decide on the twenty-six objects the Almighty is permitting me to save and to write them up. He let me mention the runners-up for each choice, but punished me with sessions in the Hartford Hospital for doing it.

The order in which the Choices of *Rescuing Horace Walpole* will appear follows Walpole's life more or less chronologically and is not the order of my preference for them.