

*Sometimes, when I have bought a book that I did not seriously need, and could not afford, and am a little ashamed go home, I make an inscription in it: To my dear wife, upon her birthday; many happy returns.*

—Rev. Carl S. Patton



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## ON THE BUYING OF BOOKS

**Reverend Carl S. Patton**

I have always felt that it was commendable to buy books. I grew up with a liking for reading my own books, instead of someone else's. This preference I still have. I have my books strictly for use. I turn down the pages. I even tear out a few, if I need them. Books that I really use are much the worse for wear when I get through with them. I always mark them. When I read one of them a second time, which I seldom do, I generally can't remember what I meant by the marks I put in it the first time. But it gives you a feeling of having dug deep into the book, and it intensifies your sense of the ownership of it, to make big black marks down the side of it as you read. So I have always felt that one should buy as many books as possible. They are not like food, of which one should buy only as much as one can consume at the moment. Nor like clothes, of

which a wise man will buy as few and as cheap as he can get by with. But of books he should buy all he can.

I am not defending this attitude toward the buying of books. I am merely saying that I have it. This attitude has met at home a larger indulgence than it has been entitled to. But I have grown a little ashamed of it myself, now and then. And in this mood, hesitating to bring home some literary purchase, I have hit upon several devices which I do not mind sharing with any of my readers who may profit thereby.

Sometimes, when I have bought a book that I did not seriously need, and could not afford, and am a little ashamed go home, I make an inscription in it: 'To my dear wife, upon her birthday; many happy returns.' This works, up to a point, the chief drawback being that it is applicable to only one brief period of the year. So I substitute for it sometimes a formula that can be used in the spring instead of in the fall: 'To my dear husband, from his loving Harriet'; or, 'From Harriet to Carl. Many happy returns.' I recommend these methods, merely suggesting that their success will necessarily depend somewhat upon the tact and skill of the performer—as also upon the temper of the party of the second part.

Sometimes I employ a method with still more indirection in it. I go into Holmes's Second-Hand Bookstore,—truly, as his advertisement has it, 'There is no place like Holmes,' and there I find a half-dozen novels. They are finely bound, and printed in large type, and constitute a series. The name of the original owner has been scrupulously removed, and they are in fine condition. One of them is Smolett's *Humphrey Clinker*, another is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a third is Charles Reade's *It Is Never Too Late to Mend*. There are six of them, and they can be had for the ridiculous price of \$3.35. No man in his right mind would pass up such a bargain. So I buy them. I take them to my study at the church. I carefully distribute them around among the stock already on hand, so that none but an extremely discerning person would observe that anything had been added. After a few weeks, I take one of them home, and carelessly leave it on the sitting-room table.

'What is this?' says the head-of-the-family, as we sit down before the fire in the evening.

'What is what?' I ask, as if unaware that there is anything.

'This book?' she says.

'Which one?' I ask. 'Oh, that,' I say, looking hard at it as if to recall some old, forgotten circumstance; 'that's something that has been kicking around down at the study for quite a while.'

The six books, being all alike on the outside, can thus be introduced, one after another, into the house, in a period of a few weeks, without commotion of any sort.

Some few books I have, of course, that I have not bought. It pleases me remember that, when my father died, thirty years ago, he had on his study table John Fiske's *Idea of God and Destiny of Man*, and Robertson Smith's *Old Testament in the Jewish Church*; they were new at the time, and they were indicative of the position to which a man who got his theological training before the Civil War had worked himself out. I prize also a book of Scotch poems, called *Scotia's Bards*, not merely because my father used to read aloud out of it, but because I remember when mother planned to buy it as a birthday present for him, and the local dealer had to send to Chicago for it, and all of us who were in the secret feared it would not arrive in time; but it did. Some such books carry a lot of personal immortality with them.

But I have others that I have not come by so honorably. I have in particular one set of gorgeous books on Norse literature. Now if there is anything I don't know or care anything about it is Norse literature. But these books are all in leather, some red, some blue; they are lettered in gold, and there is glorious gold chasing on the backs and sides.

I was once making a pastoral call on a lady in Columbus, who said, 'What shall I ever do with this set of books? I bought them for my husband and he won't read them. Do you suppose the University Library would like them?' 'Certainly,' I replied; 'a university library can use any book ever written.'

'Well, I wish they had them; and I wish they had them right off, for I want the space in that bookcase for some other books.'

I took advantage of this opening, and said, 'I will take them home, if you want them out of the way; and I'll call up Professor Taylor and ask him to come over and look at them and see if the Library can use them.'

Now, I knew Joey Taylor well. And I knew that when I called him up he would say, 'Sure; probably very valuable; be over in a

day or two and look at them'; and that he would never think of them again. There are no books in my establishment that lend quite such an air of prosperity to it as these dozen or fifteen on Norse literature. But this method of obtaining books cannot be pushed beyond a certain natural limit. And most of my books I have bought.

One book I should like to buy if I could get my hands on it; only in this case I should want the identical, individual book; it is a particular copy of Pope's *Essay on Man*. Somebody must still have that particular book—or has it been ingloriously fed to the flames long ago? How or why I should ever have hit upon Pope's *Essay on Man* is a mystery; but it was the first serious book I read, as a boy. Up to that time I had read chiefly Beadle's 'Dime Novels'; but these I had just abandoned, because I had grown so familiar with Dick Dead-Eye that I knew what he was going to do before he did it, and so I could not see the use of reading anything more about him. But Pope was different. For some time after I read the *Essay on Man*, I regarded the acquaintance with it as the one infallible sign of an awakened mind. What led me, later, to discard this criterion was the fact that, so far as I could learn, no person among my acquaintances had read it; and I got tired of being the only awakened mind in a town of four thousand people. Some I found, who had heard of it; my father and mother knew it at least by reputation, had perhaps read portions of it, or extracts from it; but in my own generation, even my older brother, who was in college at the time, had not actually read it. I have never read it since those days.

## II

But I do not mean to speak at length of particular books. Apropos of nothing in particular, this reminds me of the haphazard way in which I began to buy books when I got out of the Seminary. I had never heard of philosophy, practically, till I went to Andover. In the good old days when I went to college, they did not cast such pearls before swine. But I must know something about philosophy. So I go in for it. No use to start at all unless you do it thoroughly. So I buy a whole set of Herbert Spencer's *Synthetic Philosophy*. All the first winter of my first pastorate I read him, understanding generally some small portion of what he is getting at. I shudder now when I think what sort of fodder I must have given my people on Sundays while I was reading this stuff between times. I have carefully destroyed all the sermons I wrote during that period, lest, coming upon them unexpectedly in my barrel, I should be tempted to do myself bodily harm. But, at any rate, I did

read these books. And in the footnotes I observed that Spencer referred to the books of various other writers of philosophy. Those that he mentioned with evident disapproval I eschewed. But those that he mentioned with approval I bought. Then bought those that these gentlemen mentioned in their footnotes.

There are two difficulties in this method. First, it leads to an ever-widening circle, just as each man has two grandfathers, four great-grandfathers, sixteen great-great grandfathers, and so on. Second, it keeps you going backward, since every new book you buy was written before the one in which you saw it mentioned. It gives you a feeling like riding backward in the train. I took me some time to discover that this was what I was doing; and, indeed, I was so ignorant about this particular topic, that it made no difference whether I went forward or backward.

But I finally abandoned the practice and wrote to Professor Royce, asking him to tell me what to read. The only difference in the result was that he advised me to begin with Plato and work down, instead of with himself and work back to Plato, as I was doing. Through this period I usually bought so-called 'Introductions' to things—Introductions to Philosophy, Introductions to Sociology, and so on. I did this on the principle that, knowing absolutely nothing about these various subjects, not knowing them even by sight, what I needed was to be introduced to them. I needed, first of all, a mere speaking acquaintance with them. But titles are misleading, and some introductions are unnecessarily formal.

But this is a digression. I go back to the reason why I have bought some of my books. Most of them I have bought because I wanted to read them. Twenty years ago I never bought a new book until I had read the old one. And in those days I used to feel that I had to read every book clear through. How could you be sure you got your money out of it? Besides, I never could quite rid myself of the feeling that I had carried over from boyhood, that somewhere, on some particular page, probably 321,—or 463, if it were a larger book—I should come to what the author really had to say—to his one great secret, which he was to impart to me and which I could find nowhere except in him. I was always more or less conscious that I had not learned anything in particular from him yet; but sometime I should turn the right page, and there it would be! But how could I tell what page it would be? And what was left, under those circumstances, but to read all the pages?

This habit of reading every word, and buying new books until I had read old ones clear through, was to be recommended from motives of economy, as it was such a long time before I could justify myself in buying a new batch of books. At last, however, I perceived that I should never become a cultured man in this manner, or acquire a houseful of books, at least not in a lifetime of ordinary length. So I lapsed from this primitive and economical level, and permitted myself to buy a new batch when I could see that sometime I was going to get the old one read clear through.

This change of method has resulted in my having on my shelves an ever-increasing number of books that I have not read. But it is very hard for me to let any of them go, for I have not yet got my money out of them. Nor can I lightly bring myself to sell any books, even though I have read them, or have given up the hope of doing so. I did indeed sell four bushels to the second-hand man just before moving to California; but that was only because I was hard up. While I lived in Maine, I thought I would try selling some of the books I had read, or had had around a long time without reading. So I made up a box, the contents of which had originally cost me two or three hundred dollars, and sent it to Bartlett in Boston, who gave me twenty-five for it. But in that box—I remember it well—was a copy of Scrivener's *Plain Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*. I remember it, not because I had read it, but because it was a big purple book that took the eye on the shelf. And once after that I wanted it; and there was no copy of it, so far as I could find, in town. Especially as I could not see that I had any more money than before, I made up my mind never to repeat that experiment.

But some books I have bought because, while I did not need them, and did not propose to read them at once, I felt that I might need them sometime. Among these are anthologies, collections of poetry, mostly duplicating each other; especially, in recent years, the annual anthologies of magazine verse, and collections of the 'New Poetry.' I say to myself, 'What if I should be writing my sermon some Saturday afternoon, and about five o'clock I should want to quote something from Sara Teasdale? Not that I ever did want to, or that I even know what she has written. But then, I might want to; and how would I feel if I should have to stop at five o'clock on Saturday afternoon and go clear down to Parker's,<sup>1</sup> to buy an anthology with some of the poems of Sara Teasdale in it?' In a world of uncertainties like this, it is well to be prepared for any contingency.

Other books I have bought because I thought that sometime I should get around to read them. I once started in to read F. H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*, better described by the nickname given to it—"The Disappearance of Reality." In the introduction, the author advises the ordinary reader to read the first three chapters and then skip to the ninth, as the intervening chapters will probably be too technical for him. I ploughed through the three chapters, getting a little more hazy all the time as to what it was about; and then, with great relief, skipped to the ninth. But something must have been contained in those intervening five chapters that was necessary for the elucidation of the subject; for, when I arrived at the ninth, I was in total darkness. This experience showed me that I probably could not read Bradley. Whereupon I went and bought his book on logic. It was as I expected. I could make neither head nor tail of it. But if a man's reach does not exceed his grasp, how will he ever spend his income? as Browning says. So I have this book of Bradley's; and I value it; it is a sign of that good time coming, when I shall be brighter than I am now and can read it. Once in a while I take it down, to see if the time has come yet. No. Not yet. But what is life without a goal?

Books of the English philosopher, Bosanquet, I buy for the same purpose. I remember having in my hand, one day on the street corner, his *Value and Destiny of the Individual*. A lawyer friend of mine came along, looked at the title, and with the despicably concrete mind that some men have, asked, 'Which individual?' 'Search me,' I replied.; and the search, to this day, would reveal nothing.

### III

Some books I buy, I fear, from curiosity. So I buy a copy of *Who's Who*, to see how many of my friends have got into it. No matter really, but I am curious about it.

Which leads me to say (the subtle connection will appear in a moment) that some books I buy because they minister to my pride. I am not a scholar. But sometimes I have imagined that, if anyone had caught me young enough and encouraged me hard enough, I might have been. This pleasant illusion I keep up by buying certain books. There are the Loeb Classics, for instance—with the Greek text of Plato's dialogues and Sophocles's dramas, and other such light stuff, on one page, and the English on the other. I amuse myself sometimes by trying to make some of the Greek words fit into the English. But that is not what I have these books for. I have

them so that somebody may come into my study some day, and pick one of them up, and turning the pages thoughtfully, may say, 'What a whale of a man this Patton is!' I have not realized largely yet on my investment in these books, since nobody has actually done this. But it may happen any time.

And there are some books that I buy because I have looked at them so long in the bookstore, and so many clerks have stood around watching me, and have asked me periodically whether I have been waited on, that I really couldn't do anything else. And once in a while I buy a book because Mr. Parker advises me to. And what a book one will occasionally get in this disinterested way! There is the *Amenities of Book Collecting*, by A. Edward Newton. It is the kind of book you bring home of a winter evening, when you ought to be writing your sermon, or making a list of calls for to-morrow. But you sit down with it, before the gas-grate in your study. At ten o'clock your wife comes in and asks if you are not going to bed. You reply that you are, at once. At eleven o'clock you rise to go, but reflect that in a few minutes more your wife will be more sound asleep and will not know how you have kept promise. Sinking back into your chair, you read on; when you look at your watch again, you are surprised to find it is twelve o'clock. You reach over and turn out the gas, taking off your shoes meanwhile, so that your simian tread through the hall will be the more absolutely silent, and the first thing you know the clock downstairs struck one, and you wonder why your feet have got so cold.

And, finally, on this matter I have to confess that there are some books on my shelves which I cannot see any reason for having bought, except that I didn't have any more sense at the time.

If I may add a word or two here that do not really seem to 'belong,' I should like to say:—

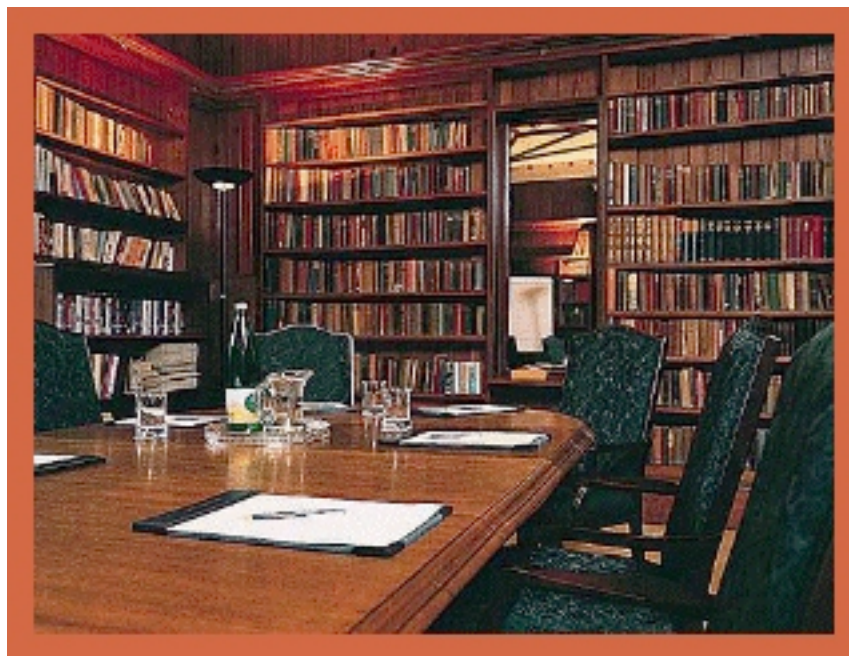
'Editions' I never buy. I don't really know one from another. The only thing that interests me about a book is the inside. When I see a book that has cost a thousand dollars, as I occasionally have seen one, what I think is, how many hundred books of my kind—books that aren't really good for anything except to read—that would buy.

One day I was in the study of a ministerial friend of mine, and looked at one or two of his books, and remarked that I was acquainted with them. 'Yes,' said he, 'the average preacher's library



is about the same the country over.' I was surprised to hear him say it, and did not believe that he was correct about it. I believed that each individual would develop idiosyncrasies of his own in the buying of his books. To test this out, I once made a list of twenty books in my library, and read it to twenty ministers, with the offer to buy a dinner for any man who had one of them. I lost two dinners on the proposition to one man, who confessed that both the books he owned out of this list had been given to him.

Here is the list; I might easily have made it harder. *The Migration of Fish*, by Meek; *The Prisoner at the Bar*, by Train; *Forty Years of It*, by Brand Whitlock; *Father and Son*, by Edmund Gosse; *Value and Destiny of the Individual*, by Bosanquet; Bradley's *Principles of Logic*; *Some Aspects of the Religious Life of New England*, by George Leon Walker; *Beginnings of Animal Husbandry*, by C. S. Plumb; Dewhurst's *Dwellers in Tents*; Ward's *Principles of Psychology*; Montefiore's *Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*; Bosanquet's *Logic*; Graves's *Peter Ramus*; Lodge's *The Ether of Space*; *The Revival of Religion in England in the 18th Century*, by Simons; Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*; Karl Pearson's *The Grammar of Science*; *A Short History of Science*, by Sidgwick and Tyler; *The Scientific Method in Philosophy*, by Bertrand Russell; *The Life of Samuel Wilberforce*. I believe that the library of any man who has had the habit of buying books will show a similar divergence from the beaten path.



I seldom get around to read a book a second time, though that is partly what I buy them for. I often think that I will, but there are still too many that I haven't read even once. Like everybody, I have read some plays of Shakespeare innumerable times. But of whole books in the ordinary sense, I can think of only three that I have read more than once:—*Vanity Fair*, *Treasure Island*, and Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. This last book I had lying around on my table, the first time I read it, for three or four years. It seemed to me like a few grains of wheat in whole measures of chaff. The second time, I read it more consecutively and more rapidly. So far as I know, my memory has been enriched by only one gem from this double reading; but that gem is a real one. It is that of the conversation in which Boswell remarked that Sheridan was naturally dull. 'Well,' said Johnson thoughtfully, 'Sherry is naturally dull. But he must have attained his present state of dullness by persistent effort. For such dullness as he now displays is quite beyond nature.'

I had an experience with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, much like that I had at first with Boswell, except that I never read the *Leaves* through from cover to cover a second time. But I had it lying around, and would try to read it from time to time; it seemed too much like the invoice-sheet of a crockery store; or, as the stranger said of the Episcopal service when he attended it for the first time, 'He seemed to spend too much time reading the minutes of the last meeting.' I was about to give it up, when I ran across John Burroughs's book, *Walt Whitman: a Study*. That book I read with delight. Then I went back to the *Leaves*. I was still some four or five years getting it all read; but Whitman has this advantage for that kind of reading; you can stop whenever you want to, merely turning down the page; and you can begin at the same place, no matter how many weeks afterward, without any particular feeling of having lost the connection. But I grew extremely fond of Walt Whitman.


Of the three books that I have read a second time, the second reading of at least one failed to bring back the flavor of the first reading. Twenty years ago I was tramping in the White Mountains. We had saved one day for hiking up the trail of Mount Washington. When the day came, it was raining torrents. We sat in the barroom of the little Darbyfield Inn, away around on the back side of the mountain somewhere. The hotel was full of woodsmen, drivers of coaches, lumber-jacks, drinking, smoking, talking. Under one edge of the inn ran a mountain stream that roared over the boulders, and rose constantly nearer to the floor of the room. The wind whistled, the roof leaked, the lumbermen got more and more

boisterous or more and more sullen; and I sat there until far into the night, reading *Treasure Island*, until I was afraid to go to bed. I have looked into it for a moment occasionally, since my second reading of it, but the chief result of it has been to convince me, with Wordsworth, that there hath passed away a glory from the earth.

Encyclopedias, for some reason, I don't get much out of. The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, for instance, of which I have ten volumes, and for a new volume of which I continue periodically to disgorge good money—how do the editors manage to secure articles of seventy or eighty pages on subjects nobody cares about, and nothing at all on some simple matters that might interest one? Which leads me to say that I was once introduced to a man in Detroit who was said to have read the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* through. I asked him if this report was correct. He said no, but explained the persistence of myth by saying that, when that monumental work was published, he was out of business and, as each volume came, he did go through it and read everything that interested him.

Dr. Johnson expressed the opinion that the best sort of book was a small one that one could 'carry to the fire'. I have sometimes improved upon this sentiment of Dr. Johnson, especially in the reading of German and French books. These books are often published in paper covers and sewed together apparently with a single thread. It is a matter of a few moments to split a five-hundred page volume into five parts of a hundred pages each, and to take each part to the printer's and have the wide margins trimmed down, until you have a pamphlet of handy size to carry in your pocket. Such pieces of books I have not merely 'carried to the fire' but carried in every conceivable place, reading them on the street-cars and while I was waiting my turn in the barber's or the dentist's chair. When I have thus been stealing a few minutes to read, I often envied the people who had more time to spare. But when I observed how many people have oceans of time, but carry no books in their pockets and spend no time reading, I have wondered whether we do not value even our highest opportunities better if we do not have too many of them. Thus I say to myself when, leaving my automobile at home because I cannot read while I drive it, I take my seat in an unobserved corner of the street-car, and pull from my pocket a copy, or even a fragment, of one of my books.

We should all be grateful for a certain perversity in human nature. In my own case, what doubles the pleasure of reading is the

subconscious feeling that I ought, most of the time, to be doing something else. 

*This article was written in 1922*

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