An Unlikely Story: The Joyce Collection at Cornell

Good afternoon, fellow admirers and supporters of the Cornell University Library. And thank you, Sarah Thomas, for your warm and generous introduction. Nearly two decades ago I lectured regularly in this room to a captive audience; looking around, I recognize a number of faces now that I saw then, and I’m delighted that you are here, this time, not perforce, but by preference.

The collection of manuscripts and letters by James Joyce at Cornell is unsurpassed in its size and range, and unequaled in its relevance to the early, formative stages of Joyce’s literary career. How did it come to rest here in rural, upstate New York at what Frances Perkins, while teaching at Cornell, described as “a centrally inaccessible location”? The story is not, I think, generally known. Its plot is one of chance, of coincidence, and of a confluence of improbable circumstances; and since I played a part, though a minor one, in its cast of characters, I can tell that story as a first-person narrative.

It all began almost exactly a half-century ago, on a pleasant afternoon in the autumn of 1956. I was sitting in my office on the main floor of Goldwin Smith Hall, trying to persuade myself that I should be doing something useful, when the telephone rang. The caller was Mario Einaudi, a professor in the Department of Government. Did I know anything about James Joyce? Well, I responded, I know that Joyce was an author who, in the words of his biographer, Richard Ellmann, “set both the English language and literature on its end”; and that he, together with Marcel Proust, was the most innovative and influential novelist of the century. Mario then said that an acquaintance from Trieste named Ottocaro Weiss, a lawyer with offices both in Italy and New York City, had gotten in touch with him. Weiss had been entrusted by Nelly Joyce, the
widow of James Joyce’s younger brother Stanislaus, to find a buyer for some literary materials by James Joyce, which she had inherited from her husband. Einaudi had an inventory of the manuscripts. Would I care to see it? Indeed I would! He at once crossed the quad and put on my desk a pile of blue-lined yellow pages, inscribed with a list of items that made my eyes dazzle. The list included a schoolboy essay by Joyce, manuscripts of early poems and of stories that were included in Joyce’s *Dubliners*, written materials for his *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and for segments of his great novel *Ulysses*; and perhaps most important, about 1000 early letters from and to Joyce, many of them intimate and revealing family exchanges, together with Joyce’s correspondence with such eminent fellow-authors as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot.

How much, I asked (a little breathlessly), did Weiss ask for the documents? He had given Mario to understand that they could be bought for $30,000.

I need to digress. The first unlikely chance, in a series of accidents, is that the late Mario Einaudi should be at Cornell. He was a thoroughly cosmopolitan European, member of a well-to-do family in the Italian intellectual aristocracy, whose father Luigi, a distinguished economist, was elected as the first president of the Italian Republic after World War II. Mario was himself an eminent, thoroughly liberal scholar of political theory and history who, in abhorrence of Mussolini’s dictatorship, had left Italy in 1933 to teach at Harvard, then at Fordham, and in 1945, finally and happily, at Cornell.

As for the man with the engaging name of Ottocaro Weiss: In his youth as a student in Zurich, he had been a friend of James Joyce. And he knew also Stanislaus – James’s admiring, but critical, often disapproving, and long-suffering younger brother, who had been persuaded by James to leave Dublin and join him and Nora in Trieste. Since James was himself a restless
wanderer, moving from Dublin to Pola to Rome to Trieste to Zurich to Paris – and also, sometimes by necessity and sometimes by choice, moving from domicile to domicile within each city -- he fell into the habit of depositing his manuscripts for safekeeping with his stable younger brother; until, that is, their relations cooled, at about 1920. Many of these early writings were still at Stanislaus’ house in Trieste when James died in 1941. They had descended to Stanislaus’ widow Nelly, who happened to know and appeal to Ottocaro Weiss to find a buyer for them, who in turn happened to remember that Mario Einaudi, whom he happened to know, was at Cornell, and so sent to Mario the list that was now on my cluttered desktop, down the corridor here in Goldwin Smith Hall.

With that list in one hand and Mario Einaudi’s elbow in the other, I hurried to the office of the Director of the Cornell Library, Stephen McCarthy, situated in the old Tower Library, now the Uris Undergraduate Library. Steve at once recognized a golden opportunity, and while Einaudi and I were still there, telephoned the President of Cornell, Deane Malott. Now, both McCarthy and Malott happened to be the right men to play essential parts in acquiring the Joyce manuscripts; and I must digress again to explain why. And that explanation requires in turn a backward glance at the extraordinary history of the Cornell Library and its special collections.

It was Cornell’s immense good fortune to have as its co-founder and first president, Andrew D. White, a man who fervently believed -- not at that time a general opinion -- that one cannot have a great university without a great research library; and in his usual mode of thinking grandly, White set out to establish, at newly-founded Cornell, the finest research library in the country. (He came remarkably close to realizing this impossible dream.) White was himself one of the leading -- perhaps the leading -- collector of scholarly books in his era, and eventually presented to Cornell his almost unparalleled accumulations – gathered chiefly for his own broad-
ranging scholarly researches -- in such areas as Martin Luther and the Reformation, witchcraft and the Inquisition, the French Revolution and Napoleonic period, and the history of science. He also wisely appointed as the first Cornell librarian his friend Willard Fiske, who doubled as Professor of Northern European languages. Fiske inherited from his wife, Jennie McGraw, the money that enabled him to gather, and then leave to Cornell, his unmatched collections in Dante, Petrarch, and Icelandic literature. White also established the policy, and made it part of the library’s ethos -- or as we now say, “culture” -- to purchase, whenever possible, ready-made collections of books gathered for their private research by individual scholars in Europe and America. (Astonishingly, for example, A. D. White arranged for Cornell to purchase the Charles Anthon collection in classical philology and literature, unequaled at that time in America, even before the University first opened its doors to students in 1868.) The result was that by the 1890s, when the first Library building -- the Tower library -- was finally constructed, Cornell’s holdings were ranked fifth among all the universities in the country. Remember, Cornell was then less than 30 years old, while three of the four libraries ranked above Cornell -- Harvard, Yale, Columbia -- had been founded before or during the eighteenth century, and had been gathering books ever since.

But alas! although Cornell continued, after the death of Andrew White, to acquire many rich collections of books, mainly through the generosity of its alumni -- who, as you know, tend to be loyal barely this side of fanaticism -- the university’s financial support for staffing, operation, and acquisitions in the new library was limited, and became increasingly inadequate. The Tower Library, the finest (as well as most beautiful) research structure in the country when built in 1891, and with what at first seemed ample space for future expansion, very quickly became overcrowded. (The Library suffered from its own success.) And in the period between
the two World Wars, especially during the great depression after 1929, conditions at the library spiraled rapidly downward. To make room for new acquisitions, books were shuffled around, crowded into obscure corners, hidden in closets and shoved under staircases, until the interior — when I arrived in 1945 — was more like the setting of a story by Kafka than a major research library. An alumna, Rita Guerlac, in a splendid essay on the history of the Cornell Library, cites a librarian from another university who remarked, in an address to a library conference in 1946: “If you want to see how a great university has systematically killed its library, go look at Cornell.”

But all that changed, drastically and enduringly, with the appointment of Stephen McCarthy as head of the Cornell Library in that same postwar year, 1946. He was promised full support by the administration, reorganized the library system, made brilliant appointments in key positions, and instilled optimism in the depleted and dispirited library staff. And perhaps most important was the fact that, soon after McCarthy’s arrival, Cornell in 1951 acquired as University president Deane W. Malott.

On the surface President Malott would seem an unlikely candidate for resuscitating the Cornell Library, when his predecessors who succeeded A. D. White had all failed to do so. For the earlier presidents had themselves been scholars, while Malott was primarily a man of business — he had a master’s degree from the Harvard Business School, became a vice-president of the Hawaiian Pineapple Company, then returned to the Business School as an associate professor before being elected President, first of the University of Kansas, then of Cornell. But Deane Malott had many powerful qualities as an academic leader. He knew, as he himself said, that “a university is not a business. We are not efficient, and never will be.” He knew also when and how to rely on the expertise and sagacity of others. And he was decisive: he knew how to
calculate odds, and had the audacity to take risks when circumstances called for and justified them. During his tenure, he transformed the physical campus of Cornell. And among his many academic initiatives, two stand out as eminently humanistic. He established for Cornell its first museum of fine arts, in the A. D. White building; the museum later moved to the wonderful, sculpturesque building designed by I. M. Pei and underwritten by Herbert F. Johnson. And he poured new funds into the library system; then, after almost fifty years of the increasing inadequacy of the original Tower Library, he got Cornell a new building, the John M. Olin Library.

The story was current that soon after his inauguration, President Malott sent his Provost, Horace Hill — known as “Frosty Hill” -- to investigate the needs of the University Library. Frosty reported, dejectedly, that to reverse its decline, the library budget would need to be doubled. Malott replied, with no hesitation, “Then double it.”

Years later, after his retirement, I repeated this story to Deane Malott and asked him whether it was true. His reply was characteristically laconic: “Approximately.” At any rate, the record shows that the library budget for buying books increased sixfold in the first six years of Stephen McCarthy’s stewardship.

I doubt that we would have bought the Joyce collection, if we hadn’t known that we were about to get a library building adequate to house it. A prime factor in delaying the construction of a new building was the problem of its location. Everyone agreed it had to be central to the College of Arts and Sciences, yet almost everyone also agreed that it must not encroach on the grand Arts Quadrangle (originally laid out by Frederick Law Olmstead, designer of Central Park in New York City), nor replace or encapsulate the historic Tower Library, nor encroach on the vista afforded by the slope of the hill, from the Arts Campus down to Ithaca and Cayuga Lake. I
happened to be a member of the faculty Library Committee when President Malott attended a historic meeting to ask us to confirm his judgment that, to ensure a central location for a new library, there was no good alternative to building it in place of Boardman Hall, standing at the south end of the Arts Quadrangle. Reluctantly, we yielded to the cogency of his argument and approved the demolition of Boardman Hall.

As some of you may be old enough to remember, when that decision was announced, all hell broke loose. Boardman, originally the site of the Law School, had been built by Henry W. Miller, a student at the opening of the Cornell College of Architecture, who became one of the earliest, and undeniably the greatest, architects of the Cornell Campus, whose structures included the Tower Library itself. And Boardman itself was undeniably handsome, with its Romanesque arches, spacious offices, and steeply gabled, red-tile roof. But as I can attest, for I gave a lecture-course there, the building was antiquated, inefficient, and a dangerous fire-trap.

The issue of replacing Boardman with a new library was bitterly fought out, not only at Cornell and in Ithaca, but in the national press. President Malott, however, proved his mettle, and stood staunch.

I remember vividly when, after all the verbal warfare, the day came, in the spring of 1959, to demolish Boardman Hall. The ultimate comment on the hullabaloo was made by students, in the form of a large cartoon that morning in the Cornell Sun. In the center a large rig has drawn up, with one of those terrifying iron wrecking balls suspended from a thick chain. On the left is the stone Romanesque structure of Boardman Hall; on the right, the brick Gothic of Sage Chapel; and at some distance in front, the nondescript modern of Day Hall, then the relatively new administration building. The driver of the rig is leaning out of his cab, obviously
asking directions from an undergraduate. And the undergraduate is wordlessly pointing to — Day Hall!

But I must resume the story where I left off, which, as I hope you remember, was at the scene in which Mario Einaudi and I were sitting in McCarthy’s office, showing him the inventory of the Joyce manuscripts. Galvanized by what he saw and heard, McCarthy at once telephoned President Malott. Now, the President had on several occasions shown himself to be rather prim, when it came to sexual matters in student publications. But as I said, he knew how and when to rely on the expertise of others. He asked: “In your judgment, Stephen, is the purchase worthwhile?” McCarthy replied, “I think it’s the chance of a lifetime.” Malott’s response was typical: “Then buy it.” “But where will we get the money?” Malott: “You buy the collection; raising the money is my business as president.”

Not the least of Malott’s virtues as president was that he knew which of Cornell’s loyal alumni had not only the financial means, but also the special interest, and the generosity, to fund a particular project; he also knew how to reason — or cajole — them into doing so. In this instance Malott appealed to several possible donors, but especially to William G. Mennen, Class of 1908. With him, we come to the last of the notable characters in our narrative.

And again, on the face of it, William Mennen — who had prospered as a manufacturer, in Morristown, New Jersey, of shaving cream and other men’s toiletries — seems an improbable person to buy for Cornell a collection of James Joyce, who by much of the reading public at the time was still thought of as the author of a work bordering on pornography, whose *Ulysses* had, not long before, been intercepted as obscene and burnt by U.S. Customs officials. But Mennen was in fact a man of broad literary interests, who collected rare books, and had already given the Cornell library two magnificent gifts — an almost priceless set of the first four folio editions of
the works of William Shakespeare, and a collection of the first editions of Charles Dickens, including the serial installments in which many of Dickens’ novels first appeared.

I shall digress one last time to narrate the delightful story Stephen McCarthy told me about his first meeting with William Mennen. One afternoon Steve was in that same office in the Tower Library, and answered a knock on the door. There stood a rather small man carrying a rather large parcel, wrapped in brown paper and tied with coarse twine. The visitor — Steve didn’t clearly catch the name — told him that he had brought some old books the library might have use for. Steve thanked him politely; he put the parcel down, and departed. Since Steve assumed this was a worthless offering — a kind known to all university Librarians — of third-rate books discarded by the owner, he didn’t get around to opening the parcel until the time to leave for home. He cut the twine, unfolded the brown paper – and all but fainted. There on his desk were all four of the first Shakespeare folios.

How did Mennen come to collect such excessively rare books? I can only repeat to you the account told by Mennen himself, at a dinner given by President Malott in the spring of 1957, to celebrate the physical arrival at the Cornell Library of the Joyce collection. I suspect, however, that Mennen’s narrative tells us much more about his wry, self-deprecating humor than about the facts of the matter.

“When I went to a friend’s for dinner,” he told us, “he would ask, after the meal, ‘Would you care to step into the next room to see my old paintings?’ Or else, ‘Why don’t we stroll into the garage, so I can show you my collection of old automobiles?’ So I asked my lawyer, ‘Is there something I can collect to show my friends that doesn’t take up a lot of room, as do old automobiles or old paintings?’ He suggested that I might collect old books, which wouldn’t require anything more than a couple of book-cases to keep them in.
“I thought that was a pretty good idea, so I started buying old books. After a while, my lawyer said, ‘Say, these books are pretty valuable; you need to insure them.’ But the insurance agent told me they couldn’t insure books on open shelves, I’d have to build a burglar-proof vault in the cellar to store them in. But, I thought, how can I say to my friends, after dinner, ‘Why don’t we stroll down to the cellar, so I can open the vault and show you my old books?’ So I reflected a while, and decided, ‘The heck with it; I’ll just give my old books to the Cornell Library.’”

But back again to our story. I’ll relieve your suspense by revealing that William Mennen did provide President Malott with the $30,000 for buying the Joyce manuscripts. For an additional $6,000, acquired from two other alumni, Victor Emanuel and C. Waller Barrett, Cornell also bought from Nelly Joyce what she had reserved from the first batch of manuscripts, the extraordinary exchange of highly-charged love-letters between James and Nora Barnacle, with whom he had eloped to Europe. William Mennen later added $7,000 to buy other important writings that Nelly Joyce had turned up, stashed away in a trunk in her attic. And finally, Cornell was able to complement its manuscript holdings by searching for and finding a ready-made collection of the initial publications, in periodicals and books, of all of Joyce’s works. And one last coincidence: It turned out that the collector of these publications, James Spoerri, a Chicago lawyer, was a Cornell alumnus – a graduate of the Cornell Law School. He agreed to sell his collection to Cornell, in 1961, for only $2250. And who do you suppose provided the money? -- That’s right: William G. Mennen.

I have been specific about dollar costs for a reason. The initial purchase of Joyce materials by Mennen cost $30,000; the additional letters and manuscripts bought from Nelly Joyce came to a total of $13,000. The question must have occurred to many of you: These seem
small sums; why all the fuss and difficulty about raising the money for buying the collection? A partial answer, of course, is that the value of the dollar fifty years ago was very much higher than it is now -- the distinguished Cornell economist Alfred Kahn tells me that it was approximately seven times higher -- so that Mennen’s initial $30,000 was equivalent to, say, $210,000 today. Much more important, however, was that, in the 1950s, twentieth-century literary writings were not yet avidly sought after, and so bid up to phenomenal heights, by a multitude of collectors; while James Joyce was far from having achieved, for the common reader, his present reputation as a towering figure in English letters, one of the greatest of world novelists. In 1924, for example, the American lawyer and collector John Quinn, who had bought the complete manuscript of *Ulysses* from Joyce, put it up for auction, and it fetched only $1,975. As for the materials offered to Cornell by Ottocaro Weiss: For one thing, Dick Ellmann told me that, while preparing his classic biography of James Joyce he had, to his jubilant surprise, discovered the existence of the cache of manuscripts in Trieste; he had then urged Northwestern University, at which he taught, to offer to buy it, to no avail. In addition, Katherine Reagan, Curator of Rare Books at Cornell, has recently discovered in the archives a letter indicating that Ottocaro Weiss had earlier offered the manuscript collection to the University of Kansas, which in response proposed buying only the letters, for $10,000; or else the complete collection, for $20,000. (Another coincidence, by the way: the lawyer acting for Kansas in that failed transaction had been James Spoerri!) Weiss, dissatisfied, had only then turned to Einaudi at Cornell. The literary market for 20th-century literature, has changed drastically since that time; while Joyce’s manuscripts and correspondence are more highly prized, and so fetch higher prices, than those of any other author of the twentieth century.
Now, I happen to be interested in how much things cost. If any of you share that interest, the question no doubt occurred to you, as it did to me: Are there indications of what the collection of Joyce papers might fetch, if it were discovered and put on the market today? As a scholar, I decided to do research on that problem. My research consisted in putting the question to Katherine Reagan, Curator of Rare Books; and she, being omniscient on such matters, was ready with an answer. In an auction at Christie’s in the year 2000, the notebook in which Joyce drafted the segment of *Ulysses* called “Circe” fetched $1,400,000. The Cornell collection has, in the form of notebooks and loose sheets, two such items, one the manuscript of the segment of *Ulysses* called “Nausicaa,” the other for the segment called “Oxen in the Sun.”

Even more startling is the amount paid for a single letter from Joyce to Nora. Five years after eloping with Nora Barnacle, Joyce, then in his latter twenties, found it necessary to go for an extended stay in Dublin, leaving Nora and his two children in Trieste. Among the letters he wrote to Nora at that time are a number which express an extraordinary gamut of moods, mingling expressions of a deep and tender — indeed, religiously reverent — love, with wild passages of erotic memories, desires, and fantasies, of a frankness, an anatomical particularity, and a blunt idiom beyond anything, even, in the once-notorious passages in the once-banned novel, *Ulysses*. Last year (2004), one stray letter from this group was auctioned at Sotheby’s; it sold for $445,000. The Cornell collection has some dozens of letters from Joyce’s fervently erotic exchange with Nora. To calculate what they, and the many hundreds of other letters written by Joyce, together with the mass of his literary manuscripts, would sell for, if discovered and put up for auction in 2005, requires an exercise in the higher mathematics.

Well, that concludes the story of the unlikely concomitance of people and events that made it possible for the Cornell Library to put together the exhibition of Joyce’s manuscripts,
letters, and memorabilia deep in the bowels of the remarkable underground library, that was built to house special collections and rare books, and funded by Carl A. Kroch. The exhibition will be available until October 28, 2005. It is designed to memorialize acquisition of the collection I have described, but above all, to celebrate that bizarre, often infuriating, but irresistibly engaging genius, James Augustine Aloysius Joyce.