

Melville scholar hunts for 'whale' of a discovery

BY KATHLEEN CRAVEN

In the basement of a library in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1999, Boise State English professor Steven Olsen-Smith, with Dennis C. Marnon of Harvard's Houghton Library, made one of those "Aha!" discoveries that is every researcher's dream. Pulling a book from the shelf, they realized they'd made a "whale" of a discovery. What they found was a battered copy of Thomas Wharton's *History of English Poetry* filled with notes in the hand of Herman Melville, the author who penned *Moby Dick*.

"It was like a lightning strike. I recognized what we had immediately," recalls Olsen-Smith (right), a Melville scholar.

It's moments like this that fuel the decades-long quest to recover as many as possible of the 1,000 texts that once made up Melville's personal library. Begun in the 1940s by Olsen-Smith's mentor Merton J. Sealts Jr., the project has so far added about 75 titles to the 210 surviving books on Sealts' original list. Olsen-Smith first met Sealts while working on his dissertation at the University of Delaware. Shortly before his death in 2000, Sealts asked Olsen-Smith to continue tracking the missing titles. Since then, Olsen-Smith has added more than 20 entries. Another 700 or so still remain to be traced.

"Some of the titles I've added to the checklist of books Melville either owned or borrowed are still missing," Olsen-Smith says. "Some were cited by Melville in an annotation, so I tracked down the author, title and edition of the book noted." He records these books in a list, then publishes them as a regular supplement to *Melville's Reading*, the list originally published in 1948 by Sealts, and sends them to rare book dealers.

Often, finding the books is just the beginning of his work. Before Melville was rediscovered as a major American author, many book dealers erased Melville's scrawled notes to clean the books up for sale. Olsen-Smith's job is to use special lighting, magnifying glasses and other tools to try to discover indentations on the page or traces of graphite that will help him reconstruct those notes. His efforts have yield-

ed early drafts of passages Melville went on to publish in *Moby Dick*, illustrating connections between his readings and the creative process.

One example is footnotes found in a copy of Thomas Beale's *Natural History of the Sperm Whale*, where scientific facts from the text were used to create poetic simile in the novel.

Melville would likely be astounded at the amount of time and effort being sunk into recovering his scribbled thoughts.

Although he is regarded by many today as the great American novelist, he died in relative obscurity after enjoying a short-lived early success. Self-taught after a reversal of family fortune put an early end to his formal education, he dreamed of achieving true literary greatness. After his first few books received acclaim, he set out to break free from literary tradition. *Moby Dick*, with its attacks on religious orthodoxy, was a critical disaster.

"Writing *Moby Dick* was probably the worst thing [Melville] ever did, because it ruined his life and career," Olsen-Smith says, noting that it also brought material hardship to his family. Yet the book is now enjoying a renaissance Melville may never have imagined.

"*Moby Dick* follows the tradition of Western literary values, but also contains a great deal of innovation in applying those standards," Olsen-Smith says. "It's an epic poem in prose devoted to democratic principles of human dignity and equality."

That epic poem is today loved by millions, who see the hero, Ahab, as an egalitarian Everyman.

"Melville is one of the few authors known and loved outside the university audience. He appeals to a variety of different people from a variety of different backgrounds," Olsen-Smith says. "That is the most reliable index of his continuing appeal and significance."



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