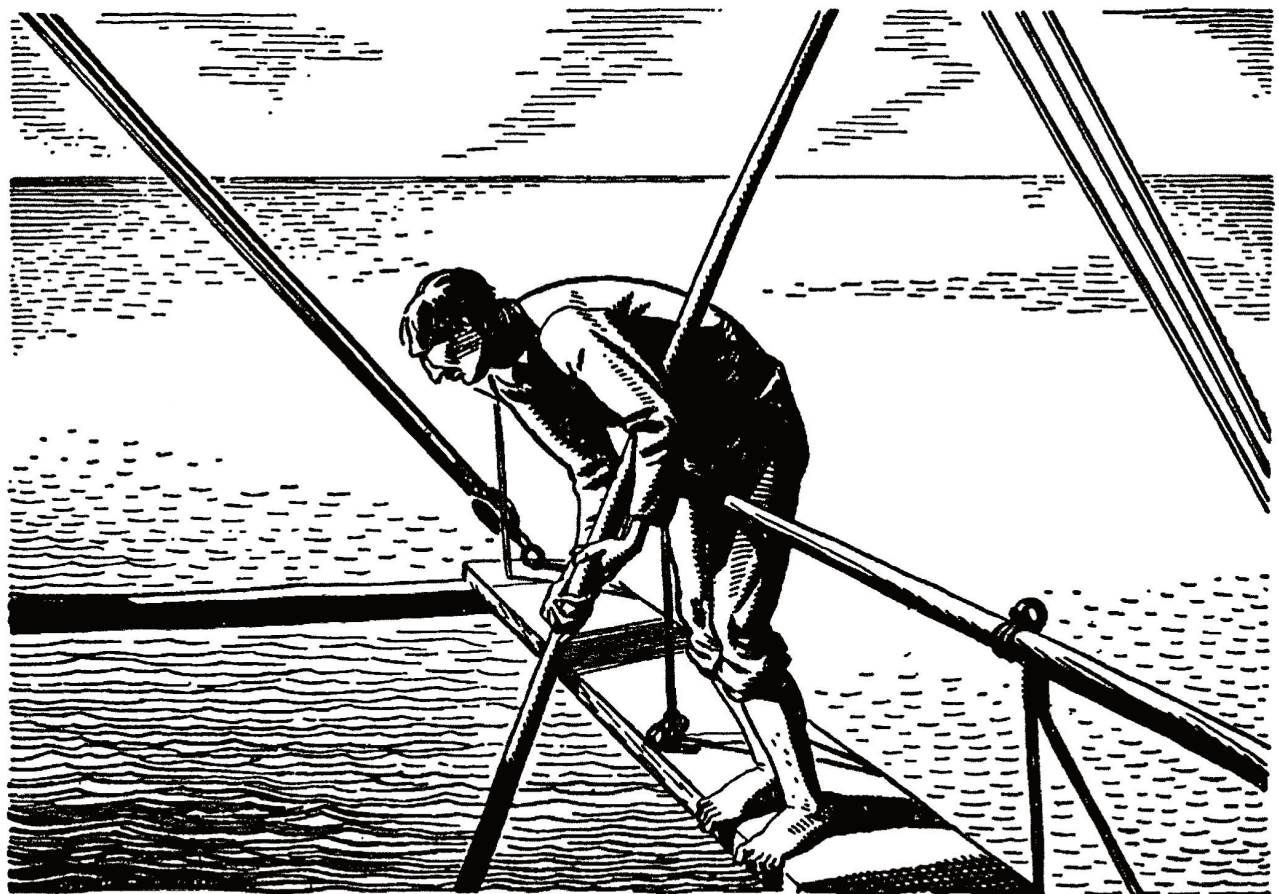


ROCKWELL KENT REVIEW

PLATTSBURGH STATE ART MUSEUM

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Plattsburgh
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

MOBY-DICK CHRONICLE

The Making of a Masterpiece

← Don Roberts →

THE SIXTH novel by Herman Melville was published in London in October.

1851



Following his successes with *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* and *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*, expectations ran high. Critics

were of two opinions, praising *The Whale* as “a most extraordinary work” or damning it as “an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact.”¹ Printed in three volumes, the mammoth book they reviewed was, in fact, incomplete, its publisher having expurgated thirty-five passages including the Epilogue, leaving no survivor to tell the tale.

In New York one month later, Harper & Brothers brought out the full text in one volume, using Melville’s final title: *Moby-Dick: or, The Whale*. Homeland criticism was equally mixed, but no one denied the originality and daring of the 32-year-old writer. Nothing like it had ever been written. Horace Greeley of the *New York Daily Tribune* wrote: “We part with the adventurous philosophical Ishmael, truly thankful that the whale did not get his head, for which we are indebted for this wildly imaginative and truly thrilling story.”² But sales were disappointing, and Melville’s next three novels fared even worse. He would drift from novels to short stories and then poetry before abandoning his literary career in the 1860s to work as a New York City customs inspector.

On October 2, 1891, the *New York Times* wrote of his “speedy oblivion”: “There has died and been buried in this city, during the current week, at an advanced age, a man who is so little known, even by name, to the generation now in the vigor of life that only one newspaper

contained an obituary account of him, and this was but of three or four lines. Yet forty years ago the appearance of a new book by Herman Melville was esteemed a literary event, not only throughout his own country, but so far as the English-speaking race extended.”³

Harper’s initial printing of three thousand copies failed to sell through during Melville’s lifetime, his earnings amounting to just over five hundred dollars. By 1876, none of his books was in print. After his death, the copyright for *Moby-Dick* reverted to his widow, who benefited from two turn-of-the-century editions. Altering the title to *Moby Dick or The White Whale*, a Boston publisher printed an edition of one thousand, of which 619 copies are said to have sold, and Charles Scribner’s Sons published the earliest-known illustrated edition as part of its series “Famous Novels of the Sea,” with a frontispiece and three full-page plates by I.W. Taber.⁴

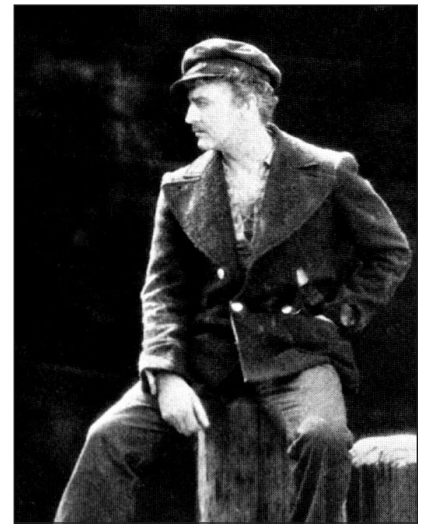
THREE DECADES after Melville’s death, *Moby-Dick* abruptly surfaced from its

1921



watery grave. Two publications—Raymond Weaver’s authoritative biography of the author⁵ and Carl Van Doren’s appraisal of *Moby-Dick* in his *The American Novel*—helped generate a revival of interest in Melville’s writings, and particularly in his forgotten masterpiece. Van Doren, a professor at Columbia University, proclaimed it a “stupendous yarn...cooked in hell-fire,” declaring, “the immense originality of *Moby Dick* must warrant the claim of its admirers that it belongs with the greatest sea romances in the whole literature of the world.”⁶ Publishers scrambled to capitalize on Melville, whose

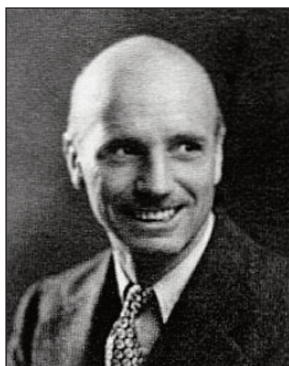
writings were conveniently no longer protected by copyright, and five new versions of *Moby-Dick* were in print by 1928. Most notable among them was *Moby-Dick, or the White Whale* (Dodd, Meade & Co., 1923) with a dozen full-color plates by Mead Schaeffer.⁷



John Barrymore as Ahab

Melville’s comeback was not lost on the motion picture industry. In 1926, *Moby-Dick* was brought to the silent movie screen as *The Sea Beast*, its plot and characters reimagined to accommodate John Barrymore as Ahab. Captain Ahab Ceeley, now the dashing hero with an invented surname, and his half brother Derek both fall for the minister’s daughter. Ahab’s right leg is amputated by an albino whale when the resentful Derek pushes him off their ship. Derek gets the girl, and the disabled Ahab takes his anger out on the whale. Needless to say, the story ends happily for Ahab, but not for the whale. Four years later, Barrymore again took on the role in a talking picture from Warner Brothers. Melville’s book was

by then well enough known that the remake was titled *Moby Dick*, although its romantic scenario again bore scarce resemblance to the novel. The release of each motion picture was accompanied by a Grosset & Dunlap edition of the novel featuring Barrymore on the jacket. And with that, *Moby-Dick* entered America's popular culture.



Rockwell Kent and William A. Kittredge

IN THE TWENTIES, Rockwell Kent relied upon commissioned illustrations to support his family and fund his adventures. For an illustrator willing to bow to a client's whims, magazine and advertising work offered financial security and a degree of visibility, but Kent's unfettered ambition and outspokenness precluded his making a satisfying career of commercial art. Book illustration was a different matter. Publishers, he discovered, were more apt to respect the artist's viewpoint. The success of his own two illustrated books whetted his interest in book commissions:

Carl Zigrosser, either knowing of my love for Moby Dick or believing that I ought to love the book and, therefore, ought to illustrate it well, had interested the publisher, Alfred Knopf, in getting me to do it. And Knopf, liking the suggestion, had offered me two hundred dollars for the job. Now, however questionable it may be that an artist should live—and there are those who say artists do their best work starving—no one can well question my obligation to support my wife and five small children; all things considered, two hundred dollars for some months of work was not enough. I told Knopf that I'd need five hundred. But I guess the publisher figured he had to live too—for, so far as I know, no one has ever hinted that men of business thrive on a starvation diet. So Alfred Knopf said no.⁸

ROCKWELL AND KATHLEEN KENT had divorced, and in April, 1926, he married

Frances Lee. She was not merely beautiful and vivacious, but also brought to

1926



their marriage the secretarial and organizational skills necessary for managing his commissions. And with two households to support, Kent could not afford to turn down a commission. In September, after a summer of honeymooning and painting in Ireland, Kent received a letter from William A. Kittredge, the 35-year-old director of design and typography of R.R. Donnelley & Sons in Chicago. R.R. Donnelley was the printer of the New York City telephone directory, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the Sears-Roebuck catalog. Its Lakeside Press, under Kittredge's direction, published one beautifully printed work of obscure American writing each year as a holiday gift for employees and customers. To supplement the company's targeted advertising, Kittredge had been granted free rein and an unlimited budget to demonstrate the company's capabilities to book publishers. "In an effort to contribute something to the improvement of standards in the making of books," he wrote Kent, "this house proposes to have designed, to print, and to publish in limited editions certain books of American interest.... It is intended in most instances that these books be decoratively illustrated by leading American artists. If the artist has an interest in and a fine understanding of typography, he will influence the typographic as well as the pictorial aspect of the book." He invited Kent to design one

of them, from a list of twenty-five works, "books which should have a place in every reading library and books which people really want to read," suggesting that he make three choices.⁹ *Moby-Dick* was the fourth title listed—just below *Huckleberry Finn*, *Tom Sawyer* and *Two Years Before the Mast*—and it was Kent's one choice.

Lakeside Press approached this project without a publisher's urgency or concern for profitability. Kittredge envisioned a limited edition of one thousand books to be sold at cost: "The original idea of this effort was to do fine editions within the reach of all under present day American conditions, not catering particularly to people who speculate in books and who are so wealthy that 'money is no object'."¹⁰ Kent was happy to accept the job, which came with a commission of four thousand dollars and Kittredge's admiration: "Believe me, Mr. Kent, all of this is inspired by a great desire to make this book unique, personal, and [as] prophetic as the genius of its author and his illustrator."¹¹ Kittredge expected to have the book in print within ten months, in time for Christmas 1927, and Kent got to work, confident that he could meet the deadline.

To ensure authenticity, he began gathering snapshots of contemporary whaling expeditions and photographs of whale models from the American Museum of Naval History. Ironically, the best reference book on 19th-century whaling was the book he was illustrating.

In December, Kent sent Kittredge his choice of type (Monotype Caslon Old Style) as well as an over-sized page format (8³/₈" x 11¹/₂"). Illustrated classic novels typically included six to ten illustrations of pivotal moments, but Kent's vision for *Moby-Dick* was far more ambitious and equally less focused. Each of the 135 chapters would begin on a new page with an illustration above its title and possibly end with a second illustration. Kittredge argued against illustrating every chapter; some were quite short—one having only 45 words—while others

MOBY-DICK: THE ANATOMY OF A PAGE

Kent's and Kittredge's collaboration on the page design began in late 1926. Kittredge envisioned a book with the "air and feel of a chronicle," subtly transitioning from chapter to chapter with the occasional illustration embedded within the text. Kent saw it differently. He favored a more formal approach with each of the 135 chapters standing rock-solid on its own, regardless of its content or length. To accomplish this, the first page of each chapter would assert itself with an illustration and a bold initial. After a year of exchanging letters and specimen pages, most of the design decisions were finalized in Kent's favor. He had, by then, completed only one of the illustrations.

8⅞ inches



CHAPTER I

LOOMINGS

CALL me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some

← I →

11½ inches

MARGINS

Top, 1 inch; Bottom, 2⅝ inches;
Outside, 1¾ inches; Gutter, 1 inch.

TYPE

Kent chose 18-pt. Caslon Old Style for the text as well as the chapter numbers and titles. The Caslon design originated in 18th-century England, and the monotype matrices were ordered from London.

CHAPTER HEADER

Kent's layout called for an illustration above each chapter title. The drawings were sized to match the width of the text below; their height varied greatly. He intended for each chapter to begin on a right-facing page; it was his only demand that Kittredge ignored.

CHAPTER NUMBER

Set in Roman numerals from I to CXXXV, the chapter numbers were aligned left immediately below the header illustrations.

CHAPTER TITLE

The varying lengths of the chapter titles presented a special problem. As concise as "Brit" and as wordy as "Of the Less Erroneous Pictures of Whales, and the True Pictures of Whaling Scenes," they were set opposite the chapter numbers in one to four lines, the first or last of which touched the right margin.

INITIAL CAPITAL

Kent's hand-lettered initials were based on letters designed by T.M. Cleland, each modified with a pair of white lines that lighten their effect. Their ascent—from the first, second, third or fourth line of text—corresponded to the number of lines required for the chapter title.

FOLIO DEVICE

What would seem to be the least important element of the page layout did not escape Kent's attention. The tiny harpoon blade that would bookend the page number completed the design. The folio, as it is properly called, is centered in the bottom margin immediately below the last line of text.

lacked pictorial value. He favored running the text as a continuous flow of narration, broken only by chapter headings and by illustrations embedded adjacent to their relevant text.¹² Without so much as a nod to Kittredge's suggestions, Kent stood by his own elaborate scheme.

THAT SPRING, exhibitions of Kent's recent paintings had opened at the Weyhe and Wildenstein galleries in New York City.

1927



If that were not distraction enough from *Moby-Dick*, the Kents were preparing to move from Manhattan to Woodstock. In April, having determined that the book should be divided into three volumes and without having completed the first drawing, Kent was nonetheless confident that the book would be in print six months later and asked Kittredge to reserve six sets for himself. Meanwhile, Kittredge was searching for the high-quality paper (very white, very opaque) that Kent preferred and had ordered a Photostat of the first edition of *Moby-Dick* from the Library of Congress: "Our type will be set from that in order to have it exactly as Melville published."¹³ He fully expected to go to press before the middle of November and issue the book in time for the holiday season.

Kent delivered the first illustration in late June: the heading for Chapter XXI, "Going Aboard." It showed Queequeg squatting on the buttocks of one of the *Pequod's* sleeping riggers.¹⁴ Although the drawing did not relate to a momentous event in the plot, it revealed Kent's singular depiction of Queequeg at the point where Melville's text informed the reader of his foreign ways. Other illustrators of the book had drawn the "head-peddling purple rascal" as an African-American, but Kent's Queequeg emerged as an exotic creature, less racially defined, and as alien to the eye as Melville had intended. Kittredge and Guy Littell, who headed Donnelley's

hand bindery, were elated over the drawing and proceeded to have a copper etching made of it.

Kittredge, realizing how costly the project would become, still insisted that the set should sell "for from \$15.00 to \$20.00—not more than \$25.00."¹⁵ More troubling was the continuing wait for the illustrations and the mystery of how many were yet to come. Kent shrugged off Kittredge's concern: "I would rather not state a definite number, because, as it has been understood between us, I am to decorate the book in whatever way the galley proof of the text may suggest. I count on making at least one hundred and fifty (150) drawings of the sizes I have already made—a number of full page drawings, say at least ten, and smaller drawings wherever I think they will appear to advantage in the book."¹⁶

In September, after a visit with Kent in Woodstock, Kittredge conceded, "I suppose work of this character always takes a great deal of time."¹⁷ With only one illustration in hand, he politely postponed publication until autumn 1928—unaware that the delays stemmed from Kent's having jumped ship to illustrate another book. Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer had taken over the Modern Library publishing firm and were in the process of establishing a subsidiary press that they called Random House when,



Queequeg, in the first completed illustration.

according to Cerf, Kent casually suggested an illustrated edition of Voltaire's *Candide* as their premier effort.¹⁸ Accepting the commission to illustrate the 18th-

century French satire, Kent put aside the more daunting *Moby-Dick* to create the close to eighty tableaux and dozens of decorative initials that would fill its pages. On Christmas Eve, Kent finally approved the most minute details of the typography for *Moby-Dick*—the precise spacing between words and lines—and promised Kittredge a bookplate design as a belated holiday gift.¹⁹

ALL WINTER, Kittredge wrote letter after letter asking for a production schedule,

1928



requesting specific direction for the formatting of pages—and pleading for more illustrations. Kent rarely responded. He was preoccupied with completing *Candide* and also launching a custom bookplate venture with Pynson Printers, but it was the construction of his country home near Ausable Forks, New York, that consumed the greater part of his time and interest.

In examining his Photostat of the original first edition, Kittredge noted the two pieces of front matter titled "Etymology" and "Extracts." Most publishers had deleted these pages of Biblical, historical and literary references to the whale and the accompanying definitions and translations of the word *whale*. He and Kent agreed to adhere faithfully to the original text. (They would, however, ignore Melville's hyphenation of *Moby-Dick*.)

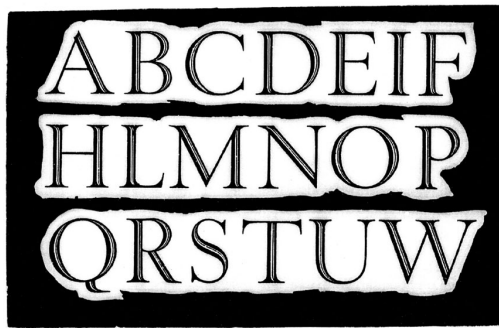
In early April, the arduous task of typesetting Melville's 212,758 words was complete, and the last of the galley proofs were sent to Kent in Ausable Forks. By then, he had completed only three drawings. *Candide* was published to great acclaim in May, and Kittredge graciously wrote to congratulate the artist, adding: "Now that you have completed your wonderful drawings for 'Candide', we wonder if you have 'Moby Dick' scheduled as the next book on your list."²⁰

Another thirteen drawings were completed in June. Reviewing the sixteen they had received, Kittredge and Littell

realized that Kent was following no particular sequence in drawing them. This would delay the task of composing the book; they could neither calculate the final number of pages nor set type for the page numbers until the last illustration arrived. Kent explained his random approach: “I don’t want to make the drawings in regular succession, for they are bound to vary somewhat as I do them, and if I begin by making them for here and there in the book they will at least make the book more uniform.”²¹ It was clear that *Moby-Dick* would not be published that fall.

In July, Kittredge wrote to Kent, voicing a new concern: that the uniform width of the illustrations, “running clear across the page,” made the pages less visually exciting.²² He was plainly concerned that Kent’s inflexible format distanced the illustrations from the associated text rather than complementing Melville’s words. But later that same day, realizing that his suggestions might be taken as an affront to the artist’s freedom, he wrote a second letter to say, “Now the book is yours, and while it is being done, this type and these presses are yours. Please tell us your wishes regarding the details and they will be carried out.”²³

One of the delights of *Candide* was Kent’s use of a unique decorative initial for the opening paragraph of each chapter. He had followed that convention in *Moby-Dick*, specifying the Caslon Old Style type. Obviously impressed by *Candide*, Kittredge asked him to hand letter the nineteen recurring initials in *Moby-Dick*, which Kent agreed to do. The result was a comparatively austere set of letters, based on type designed by T.M. Cleland. Life on the remote Adirondack farm allowed Kent to focus on *Moby-Dick*, and he employed Juliet K. Smith²⁴ to assist with the lettering and line work. As a result, he began mailing batches of small drawings to Kittredge. But *Moby-Dick* was not to receive his full attention. In August, he accepted a commission from Boni Books to illustrate its limited edition of Thornton Wilder’s *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and handily met the pub-



The nineteen initials hand lettered by Kent.

lisher’s twelve-week deadline, producing seven color lithographs and three decorations. At the same time, Elmer Adler of Pynson Printers was completing a book of Kent’s bookplates and trademarks, to be published by Random House the following spring. The signed limited edition was intended to attract lucrative bookplate commissions for Kent and Adler. To fill its pages, Adler had pushed the artist to complete more than twenty bookplates that year; among those that appeared in the little volume was the one for William A. Kittredge.

A second Christmas season passed without the publication of *Moby-Dick*. At year’s end, Kent turned his attention to its title page. His preliminary design set white lettering against a dense black background, to which he would eventually add the backlit figure of a nude man emerging from the sea.²⁵

TO ENSURE that Kent remained on board and not accept too many other commissions, the Lakeside Press had from time to time sent the artist a check for one thousand dollars as an advance on his fee.²⁶ With the latest

1929



check, Littell wrote, “Really, I am scared to death an automobile will run over you, and we don’t even know where the illustrations are supposed to go!”²⁷ An automobile accident would have been the least of Littell’s worries had he known of the plans underway for Kent’s next adventure—a six-thousand mile round-trip voyage to Greenland. That summer, he would sail with two young men of ques-

tionable seaworthiness on a thirty-three-foot yacht christened *Direction*.

After Kittredge visited the Kents in January, he asked for a rough estimate of the final number of pages and an idea of where the chapters would be divided among the three volumes, then suggested that two volumes might be more manageable.²⁸ Again, Kent stood by his scheme. At Kittredge’s request, Kent agreed to write a short introduction to the book, but ultimately decided that “for the artist to obtrude himself beyond the bounds of his art would be in bad taste.”²⁹

At Ausable Forks that winter, Kent finally hit his stride. The dozen full-page drawings he dispatched to Chicago in late March thrilled Kittredge and Littell. The large vertical format inspired dramatic images of boats tossed on waves and whales plunging and breaching, but none was more powerful than a character study of Ahab standing alone on the deck of the *Pequod*. Littell immediately wrote to propose another book project—Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*—to which Kent replied, “Let me express my appreciation of the indulgence you show in considering the continuance of any relations with so rank a procrastinator. I am going to try to have learned one lesson from this experience and make no plans ahead.”³⁰ A large batch of drawings followed in April.

Kent set sail for Greenland in mid-June. Fewer than half of the *Moby-Dick* drawings were completed, but he was sure he would return to complete the book for publication before Christmas. After a month, *Direction* and her crew reached the coast of Greenland in a freezing July gale, whereupon the boat crashed on the rocks. The artist-mariner and his two mates escaped injury, and newspaper accounts noted that two of the survivors were returning to New York. The other, Kent, could not resist remaining in Greenland and painting its majestic landscape. In September, he sailed for Copenhagen, where Frances was waiting with the remaining unfinished drawings.³¹

Kent wrote to Littell from Hundedsted, Denmark, on November 2 to say, "My work on 'Moby Dick' is finished, except for the supervision that I hope I may still be allowed to exercise over the making of the cuts and the printing of the book."³² A box containing the remaining 157 illustrations arrived in Chicago in late November.

KITTREDGE AND LITTELL were relieved to at last have the more than 270 illustrations in hand, and the process of making engravings from them got

1930



u n d e r w a y — t h e n quickly came to a halt.

The drawings completed in Denmark presented an unanticipated challenge to the Donnelley engravers, owing to what appeared to be gray shading in some of the black areas. Kent explained, "I was unable in Denmark to get as good quality of ink as we have in America, consequently the blacks suffered a little when I rubbed out the pencil marks."³³

The tedious business of proofing the final page layouts would soon begin. From the beginning, Kittredge had sent sample proofs of the type and engravings for Kent's consideration and approval. Sometimes Kent responded; sometimes he ignored them. In the months ahead, he would receive batches of hundreds of page layouts with the illustrations in place, and it would be essential that he examine each one with the utmost care and quickly return them with his approval or carefully stated corrections. In some cases he would need to clean up the copper etching, using an engraving tool. It was a long, tedious, wearying process essential to fine printing, and Kent faced it with a growing appreciation of R.R. Donnelley's resources and Kittredge's devotion to perfection. Before the pages could be laid out, one detail was yet to be determined: the folio device. In January, Kent finally designed the harpoon blade that, reduced to minuscule proportions, would appear on either side of the centered page numbers. Larger issues re-

garding the physical book were yet to be resolved—the paper, the binding and the slipcase—as well as Donnelley's strategy for selling its one thousand sets.

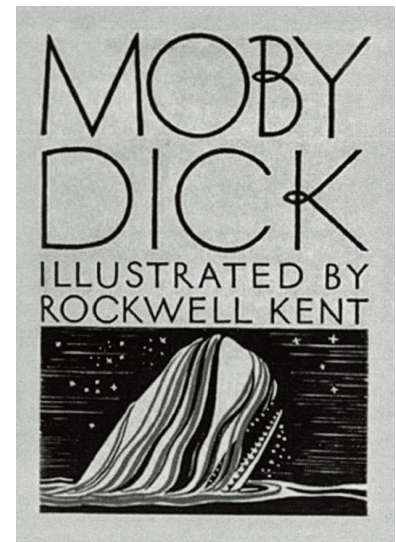
Kent had already launched his own promotional campaign in New York City. Believing the Lakeside Press would miraculously complete *Moby Dick* before Christmas 1929, he had arranged with Carl Zigrosser to exhibit and sell the drawings at the Weyhe Gallery for three weeks, beginning in late February. When Kittredge reminded him of the Donnelley Company's plan to exhibit all the drawings at its Chicago headquarters after the book's publication, Kent ordered Weyhe to delay delivering the forty drawings that had been sold. Kent had also offered the *Moby Dick* illustrations to his magazine publishing friends. *Harper's* selected the image of Ahab as the frontispiece of its June issue. *Vanity Fair*, which had jumped at the chance to print Kent's sophisticated images from *Candide*, was a different story. Its managing editor wrote to Kent that *Moby Dick* was not "the right thing" for *Vanity Fair* and its readers.³⁴ After Kent questioned the magazine's assumption that its readers were "morons,"³⁵ Frank Crowninshield, the editor of *Vanity Fair* and a longtime friend, stepped in to see that a sampling of the drawings would appear in the May issue.

In February, Kent traveled to Chicago to visit the R.R. Donnelley facility and discuss production details with Kittredge and Littell. From the beginning, he had lobbied for simultaneously publishing what he described as "a small and inexpensive popular edition of the book."³⁶ R.R. Donnelley's business was printing, not publishing, and they had no interest in selling and distributing books. But in the Chicago meeting, Kent made a strong case for a smaller single volume that could stay in print indefinitely and return a huge profit. Kittredge was receptive to the idea. Given the company's stake in *Moby Dick*, he suggested that Kent locate a publisher for the trade edition, with the understanding that it would be manufactured exclusively by

R.R. Donnelley. Kent turned to Donald Klopfer at Random House, and Random House not only placed a large initial order but also negotiated a much larger one from the Book-of-the-Month Club.

Kent had hand signed the limited editions of *Candide* and *The Bookplates & Marks of Rockwell Kent*, both published by Random House, and Kittredge proposed that he sign each of the limited-edition *Moby Dick*. Kent objected: "There are, to be sure, some people who buy books because they have the author's or artist's signature, they are not the people who ought to have books."³⁷

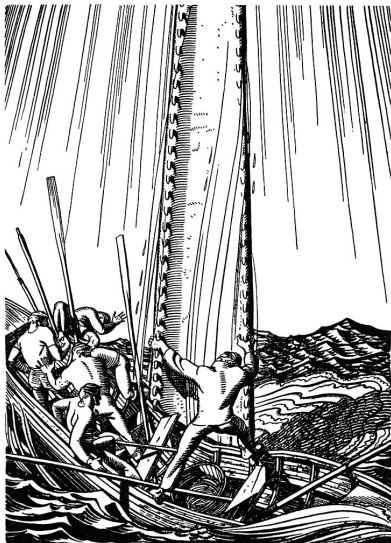
That winter, Kent's concentration shifted from *Moby Dick* to what he called his "Greenland book," an account of the voyage and shipwreck of *Direction*. It, too, was to be published before Christmas, and writing and illustrating it consumed his days and nights. R.R. Donnelley had by then become Kent's printer of choice, and the ever-indulgent Kittredge agreed to oversee the Greenland book's design as well as engraving the drawings. To save time, the typography and page layouts would be modeled after *Moby Dick*.



The Random House Trade-Edition Jacket

Kittredge had also taken command of producing the Random House *Moby Dick*. This trade edition would be first-class and sell for \$3.50; the book-club version, slightly smaller in size, would be

produced using a less costly paper and binding. Without becoming scaled-down facsimiles of the limited edition, they would maintain the essential composition and content of each page, but have narrower margins. The more than eight hundred pages of type were then reset, and new engravings were made from the original drawings. Kent had



The illustration that Kent called "a revelation of the stupidity of the artist."

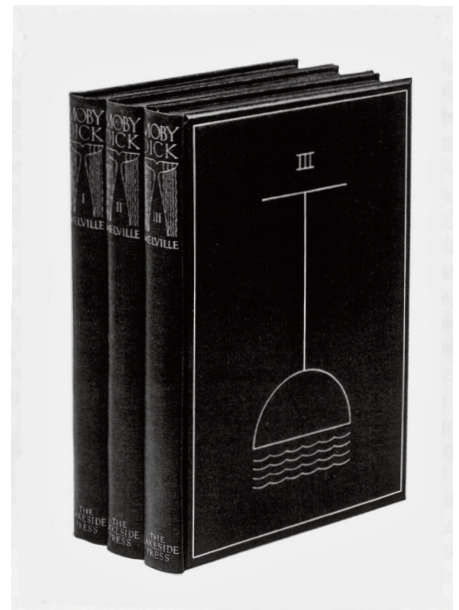
only to design the paper jacket and cloth cover. For the jacket, he provided a two-color image of the white whale against a black sky with the title and credits hand lettered in a contemporary sans-serif style quite unlike the book's roman typography. He requested a textured white paper to contrast sharply with the black and red of the image, but the final design would evolve to black and blue on a "mouse colored paper."³⁸ When the artist was not forthcoming with a design for the black cloth cover, Kittredge suggested repeating the entire jacket design using aluminum leaf. Kent agreed to it, but asked that his credit be deleted from the cloth cover: "It seems to me that we are overdoing my name a bit."³⁹ (His name remained on the spine above the image of a plunging whale.)

As Kent reviewed proofs of the completed pages of the limited edition, he was struck by the quality of the illustrations—they were more impressive than

his original drawings. His trusted friend Carl Zigrosser agreed: "The whole work is a noble thing—nothing finer has been done in America."⁴⁰ But a month later, Zigrosser warned Kent that a customer at the Weyhe Gallery, upon examining the drawings, had pointed out a startling error. On May 13, Kent wrote to Kittredge with his go-ahead to begin the printing, except for one matter: "Someone has discovered a mistake in the last full page drawing for the third volume, the drawing of the man struggling with the jaw of the whale. That is, of course, Captain Ahab, and I knew it; but I have given him two good legs whereas Ahab only had one. I can change the drawing if you consent, but I am perfectly willing to let it go through as a revelation of the stupidity of the artist."⁴¹ No last-minute change was made. By then the Lakeside Press was accepting orders⁴² and already acknowledging that, despite the economy being in tatters, their three-volume set priced at \$52.00⁴³ would sell out before publication. Kent rushed to reserve copies for himself, his family and friends.

ON JUNE 6, printing was underway—but quickly came to a halt when the imported English paper proved to be defective. An American papermaker was then hired to create from scratch a paper of the same quality, which probably pleased Kittredge. From the beginning he had bowed reluctantly to the artist's choice of, first, a handmade Japanese paper and, later, the English paper, all the while preferring that this *Moby-Dick* written, illustrated and printed in America be produced in its entirety from domestic materials.⁴⁴ Printing was thus delayed until late August.

The slipcase for the three-volume set had yet to be determined. When Kent visited the R.R. Donnelley headquarters, he had suggested fabricating it from aluminum. Obviously, more expensive than the usual paperboard, a gleaming metal case would afford the ultimate protection and also make a strong statement of the book's importance and value. Kent contacted the Aluminum Company of

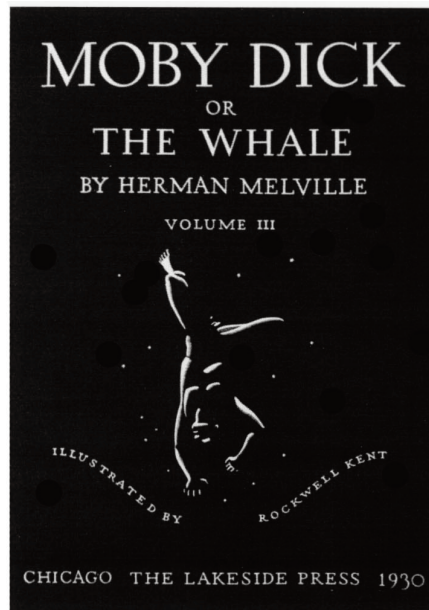
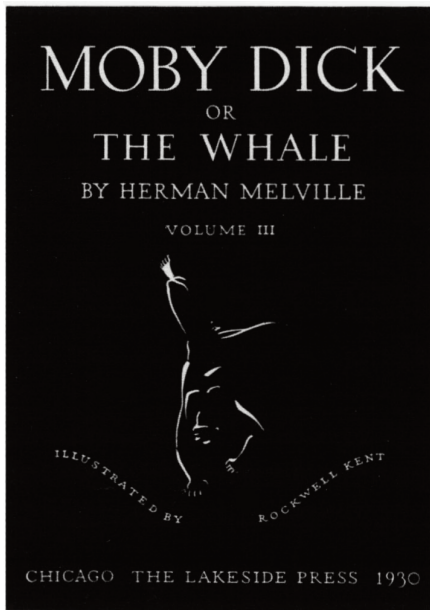


The Three-Volume Limited Edition

America (ALCOA), and a thousand cases were specially manufactured from oil-finished, 16-gauge aluminum with finger notches.⁴⁵

In mid-September, having completed the Greenland book that was by then titled *N by E*, Kent was back at work on the limited edition *Moby-Dick*. All that remained to be finalized was the binding. Perhaps hearkening to the author's metaphorical black and white, there were no colors. Kent's design for the black cloth covers features each volume's identifying Roman numeral and a bold pictograph stamped in aluminum leaf. Mistakenly interpreted as symbolic of a whale, the simple image actually represents an overturned goblet of wine, a design with special meaning for the artist and his wife. The book's title and author are identified on the spine. The top edge of the pages were simply stained black.

One of the preeminent figures in the extended extravaganza of producing the illustrated *Moby-Dick* had remained in the background—and embarrassingly so when the trade edition came out in October. Bennett Cerf would assume the blame: "We were so excited about it, we forgot to put Herman Melville's name on the cover, so our edition of *Moby-Dick*, to the vast amusement of everybody (*The*



Left: The original ink rendering of a falling man for the title page of *Moby Dick*, Volume Three, 1930 (Rockwell Kent Collection, Plattsburgh State Art Museum). Before the book went to press, Kent reworked the printing plate, adding tiny stars to the background. Right: The more dynamic printed version.

New Yorker spotted it), said only, 'Moby Dick, illustrated by Rockwell Kent'.⁴⁶

Weeks after the trade edition appeared in bookstores, the epic work that began four years earlier was completed. The three volumes were bound, individually wrapped in a Kent-designed paper, slipped into their aluminum cases and enclosed in corrugated cardboard for shipping, all with the utmost care. The shipping label designed by Kent was then attached to each one. He received his set on November 9 and, in a letter to Littell, called it "the best thing that I have done," crediting Kittredge for its success.⁴⁷ William Kittredge had set out to create reasonably priced books "of convenient and handy formats, getting away from large or bulky volumes and avoiding any attempt to make the books too 'fine' or 'precious'."⁴⁸ The outcome was the exact opposite: a book for bibliophiles, a book that served primarily as a gallery of Kent's art and a demonstration of the printer's skill, a book too fine and too precious to be read. It was the Random House edition, published at Kent's urging, that would ultimately fulfill Kittredge's vision.

AT YEAR'S END, every set of the limited-edition *Moby Dick* had been sold, as well as 61,000 copies of the trade and book-club editions.⁴⁹ The trade edition proved to be as profitable as Kent had predicted, and Random House kept it in print and installed a seven-foot long mural of the Chapter I title illustration at the company's new offices.⁵⁰ But a rift in Kent's friendship with Cerf and Klopfer over the aborted publication of Goethe's *Faust* led Kent to seek another publisher for *Moby Dick*. In the most underhanded fashion, he masterminded the transfer of its publication rights to Garden City Publishing in 1937. It was a financial arrangement that initially benefited Kent and Donnelly. Not to be outdone, Cerf wisely added a proviso that would restore the rights to Random House after five years.⁵¹ Garden City's deluxe edition was distinguished only by the gilt image Kent created for its blue cloth cover, his four-color pictorial jacket failing to capture the power of the illustrations within.

Random House reclaimed its *Moby Dick* in 1942. Facing a government order that printers scrap their metal plates to aid the war effort, Cerf proposed trans-

ferring the volume to their Modern Library Giants series of inexpensive classics: "It is such a beautiful job all around that I think it would be a disgrace to let it disappear from the market altogether."⁵² Kent agreed to Cerf's solution, and the Modern Library Giant *Moby Dick* (No. G64) was published in 1944 with the iconic drawing of Ahab on its cover. Six years later, to celebrate the book's twentieth anniversary, Random House briefly resurrected the original trade-edition jacket, revised to properly credit Herman Melville.

Although the copyright of the illustrated *Moby Dick* was in the R.R. Donnelly name, Kittredge had made it clear that the drawings would remain the property of the artist.⁵³ This arrangement went unquestioned until the copyright was to be renewed in 1957, one year after the release of John Huston's popular film adaptation of the novel. Littell had retired in 1942, Kittredge had died in 1945, and Kent's warm relationship with his printer-patron had chilled after he endorsed the International Typographical Union's efforts to organize the company's workers.⁵⁴ Donnelly was satisfied with renewing the copyright as it stood, which secured their authority over the makeup of the book and protected Kent's illustrations from entering the public domain.⁵⁵ But Kent was determined to claim *Moby Dick* entirely for himself, despite having written to Kittredge prior to the book's publication: "I am so impressed by your interest in the book and by the care that you have taken to make the limited edition fine and by the resources and moral[s] of the Lakeside Press, that, if I owned the drawings and all rights to them outright, I would still want Lakeside Press to make them into a book."⁵⁶ In 1958, an agreement was reached whereby the company and the artist would share the publication rights.⁵⁷

By 1962, every Kent-illustrated edition had been manufactured by R.R. Donnelly or using plates rented from them. That year Cerf determined that the expense of working with Donnelly

made it financially unfeasible to continue printing the Modern Library Giants *Moby Dick*, thus halting its publication.⁵⁸ As Kent predicted, *Moby Dick* had been a “gold mine.”⁵⁹ For three decades, he had enjoyed a steady income from sales of the book, as well as from the “Moby Dick” dinnerware pattern he designed for Vernon Kilns. Nothing in his career had reached so wide a public or, possibly, yielded so great a financial return as *Moby Dick*, and with the determination of Ahab, he set out to find a new publisher. Dover Press and Doubleday & Co expressed interest, but declined when Donnelley’s exclusive printing rights proved insurmountable.

LIKE HERMAN MELVILLE, Rockwell Kent would outlive his fame, and when he died in 1971, his masterpiece of illustration had been out of print for almost a decade. Random House returned *Moby Dick* to the Modern Library in 1982. Robert Frost, in a line from his 1947 one-act play *A Masque of Mercy*, had referred to “Moby Dick by Rockwell Kent that everybody’s reading”—a jesting comment on how closely the novel had become associated with its illustrator, overwhelming the identity of its author. But time has a knack for redemption, and the current Modern Library edition (copyrighted 1992) displays a portrait of Herman Melville on its jacket—with no mention of Rockwell Kent.

NOTES

Items from the Rockwell Kent Papers in the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution are cited as RKP.

1. Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819-1891* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 430-31.
2. Hershel Parker (Editor), *The Recognition of Herman Melville: Selected Criticism since 1846* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 37.
3. “Herman Melville,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 1891.

4. A native of Massachusetts, Isaiah West Taber (1857–1933) was a skilled illustrator, working primarily in pen and ink. His illustrations for *Moby-Dick* were rendered in gouache.

5. Raymond Weaver, *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* (New York: George H. Doran, 1921).

6. Carl Van Doren, *The American Novel* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 74.

7. Mead Schaffer (1898–1980) was one of the preeminent illustrators of the early 20th century. He illustrated numerous books in the style of N.C. Wyeth and produced 46 *Saturday Evening Post* covers. He lived in Arlington, Vermont, where he enjoyed a close association with Norman Rockwell.

8. Rockwell Kent, *It’s Me O Lord: The Autobiography of Rockwell Kent* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1955), 430-31

9. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 16 Sept. 1926, reel 5174, frame 1073.

Kittredge’s list: *Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, Two Years Before the Mast, Moby-Dick, My Antonio, The Red Badge of Courage, The House of the Seven Gables, The Four Million, The Spy, The Last of the Mohicans, The Rise of Silas Lapham, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Fables in Slang, Old Creole Days, The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Tales, Moran of the Lady Letty, The Three Black Pennies, The Call of the Wild, The Virginian, The Honorable Peter Stirling, Uncle Remus, The Fugitive Blacksmith, Typee, Omoo and Arizona Nights.*

10. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 24 June 1927, reel 5174, frame 1100.

11. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 30 Dec. 1926, reel 5174, frame 1077.

12. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 30 Dec. 1926, reel 5174, frame 1075.

13. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 25 May 1927, reel 5174, frame 1092.

14. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 20 June 1927, reel 5174, frame 1096.

15. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 24 June 1927, reel 5174, frame 1100.

16. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 7 July 1927, reel 5174, frame 1104.

17. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 8 Sept. 1927, reel 5174, frame 1106.

18. Bennett Cerf, *At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf* (New York: Random House, 1977), 65.

19. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 24 Dec. 1927, reel 5174, frame 1110.

20. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 18 May 1928, reel 5174, frame 1125.

21. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 13 June

1928, reel 5174, frame 1128.

22. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 27 July 1928, reel 5174, frame 1132.

23. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 27 July 1928, reel 5174, frame 1133.

24. Don Roberts, *Rockwell Kent: The Art of the Bookplate* (San Francisco: Fair Oaks Press, 2003), 97.

25. As the physical book took shape, Kent decided that each volume’s title page would be unique. The figure shown emerging from the sea in Volume I reappears running in Volume II, and free-falling through a starry sky in Volume III.

26. The Donnelley Company’s casual issuance of checks would result in Kent’s receiving \$6,000 for his work, plus a set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* with bookcase.

27. RKP, Littell to Kent, 8 January 1929, reel 5174, frame 1148. Book artists ordinarily illustrate a specific incident or narrative line in a text. Their drawings are, in effect, wedded to the words. In *Moby-Dick*, Kent more often illustrated the essence of the story and its characters. He often neglected to label his drawings, and Kittredge and his colleagues were hard pressed to position them in the page layouts.

28. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 19 Feb. 1929, reel 5174, frame 1157.

29. Kent, *It’s Me O Lord*, 442.

30. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 25 March 1929, reel 5174, frame 1172.

31. Kent, *It’s Me O Lord*, 442.

32. RKP, Kent to Littell, 2 Nov. 1929, reel 5174, frame 1188.

33. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 6 Jan. 1929, reel 5174, frame 1146. [This misdated letter was actually written in January 1930.]

34. RKP, Donald Freeman to Kent, 17 January 1930, reel 5244, frame 229.

35. RKP, Kent to Crowninshield, 14 February 1930, reel 5244, frame 232.

36. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 7 July 1927, reel 5174, frame 1104.

37. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 26 February 1930, reel 5174, frame 1223.

38. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 7 July 1930, reel 5174, frame 1309.

39. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 30 July 1930, reel 5174, frame 1317.

40. RKP, Kent to Littell, 2 April 1930, reel 5174, frame 1255.

41. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 13 May 1930, reel 5174, frame 1280.

42. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 7 May 1930, reel 5174, frame 1278.

43. RKP, Order Form, Illustrated Edi-

tions of American Books, Lakeside Press, undated, reel 5175, frame 411. In later years, Kent would say that the limited edition *Moby-Dick* was priced at \$75.00, but the stated price on the Lakeside Press order form was \$52.00. The series that Kittredge proposed, "Illustrated Editions of American Books," was published in the summer of 1930. Along with *Moby-Dick*, it included: *Tales by Edgar Allen Poe*, illustrated by W.A. Dwiggins (\$15.00); *Two Years Before the Mast* by Richard Henry Dana, Jr., illustrated by Edward A. Wilson (\$20.00); and *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, illustrated by Rudolph Ruzicka (\$15.00). The order form noted that orders for all four books would be given preference over orders for single titles.

44. The single exception was the binding material: black buckram cloth imported

from England.

45. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 24 July 1930, reel 5174, frame 1313.

46. Cerf, At Random, 71–72.

47. RKP, Kent to Littell, 10 Nov. 1930, reel 5174, frame 1393. Kittredge credited Frances Kent for the book's completion.

48. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 16 Sept. 1926, reel 5174, frame 1073.

49. RKP, Royalty Statement, Random House, undated, reel 5228, frame 65.

50. RKP, Source unknown, undated, reel 5175, frame 397.

51. RKP, Cerf to Kent, 13 May 1937, reel 5228, frame 144.

52. RKP, Cerf to Kent, 4 Dec. 1942, reel 5212, frame 557.

53. RKP, Kittredge to Kent, 2 February 1928, reel 5174, frame 1114.

54. RKP, Kent to Leonard B. Boudin, 6 Dec. 1958, reel 5212, frame 587.

55. In 1965, Kent was troubled by Israeli and Japanese editions of *Moby-Dick* that incorporated his illustrations without permission or royalty. Although the copyright was his, he expected Random House to initiate legal action. Cerf advised Kent that, given the various copyright laws, he might halt such publications but would not receive compensation, and the matter was dropped. (RKP, reel 5212, frames 597 and 604)

56. RKP, Kent to Kittredge, 16 Feb. 1930, reel 5174, frame 1216.

57. RKP, Kent to Elmer Adler, 18 January 1959, reel 5212, frame 592.

58. RKP, Cerf to Kent, March 1968, reel 5212, frame 611.

59. Kent, *It's Me O Lord*, 471.

