

"In My Mind I'm Going to Carolina ...":

Bruce Cotten's Passion for North Caroliniana

by Eileen McGrath

In the 1890s, a tight-knit family in rural eastern North Carolina was under siege. The Cotten family was a prominent one, respected locally and with civic and political ties across the state. Like many southern farm families, they had experienced several financial ups-and-downs, but the steep decline in cotton prices, together with a risky switch into tobacco production, had forced the Cottens to the edge of ruin. The plantation was mortgaged and then put up for sale; only the intervention of a family friend prevented loss of the home place. Mr. Cotten was distracted by these financial crises, while his wife was still mourning the death of her eldest son a decade earlier. Their oldest surviving son had yet to find his place in business or society. His sisters and their friends loved the young man's good looks and easy charm, but without secure prospects, he'd be always a houseguest, never the master. What was this young man, Bruce Cotten, to do? "Go west," as the slogan of the era urged? Go west he did, but at an emotional cost. To assuage the loneliness and estrangement he felt, Cotten turned to a "gentle pastime"¹ and in doing so made himself the preeminent twentieth-century collector of North Caroliniana.

Bruce Cotten, the fifth child of Robert Randolph Cotten and Sallie Southall Cotten, was born in Wilson, North Carolina, on March 3, 1873. Robert Randolph Cotten, a native of Edgecombe County, was a prominent businessman, planter, and civic leader in eastern North Carolina for over sixty years. The elder Cotten began his business career as a clerk in Tarboro, but he

later moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where he was a partner in a cotton brokerage. Cotten's firm dissolved at the start of the Civil War, and he returned to North Carolina to join a Confederate cavalry unit. While in North Carolina on leave near the end of the war, Cotten met a young teacher, Sallie Swepson Sims Southall. They were married in 1866.

Sallie Southall Cotten was a native of Amelia County, Virginia. Mrs. Cotten spent the first decades of her marriage at home raising her family, but after most of her children were grown, she began a public life as an advocate for women and children in North Carolina. She was one of the North Carolina "lady managers" for the 1893 Columbian Exposition, an organizer of the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs, a participant in the first National Congress of Mothers, and the author of numerous poems and essays.

The Cottens settled permanently at Cottendale, a Pitt County plantation, in 1879. The household at Cottendale consisted of Robert and Sallie Cotten, their seven offspring, an older, unmarried white woman who helped manage the household, and several African-American servants. Isolation forced family members to depend on each other for entertainment, education, and emotional support. Mrs. Cotten was the most important early influence in Bruce Cotten's life. He later characterized his mother as a loving and devoted mother, but also dreamy and unconventional, a good reader and a romantic. He remembered her as

a woman tormented by private fears as well, "an unaccountable, but pronounced temperamental brooding and apprehension of ill that might befall her or those she loved."² Misfortune did strike Sallie Cotten's family: two of her children died as infants and her oldest son, Robert Randolph Cotten, Jr., drowned on his fifteenth birthday in 1883. Mrs. Cotten took her oldest son's death especially hard; she wore partial mourning attire for the rest of her life.

The 1890s were especially difficult years for Robert Cotten's businesses. Cottendale was mortgaged in 1893 and put up for sale in 1897. It remained in the family only because former North Carolina Governor Thomas Jordan Jarvis gave the family a new mortgage. Despite such well-placed friends, the family's financial situation remained precarious for several years.

Bruce Cotten was little help in this family crisis. He followed his father's example and went to Baltimore in search of employment, but he could not secure a position. Years later, Cotten admitted that the world of business did not appeal to him and that his heart was not in this search for work. In an unpublished memoir, Cotten confessed "[I] was conscious of being influenced by my own peculiar temperament and a strong dislike I had of

His passion was to amass a library that reconnected him to the land of his birth.

an ordinary business life, — that perpetual buying and selling of things... I wanted something else, the nature of which I can not define. I dreaded the sameness and monotony of the life ordinary."³

Fortunately for Cotten, gold was discovered in the Yukon Territory in 1896, triggering the Alaska Gold Rush of 1897-1898. Cotten became obsessed with the possibilities for wealth and adventure that Alaska might offer. To finance a trip to Alaska, Cotten tried to organize an investment group from among his family's friends. The attempt failed, but Cotten left for Alaska in October 1897. William Stephenson, a biographer of Sallie Southall Cotten, thought that Cotten's attempt to raise funds for the Alaska trip had dishonored the family; family correspondence hints that Cotten's drinking concerned his parents.⁴ The remaining evidence does not allow us to know the exact reason for Cotten's departure,⁵ but what we do know is that Cotten had not found a place for himself in North Carolina business or society commensurate with his family's stature or his image of himself. Even if he did not dishonor the family, he was not able to help them in a material way. At the least, this was a blow to his pride.

When he reached Seattle, Cotten sought to join any expedition going north to the gold fields. Unbeknownst to him, the expedition that accepted Cotten was a fraud: the organizers of the expedition solicited investors, recruited and outfitted a crew, dropped the crew in a remote location, and then absconded with the remaining funds. The crew was left to die when their supplies ran out, or find their way back to civilization. Cotten, hearty and resourceful, came out alive. Rather than being shaken by this brush with death, he was exhilarated. "Drills, Raids and Escapades" opens with Cotten's judgment of his Alaska experience: "This trip to Alaska had been an experience very excellent, hardening and educating; it had set me aright with myself and with the world."⁶

Upon returning to Seattle in June

1898, Cotten joined a battalion of Washington volunteers organized to fight in the Spanish-American War; later he joined the regular army. In the army he found some of the adventure that he was seeking, serving in China during the Boxer Campaign and in the Philippines during the insurrection there. Cotten returned to the United States as a second lieutenant in 1902. In early 1907, while stationed at Fort Monroe, Virginia, as part of the

certs, and trips to spas in America and abroad. It is telling that Cotten dedicated *An Adventure in Alaska* to Edyth, calling her "the little nugget and great possession" that all his efforts had been leading to.⁸ Cotten once referred to his Alaska experience as an attempt "to win at one turn of the wheel, that fortune and affluence that is denied many deserving millions after a life of toil and labor."⁹ Winning Edyth Tyson's hand was Cotten's lucky turn at the wheel; after their marriage he never wanted for affection, comfort, or status.

Cotten traced the origin of his interest in collecting North Caroliniana to his mother's experiences when she was preparing the North Carolina exhibit for the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Sallie Southall Cotten wanted the exhibit to include a collection of books about North Carolina, but as she traveled the state, sometimes with Bruce accompanying her, she found few libraries of North Caroliniana. For Cotten the experience "planted the germ and desire in me to know and to possess something of the books and literature that had been published in and about my native State."¹⁰ Cotten began collecting for himself when he was in the army. He frequented used bookstores and curiosity shops. Although hindered because "both money and knowledge were entirely lacking,"¹¹ Cotten did amass a collection of about two hundred volumes before he left army service.

Bruce Cotten wrote his parents only infrequently between 1898 and 1902. This was very hard on Mrs. Cotten. When correspondence between mother and son picked up in 1902, Sallie Cotten's letters to her son were filled with assurances of love and pleas for him to visit. "We are all crazy to see you again — and you know that a warm welcome awaits you whenever you come." "[Y]ou must constantly bear in mind that we all love you — that time and long absence and distance — all tend to make us love you better and long more to see you." "Never mind, son, when you come home — no matter what month the



This caricature of Cotten appears at the end of *Housed on the Third Floor*. Courtesy North Carolina Collection, University of N.C. Library - Chapel Hill.

Jamestown Tercentennial, Cotten met Edyth Johns Tyson. Edyth Tyson was the widow of Jesse Tyson, a Baltimore industrialist who had made a fortune mining chrome. Beautiful and wealthy, she was a grande dame of Baltimore society. For Cotten, it was love at first sight. Although Cotten was discreet about the courtship, he did confess in "Drills, Raids and Escapades" that "I instantly liked her far better than any person I had ever seen. She was my fate, my joy or sorrow."⁷ The couple were married three years later in England.

Cotten easily adjusted to a life filled with parties, club meetings, con-

calendar may record, it will be Christmas to us, because our hearts will be full of gladness."¹² After all this prompting and pleading, Cotten visited Cottendale in the fall of 1905. The prodigal son returned; a reconciliation was effected. His interest in North Caroliniana helped with that reconciliation. Family members, particularly his mother, became participants in the collecting process, inquiring about books with friends and associates, following leads about particular titles, and purchasing books for Cotten. Cotten's parents, through their travels around the state on civic and social affairs, provided Cotten with contacts and information that enabled him to locate and acquire many obscure titles.

All through the 1910s and well into the 1920s, Mrs. Cotten's correspondence with her son shows evidence of the family's collaboration with Cotten, and it also gives glimpses of the books that Cotten was seeking. Robert Cotten was the one to locate John Lawson's *A New Voyage to Carolina* (London, 1709); Sallie Cotten tried for eight years to get Joseph Biggs's *A Concise History of the Kehukee Baptist Association* (Tarboro, 1834). Mrs. Cotten's diligence eventually paid off with that book and with Edwin Fuller's *Sea-Gift*, which she also pursued for years.¹³

Cotten did not rely solely on family contacts. As all collectors do, he read dealers' catalogs. By the time he published *Housed on the Third Floor*, a catalog of the highlights of his collection, Cotten estimated that he had read over a half a million pages of catalogs.¹⁴ He also used book dealers and book scouts in North Carolina and neighboring states. He even published a newsletter that he mailed to such agents. He used the bulletins to inform "certain dealers, scouts and friends of my Collection of North Caroliniana" about his most notable acquisitions.¹⁵ He also included pointed, but friendly, jabs in the bulletin to goad scouts into giving his interests more attention.

The collection that Cotten amassed consisted of almost two thousand titles. It contained books printed in North Carolina, books by North Carolinians, books about North Carolina, and a few associational volumes. Addresses, biographies, catechisms, college and school publications, gene-

alogies, histories, memorial volumes, natural histories, novels, poetry, and religious tracts were all present. Unlike that other great collector of North Caroliniana, Stephen B. Weeks, Cotten limited his collecting to books that were wholly about North Carolina or some area of the state. As a professional historian, Weeks collected to support his research interests, while Cotten had no research needs or institutional constraints. This freedom, together with

men that met his standards for condition. There is also evidence that Cotten rebound volumes in order to possess an aesthetically pleasing collection.

Cotten was not a scholar, but he was knowledgeable about the history and publishing heritage of North Carolina. Cotten knew which early European titles to collect, but despite his wealth and contacts abroad, he had difficulty acquiring first editions of European works on North Carolina. He felt

great pride that he was able to acquire Sir Walter Raleigh's *The History of the World* (1614).

Cotten was far more successful at acquiring titles published in North Carolina. He had 44 eighteenth century North Carolina imprints; he also had 71 Confederate imprints, chiefly from North Carolina presses. Cotten discriminated severely among twentieth century imprints; the twentieth century portion of the collection is heavily weighted towards materials on the eastern part of the state.

After his wife's death in 1942, Cotten sold their estate, Cylburn, to the city of Baltimore and moved to smaller quarters. No longer would Cotten's collection be "housed on the third floor." Edyth Cotten's death, and Cotten's dissatisfaction with how his books were handled in the move from Cylburn, caused Cotten to worry about what would become of his books when he died. There is no indication which

side made the first move, but by the mid-1940s, Cotten and the library staff at the University of North Carolina were engaged in a steady correspondence about Cotten's collection. In December 1948, Mary Lindsay Thornton, the librarian of the University's North Carolina Collection, visited Cotten at his home. The trip cemented the relationship between Cotten and the University Library. Cotten then consulted John Sprunt Hill, a prominent benefactor of the university and someone whom Cotten much admired, about how his will should be amended to give his collection to the university. University Librarian Charles E. Rush made several suggestions, most of which became part of the final document. The notable suggestion that



Bruce Cotten, courtesy North Carolina Collection, University of N.C. Library -Chapel Hill.

his wealth and contacts, helped him become the greatest amateur collector of North Caroliniana. His passion was to amass a library that reconnected him to the land of his birth. This very personal impetus led to some idiosyncracies in his collecting. Because politics was distasteful to him, he made little attempt to collect political addresses and public documents; he also excluded items that rarely came as complete sets, such as newspapers, church minutes, and school catalogs. He was "very partial to items of some interest large enough to stand in their own binding,"¹⁶ so he rejected many pamphlet items. The physical condition of an item was important to Cotten. He would successively buy and sell copies of a title until he had a speci-

Cotten rejected was that the collection be named for his mother.

Cotten was revitalized by the successful conclusion of negotiations over the will. In his correspondence with Mary Lindsay Thornton, he began to address her as "My dear Partner."¹⁷ Cotten also began to re-write his manuscript catalog of the collection. This, too, renewed his interest in the collection, and he was surprisingly active as a collector during the last few years of his life. Library staff continued to visit and correspond with Cotten; his correspondence with Mary Lindsay Thornton was interrupted only by his frequent bouts of ill health. The last letter from Miss Thornton reached Cotten just a week before his death on April 1, 1954.

Bruce Cotten was buried in Baltimore, but his book collection came home to North Carolina, to the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Cotten left North Carolina to find his place in the world, but he still needed some connection to his family and his home state. Collecting North Caroliniana provided him with that connection. It became his passion. He combined that passion with great wealth and many family connections, and in doing so amassed a private collection of North Caroliniana not equalled to this day.

References

¹ The term is the one used by Bruce Cotten in the dedication of his *Housed on the Third Floor* (Baltimore: Horn-Shafer, 1941).

² Bruce Cotten, *As We Were: A Personal Sketch of Family Life* (Baltimore: Privately Printed, 1935), 23.

³ Bruce Cotten, "Drills, Raids and Escapades: A Personal Narrative of Life in the Army, 1898-1910," 17. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴ William Stephenson, *Sallie Southall Cotten: A Woman's Life in North Carolina* (Greenville, NC: Pamlico Press, 1987), 123; Bruce Cotten to Robert Randolph Cotten, October 3, 1897, Cotten Family Papers, Collection #3589, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵ The chief sources for studying the Cottens are the Cotten Family Papers (Collection #3589) and the Sallie Southall Cotten Papers (Collection #2613) in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The later collection consists primarily of letters from Sallie Southall Cotten to her son Bruce, 1902-1926. Unfortunately, the correspondence is one-sided; we read news of Cottendale and many protestations of a mother's love, but nothing concrete about why Bruce Cotten left

home or what kept him away.

⁶ "Drills, Raids and Escapades," 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁸ Bruce Cotten, *An Adventure in Alaska during the Gold Excitement of 1897-1898: A Personal Experience* (Baltimore: Sun Printing Office, 1922), dedication.

⁹ Bruce Cotten to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Randolph Cotten, 14 April 1925. Letter bound in "Drills, Raids and Escapades."

¹⁰ *Housed on the Third Floor*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² Sallie Southall Cotten to Bruce Cotten, January 1, 1903, June 23, 1904, December 18, 1904, Sallie Southall Cotten Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹³ Sallie Southall Cotten to Bruce Cotten, June 17, 1915, February 20, 1916, March 13, 1921, February 18, 1923, January 7, 1924, Sallie Southall Cotten Papers.

¹⁴ *Housed on the Third Floor*, 11.

¹⁵ Only a few bulletins remain. They are in the Bruce Cotten files, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁶ *Housed on the Third Floor*, 10.

¹⁷ Bruce Cotten to Mary Lindsay Thornton, January 16, 1950, Bruce Cotten files, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



John Higgins, Sales Representative

P.O. Box 21011
Columbia SC 29221

1-800-222-9086
Fax: 803-731-0320



OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



QUALITY BOOKS INC.