

Anne O'Donnell

6 December 2015

Dr. John B. Nykerk: An Illustrative Figure of the Radical Arts and Crafts Movement

Dr. John B. Nykerk is representative of several scholars throughout the world who were shaped in the early 20th century by the Arts and Crafts movement. Although Nykerk is known most for his establishment of the Nykerk oration, song, and theatre competition at Hope College, his greater impact on the college was as a Western literature professor through his devotion to the classics. This devotion was solidified, and perhaps, turned to fanaticism, while on sabbatical to Oxford University in England. In tracing his encounter, one can clearly see his adoption of the Arts and Crafts movement ideology which is evident in him, physically, through his mannerisms as he tried to imitate the traditional Oxford scholars; his increased love of Tennyson and other Realist literary giants; and lastly in his purchase of two unique Pre-Industrial Revolution texts, a *Beowulf* and a special edition of *The Canterbury Tales*. The presence of these works and these new mannerisms that Nykerk adopted are no accident. Only through the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement did scholars such as Nykerk adopt a classical literary canon which has remained a standard at colleges and universities throughout the world.

With the advent of the 18th century, the world forever began to change with the rapid technological advances of the Industrial Revolution. As the industrial age began to take hold of almost every aspect of life, wealthier members of society rebelled against these modern innovations. Seeking to hold onto both a physical piece of the past, as well as the ancient ideals classical art and literature embodied, artists and scholars lead a campaign for an ideological movement whose roots were in Realism and late Romanticism, the culmination of which is now

known as the Arts and Crafts movement. This movement was a way for many people, especially scholars like Nykerk in particular, to preserve a small part of their history, a former way of life, which was rapidly disappearing in a world of machines and manufacturing.

Dr. Nykerk was born in 1861 in a small rural town in western Michigan. Growing up during this time, Nykerk witnessed the effects of the Industrial Revolution that were already well underway by 1861. Within the first years of his life, he experienced its effect in Chicago and Detroit, two towns that during the early years of his life were transforming both economically and physically as skyscrapers and factories were rapidly built during his childhood. As seen by his desire to stay in western Michigan, Nykerk must have had very little love of the then “modern city.” It is also clear that he did not wish to study the modern age through business or science of any kind, because when he enrolled in Hope College in 1881, he immediately joined the college’s classics program (MacKay 2). Over the course of the next several years, Nykerk’s love of the classics began to grow. In 1884, in his early years as a professor, Nykerk went to study at the College of Liberal Arts in Chautauqua where his research mentor was a Dr. Cook from Yale University, whose specialty was Anglo Saxon literature (MacKay 3). This type of literature is characteristic of material from the Arts and Crafts period, as it is one of the oldest and most beloved genres of literature in the English language.

The heart of the literature portion of the Arts and Crafts movement was in Oxford, England. The father of the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris, founded his famous Klemmott Printing Company just outside of Oxford. Although the company itself closed in 1898, the audience that the company had printed for still had an active presence on Oxford’s campus less than a decade later, in 1906, when Nykerk arrived (“William Morris”). While at

Oxford, Nykerk interacted with these academics, the audience that artisans, such as Morris, catered to.

When Dr. Nykerk returned from Oxford, he was a different man. The most distinct change was the Oxford accent he now used as a normal part of his conversation. Several friends, colleagues, and students all remarked that “he kept that accent until the day he died” (Lampen). This outward change in manner clearly indicates an inward one since, by adopting the native tongue, he became fully immersed in classical Oxford academia. In many ways, the trip enhanced his language skills and love of the English language as he became obsessed with proper syntax in an attempt to become a “dictionary expert” (Hinkamp). After his first journey to Oxford, Nykerk’s interests in the classics began to grow, especially his love of ancient texts and languages. One of Nykerk’s contemporaries, Dr. Lampen of the Math Department, testified to the fact that Nykerk was “an expert on Old Dutch or Frisian Languages,” and in 1907 Nykerk returned to Oxford a second time to work on a translation of the epic poem, *Beowulf* (Lampen). Ironically, because of his expertise with several languages, he was asked to collaborate with a few other professors at the University of Chicago to work on creating an appendix of footnotes for none other than the Oxford dictionary (MacKay 6). All of his actions upon returning from his two sabbaticals indicate an inward turn to an Oxford, Arts and Crafts, medievalist, way of life and thought; a revolution that was occurring in scholars throughout the world.

In many ways the Arts and Crafts movement had a moral dimension to it as several proponents of the movement sought to “reform society through craftsmanship” (Boehm). Work done solely by human hands and manual labor was seen to be of better quality, as it was closer to the work of idealized medieval craftsman whose work was meant to “glorify God” (“William

Morris”). Dr. Nykerk was a strongly religious man. He was greatly involved in his church serving not only as a choir director, but eventually as deacon and elder at Hope Church; a colleague reported that “he never missed a prayer meeting” (Boyd; Lampen). Some people, called Nykerk an outspoken man, as he was a person who was not afraid to take a strong position if he believed he was in the right, especially regarding ethics and religion. A prime example of this includes a story of how he expelled a boy from his choir, because the boy had fallen into trouble with the law. Dr. Nykerk felt it was his place to take such actions, despite the sentiment of others who pitied the young man (Snow). As a strongly religious, moralizing man, Nykerk once again fits the profile of an advocate of the Arts and Crafts movement, as many in the movement, including the founder, William Morris, gave lectures promoting the moralizing nature of medievalist and classical thought and craftsmanship (Boehm). His unusual mannerism and increased moralizing based actions are characteristic of the movement, and indicates that he must have come in contact with scholars who were reviving traditional literature and philosophy.

Further evidence of Nykerk’s interaction with the movement is his increased devotion to the classics after his two journeys to Oxford. While a professor at Hope College, his specialty was Shakespeare, Browning, and Tennyson (MacKay 3). This, in and of itself, testifies to his love of classics, as all three of these poets and authors are known as classical giants. Tennyson was especially important to Nykerk, as he was reported to have often said that “Good poetry died when Tennyson died,” (Pieters). Tennyson was a poet of the Realism movement of the mid-19th century, whose criticism of the Industrial Revolution was characteristic of many Realist authors and poets who often described the extreme poverty and harshness of industrial life. Tennyson’s criticism of the Industrial Revolution, and his praise of classical literature, clearly had an impact

on Nykerk. Tennyson's poetry often featured elements of classical mythology, as well as elements of Romanticism. In his work *Ulysses*, he centers the story around the hero Odysseus, which is clearly a classical reference, and in his *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson uses the Arthurian legend as inspiration, which in many ways is reminiscent of the themes and motifs of the classical and Romanticism eras of literature ("Tennyson, Alfred Lord"). Literary scholars remark that Tennyson felt "called upon to celebrate a quickly changing industrial and mercantile world...[but] his allegiance [belonged] to the eternal beauty of nature..[and] an unaltered rural England" ("Alfred Lord Tennyson"). This is very similar to the sentiment of William Morris, the founder of the Arts and Craft movement, who is known for his study of nature and inclusion of it into several of the books he printed, believing that nature was a "spiritual antidote" for the industrial age ("William Morris"). Likewise Nykerk expressed the same sentiment, as he, as a man from rural Michigan loved nature. While studying at Oxford on his first journey, Nykerk had the great privilege and honor to study literature under Alfred Lolyd Tennyson's nephew-in-law Dr. R.A Pope (MacKay 4). Bearing in mind that Tennyson was one of Nykerk's literary heroes, surely studying Tennyson from one of Tennyson's own relatives, at Oxford, the heart of the Arts and Craft movement, clearly helped to foster a classical, Arts and Crafts sentiment in Nykerk.

Those who knew Dr. Nykerk well remarked that he was never a "progressive" man, as he was both "anti-Christian Reformed" and "anti-Democrat," and many noticed that he was never seemed "open to change" (Hinkamp; Snow). This trait in Nykerk continued to become apparent, especially as he aged, and after his journeys to Oxford. Stories from students and faculty suggest that after his two sabbaticals, he never endorsed modern literature, and therefore, when he was

head of the English department, he opposed the addition of new courses in modern literature. Instead he preferred to promote a “strong classical education” (Boyd). These actions as a professor, confirm the influence that Oxford scholars, members of the Art and Crafts movement, must have had on Nykerk.

The strongest piece of evidence that testifies to Nykerk’s adoption of the ideals of the movement was his purchase of two books, *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales*, both of which are now housed in the Van Wylen library. These two works were both published before 1815, before the peak of the Industrial Revolution, and as such, they are exemplary examples of traditional bookmaking and classical works that were idealized when they were published and revived during the Arts and Crafts movement. As such, these two works embody the ideals of the authors and artisans of the movement, which is seen in both the physicality of the books themselves as well as the composition of the tales.

Beowulf is one of the oldest known stories from any civilization, with its oldest manuscript from the 11th century, but evidence suggests it had been passed down orally for centuries prior to this (“Beowulf”). The story itself is centered on the hero for whom the tale is named after, Beowulf, and it recounts his exploits: his fight with the monster Grendel, Grendel’s vengeful mother, and the infamous dragon. The character Beowulf himself is the embodiment of both classical heroism in both the secular and Christian literary sense, as Beowulf is interpreted by many scholars as more than just a hero, but perhaps a Christ-like figure come to slay Grendel, who is the offspring of Cain, and the dragon, a symbol of Satan. *The Canterbury Tales* is another classical text, written in the late 14th century by Chaucer (“The Canterbury Tales”). Like *Beowulf*, the tale is written in verse, however the story itself features several characters, all

traveling together on a pilgrimage to the Canterbury Cathedral. The journey itself is spiritual in nature, but the tales are centered on a competition for each pilgrim to tell the best tale on the journey, which results in both bawdy, humorous tales from some of the pilgrims, and spiritual, reflective tales from others. The spiritual and historical nature of each of work is characteristic of the Arts and Crafts era which featured a return to the classics with an emphasis on the morality and spirituality. Therefore in the purchase of both texts, Dr. Nykerk was once again seeking to protect classical culture and the virtues of the Arts and Crafts movement, like many other scholars throughout the world.

Although these two works were published before the advent of the Arts and Crafts movement, their physicality and content were sought to be preserved through this movement of printing. The *Beowulf* text is a small, almost perfectly square, black book that has a worn, weather beaten cover with type letter text. The book is very delicate and must remain bound at all times when it is not in use, in order to ensure the cover will not fall from the binding. In its content, the edition of this Beowulf fits the historical context of the Arts and Crafts era, as it represents a return to classical works. This is most evident in the fact that the text is not written in the vernacular of the time, but instead features two translations, one of Latin running down the right side of the page, next to the Old English translation on the left. As the eye, in Western culture at least, is trained to read left to right, one would have first looked at the Old English translation, however, the Latin remains distinctly next to it, as a reference for a more skilled, scholarly audience. Also, it is important to note that the original tale itself, the oldest manuscript that has survived, is written in Old English, not Latin, meaning the work was deliberately translated into Latin for this edition. Latin historically is known as the language of scholars and

ancient historians, and including a Latin translation was another way to emphasize the “old nature” of the book itself as it helps to create an archaic, ancient atmosphere. These are all attributes that were sought to be preserved in printing during the Arts and Crafts movement.

The other work acquired by the Van Wylen Rare Books Collection is a beautiful Chaucer edition of *The Canterbury Tales*. In contrast with this work, the previous publication of *Beowulf* could be called plain. The *Beowulf* book is literally dwarfed in comparison with the Chaucer text, as the Chaucer text is roughly a foot by a foot and a half in size, and weighs several pounds, much larger or heavier than books published now in the modern 21st century. This edition of *The Canterbury Tales* is a rich text, with detailed pictures, and hand-sewn cover. It is a student edition, obviously meant for a wealthy student who might attend Oxford or Cambridge, but it appears Dr. Nykerk bought the book for himself, as he was observing lectures and performing research at Oxford. It features beautiful text and illustrations, along the sides of each page, which is made of a thick, rich paper. It is somewhat damp, from the moisture it has absorbed throughout the years, and the burnt orange cover appears to be hand sewn, however the stitching is worn enough that the cover has fallen from the original binding. From cover to cover, there are several rich illustrations as well as student introductions regarding Chaucer himself, and background about the time period in which the text was written. Before each tale, there is a very handsome depiction of each pilgrim in the famous story which coordinates well with the stylized letters and text font.

While the *Beowulf* text itself is much plainer and simpler, the Chaucer text has several stylistic curves and ornate letters that begin each tale. The very ornate nature of the text and the illustrations, demonstrate how this work specifically, and books similar to it, impacted the Arts

and Crafts movement, as its letter type and decorative illustrations are similar to those of William Morris, the famous publisher. This is seen even by its size, which references several ancient texts, as books historically were printed as physically more substantial works. The *Beowulf* text in contrast is much more modest, and perhaps “modern” in size, as it is more of reasonable size for a personal book to carry on a regular basis. However, *The Canterbury Tales* book is meant to embody an ideal, and romanticize a time of literature and printing that was fading in the industrial era, so its size both physically and metaphorically references the large, grand ideas of the ancients. As a whole *The Canterbury Tales*, perhaps more so than the *Beowulf* text, is a testament to the ideal book that the Arts and Crafts era strove toward. The style and content of each of these books is characteristic of those that publishers and artisans of the Arts and Crafts era sought to preserve and protect. Therefore Dr. Nykerk’s interest and purchase of these two books serves as a testament to his participation in the Arts and Crafts movement, as he, like other scholars and artisans, sought to preserve both the physical history of an era in which books were handmade, as well as classical ideas and morality that the books in their content embodied.

Throughout his early life, Dr. Nykerk always had a deep love and respect for the classics; however this love came to fulfillment on his two journeys to Oxford which brought him into contact with the academics of the Arts and Crafts literature and artistic movement. This predominately art based movement coincided and catered to Oxford scholars whose love of old books, and the ideals they embodied, were the heart of this anti- Industrial Revolution movement. It was this journey to the center of the Arts and Crafts movement that fostered and encouraged Dr. Nykerk’s beliefs in classicism, and he is one of many scholars and academics that joined this large, counter-culture movement. His adoption of the ideas of this movement are

evident in the actions after his journey to Oxford, in the mannerisms and the moralizing nature he adopted; his increased love of Realist literary giants and classical works as a whole; and in his purchase of the two texts *The Canterbury Tales* and *Beowulf*. Dr. Nykerk's love and loyalty to the classics has impacted the Hope College community, just as the work of Arts and Crafts scholars and artisans have impacted and continue to impact people around the world, as the classics continue to be taught and treasured here at Hope College.

Works Cited

“Alfred, Lord Tennyson.” *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 7 Nov. 2015.

“Beowulf.” *The British Library*. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 Nov. 2015.

Boehm, Mary. “San Diego History Center | Our City, Our Story.” San Diego History Center | Our City, Our Story. N.p., July 1990. Web. 26 Oct. 2015.

Chaucer, Geoffery. *The Works of Geoffery Chaucer*. London: Bernart Lintot, 1721. Print.

Mackay, Gordon. *John Benardes Nykerk*. 1961. TS The Joint Archives of Holland, Michigan.

Gordon, Mackay. Interview with Miss. Boyd. Department of History: Hope College, 20 March 1961. Print.

Gordon, Mackay. Interview with Professor Lampen. Department of History: Hope College, 23 March 1961. Print.

Gordon, Mackay. Interview with Rev. Paul Hinkamp. Department of History: Hope College, 26 March 1961. Print.

Gordon, Mackay. Interview with Mrs. Snow. Department of History: Hope College, 27 March 1961. Print.

Gordon, Mackay. Interview with Ms. Pieters. Department of History: Hope College, 13 April 1961. Print.

"Tennyson, Alfred Lord | Robbins Library Digital Projects." *Tennyson, Alfred Lord | Robbins*

Library Digital Projects. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Nov. 2015.

Thorklein, Grimur. *Beowulf*. Havniæ, typis T.E. Rangel, 1815.

"William Morris - The Arts and Crafts Movement." William Morris - The Arts and Crafts

Movement. N.p., n.d. Web. 7 Nov. 2015.