The Nicholas B. Scheetz Celtic Collection
A Gift to Fairfield University

A plethora of scholarly benefits will accrue to Fairfield University through Nicholas B. Scheetz’s gift of his Celtic Collection. Gathered over the course of 40 years, the compendium of nearly 500 books and items represents the historical arc of Celtic literatures, as well as their influence on the geographic/spatial contours of Celtic languages across the British and Irish Isles. The collection’s depth and breadth will make it a unique resource for scholars of Celtic literature and history, and will support the University’s multidisciplinary Irish Studies Program.

The Discovery of Things Celtic

Mr. Scheetz (Nick), a native of Seattle, Washington, first became interested in “things Celtic” at Georgetown University. His love of literature and history resulted in a double major; he graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in 1974. While an undergraduate, he became involved in the theater program, co-directing numerous plays. In preparing for one of those productions, John Synge’s Playboy of the Western World, the young director realized that he needed to know more about Ireland, where the play is set.

To that end, he contacted Robert T. Meyer, Ph.D., a professor of Celtic Studies at Catholic University, requesting a meeting. The noted Celtic scholar and philologist agreed to a conversation, neither party realizing that a lifelong relationship was about to begin. Dr. Meyer would become Mr. Scheetz’s first mentor not only in all things Celtic, but in the fine art of book collecting as well.

Dr. Meyer taught every second summer term at Oxford University, invited to do so by the noted Oxford scholar, Sir Idris Foster. As Nick and Dr. Meyer got to know each other, he urged Nick to enroll in the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS) School of Celtic Studies after his graduation from Georgetown. “Dr. Meyer said that anyone could study Irish literature, but that few could read it in the original language, 9th century Old Irish,” recalls Nick. Taking his
mentor’s advice, Nick spent two summers at DIAS, where he learned to read, write, and speak Old Irish.

The Scope of Things Celtic

In delving so deeply into the country – its history, language, and politics – Nick came to “adopt” Ireland and England as his own. He also began to scout antiquarian book stores for gems of the centuries-old Celtic tradition. Its evolution from early oral tales to various forms of the written word fascinated him, as did the linguistic changes that accompanied the socio-political environment of a given period. In the close study of literary texts, Nick learned the methods of establishing their authenticity and of tracing back to their original forms.

Keep in mind that “things Celtic” span not only centuries but continents. Ancient migration patterns brought the Celtic influence (both linguistic and cultural) to Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Northern Italy, Spain, France, and Belgium, before settling primarily in Britain and Ireland. The “Continental Celts,” who had had contact with Greek and Latin, became literate earlier than the “Insular Celts” living on the islands of Britain and Ireland. *

The transmission of native Irish lore and learning remained primarily an oral tradition through the 17th century. Christian monastic communities had introduced Latin learning and thought centuries earlier, but only in the middle ages did they begin committing Irish poetic legend and lore – in the Irish language – to vellum, and later, paper.

This practice of handwritten poetry, prose, and record keeping would last well beyond the introduction of the Gutenberg printing press in Germany (1440) because the printing of books in Irish was proscribed by Penal Law until the late 1800s. Only in Britain and Ireland have the Celtic/Gaelic languages survived, albeit with fewer speakers. Those in use today include Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Manx (Isle of Man), Welsh, and Breton.

The Scheetz Celtic Collection includes examples of works in each of these languages, an important philological resource for scholars. It also houses crucial examples of the evolution of Irish literature. Because the written word came relatively late to the Celtic islands of Britain
and Ireland, stories of the nations’ history, character, and pride were passed down orally, generation to generation. The primary vehicle for conveying this vital national record was poetic verse – charming to listen to and more readily remembered.

Initially the prestigious role was carried out by an educated class called the fili, to whom spiritual insight was also attached. Often referred to interchangeably as the bardic poets, the latter did not carry the same spiritual ascriptions and gradually adapted the legend and lore to a stricter metric form. The Celtic Collection includes heroic legends of the Finian Cycle and the Ulster Cycle; works of the Scottish, Welsh, and Cornish literary traditions; examples of the 19th-century Irish literary revival movement; and works of at least one modern-day inheritor of the Celtic tradition, playwright Brendan Behan.

**The Value for Scholarship**

This fall, in preparing to make the Celtic Collection gift to Fairfield University, Mr. Scheetz engaged Willis Van Devanter, one of the world’s foremost book and manuscript appraisers, to examine the collection. Mr. Van Devanter had spent 17 years as the curator of philanthropist Paul Mellon’s vast personal library, and after its donation to Yale University, became an independent appraiser. Among the public figures whose papers he has assessed are the late Senator Robert Byrd and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“I’ve never seen a collection like the one Nick is donating to Fairfield University,” says Mr. Van Devanter. “What he has collected reflects a brilliant mind. It could never be reassembled except at great cost, and its value to scholarship and to general knowledge has the potential to be immense as a teaching collection.” Mr. Van DeVanter cites the following as a small sample of the collection’s most rare and valuable books:

- A complete set of printed literary manuscripts published by the *Irish Texts Society* (*64 volumes*), representing the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries;
- *Kincora*, a play written by Lady August Gregory (1852-1932), cofounder with W. B. Yeats of the Abbey Theater in Dublin, who played a considerable role in the late 19th-century Irish literary revival. The Scheetz copy of *Kincora*, considered both rare and important,
includes a handwritten note by the playwright and an inscription on the title page to the Irish diplomat, Shane Leslie (a first cousin of Winston Churchill);

- The first American edition of W. B. Yeats’ *The Green Helmet and Other Poems*;
- A very rare author’s presentation copy of *The Celtic Origin of a Great Part of the Greek and Latin Languages* (Thomas Stratton); and
- *Illustrations of the Life of St. Alban* (collotype facsimile, Trinity College, Dublin).

These valuable works only hint at the range of history, biography, and literature to be discovered and plumbed within the Scheetz Celtic Collection.

### A Glimpse at the Collection

Categorizing or summarizing a collection this unique has inherent challenges, as it includes almost equal numbers of primary texts and classic scholarly works. Among the latter is the four-volume *History of Ireland* by Geoffrey Keating (c. 1570-1644) published by the Irish Texts Society with Gaelic and English on facing pages. Experts consider this a keystone, foundational work, perhaps the most thorough account ever compiled. James Simon’s *The World of the Celts* represents a more recent example of brilliant historical scholarship, as does *The Celts*, edited by the late Italian linguist and archaeologist, Sabatino Moscati, who covers the history, art, archaeological digs, clothing, food, and migration paths of a people who once inhabited all of Europe.

Within the collection, works by the 1970 Nobel nominee for literature, Saunders Lewis, showcase many of the author’s works in the Welsh language. Douglas Hyde and W. B. Yeats provide important examples of the Irish literary renaissance, which included the push to write in Gaelic (also called Irish), the native language that had fallen into disuse under pressure from the British colonizers. Aspects of that revival, as well as a must-have grounding in the evolution of literary forms from Celtic times to the present, is provided in the reader-friendly *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (ed. R. Welch), whose system of cross-references makes
it a wonderful resource to identify and understand the historical forces within which creative genius arose (or was suppressed). The range of the Scheetz literary collection – from poetry and short stories to essays, art, drama, biography, novels, and bibliographies – covers nearly every aspect of literature mentioned in this seminal reference book.

The Celtic Collection also includes features books of a religious nature, two of special note: 1) a second-edition *Old Testament* in Irish, published in 1827 by the British and Foreign and Bible Society, with contributions from William Bedell (1571-1642), and 2) *Illustrations to the Life of St. Alban* in Trinity College, Dublin. The latter is reproduced in collotype facsimile with 56 leaves of plates (illustrations) beautifully rendered.

Other saints represented in the collection include St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Declan, St. Anthony of Padua, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Columba, St. Blathmaic and, of course, St. Patrick. Most are translations into Irish of centuries-old works; even Adam and Eve make an appearance in the Irish version of their story. There’s also an Irish *Life of Christ*, an encyclical by Pope Innocent III, the Irish Gospel of St. Thomas, and the Gospel of Nicodemus. Life in an ancient Irish monastery is covered from two perspectives in different centuries. Cornish dramaturgy gets a nod, and two volumes on saints and soldiers reveal the “crossover characteristics” that led each to be held in esteem.

**How It All Began**

No doubt, Mr. Scheetz’s most treasured collecting activities have focused on the Victorian poet and translator, Edward FitzGerald, an illustrious example of philological genius and the intellectual life who fell into Nick’s life quite by accident. While this part of his collection will remain with him in Newport, R.I., the story sheds light on a collector whose life’s work he has summarized as follows: “I save the past for the future.”

Nick’s entry into the joyous world of book collecting began in earnest while a graduate student in Celtic Studies at Catholic University. When not engaged in his studies, he continued to direct Shakespearean plays at night. In his free time, he began scouring a bookstore he had
discovered right in his D.C. neighborhood – the Park-Reifsneider. “Mrs. R.,” as she was called, had purchased the bulk of Dewitt Miller’s (1857-1911) renowned book collection, which the Methodist minister and professor had willed to the National Park Seminary in Maryland. After it closed, Mrs. Reifsneider’s bulk purchase made the works available to a new generation of collectors. Among the acquisitions were many presentation (inscribed to someone by the author) and association copies (marked with a previous owner’s name).

“When I began to roam the shop,” Nick has written, “I noticed that a small, circular red and white library label appeared on the spines of some of the Dewitt Miller’s books, denoting that they were presentation or association copies. Eureka! A key to a bookish puzzle had been solved, and I now began to traverse the stack ranges with even greater gusto. It was like finding gold coins from some pirate’s hoard scattered up and down a beach.”

One of those red-and-white labels called to him – More Letters by Edward FitzGerald (London, 1901). Carefully inlaid were original autograph letters to Dewitt Miller in response to his questions about the text, as well as correspondence from Sir Leslie Stephen (father of Virginia Woolf); William Aldis Wright, who was FitzGerald’s editor and executor; and John Loder, a close friend of the author.

The correspondence offered unique insight into FitzGerald, the British poet (1809-1888) best known for his translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. It also ignited in Nick a desire to know this scholar/poet who, at age 33, had begun learning the Persian language along with his friend, Edward Byles Cowell. Who knew that a dozen years later, Cowell would unearth the manuscript of the Rubaiyat in Oxford? And offer it to Edward FitzGerald for translation from the Persian? In 1859, with neither fanfare nor recognition, FitzGerald brought to the West a volume of poetic wisdom compared for its power, pathos, and beauty to the book of Ecclesiastes.

Today, Nick Scheetz’s FitzGerald collection – books and manuscripts, first and second editions, and the author’s annotations in a rare volume – fills shelf upon shelf in his personal library. Boxes of FitzGerald-related manuscripts enrich understanding of the author, and include
correspondence with the likes of Alfred Lord Tennyson (his Trinity classmate and lifelong friend), dramatist and playwright Edward Rose, and author Henry Schütz Wilson.

Nick’s 40-year quest has yielded perhaps the most comprehensive FitzGerald collection known to exist, which the Grolier Club in New York City exhibited in 2009 to commemorate the double anniversary of FitzGerald’s birth (1809) and the Rubaiyat’s publication (1859). And, to think, that collection began when a young graduate student noticed a small, circular red and white library label.

The Fairfield Connection

“I met Nick while serving at Georgetown,” recalls the Rev. Jeffrey P. von Arx, S.J., today president of Fairfield University. At the time, Fr. Von Arx was teaching Historical Interpretation, an advanced course that introduced undergraduates to the methods of in-depth historical research. Nick, having completed his M.S. in Irish Studies, returned to Georgetown as curator of manuscripts at the school’s J.M. Lauinger Library.

“Once a semester, I’d arrange with Nick to hold a class at the library,” recalls Fr. Von Arx. “Not only would he bring out a range of ancient and modern manuscripts, but he conveyed a respect for the materials that underscored their value and importance. Nick’s day-to-day work was typically done behind the scenes, so he enjoyed the opportunity to engage with the students. He did that well, and we all benefited from his expertise.”

The two have remained good friends over the ensuing years. In deciding to make the Celtic Collection gift to Fairfield, Nick knew that to make it immediately useful he would need to catalog it and provide a means of interpretation. Thus, the process of donation has gone far beyond the mere packing and shipping of books. In 2014, in sync with his retirement move to Newport, R.I., a team of part-time librarians began cataloging the Celtic Collection according to the standards used by Fairfield’s DiMenna-Nyselius Library.
Providing Scholarly Treasures

“The time and expense involved in Mr. Scheetz’s having done all this in advance actually adds to the gift,” says Ms. Joan Overfield, dean of libraries at Fairfield. “The collection will arrive ready to use. The books will be housed initially within the library, in renovated space designed to showcase the works and draw attention to their presence. Mr. Scheetz’s generosity may well make Fairfield University a destination for scholars already drawn to the academic corridor between New York and New Haven.”

An educator at heart, Nicholas Breier Scheetz, has dedicated his life to preservation. In 2009, he received the Doris Duke Preservation Award for the work done in restoring his 18th century home in Newport to its former beauty. “Things old” continue to attract Nick, not only for the joy they bring him, but also for the satisfaction he receives in saving the past for the future.

“I have always collected books and manuscripts that intrigue me,” says Nick, noting that 40 years have produced an eclectic compendium of material, some of it rare and much of it valuable. “I’ve done this so future scholars will have access to source documents, and discover new insights and connections as they explore.

“It pleases me to be giving this Celtic Collection to Fairfield University in honor of my longtime friend, Fr. Jeff von Arx, who shares my love for history, scholarship, and rare books. He has a mind that appreciates the collection’s value to scholars and understands its potential to enrich faculty and student learning as well.”