

LIBRAS Report: Rare Book School 2007

University of Virginia (Charlottesville, VA), July 30 – August 3, 2007
Publisher's Bookbindings, 1830-1910 – Sue Allen, Instructor

Benn P. Joseph / Benedictine University

The history of books and bookbinding is a problematic field of study. It is circuitous, poorly documented, and is sometimes considered historically irrelevant because of this. Thus, the history of books is essentially a bottomless well—the more one learns, the more aware one becomes of how little they know, and the more aware one becomes of how difficult it is to apply said knowledge consistently within the field. This can probably be said for many fields of study, but having just finished a week-long course on 19th century publisher's cloth bookbindings, I'll apply it here.

Despite the broad generalization I've just made, there is an enclave of devotees to the book in all its rarities and incarnations that exists as an autonomous entity within the framework of the University of Virginia. This entity is known simply and succinctly as 'Rare Book School'.

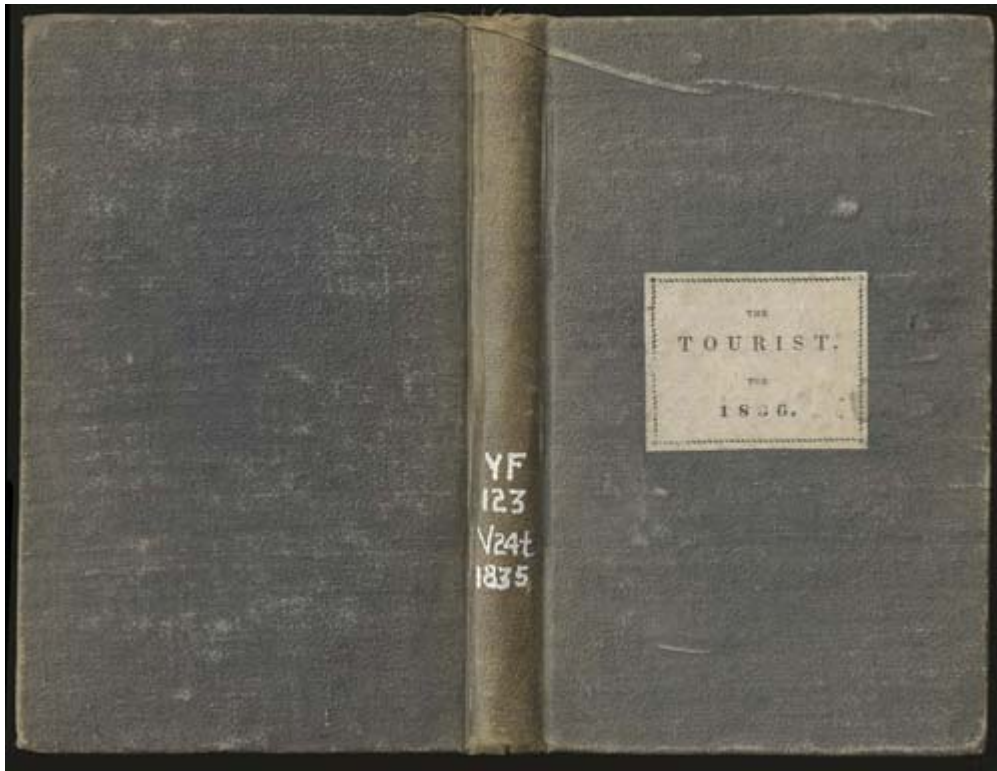
Rare Book School was founded by and remains under the direction of Terry Belanger. It held its first classes in 1983 at Columbia University, and continues today at the University of Virginia. Each summer, RBS offers over a dozen week-long high-intensity classes geared towards different aspects of special collections and rare book librarianship. Sue Allen, the instructor for the course I took, has been teaching this same course since the inception of RBS, and is considered the leading scholar in 19th century cloth bookbindings. She works as an independent rare book consultant for Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.

Each day at RBS begins at the RBS offices in the basement of the main campus library with breakfast and informal discussions amongst the students. This runs from 8:00-8:30 a.m. Classes begin at 8:30 and go until 5:00, including breaks and a lunch period. Sue Allen has a very disjointed teaching style, which I assume is representative of the study of bookbindings. Since a book is a culmination of countless circumstances representative of its time period, the pace of the class was based more on time period rather than components of the books themselves (cloth, boards, stamping, endpapers, headbands, etc.). To simplify this report, I'd like to give summaries of the traits usually found in cloth bookbindings between 1830 and 1900. It may be interesting to note that these bindings are called 'publisher's bookbindings' because before 1830 it was somewhat expected that the purchaser of a book would have it bound in a fashion to suit their own library (i.e. so all their books would match), so publishers sold books in rather generic bindings or left them unbound. Furthermore, leather bindings were expensive and publishers often did not have the capital or inclination to invest in a proprietary binding operation. It wasn't until 1830 (in Britain) and 1831 (in the US) that publishers first began commissioning cloth bindings, which were cheaper to manufacture. These operations were still outsourced to binderies by the publisher for the most part, but it required some creativity on the part of the binder to create cover designs that were

attractive and pertinent to the book. It was at this time that consumers first gained the ability to 'judge a book by its cover', so to speak.

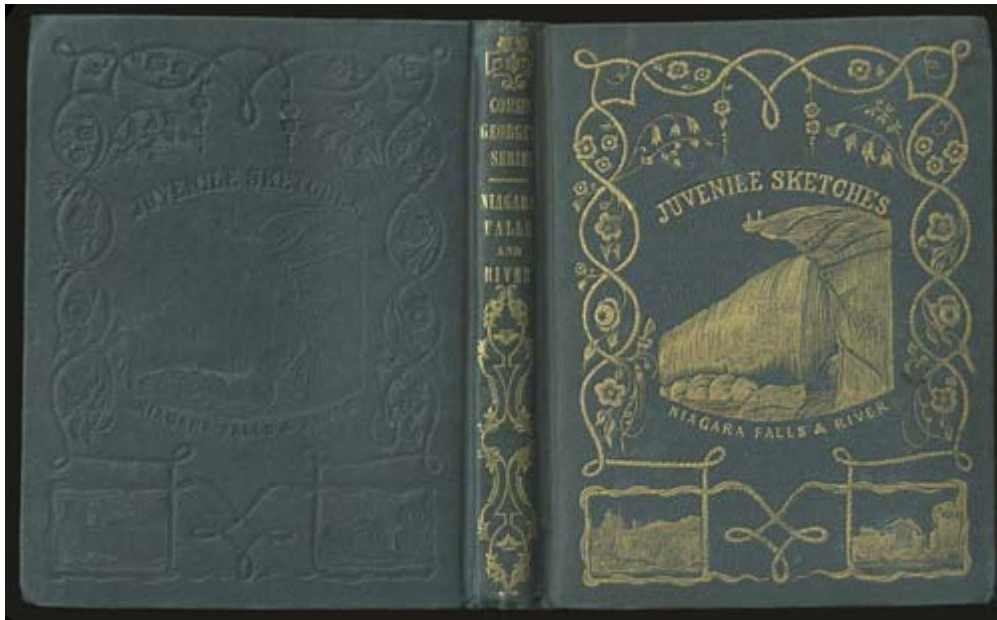
There are always exceptions to rules, but on the whole each decade between 1830 and 1900 exhibited unique and identifiable traits which I will speak of here.

1830s: This time period often sees paper labels pasted onto the book cloth, on the spine and front cover. Stampings are done in gold, and usually consist of either the title or a generic cartouche in the center of the cover. The outer ruled (blind-stamped) border is introduced. This time period sees cloth grains such as morocco, rib grain, and 'ribbon-embossed' (the latter only during 1834-1842) cloth. These cloth grains are introduced to combat consumer thought that cloth bindings were for worthless books, whereas the books that really mattered were done in leather (thus the grained cloth resembled leather). See example below.



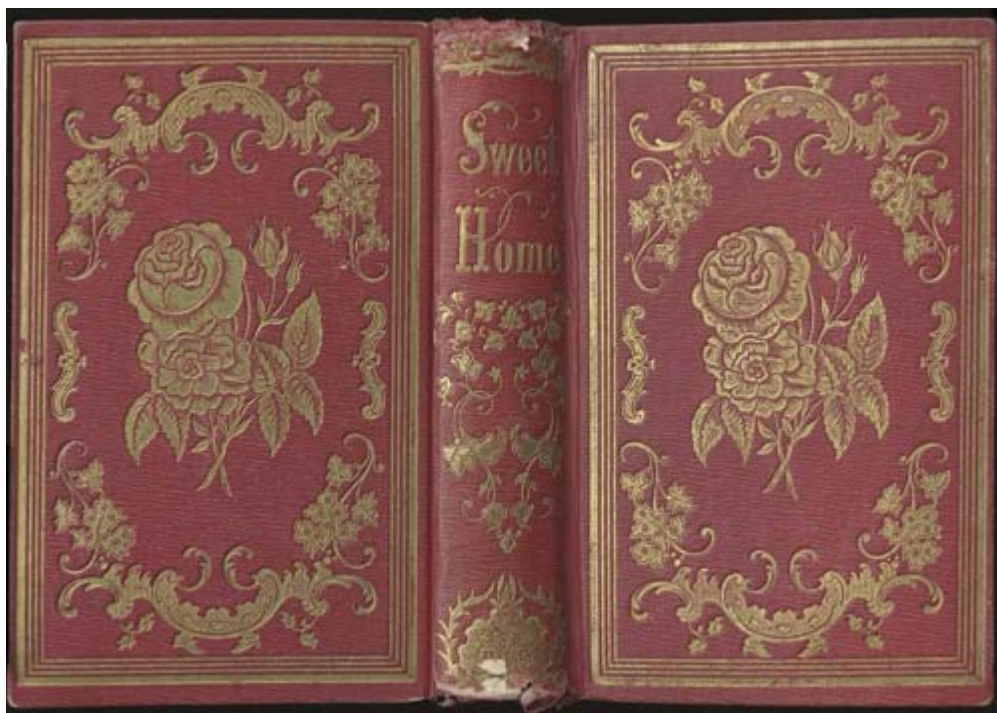
Robert J. Vandewater. *The Tourist*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835.

1840s: This decade sees a more refined style develop, and designs become highly symmetrical and slightly less generic. An outer ruled border has become common. Ornamentation starts to exhibit delicate curling. Ripple grain and net grain are introduced, and binders begin using printed cloth (1845-1852). See example below.



George William Clinton. *Sketches of Niagara Falls and River*. Buffalo, NY: William B. & Charles E. Peck, 1846.

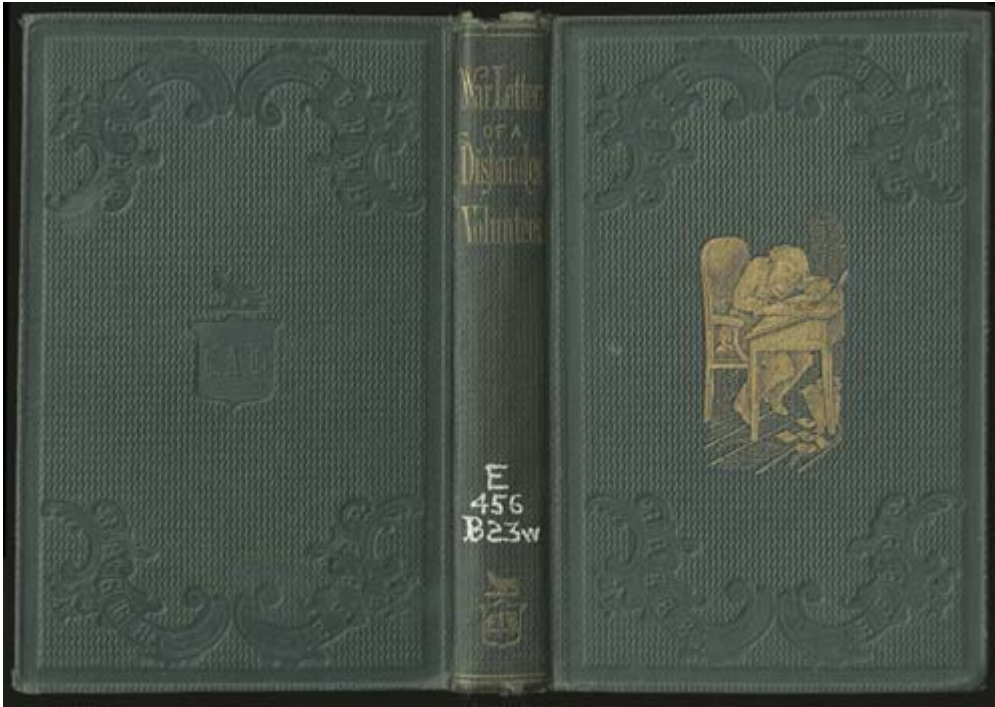
1850s: Elaboration is common, and ornamentation becomes crowded. Vignettes become large and specific to book contents. This decade sees the 'gift-book' style, consisting of red cloth and all-edges-gilt, at its height. All stamping is still done with gold, though attempts are made in 1851-1852 to stamp in silver (which tarnishes immediately). Bead grain and wave grain introduced. See example below.



Frances Percival, ed. *Sweet Home*. Boston: L.P. Crown & Co., 1856.

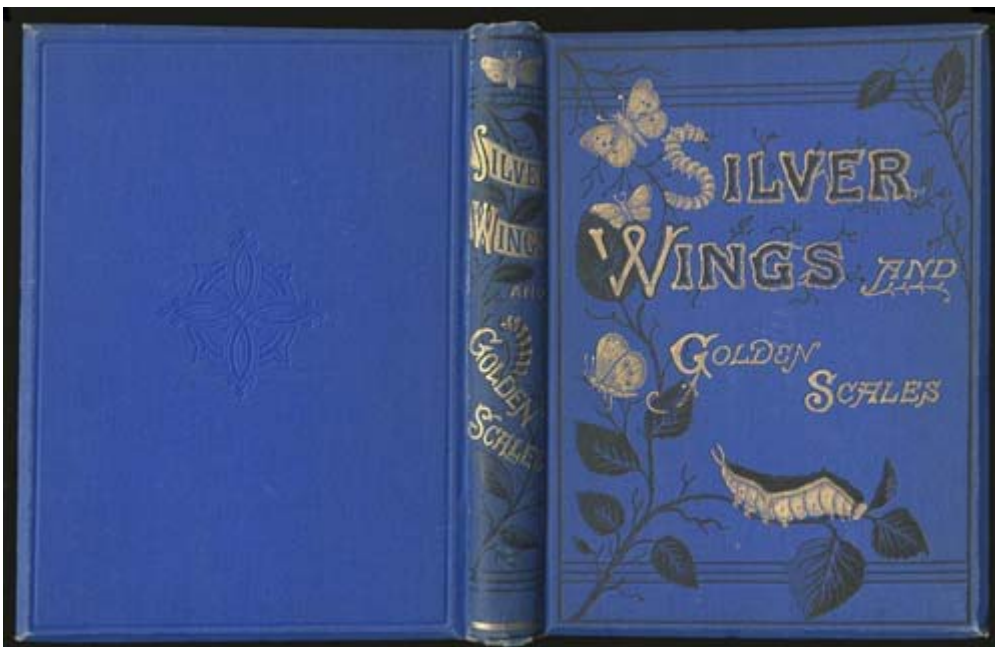
1860s: Gift-book style is seen up until the American Civil War, then drops off in favor of sparse design exhibiting restraint and sparseness. Curling ornamentation is now

largely omitted. Book covers now frequently bear book titles that are part of emblematic pictorials in a modest style. Aniline dyes appear (purple insect-based dyes). Sand grain comes into fashion, as does black stamping (using 'black leaf') and bevel-edge boards. See example below.



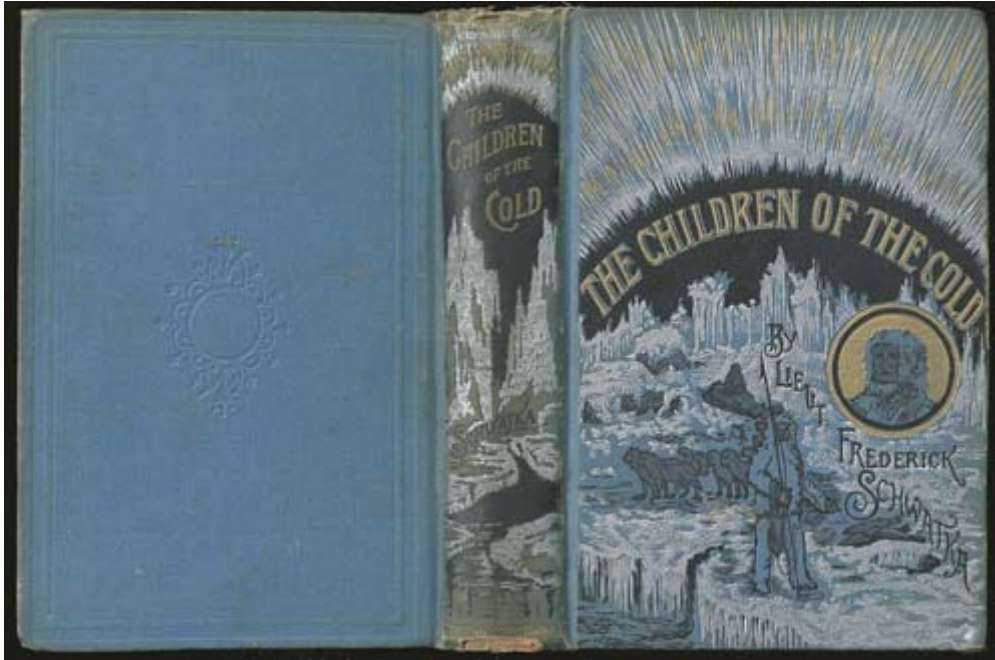
Joseph Barber. *War Letters of a Disbanded Volunteer*. New York: Frederic A. Brady, 1864.

1870s: The symmetry of the 1860s disappears in favor of extreme asymmetry and Eastlake-style ornamentation. Beveled boards and black stamping continues. Silk grain comes into fashion. See example below.



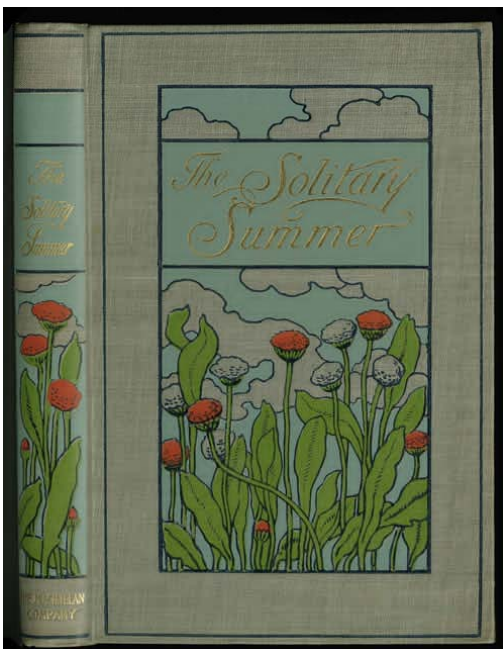
Silver Wings and Golden Scales. London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1877(?).

1880s: Designs become very picturesque and expressive, with flowing lettering. Elements overlap. Stamping can now be done in multiple colors rather than just gold and black (Aluminum now commonly used for silver ornaments). See example below.



Frederick Schwatka. *The Children of the Cold*. New York: Cassell & Co., 1886.

1890s through early 1900s: Cover layouts become highly professional—begins the short age of the artist/designer. Most covers done in a flat poster style. Cloth grains go out of fashion. Lettering done in classic Roman style; is no longer ornamental. See example below.



The Solitary Summer. New York: Macmillan Co., 1899.

All images above are part of an online exhibit space at the University of Rochester entitled *Beauty for Commerce: Publishers' Bindings, 1830-1910*.

<http://www.library.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=3342>

In conclusion, this week-long session was a fantastic crash course in 19th century cloth bookbindings. It was a surprisingly thorough experience—with about 30 classroom hours, this pretty much equates to a 2 credit-hour class taken over the course of a 16 week semester. Sue Allen covered every aspect of these books, but paid specific attention to American bindings, and only talked about British bindings to serve as a kind of background. Even though this same phenomenon was taking place all over Europe and probably throughout the rest of the world, we did not discuss this. Also it should be noted that cloth bindings were only a subset of binding in general—books were still being bound in leather. Considering all this, my perception of the course is that it was both introductory (as it covered only a portion of cloth bookbindings during this time) and very specific (as the only way to learn more about American cloth bookbindings during this time would be to begin doing your own research).

Many thanks to LIBRAS for their generous support in this adventure.