

Martin Steenson, *The Life and Work of Alan Odle* (Stroud: Books & Things, 2012), 126 pages, ISBN 978-0-9544395-1-4

*George H. Thomson*

At last, a book about Alan Odle and his art of illustration. A handsome book it is, with big coloured reproductions of illustrations by Alan on both covers, back and front. The text begins with a short survey of Alan's life and career, followed by a detailed thirty-five page bibliography of his published illustrations and other art works. Next come some of Alan's letters to others, also three letters from the editor of *Vanity Fair* urging Alan, please, to provide the kind of material the magazine wants. On account of their length, four letters from Alan to his brother Edwin Vincent (Teddy) Odle dominate the selection.

Next are Writings by Alan, a brief section comprising seven fragments all apparently about Old Gobsart whose life has been consumed with old Burgundy and old linen. A shirt when worn and dirty has 'KNOWN REALITY'. During fifty years he has accumulated forty five shirts. Now, survived by dirty linen, he approaches death in a Burgundy-induced haze. To compare great things to small, one might recall the weird compulsiveness of Melville's 'Bartelby the Scrivener'. Steenson then offers a brief account of The Works accompanied by thirty-one numbered Illustrations. Here he establishes approximate dates for the illustrations and defines Alan's development over the years, referring throughout to the thirty-one Illustrations as well as other reproductions scattered through his text of 126 generous pages.

In his brief Introduction, Steenson says of Alan: 'A few years ago there came into my possession some letters he wrote to his brother Edwin' (p. 5). The source we suppose is Phyllis Mégroz, a minor writer who translated a wide variety of European books, with whom Edwin Vincent lived after he left his wife Rose Odle in 1934. Though the survival of these letters has been previously unknown, readers are left in the dark as to how many have survived and where they are now? Nor is this the only instance in

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Stenson's text where citations are sparse or casual. His wish it would seem was to avoid burdening his text with too much scholarly apparatus. At the same time, his thoroughly scholarly bibliography of Alan's artistic production is at the heart of his text. A paradox readers must live with even as they give thanks for the feast that has been offered.

### *Afterthought*

Surely there remains some original research to be done on Alan's life and work? For instance, Fromm in her biography of Richardson tells us that after Alan's death in 1948, Dorothy sorted and gathered Alan's art and had the resulting seven bundles transported to Alan's nephew John Odle, the eldest son of Edwin Vincent (p. 383). John tried to arrange for an exhibition of some of the surviving art but failed. So as Steenson tells us, Alan's art was auctioned by Sotheby's in two sessions in 1976 (p. 28), and some of the works from those auctions were exhibited in Geneva in 1977 (p. 29). Have any records of these auctions survived? Is there a surviving record of the 1977 Exhibition? What is its relationship to the book *Alan Odle: Gargantua, Contes Drolatiques de Balzac* published by Editions Claude Givaudan also in Geneva in 1977? And what about the manuscripts by Odle not mentioned here held in the Paterno Library in the University of Pennsylvania: 'A Lecture on Humour'; 'Rabelais and His Modern Readers'; 'The Man Who Killed Time'; and 'The House of Clothes'? These are puzzles that deserve attention. There are others I am sure.