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## May 6th, 2008

# Rare Hemingway Items Sell for Record Prices

by Jeanne Schinto



Swann Galleries, New York City

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In 2007 Swann Galleries achieved five new auction price records for Ernest Hemingway items. On November 29 a publisher's advance proof of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, signed and inscribed to the writer's longtime factotum, Toby Otto Bruce, sold for \$96,000 (includes buyer's premium).

At the same sale three other new price points were reached. A first edition of *Across the River and into the Trees*, signed and inscribed by Hemingway to his lawyer Alfred Rice, fetched \$20,400. A rare piece of Hemingway juvenilia—his first published short story, contained in his high school literary magazine—brought \$10,200. A first edition of *To Have and Have Not* with the ownership signature of Hemingway's sister Marcelline sold for \$7200.

The fifth record price was realized at a sale on April 19, 2007, when Swann offered the rarely encountered *Voyage to Victory: An Eye-witness Report of the Battle for a Normandy Beachhead*. Hemingway's firsthand account of the D-Day landing at Omaha Beach first appeared in *Collier's*. This separately published pamphlet in unusually good condition sold to a New York City dealer for \$24,000.

Jeffrey H. Marks, a dealer in Rochester, New York, said he was the underbidder on the war report. "It is the hardest Hemingway A item to get your hands on," said Marks. "When I say it's scarce, I mean it. I've had it only four times in twenty-five years, and one of those times it was the same copy we'd previously had."

By the same token, it's not a guaranteed easy resell for a dealer. "If I get a nice copy of *The Sun Also Rises*, I can always think of ten people who not only want it but are ready to buy it," Marks said. "Having *Voyage to Victory* is a different experience. Eight out of ten people wouldn't know what it is. [The dealer who bought it] had a customer who wanted that thing, come what may, and it brought much, much more than we've ever sold one for."

Christine von der Linn, senior specialist for literature, art, and illustrated books at Swann, said *Voyage to Victory* came from a private Hemingway collector who has decided to concentrate only on signed items. "He's getting rid of all the ephemera and oddball things," she said. "Who knew it would show up? If you're a completist, you have to have one. A copy that bright and clean is a real find."

In conversations with several others knowledgeable about the Hemingway market, the word "completist" came up time and again, and the sentiment was that their numbers are waning. True, *Voyage to Victory* brought a phenomenal price because someone who wanted a complete Hemingway collection drove the price upward, but the result is viewed as an anomaly. There is a distinct trend away from that kind of collecting. Rather than every title and its every variation, what many collectors seek now are the best possible copies of the trade books that represent the so-called high spots of the author's career. That goes as well for the other major 20th-century authors, such as Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Joyce.

"It's too expensive for most people to collect all the works," Marks said by way of explaining the tendency. "Once you get your copy of *The Sun Also Rises*, there's not much money left over to start worrying about *Winner Take Nothing*."

Today it's more about the pursuit of beauty than obscurity, said von der Linn. "These books are gorgeous to look at." Of course, the thrill of the hunt is diminished, she added. "It's still a thrill, but a little shorter and easier." And being less challenging, it may be less fun.

Charles Agvent, a dealer in Mertztown, Pennsylvania, said he thought collecting books that look "unread, right off the press" was "probably ego-related." Von der Linn said she thought these trophy collectors were at least partly interested in "showing off," but it's also smart investing. Other things are smarter bets, but if you're going to collect books with investment in mind, you should at least "play by the rules," in von der Linn's words. One of those rules stresses condition.

In the past, completists could be relied upon to compete vigorously for authors' proofs. Institutions have also traditionally been their buyers, because scholars can learn about an author's process from proofs that have been heavily corrected. Institutions were interested in the record-setting author's proof of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, said von der Linn. "It has chapter changes, the name of a character changes...But in the end the institutions didn't have that kind of money." It went instead to a collector, but at \$96,000 he or she paid well within the \$75,000/125,000 estimate.

Associations also figured into that proof's appeal. A penciled dedication to Martha Gellhorn, who would become Hemingway's third wife shortly before the novel's publication, enhanced the other association with Toby Otto Bruce, whose descendants were the item's consignors. As Philip C. Salmon, manager of Boston's Bromer Books, said, "With Hemingway, associations are everything. They really seal the deal. And if you can build a story around the associative inscription, it's all the better."

Which Hemingway associations are most desirable? The question has no perfect answer, given the subjective nature of collectors' desires. "The values can be difficult to gauge, which is why you sometimes see these selling at auction rather than through a bookseller," said Agvent. But there is a pecking order. Generally "what's sought after the most is Hemingway and another writer," said Marks. "The more businesslike or more unequal the relationship, the less interesting I think it is to most people."

John Reznikoff of University Archives in Westport, Connecticut, concurred, adding that at the top of the most desirable list of Hemingway inscriptions would be one that discusses writing, particularly the writing of a particular book.

In the Swann catalog, Bruce is characterized as more than a mere employee of Hemingway, and the proof's inscription seems to corroborate that representation. "To Otto, with much affection and deep appreciation for all he did to make this book," Hemingway wrote to the man who worked as his variously paid and unpaid driver, traveling companion, handyman, personal assistant, and personal trainer from the mid-1930's until the author's death by suicide in 1961. In Bruce's own words, he was also Papa's "secretary, man-Friday, getaway-money-holder, and drinking companion." (See James McLendon's *Papa: Hemingway in Key West, 1972*; revised, 2000, p. 145.)

The men met in 1928 in Piggott, Arkansas, hometown of Hemingway's second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer. (Hadley Richardson was the first wife; Mary Welsh was the fourth and last.) While Pauline and Hemingway were in Piggott visiting Pauline's family, Bruce took Hemingway hunting. The two became friends and often hunted on Hemingway's subsequent trips to Piggott.

In 1935 Bruce, who worked as a furniture maker, was summoned to Key West, where the Hemingways had already bought the property that today is open to visitors ([www.hemingwayhome.com](http://www.hemingwayhome.com)). Not until publication of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* would Hemingway become an international celebrity, but he already needed a "privacy wall," and Bruce was hired to build it. A year later Hemingway offered him a full-time job with a \$65 monthly salary, optional room and board, and, according to Bruce, "all the booze and cigarettes I could stand" (McLendon, p. 145). He also worked for Papa in Cuba, site of Finca Vigia, owned by the author from 1939 to 1960, when the residence was taken over by the Cuban government. At Finca Vigia, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was completed.

Hemingway biographer Jeffrey Meyers describes Bruce as a "small, thin, shrewd, and precise young man" 11 years Hemingway's junior, who had many skills useful to Hemingway. Besides woodworking, hunting, and fishing, he knew how to fix guns and cars. Perhaps more important, he "followed orders and made no demands." (See *Hemingway: A Biography*, 1985, pp. 234-235.)

Bruce's driving assignments were sometimes long distance. On several occasions he drove Hemingway and the wife of the moment from Florida to Idaho for vacations. "The boat from Cuba would dock in Key West, and Bruce would meet Hemingway there for the drive West," Susan F. Beegel, editor of *The Hemingway Review*, wrote us in an e-mail. According to Swann, at least one Hemingway car, a Buick Special convertible, was equipped with a spotlight, so that Hemingway and Bruce could "shoot rabbits and raccoons on nighttime excursions."

Bruce may have been more than a Hemingway helpmate, playmate, and provider of diversions. Bruce was instrumental in keeping "the family peace during the turbulent last years of Ernest and Pauline's marriage," in the words of the Swann catalog. Bruce is also credited by various sources with supervising the typewriting of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which he read as Hemingway wrote it.

What exactly does "supervising the typewriting" mean? "Hemingway knew the difference between the one who writes the book and the one who supervises its typing," said Marks dismissively. "If he were here, you would hear from him an expletive that would have to be deleted."

It's easy to believe. Nonetheless, in acknowledgement of that supervisory task and others, Hemingway gave Bruce, whom he nicknamed "Iron Man," the privilege of designing the book's dust jacket. And while an artist refined it, Hemingway is said to have declared it to be "the Iron Man's masterpiece" (McLendon, p. 205).

Of the author's proof, a further gift in recognition of Bruce's role in the novel's completion, Hemingway reportedly told Bruce it could be considered an "insurance policy...its value will go up with Hemingstein [sic] stock...let's hope the company doesn't run dry!" (McLendon, p. 205).

Alfred Rice, to whom Hemingway signed the record-setting copy of *Across the River and into the Trees*, is not a particularly desirable association, said several of the dealers with whom we spoke. Ken Lopez of Hadley, Massachusetts, said he was puzzled particularly by the discrepancy between that book's \$20,400 price and the *To Have and Have Not*—a \$13,200 difference. "His association to his sister is better than the one to Rice," Lopez stated flatly. "My experience"—30 years' worth—"would have suggested the exact opposite outcome," especially since Swann estimated them both at the same level, \$1500/2500.

Von der Linn said even her consignor was "blown away" by the results on the book inscribed to Rice. "He's a very astute Hemingway collector. He couldn't quite figure it out, either."

The inscription Hemingway wrote to Rice states, "With all good wishes and affection." Was it sincere? "Hemingway would fire and rehire Rice at the drop of a hat," said von der Linn. "They had a very difficult relationship and often had blowups. And when you see these inscriptions that say 'with affection,' you can almost imagine Hemingway writing it to get back into Rice's good graces."

What kind of man was Rice? Swann doesn't give details in its catalog, but in an article published in the centennial year of Hemingway's 1899 birth, biographer Meyers wrote, "I strongly felt, without firm evidence, that Rice was dishonest. His arrogant manner, the way he had suddenly taken over Hemingway's affairs, the fact that Hemingway (one of his few clients) took no interest in business matters and never checked up on Rice, and that Rice, as agent, manager, and lawyer, had control of his finances when he was alive and of his estate after his death, all made me extremely suspicious. When Hemingway's sons took over the estate after Mary's death in December 1986, they discovered that Rice had been taking as much as a 30 percent commission (instead of the usual 10 percent) and had several secret bank accounts in Switzerland. The sons sued Rice, who escaped being jailed for fraud and embezzlement by dying in April 1989." (See "The Hemingways: An American Tragedy," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Spring 1999.)

Maybe the price of *Across the River and into the Trees* had nothing to do with Rice. Although Hemingway "signed books like crazy," he did not inscribe many copies of that one, said Marks. "It's considered by far his weakest book and even a bit of an embarrassment." That lack of signed examples may have helped determine its result.

Hemingway grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, and the record-setting juvenilia in Swann's fall sale was a 1916 issue of Oak Park High School's literary magazine *Tabula*, in which the Nobel Prize winner-to-be published his first short story. It came from a collector who noticed presale advertising about the author's proof and consigned it on the strength of that, said von der Linn. "Hemingway published three stories in *Tabula*, but this first one is the hardest to find and the most desirable, and you rarely see it in such good shape."

Titled "Judgment of Manitou," the story is about Pierre, a half-Cree half-Frenchman who suspects his friend Dick Haywood, of having stolen his wallet. In retaliation Pierre sets a snare trap for Dick, who, having been caught by it, makes easy prey for wolves. When Pierre discovers that a squirrel rather than Dick stole the wallet, he rushes to save him. Not only too late to save his friend, Pierre is himself caught in Dick's nearby bear trap. Interpreting it as the judgment of Manitou (the Ottawa Indian word for God), Pierre ends his life with his rifle. It, of course, prefigures Hemingway's own self-inflicted shotgun death, 45 years after this story was published.

Inevitably, at Swann in 2007 some Hemingway books did not do well. The usual reasons applied. They were not fresh to the market; they were duplicated in dealer stock; or their reserves were too high. One of those titles, from the April 19 sale, was a limited edition of Hemingway's second book, *In Our Time*. Estimated at \$30,000/40,000, it sold for \$24,000.

"It used to be a title hard to come by," said von der Linn. "In 2001 or 2002 we sold the book for forty-two thousand, which was a record, and it was quickly superceded. And then other copies came to light, and the book dropped in value. It's a 'high spot' but doesn't have the aura of some of the others."

The best items break records, and many of the rest don't bring what they used to. Sound familiar? It's a scenario repeated in virtually every market of the antiquarian world. What to do? "This is a force of nature," said Ken Lopez. "You can't rail against a hurricane. You just have to figure out how to live with it. This is beyond anybody's ability to manipulate. It's a whole bunch of different factors converging that are creating a market that works differently than it did some years back. All of us have to be able to learn on our feet. And in some sense, that's not different from any other era. It just seems to be, because it's the one we're living through."

For more information, contact Swann at (212) 254-4710; Web site ([www.swanngalleries.com](http://www.swanngalleries.com)).

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