

Ameen F. Rihani: The English Manuscripts and Universalism

In 1998 the Albert Ferris Rihani family donated to the Library of Congress facsimiles of the manuscripts of all of the English works and correspondence of pioneer Arab-American author Ameen F. Rihani (1876-1940). The originals of these documents remain in the family museum in Freike, Lebanon. Since most scholars could not travel there to conduct research, an exception was made in Library policy that allowed the acquisition of copies while originals are extant. In the 1998 negotiations, Ramzi Rihani represented the family for this Gift to the Nation.

Ameen Rihani's papers are important to the nation's memory. He was the first American of Arab heritage to devote himself to writing literature, to publish a novel in English, and the first Arab author to write English essays, poetry, novels, short stories, art critiques and travel chronicles. He is now the author of 32 books in English, published from 1911 to 2002, his publishing life being extended already by 62 years due to the editorial efforts of the Rihani family. His writings in English mark the beginning of a body of literature that is Arab in its concern, culture and characteristic, English in language, and American in spirit and platform. He published in the United States during the first three decades of this century in many major magazines and newspapers. According to University of Pennsylvania Professor of Arabic Roger Allen, Rihani and his fellow Arab immigrants were leaders in "the literary movement that was so crucial to the life and development of certain communities in the

United States (especially Brooklyn, Cincinnati and Detroit) and also to the development of cultural and literary ties to the Middle East region."¹

Rihani is recognized as the founder of Arab-American literature and the forerunner of ethnic American literature written by popular Middle Eastern writers. He was regarded as a mentor by Kahlil Gibran, a younger writer whom he befriended in New York. Gibran was particularly influenced by Rihani's major novel, the *Book of Khalid*, 1911. It established the basic characteristics of Arab-American literature in general and Lebanese-American literature in particular: the motifs of wisdom and prophecy which seek to reconcile matter and spirit, and reason and faith, and to unify the beliefs of East and West within a larger universal vision. When Professor Allen encouraged our acquisition of the Rihani Papers, he said of future Rihani research:

In view of not only the breadth and sophistication of his own learning but also the extreme shortage of studies on the heritage and 20th century development of Arabic literature, these studies must be of the highest value to specialists in Arabic literature and to all those who are concerned with the history of immigrant communities in the United States.²

The Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress collects personal papers representing other important ethnic contributors to American culture, such as the papers of African American author Ralph Ellison, Jewish American novelist Philip Roth, Russian

American author Vladimir Nabokov, and the Sigmund Freud Archives. I was very pleased, therefore, to accept the papers of this distinguished Lebanese American author.

Rihani's books on the Arab world, written in both Arabic and English, represent an alternative perspective to the "Orientalist" movement by giving that world, for the first time, an objective and analytical description from an Arab point of view. His Kings of Arabia marks the beginning of the "counter-Orientalist" movement. Terri De Young, Associate Professor of Arabic at the University of Washington, characterized Rihani as "one of the pioneers in the literary movement he belonged to, the Mahjar movement," noting that the arrival of the Rihani Papers in Washington, D.C. "is very exciting news for those of us who study the Arab immigrant authors in America, for they had an impact, not only on American literature, but also (and perhaps an even more striking impact) on the developments that took place in Arabic literature in the first half of the 20th century."³

One of the most complete tributes to Rihani was delivered at the Library of Congress in 1990 by Suheil Bushrui. He described Rihani as "a man who believed passionately in the oneness of the world's religions and the brotherhood of all nations." Bushrui saw Rihani as "a dedicated liberal," with idealism "tempered with a very practical recognition of the need for an ordered, disciplined, society," and the beneficiary of "a rich synthesis of Christian-Muslim traditions."⁴ He also noted Rihani's deep interest in American authors such as Emerson, Thoreau and Washington Irving.

The donated papers span the years 1897-1940. They consist of copies of some 1,250 items of correspondence (including incoming letters), biographical material, drafts of essays, historical and political analyses, literary criticism, novels, short stories, plays,

poetry and travel literature reflecting Rihani's Arab-American heritage and the cultures of both the Middle East and the West. The collection also includes many unpublished manuscripts: a social study describing the vanished Mayan culture, a verse tragedy, a novel about a World War I romance, essays on art and dance, poetry written 1921-1940 as well as literary and political letters. I will discuss some of these in more detail later. These files are arranged like the originals in Lebanon and fill six standard archival boxes. The folders fall into three groups: documents, correspondence, and writings (which comprise half the collection). The Rihani Papers are open for access by registered graduate students and adult researchers in the Manuscript Reading Room of the James Madison Building of the Library. Undergraduates must bring a professor's letter to gain access.

As many of you know, Ameen Rihani's upbringing and the nature of his intellect shaped him into a true bilingual and bicultural author. He was born November 24, 1876 in Freike, Lebanon where his father, Ferris, was a raw silk manufacturer. When the boy was twelve, Ferris sent him to the United States with his uncle Salamon who opened a drygoods store. The father followed the next year. The boy was soon taken out of school to do the paperwork for the family business in a small cellar in lower Manhattan. During this period, he read widely in literature, discovering Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare, and Keats, Shelley and Whitman, among other classic authors of Western civilization.

In 1895 he decided to become an actor and toured with a Shakespearean theater troupe. Pining for a formal education, he was accepted at New York Law School in 1897. When a lung infection interrupted that course of study, he went back to Lebanon to recuperate. There he relearned his native Arabic and began teaching English. He also

studied the Arab poets and their culture. Ameen returned to New York in 1898 and began publishing in both Arabic and English at the turn of the century. In 1904 he returned to Freike for a five-year period during which he lectured and published essays, allegories, stories and plays in Arabic.

After returning again to New York, in 1916 he married Bertha Case, an American artist who “was part of the Matisse, Picasso, Cezanne, Derain group which frequently worked together” and exhibited in France.⁵ In 1922 Ameen traveled again to the Arabian peninsula, where he met, interviewed and befriended many rulers. He lectured widely, often carrying the banner of American democracy and Arab independence from Ottoman Turkey and Europe. He died at his birthplace in 1940 and was buried in the family cemetery following a funeral attended by Arab rulers and foreign diplomats. Although Rihani and his wife had been divorced, she visited the family in Lebanon in 1953. According to her wishes, her ashes were buried near his mausoleum after her death in New York in 1970 at the age of 91. Their correspondence is included in the collection.

Rihani was recognized as early in his career as 1904 in New York and subsequently abroad in Beirut, Cairo and elsewhere. He was elected to life honorary membership in the Italian Art Club of New York and was a member of the Pleiades Club, the Authors Club, the New York Press Club and the Poetry Society of America. His travels were reported in the New York Times, and he was entertained by diplomats and men of letters in New York and Boston, as well as in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Morocco, England and Mexico. One of the receptions held for him in the shade of the pyramids attracted 5,000 guests. He was a member of the Arab Academy of Damascus

and in 1932 was elected Honorary President of the Arab Institute of Studies in Spanish Morocco.

What are the possible uses for this unique set, outside of Lebanon, of the English manuscripts of Ameen Rihani? I see three major applications: 1) for biographical research—a new and complete Rihani biography, as well as biographies of some of his noted friends and associates; 2) to study his publishing history as representative of immigrant publishing history of the early 20th century; and 3) to explore the remaining unpublished writings and letters for publication-worthy information and literature, as well as a fuller understanding of Rihani's Universalist views.

A scholar should undertake a comprehensive biography of Rihani along with a history of his times. Rihani is only one of three persons described in Nadeem Naimy's English language biographical book, The Lebanese Prophets of New York⁶. There are skeletal biographical chronologies on dust-jackets of recently published, or re-published, Rihani books. The Documents series of the Rihani Papers at the Library of Congress is rich in biographical sources, e.g. a Feb. 10, 1915 program for a Twilight Club dinner at the Hotel McAlpin Ballroom in which Rihani spoke along with Amos Pinchot, a leader of the Progressive Party, and humorist Max Eastman, among others. There is a 1917 statement by the Syria-Mount Lebanon League of Liberation appealing for Syrian-Americans to join a French Government army, the Legion d'Orient, training in Cyprus, to help free Syria from Turkish rule. There is a Feb. 3, 1919, dinner announcement from the Society of Arts and Letters listing the speaker before Rihani: the then popular dramatist, Fannie Hurst. There are many Foreign Policy Association Speakers documents detailing his 1929 lecture venues: he spoke at over eight local branches of the FPA; at gatherings

of the International relations Committee; the Womens' City Club; Wheaton College, Mass.; the Cosmopolitan Club in New York City; Hampshire County Progressive Club; Amherst and Kenyon Colleges; and the Near East Club of the University of Chicago. In Boston he lectured about Palestine to luncheon guests that included Felix Frankfurter and Rabbi Harry Levi; in Buffalo, N.Y., he spoke about Zionism opposite Louis Lipsky, President of the Zionist Organization of America. From these many documents it appears that Rihani kept up the spirit of open dialogue so lacking in today's Middle East.

In the first three months of 1939 he toured the East and West coasts of the United states, speaking at 14 venues, for a total compensation of \$ 480.39. The Documents series ends with the American Foreign Service's Sept. 26, 1940, "Report on the Death of an American Citizen." Rihani died at the age of 64, it says, from "septic and infectious injuries resulting from multiple fractures of the skull and hip-joint following a bicycle accident." His body was left in care of brother John Albert F. Rihani, Beirut.⁷

In the Library's collection, following the biographical documents is a group of Special Correspondence folders. The special people in Rihani's life were: Bertha Case, his Oregon-born artist wife; Charmion von Wiegand Habicht, another American painter whom he knew during his separation from his wife; the French woman, Marie-Louise Fontaine, whom he saw before meeting Bertha; Charlotte Teller, a New Yorker who was also a close friend of Gibran's, and Michael Monahan, editor of the literary journal Papyrus and its sequel, Phoenix.

The two full folders under "Bertha Case" cover 1916-1939. They include more of Rihani's earnest letters to his wife than her own to him during their many separations due to ill health or professional travels. His letters are highly descriptive of his travels

and of his reception from rulers and potentates. For example, in 1922, while crossing the desert, he wrote to his “Dear Birdy: The Sultan Ibn Sa’aud and 200 of his men on camels *are my escort.*” Michael Monahan’s file covers 1910-1921 and includes almost 100 stylish, humorous, intimate letters from this editor who became a close friend.

Letterheads in the General Correspondence section, which follows, help the researcher track the ever-moving Rihani. In 1910 he resided at 28 West 9th St., in New York City; in 1911, Homdel Stock Farm, New Jersey; in 1913, back to west 9th St.; in 1916 it was 164 Remsen St., Brooklyn, and then 43 East 27th in Manhattan, and in 1921 he writes from 325 East 69th St. Travel addresses include: in 1922, c/o <r/ S/S/ Sarkis, Cairo; in 1925, c/o Prof. Khuri, American University of Beyrouth, Syria; in 1926, Freike, Mt. Lebanon, Syria; in 1927 c/o Joseph Sader, Imprimerie Scientifique, Beyrouth, Syria, and Mt. Lebanon; and from 1919 to 1931 he used the Authors’ Club as a mailing address, 48 West 76th St., New York City.

As an example of Rihani’s publishing history, I studied the Atlantic Monthly General Correspondence files. This history could also work as a Writer’s Market feature article because Rihani attacked this major American publication with great persistence from 1910-1919. Letters from the Editors: October, 1910, “These verses are not altogether adapted for The Atlantic’s use”; and later, “Atlantic Monthly scarcely ventures to print” your paper; and in November, “this poem is too cryptic for our public, and both your stories are more grisly than meets the taste of our readers.” A revised poem is finally then accepted Nov. 23, 1910. The next year, however, brought more rejections: “These verses fall, we fear, too strangely on the Anglo-Saxon ear. There is music in them, and we are really sorry to let them go.” And later, “Once again we are afraid it

would be a mistake for The Atlantic to allow itself to be carried so far afield. After all, as you know, we Americans are of a conventionalized turn of mind in spite of everything we wish others to think of us.”⁸ For the journal Papyrus, however, editor Monahan found two of Rihani’s stories “not rough and crude enough for the New York market.”⁹

In his preface to the 2002 first publication of Rihani’s scholarly study, The Lore of the Arabian Nights, Geoffrey Nash wonders why Rihani did not publish it and conjectures a composition date of 1928, noting that Rihani wrote many related pieces earlier. In 1913, Rihani, in fact, did submit a piece on the same subject to Atlantic and received this response:

Your paper is chuck-full of most interesting information and your learning is indeed impressive, but we do not see how it is possible for us to give so much space at present to a discussion of the Arabian Nights. Yours faithfully,
The Editors¹⁰.

In 1919, Atlantic liked his “musical, lilted” sonnets, but still rejected them as belonging “in pages more romantically colored than ours.”¹¹ Though he tried this major market again in 1929 with excerpts from forthcoming books, from 1919 on he largely turned to more specialized publications for full acceptance. One of these was Asia where editor Louis Froelick began publishing many of Rihani’s pieces in 1919 and continued to accept them through 1937. Incidentally, in 1932 they also rejected his Arabian Nights piece “because we’ve never been able to illustrate it,” and in 1934 they found it just “too long.”¹²

Universalism: according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term has been used in many different contexts. It can mean “the fact or quality of being concerned with or interested in all or a great variety of subjects”-- universality of knowledge. In theology, it is “the doctrine of universal salvation or redemption, or the universality of the Roman Catholic Church.” It is also the fact or condition of being universal in character or scope (contrasted with particularism and regionalism) asserting the brotherhood of all men in a manner not subject to national allegiances.” It is especially this last sense, universal in scope, which I believe best relates to Ameen Rihani’s life and works. All his efforts were bent on peace and harmony in the world. He lectured in open dialogue with opponents of his views. Being a pacifist, at least until World War I, he opposed the military. His writings focused on harmonizing eastern spiritualism with western materialism. At home both on Mt. Lebanon and in the cliff dwellings of Manhattan, he was a man of two worlds. Even the variety of form and subject in his recently published posthumous books itself illustrates his immense creative scope: Wajdah, written in 1909, is a drama about a defiant 7th century Arab-Yemeni Princess –a strong, liberated woman. Letters to Uncle Sam publishes his personal essays, written in 1917-1919 after his trip to Mexico to mobilize the Syrians (then called “Turcos”) there to support the allies and the United States during the Great War –activities causing his expulsion by the pro-German Mexican government. The Lore of the Arabian Nights, perhaps written as a whole in 1929 and based on earlier Arabic and English works, is a scholarly study analyzing authorship, translations and ethnic origin of the famous legend.

Rihani’s Universalism is further illustrated by the wide scope of the remaining unpublished nonfictional writing.¹³ First the nonfictional prose. The White Way and the

Desert is a gathering of his literary and political essays, some of which appeared during his lifetime in various journals. The Literary grouping in it covers a wide array of interests. Here are some titles: “Agnosticism,” “The Incarnation of Gamesh,” “The Plant of the Ideal,” “The American Sun,” “A Talk in San Francisco,” “Poetic Temperament,” “The Arab Tribesman,” “The Desert in Fiction and on the Screen,” “The Liberty of Woman,” “The English Woman,” “The Syrian Woman in America,” “Richard III,” “The Passion Play,” “In the Land of the Mayas,” “Kurdistan,” and “My East and West.” Among unpublished creative literature in English remain: the short stories in The Green Flag, the long, biblical novel, The Lily of al-Ghore, the World War I novelette Jahan, the long novel set in Italy, Doctor Della Valle, the 138 poems of The Third Poetry Collection, and two short verse dramas.

One of Rihani’s defining poems is the 1935 “Ode to America” in which his affection for his adopted land overflows. In this poetic prayer, inspired I believe by Walt Whitman, who so impressed Rihani, he urges the United States, as the clouds of war again darken the skies of the world, to speak out as the voice of democracy and justice. Both the published and the unpublished English works of Ameen Rihani document the productions of a writer with universal curiosity and enormous means of expression, forever bridging East and West.

-- Dr. Alice L. Birney

1. Roger Allen, Letter to Manuscript Division Literary Specialist, Alice Birney, Sept. 5, 1997.
2. *Idem*.

3. Terri De Young, Letter to Manuscript Division Literary Specialist, Alice Birney, Nov. 12, 1997.
4. Suheil Badi Bushrui, "Arab American Cultural relations in the 20th century: The Thought and Works of Ameen Rihani With Special Reference to His Writings in English," Fifth Annual Phillips Lecture, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Dec. 12, 1990 (unpublished).
5. [Albert Rihani], Ameen Rihani (n.p., 1977), p.8 [small, privately published, illustrated 32 page leaflet].
6. Nadeem N. Naimy, The Lebanese Prophets of New York (Beirut, Lebanon: American University of Beirut, 1985).
7. Box 1, Ameen Ferris Rihani Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540.
8. The Editors, Atlantic Monthly, Jan. 9 & 23, 1911, *Ibid.*
9. Michael Monahan, Oct. 3, 1910, *Ibid.*
10. The Editors, Atlantic Monthly, Oct. 1, 1913, *Ibid.*
11. The Editors, Atlantic Monthly, Oct. 18, 1919, *Ibid.*
12. Managing Editors, Asia, Sept. 28, 1932, and Oct. 24, 1934, *Ibid.*
13. The manuscripts of these works are located in Boxes 4-6, Ameen Ferris Rihani Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540.