



# LEA'S *L*EGACY

His library—preserved on Van Pelt's sixth floor—is one of the great campus spaces, but there's a lot more than that to know about historian and civic reformer Henry Charles Lea.

BY DENNIS DRABELLE

**“If** Mr. Lea is not stopped,” Benjamin Disraeli once warned, “all the libraries of Europe will be removed to Philadelphia.” In the end, the libraries of Europe stayed home, but the only thing that could stop Henry Charles Lea was that which stops us all.

During his long life (1825-1909), Lea acquired an estimated 20,000 books, many of them rare, on his subjects of interest: medieval history, legal history, ecclesiastical history, the Inquisition, and witchcraft—with special attention to the persecution of dissidents and eccentrics in the name of religion.







And when he couldn't buy or borrow a desired item, he paid to have it copied. His collecting was no mere hobby. He mined old books and documents to write new ones of his own. This passion for original sources set Lea apart from most of his peers, helping to make him—in the words of Edward Peters, a Penn history professor emeritus who is an authority on Lea and his library ["The Immeasurable Curiosity of Edward Peters," May/June 2003]—America's "greatest scholarly historian of the nineteenth century."

Though Lea owed his education to his parents, a private tutor, and his own wide reading, rather than to institutions, he became a Penn supporter and trustee. In 1925, his children Arthur and Nina carried out a wish expressed in Lea's will by giving the scholarly portion of his library to the University and, for good measure, throwing in an endowed professorship in his name. They sent over to Penn not only the books, but also their habitat: the two-tiered, shelf-lined Victorian Gothic reading room incorporated into the Lea residence at 2000 Walnut Street in 1881. For many years the donated books and room were housed in the old Furness Library (now the Fisher Fine Arts Library), whose 34th Street façade is still inscribed "THE HENRY CHARLES LEA LIBRARY AND READING ROOM." When Van Pelt Library was completed in 1962, the Lea legacy migrated to the top floor, where it remains—a tenebrous sanctum in which you almost expect a raven to come flapping down and croak, "Nevermore"—unchanged amid the rest of the floor's recent extensive renovations ["Gazetteer," July/Aug 2013].

**LEA** was the son of a mixed marriage: Quaker on his father's side (the primordial American Leas came over in 1699 on the same ship that brought William Penn to the New World for good) and Catholic on his mother's (the Careys founded the Philadelphia publishing house that became the Lea family's mainstay and lasted, under various names, until 1994). Henry and his older brother enjoyed a comfortable and stimulating childhood, with their tutor accompanying them on European tours that brought to life the history he taught them.

The precocious Henry was still a teenager when he began publishing scientific papers; according to his biographer, the late Penn English professor E. Sculley

Bradley C'19 Gr'25, as "a mere youth Lea discovered and named no less than 133 new species of mollusks, and, what is still more remarkable, 2 new genera." The lad also produced poems, literary criticism, and translations from classical Greek while mastering Latin and assorted modern languages. (As a full-fledged scholar, he was able to read Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, and Italian with ease, and could deal with Hebrew, German, Dutch, and Sanskrit.) But this polymathic precocity took its toll. Unable to rein in his lunging curiosity, the boy suffered from frequent



headaches. He joined the family business in 1843 but continued to pursue his avocations. After four years of capping off a full day's work with hours of study and writing, he collapsed.

For relief he turned to an old friend, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the foremost American neurologist of his day ["The Case of S. Weir Mitchell," Nov/Dec 2012]. Mitchell prescribed his old standard for this sort of thing, the rest cure, but the best Lea could manage was to slow down for a few years—a period in which he continued to hold his day job, got married, and read voraciously.

After dropping poetry and science to concentrate on history, Lea prepared to resume scholarly work by acquiring books from American and European dealers. In doing so, he joined a wave of book-buying that filled out many an American university library. Indeed, the mid- to late-19th century was a fine time to be

collecting books, especially ones on the ecclesiastical topics that came to fascinate Lea. The French Revolution and the revolutions of 1848 had stripped churches and monasteries of their possessions, books included, and he benefited from the consequent flooding of the market.

In 1858, Lea published his first work of historical analysis, a review of a book called *The History of Normandy and England*. Meanwhile, he made partner in the family firm and then, in 1865, became its sole owner. Despite Dr. Mitchell's cautions, not to mention the burdens of being a husband and father, Lea took on a plethora of civic duties, notably at the Union League, which he and others founded after the Civil War broke out. As a Philadelphia gadfly and reformer, his greatest coup was helping to bring down the Gas Trust that had dominated the city's economy and politics for decades. On the national level, he was so disgusted by federal patronage abuses that he served as president of the Civil Service Reform Association.

Until his retirement from publishing in 1880, Lea had to cram his historical research into what Peters describes as "the odd hours he had remaining after the several other lives he led had exhausted their claims on him." Striking a similar note at a 1911 commemorative tribute to Lea, the Shakespeare scholar Horace Howard Furness asked rhetorically, "Would not an historian of Philadelphia express his conviction that there were here during the last half century two men both bearing the identical name, one striving and prominent in the heady fight of politics and reform; the other a modest and sequestered scholar, leading a cloistered life of historical research?" Not surprisingly, in later life the one-man duo had been plagued by headaches again, along with spells of impaired vision.

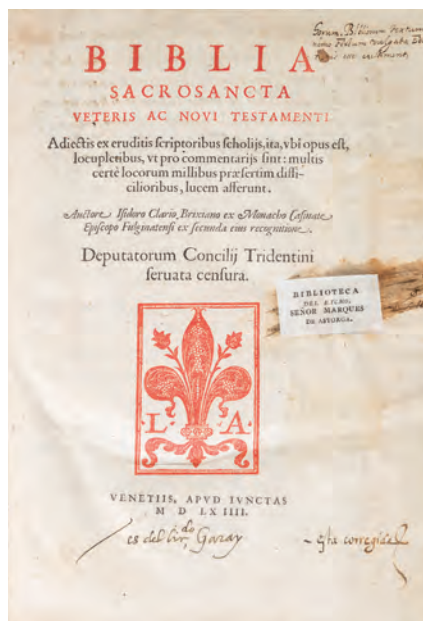
**Health permitting, Lea focused on medieval history and law**, which led him naturally to the Christian Church, with its powerful influence on trial and punishment. His first book, *Superstition and Force: Torture, Ordeal, and Trial by Combat in Medieval Law*, which came out in 1866, gives a good sense of Lea's interests and range. The book's overarching subject is the judging of earthly disputes not by humans but by God, who is thought to express his will by awarding victory or loss in a contest of





some sort, or by the occurrence or non-occurrence of an event. In the ordeal chapter, Lea's erudition carries the reader from ancient Rome, where a holy snake was called upon to settle disputes by either eating or spurning a proffered cake, to 15th-century Florence and the fate of Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), an excommunicated Dominican preacher and pre-Reformation scourge.

As Lea tells it, an outdoor competition was set up to test the validity of Savonarola's claim that the Church could do with a thorough house-cleaning. Two champions, one representing Savonarola and the other his Franciscan rivals, would walk through a bonfire, and whichever fared better could claim victory for his side. On the appointed day, however, "quibbles arose about permitting the champions to carry crucifixes, and to have the sacrament with them, about the nature of their garments, and other like details, in disputing which the day wore away, and at vespers the assemblage broke up without result." The populace felt so cheated of a good show that they "easily gave credit to the assertions of the Franciscans, who stimulated their



ardor by affirming that Savonarola had endeavored to commit the sacrilege of burning the sacrament ... [Savonarola] was taken prisoner, and after undergoing frightful torture, was hanged and burned." Given the people's blood-lust, Savonarola probably never had a chance. Nor did those

subjected to a form of ordeal by water, in which one's veracity was put to a sink-or-swim test. In 1583, magistrates of Lemgow in Lower Saxony stripped three accused witches naked and threw them into a stream, in which they "floated like logs of wood." Although their buoyancy might well have been greeted as a sign of divine favor, this was not the case. Lea sums up the twisted logic by which the floaters were convicted: "Sorcerers, from their intercourse with Satan, partake of his nature; he resides within them, and their human attributes become altered to his; he is an imponderable spirit of air, and therefore they likewise become lighter than water." Thus, the deck was stacked against the poor women before the ordeal started: the very thing that would proclaim their innocence—sinking—might also drown them.

This is grim stuff, but Lea could display a sense of humor when appropriate, as he did in a satire written during the Civil War. The Episcopal bishop of Vermont had authored "Biblical View of Slavery," a pamphlet arguing that since slavery was countenanced in both the Old and New Testaments, there could be no objec-





tion to it on religious grounds. In 1863, Lea replied with a four-page “Bible View of Polygamy,” purportedly written by a Mormon named Mizpah. Mizpah points out that the bishop’s reasoning could apply with equal force to polygamy: as far as the prophets and the savior are concerned, it’s just a fact of life, recorded without comment. Not even Solomon’s harem of “seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines” (I Kings, xi, 3) elicits so much as a divinely inspired raised eyebrow.

With commentary by Edward Peters, “A Bible View of Polygamy” was republished to honor him on his retirement in 2009. In light of a federal judge’s recent decision that portions of Utah’s anti-polygamy law are unconstitutional, Lea’s Biblical scholarship may be in for a revival.

Among Lea’s many other books are *An Historical Sketch of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church* (1867), a three-volume *History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages* (1888), a three-volume *History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences* (1896), and a four-volume *History of the Inquisition in Spain* (1906-08). At the time of his death, he was working on a history of witchcraft; edited by the Penn historian Arthur C. Howland, Lea’s copi-



ous notes for the unfinished work were published in 1939.

If the reader senses anti-Catholic animus in Lea’s work, that is not a baseless perception. (As a young man, however, he had opposed anti-Catholic riots in Philadelphia.) His misgivings about Catholicism had to do with its anti-liberalism during the 19th century and with a feature he did not want to see imported to the United States: the Church’s privileged position in many European countries. In a letter to a fellow scholar written in 1869, Lea summed up what his research had taught him about religion: “The more I investigate the history of the Church the less easy do I find it to

preserve the proper amount of toleration for intolerance, and the warmer become my convictions of the evils which have sprung from the vast theological structure erected upon the simple and sublime primal truths of Christianity.”

There is no reason to think that Lea meant for the library in his (long-gone) Walnut Street house to be spooky—his interest in witchcraft didn’t fully ripen until the last years of his life. But as reincarnated in Van Pelt, the old room’s shelves, panels, and pillars of eastern black walnut make a fitting backdrop for tomes on the dark arts—Rupert Giles, the librarian/Slayer trainer in the TV-series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, would feel right at home there. Lea’s slant-top desk anchors one end of the room, and a decommissioned fireplace the other. Rolling ladders affixed to the shelves conjure up a vision of an agile scholar darting up, down, and sideways to nail down a reference.

But the 21st-century visitor needs help getting around—for one thing, the collection answers to six different cataloguing systems, some left over from Lea’s heyday. This writer’s guide was David McKnight, director of Penn’s Rare Book



and Manuscript Library. McKnight ushered me to a different reading room, a clean, well-lighted place serving the special collections as a whole. There I stowed my belongings in a locker, handed over my ID, filled out a request slip, and agreed to take notes in pencil only.

Going for broke, I asked for what is perhaps the most treasured item from the original Lea holdings: a 1496 edition of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum*—*The Hammer of Witches*, originally published in 1486 and a sequel of sorts to an earlier book called *The Hammer of Jews*. The newer *Hammer* was written as a handbook for inquisitors by two Dominican monks who plied that trade in Germany. Penn's copy, acquired by Lea from a Philadelphia bookseller in 1876, is an example of *incunabula*: books printed before the craft of printing was standardized circa 1500. To page (delicately) through this venerable artifact is a daunting experience—the vellum covers are in good shape, but the binding is starting to come loose, and suddenly it dawns on you that you've got five-plus centuries' worth of fragility in your hands. As for the contents, the words present themselves in double columns of squat Gothic script that would pose a challenge even if your Latin were up to snuff, and the text rumbles along without indentations; instead, paragraphs are indicated by handwritten marks made in red ink—a process known as *rubrication*.

Fortunately, the reader can get a flavor of *The Hammer* from translated excerpts in a 21st-century book, *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, co-edited by Peters and Alan C. Kors, Peters's successor as Penn's Henry C. Lea Professor of History. *The Hammer*—a compendium of the two Dominicans' firsthand "knowledge" and what they'd heard through the witchcraft grapevine—justifies the scholar Anthony Grafton's description of it (in the November 5, 2007, issue of *The New Republic*) as "a strange amalgam of Monty Python and *Mein Kampf*."

In one passage, *The Hammer* authors betray their root prejudice: "Let us consider [woman's] gait, posture, and habit, in which is vanity of vanities. There is no man in the world who studies so hard to please the good God as even an ordinary woman studies by her vanities to please man."

Among several possible paths of inquiry, I took one pertaining to women who for-

nicate with devils, namely, "the methods by which such abominations are consummated." The co-authors go on to consider the mechanics of copulating with an incubus, a male evil spirit with only one thing on his mind. This leads them to the most tantalizing question of all: "whether the actual venereal pleasure is greater or less" than it is with a mortal man. Much discussion ensues, but no clear outcome. The question, it would seem, can only be answered on an incubus-by-incubus basis.

Bound by no discernible standards of what constitutes evidence, the two Dominicans manufactured an elaborate taxonomy of devils and those who consort with them. Although today we are entitled to dismiss *The Hammer* as a farrago of nonsense, in its time it was no laughing matter. Its suggested punishment for "high treason against God's majesty"—that is, witchcraft—was the rack. By the time the witch-hunting craze died out around the year 1700, an estimated 50,000 women (and a few men) had been executed, and *The Hammer* bears no small responsibility for this slaughter of the innocents.

**W**E know a lot about Lea the bibliophile and scholar, not so much about the private man—which may be the way he wanted it. At the dedication ceremony for the Lea Library in 1925, a eulogist described Lea as "modest, unobtrusive—I might also say shy and retiring." The modesty is corroborated by Sculley Bradley, who explained that Lea's doubts about what may be his masterpiece, *The History of the Inquisition in Spain*, kept him from dedicating it to his longtime friend Weir Mitchell. Yet as demonstrated by his civic bulldogging, Lea was no milksop. He once said of himself that when he hit a man (figuratively speaking), he "liked to hear him squeal."

He could be stodgy, at least where the future of Philadelphia was concerned. Lea opposed both the location of the present city hall and the building of what is now the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. This backward-looking perspective probably reflected Lea's nostalgia for his childhood, when Philadelphia, in Bradley's words, "still maintained some of the aspects of the quiet Quaker village, with its red brick, and walled gardens, its green, leafy open spaces."

But he must have been an A-plus father, as witness his children's willingness to go beyond the letter of his will. Along with paying to have his books and their physical envelope moved to the Penn campus, the younger Leas established a fund to maintain the library as a living organism. (As of this writing, income from that fund is being used to acquire books on the Mexican Inquisition.) And in addition to the chair at Penn, the children endowed one each at Princeton and Harvard.



Above all, Lea will be remembered for his books and the tools he acquired to make use of them. Asked if any member of today's Penn faculty has Lea's command of so many languages, David McKnight said he couldn't think of one. Lea's thirst for knowledge played havoc with his health, but he recovered and juggled his days and hours and minutes, and somehow managed to be all things to all people while writing path-breaking history until almost the last day of his life. Still intact as a collection and an ambience, his library stands as an enduring tribute to its maker's intellect and industry. ♦

**Dennis Drabelle G'66 L'69** is an editor of *The Washington Post Book World*. His most recent book is *The Great American Railroad War*.