

The Authors Club

by Mary Catharine Johnsen, Special Collections Librarian

The Authors Club of New York, organized in 1882, was a social club for like-minded men and a support group for younger writers. *Liber Scriptorum*'s Preface notes that the term "author" was restricted to "writers of published books proper to literature and those who have a recognized place in other kinds of distinctly literary work" (p. iii). The men met the second Thursday of each month from October until May, for dinner, conversation and speeches by members or guests. During its first years, as membership grew from 25 to 300, the Club moved frequently, occupying larger and larger rooms—some more pleasant than others.

In 1891, club members conceived of *Liber Scriptorum* as a means to raise money for a suitable permanent home. Each member contributed an original essay, story or poem that would never be published elsewhere. The subscription price was \$100 (almost \$2000 in 2002 dollars). Each author signed 251 copies of his entry, and the books were then bound. The Preface notes, "Every article, in every copy of the book, is signed by its author with pen and ink. In this feature it is unique [with] more than 27,000 signatures in all." For production, the committee relied on club member Theodore Low De Vinne, publisher and fine printer, and the book was "presented in the best typographical dress that the De Vinne Press can furnish." (p. iii). De Vinne donated the work at cost, and the club enjoyed a profit of \$10,500. By the time the book was finished and the profit realized, Andrew Carnegie had given the Club a suite of rooms in his building at 57th and Seventh Avenue, and publication proceeds were used to furnish the rooms.

Many members of the Authors Club were editors. Others had more peripheral writing occupations, such as diplomat John Hay and professor Felix Adler. Some members were great storytellers (Samuel Clemens and Frank Stockton). When Andrew Carnegie first attempted to join the club and submitted a book for review, a club member said words to the effect that "No Pittsburgh ironmaster ever wrote this. Why, this book shows that he has a style." The self-taught Carnegie was immensely gratified by this criticism. He became a member May 20, 1886. He contributed an essay on poet Robert Burns, "Genius Illustrated from Burns," published in *The First Book*. There were often connections between club members. They worked with each other on newspapers and journals, were academics in the same universities, or worked together on copyright reform. For example, one of the first 25 founders, Edmund C. Stedman, was a banker, poet, critic, and journalist, and also president of the American Copyright League. Some members worked with Andrew Carnegie, including Nicholas Murray Butler and D. C. Gilman, who helped Carnegie organize the Carnegie Institution in Washington.

With a sense of tradition, the Club planned a second book for the 25th anniversary of their premier effort, but World War I delayed publication until 1921. The second *Liber Scriptorum* appeared in the same format as the first, with prose articles and poems, all signed by their authors. The subscription price was \$125 (or \$1240 today).