

Edgar Allen Poe: Conchologist

by Tom Eichhorst

Introduction

Edgar Allen Poe (January 19, 1809 – October 7, 1849) is certainly well known as a writer and poet. He was one of the earliest American writers of the short story and is known to all school children for his mysteries and tales of the macabre. His poem "The Raven" is found in most textbooks on American Literature, as are many of his short stories, several of which provided grist for the movie mills of Hollywood. His tale "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" was released in 1914 as a silent movie, then in 1932 with Bela Lugosi, again in 1971 with Jason Robards, in 1973 as a made for TV movie in France, and finally in 1986 with George C. Scott, Rebecca De Mornay, and Val Kilmer. His "The Pit and the Pendulum" was most recently filmed in 2009 (there are eight previous versions). He is considered the originator of the detective fiction genre ("The Murders in the Rue Morgue") and also published several novels, numerous essays, and a play. He became well known after publication of "The Raven" in 1845, but never had any real economic success. He died at the age of 40 in 1849. His life was a series of tangled tragedies and misadventures. It is one of these misadventures that earned Poe a place in the annals of conchology.

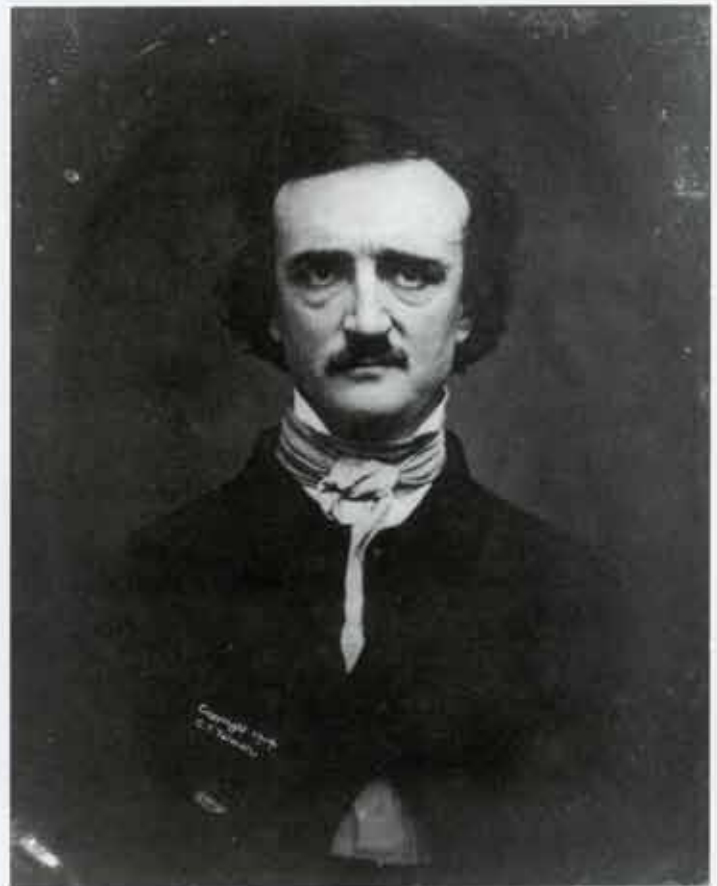
Most readers of this magazine will know that Poe "authored" a book on conchology. Like almost every facet of his life, this tale is not a simple one; so before getting to Poe, the conchological writer, let's review some facts about his life.

The Life and Career of Edgar Allen Poe

Born Edgar Poe in Boston, Massachusetts, he was orphaned at the age of two and fostered (but never adopted) by John and Frances Allan of Richmond, Virginia. The Allens moved to England and Poe received his early education at various schools and boarding houses in Scotland and England. They returned to the U.S. in 1820 and in 1826 Poe entered the newly established University of Virginia. While in Richmond, he courted Sarah Elmira Royster who was 15 at the time. Her father ended the affair. Poe left the university after one semester due to money and drinking problems (a continuing thread throughout his life) and enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1827.

Poe was actually fairly successful in the army and published his first book, "Tamerlane and Other Poems," while serving at Fort Independence at Boston Harbor. After two years, and with the help of his foster father, he procured a replacement for the remainder of his five-year commitment and entered West Point in 1830 as a cadet. Popular with his fellow cadets but not with his commanding officers, Poe was eventually court marshaled and dismissed from West Point in 1831. His third volume of poems (titled simply "Poems") was released at this time, financed largely by donations from fellow cadets.

Poe moved to New York, but after only a few months moved back to Baltimore and tried to support himself through his writing. He wrote numerous short stories and newspaper articles, but was often forced to ask friends for money. In 1835 he married his 13-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm. Poe and his bride moved back to Richmond where he had some limited success writing for various magazines and gained a reputation as a literary critic. He

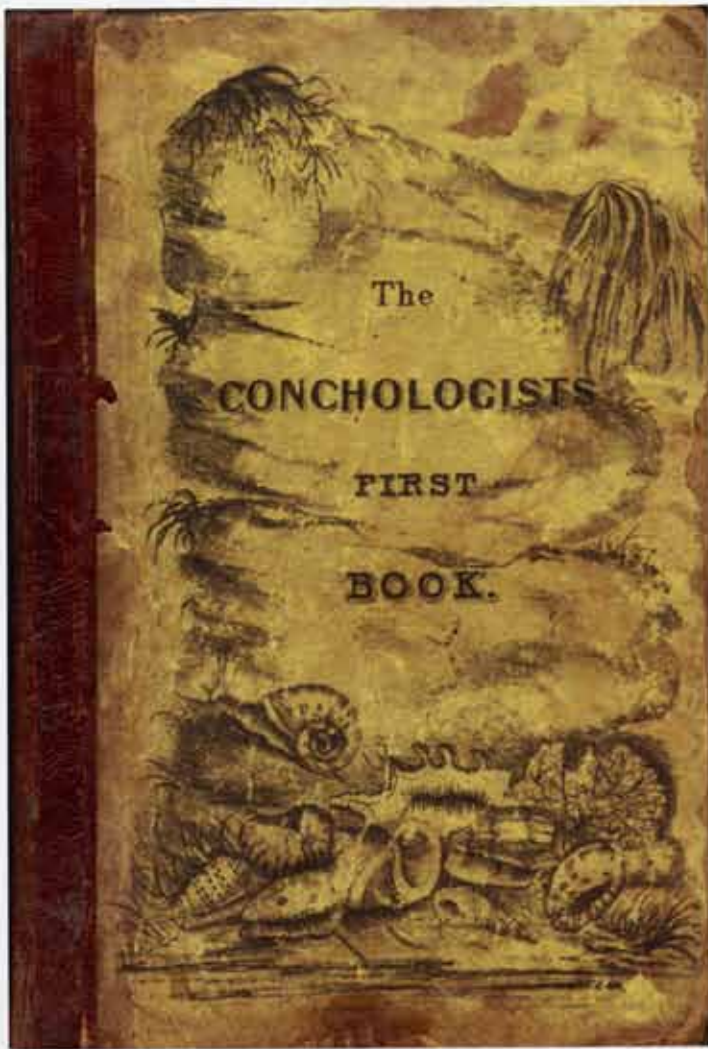


Edgar Allen Poe was much more popular with his readers than with his literary contemporaries. His short tumultuous life culminated in a mysterious death that has been variously blamed on drinking, drugs, heart failure, and cooping (a practice where unwilling participants were forced to vote over and over again).

still had problems with employers due to his drinking. In 1842, Virginia became ill with consumption (tuberculosis) and the Poes moved to New York, where he edited and for a short time owned *The Broadway Journal* (it failed in 1846). Virginia died in 1847 and Poe's drinking and erratic behavior worsened. He had several affairs, finally returned to Richmond, Virginia, and resumed a relationship with his childhood sweetheart, Sarah Elmira Royster. Poe died of unknown causes in Baltimore, Maryland – a source of speculation for any number of authors over the years.

Poe the Conchologist

Some time after his return to Richmond in 1835, Poe was approached by Thomas Wyatt, an English author and lecturer. Wyatt had written "A Manual of Conchology, According to the System Laid Down by Lamarck, With the Late Improvements by De Blainville Exemplified and Arranged for the Use of Students." This rather large tome was published by Harper and Brothers in 1838 and sold for the exorbitant (at the time) price of \$8. Wyatt wanted to prepare a condensed version that could be sold to students at \$1.50 per book, but the publishers felt it would follow too soon



The front cover and title page from "The Conchologist's First Book." During his life, this was Poe's best seller and the only book to go into a second printing. For a \$50 fee, Poe forever tarnished an already spotty reputation. Cover image from Wikipedia.

upon his earlier book and would hurt sales. Wyatt decided to go ahead with the smaller book using a different title and publisher. Wyatt knew Poe needed money and he asked Poe if he would lend his name as the author, figuring sales would benefit as Poe was by then well known. For the sum of \$50 Poe agreed to the use of his name on a book titled "The Conchologist's First Book."

Most Poe biographers when referring to this episode use words like "shameful" and "hackwork," obviously uncomfortable and adding that Poe only wrote the introduction and preface. In fact, according to Stephen Jay Gould (1993 & 1997), Poe became editor, organizer, and translator. Wyatt's original work was largely based on (or more accurately plagiarized from, although international copyright laws did not yet exist) "The Conchologist's Textbook" by Captain Thomas Brown, published in Scotland in 1837. According to Gould, Poe condensed what Wyatt had written, translated French naturalist Georges Cuvier's scientific classification scheme and used this to reorganize the taxonomy presented in the book. Thus while the listing of the parts of a shell is straight from Brown, repeated in Wyatt, and finally presented by Poe, he did bring more than just his name to the effort. According to Gould, Poe brought a new understanding of the biology of mollusks by addressing both the shell and the anatomy of the animal. Poe added his translation of Cuvier to describe the animal anatomy

THE
CONCHOLOGIST'S FIRST BOOK:

OR,

A SYSTEM

OF

TESTACEOUS MALACOLOGY

Arranged expressly for the use of Schools,

IN WHICH

THE ANIMALS, ACCORDING TO CUVIER, ARE GIVEN
WITH THE SHELLS,

A GREAT NUMBER OF NEW SPECIES ADDED,

AND THE WHOLE BROUGHT UP, AS ACCURATELY AS POSSIBLE, TO
THE PRESENT CONDITION OF THE SCIENCE.

BY EDGAR A. POE.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS OF TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN SHELLS,
PRESENTING A CORRECT TYPE OF EACH GENUS.

PHILADELPHIA :

PUBLISHED FOR THE AUTHOR, BY

HASWELL, BARRINGTON, AND HASWELL.

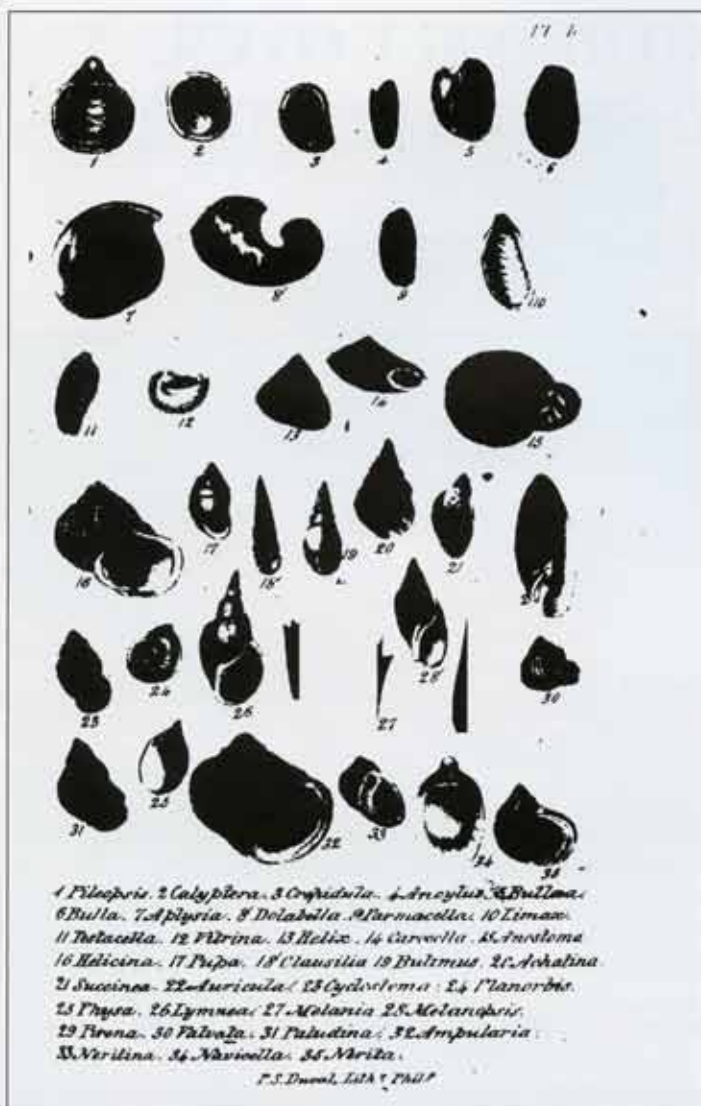
AND FOR SALE BY THE PRINCIPAL BOOKSELLERS IN THE
UNITED STATES

1839.

for each genus. This use of Cuvier's system is credited on the title page of the initial 1839 edition of "The Conchologist's First Book" by Edgar A. Poe.

The book was immediately successful, although Poe never received anything more than the initial \$50. The book sold out in two months and a second edition was quickly prepared and published in 1840 (the only work of Poe's to have a second edition during his lifetime). Critics of Poe (and he developed a plethora over the years) were quick to notice the similarities between this work and the 1838 book by Wyatt, as well as the earlier book by Brown. Talk of plagiarism soon surfaced, a charge that Poe had leveled more than once at other authors, most notably Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. When the third edition was published in 1845 it lacked Poe's name.

Looking at this through a 270-year lens we can recognize plenty of culpability without getting involved with quite the passion of most of Poe's critics – even today. "The Conchologist's First Book" is available on Goggle Books and is an interesting read. In Poe's introduction he defines at length what he means by conchology (in his words, "...not infrequently confounded with crustaceology...") and he even provides some justification for the "frivolous or inessential" nature of what many deem an "exclusive and extravagant pursuit." The example he cites is: "The *Conus*



One of the plates from Poe's book, which under the guise of conchology covered mollusks, barnacles, polychaete worms, and brachiopods. Image from Goggle Books.

Cedo Nulli has been sold for three hundred guineas." (Poe, 1839: 6) He finally provides the following:

The study of Conchology, however, when legitimately directed, and when regarding these *exuviae* [the shell] in their natural point of view, as the habitations, wonderfully constructed, of an immensely numerous and vastly important branch of the animal creation, will lead the mind of the investigator through paths hitherto but imperfectly trodden, to many novel contemplations of Almighty Beneficence and Design. (Poe, 1839: 7)

So it seems while Poe might not have been quite in tune with the avid interest in natural history and especially conchology of the time, he certainly sensed the admiration and awe found in the pursuit of this avocation. He defines anatomical and shell parts for multivalves (chitons and barnacles), bivalves (mollusks and

brachiopods), and univalves (gastropods and polychaete worms). A series of plates follows to illustrate the various shell parts. He then lists four classes, with attendant families and genera.

His first class is Annulata [now the phylum Annelida] where he lists four families with some astounding member genera. His family Dorsalia has two genera: *Arenicola* (with one species of polychaete worm) and *Siliquaria* (with eight species of molluscan Siliquariidae (worm shells)). His second family listed is Maldania with two genera: *Clymene* (with one species, another polychaete) and the scaphopod genus *Dentalium* (with 21 species of Dentaliidae). And so it goes, with more polychaetes and the occasional mollusk.

Poe's second class is Cirrhipeda with a single family and ten genera of barnacles. His third class is Conchifera with 20 families. Here we find the various molluscan Bivalvia, as well as Terebratulidae and Lingulidae (brachiopods). The final class is Mollusca with 22 families of gastropods and the Nautilidae. Poe provides a summary description of both animal and shell for each listed genus. The book ends with a glossary and an index.

"The Conchologist's First Book" is of interest because it provides a look at conchology before the writings of Sowerby (G.B. I, II, & III), Reeve, Von Martens, Philippi, Pfeiffer, Tryon, etc. who defined, in large part, how we view the conchological world. It also has a nice touch of scandal linked to a well-known literary figure. Finally, it is available for free through Goggle Books.

References:

- Anonymous. 2009. *The Conchologist's First Book*, accessed on line at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Conchologist%27s_First_Book
- Anonymous. 2009. *Edgar Allan Poe*, accessed on line at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Allan_Poe
- Anonymous. 2009. *Edgar Allan Poe - 200th Birthday - A Chronology*. 2009, accessed on line at: <http://apoetsview.today.com/2009/01/19/edgar-allan-poe-200th-birthday-a-chronology/>
- Gould, Stephen Jay. 1997. *Poe's Greatest Hit*, "Dinosaur in a Haystack." (Paperback ed.), New York, Three Rivers Press (Random House), pp. 173-186.
- Gould, Stephen Jay. 1993. *Poe's Greatest Hit*, "Natural History," 102, No. 7, July 1993, pp. 10-19.
- Liukkonen, Petri & Pesoen, Ari. 2009. *Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)*, accessed on line at: <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/enpoe.htm>
- Poe, Edgar A. 1839. "The Conchologist's First Book: or, a System of Testaceous Malacology, arranged expressly for the use of Schools, in which the animals according to Cuvier, are given with the shells, a great number of new species added, and the whole brought up, as accurately as possible, to the present condition of the science." Philadelphia: published for the author, by Haswell, Barrington, and Haswell. 156 pp., 12 pl.
- Poe, Edgar A. 1840. "The Conchologist's First Book," second edition. Philadelphia: published for the author, by Haswell, Barrington, and Haswell. 166 pp., 12 pl. Available at Google Books: http://books.google.com/books?id=2vw-AAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=poe+conchologists&client=firefox-a&source=gbs_book_other_versions_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q=&f=false.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. 1992). *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy* (Paperback ed.), New York: Cooper Square Press, pp. 348.
- Silverman, Kenneth. 1991. *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (Paperback ed.), New York: Harper Perennial, pp. 564.

Thomas E. Eichhorst
thomas@nerite.com

