

# David Mason: The Truth As I Saw It

PAUL WHITNEY takes an extended look at an insightful and potentially controversial new memoir from one of Canada's legendary rare book dealers.

DAVID MASON'S *The Pope's Bookbinder: A Memoir* (Biblioasis, 2013, \$37.95 cloth) is a totally engaging, informative and provocative consideration of his 45-year career as arguably the best rare bookseller in Canada. Combining telling personal details with profiles of those he encountered pursuing his trade and, perhaps most important, the distillation of what he has learned about bookselling and collecting over the decades, this is a book that should be read by anyone who cares about antiquarian bookselling.

As with most memoirs, the story begins at the beginning. Mason's depiction of his childhood in Ontario will resonate for those of a certain age. "Books really can change your life," he writes, and he provides several examples that bear out the old truism. Specific titles cited in forming his early and lifelong attachment to books and reading paralleled my experience growing up in a home with few books; *The Wind in the Willows*, the Tarzan series and *Classics Illustrated* comics figure prominently.

The childhood of our contrarian memoirist is described with an almost passing reference to the fact that he and his sister were adopted. "It was never talked about, ever." His relationship with his banker father is a recurrent theme through his early



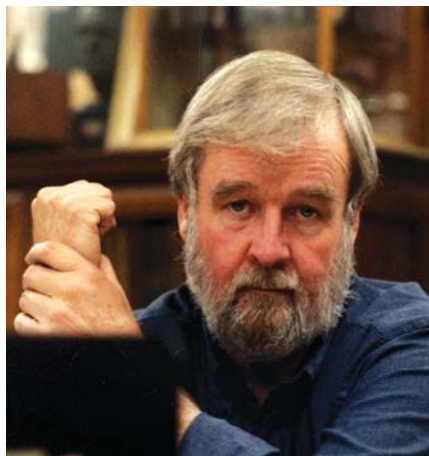
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*David Mason in Spain as an apprentice bookbinder.*

years as a bookseller. It should not surprise us that a banker would consistently express skepticism about bookselling as a viable career option for his son. His father's ongoing failure to grasp the underlying business model of selling used books combined with his fear that whenever Mason turns up he is looking for a loan forms an endearing thread in the narrative.

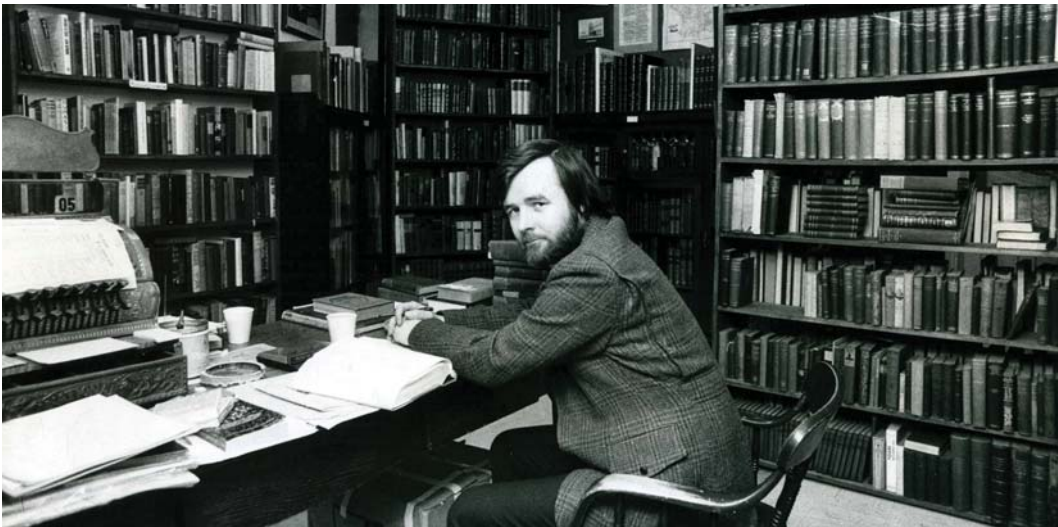
While I shared Mason's affinity for the local pool hall (I have found snooker to be a good means of bonding with book dealers), I can in no way match his rebellious adolescence and

early adulthood, wherein he describes himself as rebelling "against all authority, the whole world." Following a period of wandering broke in Europe, including sleeping on the floor in the Beat Hotel in Paris with William Burroughs banging away on a typewriter in an adjacent room, Mason ended up apprenticing for a bookbinder in Spain.

This job furnishes the incident that provides the book with its somewhat misleading title. The Spanish government commissioned a special binding of a religious text to present to Pope John XXIII, who was to visit. Mason worked on this complex binding, including heating the wheels that applied the gilt. This fleeting brush with His Holiness provided the justification for ongoing assertions that



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*David Mason.*



*Mason awaits customers in his store at 638 Church Street in Toronto, premises he occupied from 1973 to 1984.*

he used to work for the Pope as well as the title for his memoir (which he intends as a joke).

Mason returned to Canada at age 30 and soon began his indoctrination into the world of secondhand bookselling in Toronto. The balance of *The Pope's Bookbinder* discursively describes his evolution as a book dealer: learning from mentors as an employee, setting up his own store, early struggles and his emergence as an accomplished and respected expert. For book lovers, Mason's reflections on the trade and lessons learned are reason enough to relish the book. When combined with his sometimes affectionate, sometimes acerbic sketches of those he crossed paths with in the ensuing decades, the book becomes indispensable for anyone who cares about the book as an important cultural artifact.

#### TRUTHS FROM THE TRADE

*The Pope's Bookbinder* is infused with insights on the dynamics of the rare book trade, the motivations of collectors, the role of librarians and other custodians of the book, and Mason's dealer colleagues. Here is a glimpse of some of the bookselling "truths" Mason provides throughout the book:

- The worst mistake made in his career? Not buying a building.
- There is no school for booksellers—

tradition demands that older booksellers educate the younger.

- Other book dealers will always be your best customers.
- Rarity is the one essential in gauging the merits of a desirable book.
- A priced book is fair game: i.e., if it is priced and grossly undervalued, it is the seller's loss.
- Any fool can sell a book. It takes a pro to buy one.
- A good \$5 book is just as important as a good \$500 book.
- Booksellers should not submit a tax form until they have been in business for five years.
- A good book, especially in fine condition, will always sell.
- A collector should always have a dealer represent them at an auction when in pursuit of a specific lot.
- A bookseller should always make good books available to young collectors on very extended terms—a variation on the old adage that a gentleman should always be in debt to his bookseller.
- Bookselling is a trade; book scouting is a profession.

The list goes on and this partial summation doesn't capture the richness of the context Mason provides for his conclusions.

One more detailed example which I had some personal experience with will illustrate this. The bookselling truth “Keep your mouth shut” is supported by the story of renowned University of Toronto special collections librarian Richard Landon, who revealed over drinks to a U.S. dealer that he had just purchased from him an issue of the book-collecting journal *Colophon* (no. 5) at a ridiculously low price. The secret revealed was that this issue contains a signed drypoint etching by David Milne, in Mason’s words “one of the very few signed Milnes that is accessible to a Milne admirer who is not rich.”

After Landon’s boastful indiscretion, U.S. dealers began offering this issue of *Colophon* for \$100 and increasingly higher amounts to their Canadian colleagues, who had been used to buying copies for \$10 or \$20. The Milne etching was then selling in Canada for \$1,500 to \$2,000.

I remember buying that issue of *Colophon* in the late ’70s from a Vancouver dealer (who was well aware of its significance but sold it for considerably less than four figures) and thereafter always being on the lookout for single copies or affordable runs, but only being successful once (Blackwell’s in Oxford, for the record). Knowledge is power in scouting, and when too many people know about sleepers, they disappear.

#### POINTED CHARACTER PORTRAITS

As indisputable as Mason’s conclusions about rare and used bookselling are, the same cannot be said for all of the portraits of those he encountered during his career. While many characterizations of individuals are affectionate and clearly inspired by respect tempered with bemusement occasioned by eccentricity, others are pointedly critical and may strike readers as harsh. In a promotional interview for the book Mason commented:

I sometimes felt—and so did my editor—that I should be nicer, more gentle, with a few of my colleagues, but since I probably won’t be writing another [book] I felt I needed to tell the truth as I saw it, for the record.<sup>1</sup>

In correspondence with the reviewer discussing his chapter on bookseller Bill Hoffer, Mason elaborated:

I said a lot of strong things about other booksellers too—I really felt that I needed to be as honest as I could since I am aware that most of my colleagues will never put anything down.

Mason continues that he wishes others would write books to serve the history of bookselling, a wish many of us no doubt share, irrespective of how we are aligned with the factions that permeate this seemingly genteel and refined world.

It is illustrative that much of the discourse surrounding rare bookselling relies on military jargon: “enemies,” “campaigns.” Those who were directly or indirectly involved in the world of rare bookselling in Canada in the period covered by *The Pope’s Bookbinder* will know that the feud to end all feuds was between Mason and West Coast bookseller Bill Hoffer (the prime suspect in the deployment of military jargon).

I’m sure every friend and colleague of Hoffer approached Mason’s memoir with trepidation, expecting a scorched-earth assessment of Bill. But a surprise awaited. The chapter “William Hoffer and the ABAC Wars” stands as a fair assessment of a complex individual who, idiosyncrasies aside, was a brilliant bookseller.

While not addressing Mason’s account of the struggles with Hoffer over the Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association of Canada (for which I have little information other than what is



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*Stan Bevington of Coach House (left),  
 Karen Mulhallen of Descant magazine (centre),  
 and Mason mingle at a Coach House event.  
 (Don McLeod photo)*

presented here), I feel Mason's appreciation of Bill as a bookseller and as a man who "really did care about what I care about" is clear and resonates. Note that this assessment comes from a man who, among other things, directly inserted himself into a public dispute between Hoffer and author Brian Fawcett by publishing as a pamphlet a *roman à clef* (*The Enemy*) featuring Hoffer surrogate Seymour Hoffman.

As a librarian, I would be remiss in not noting Mason's insightful discussions of his relationships with individual librarians and their institutions over the years. His acknowledgment of the importance of children's librarians in fostering his reading and shaping his life is heartfelt and resonant. While unrelenting in his scorn for doctrinaire bureaucrats wherever they are encountered (including in libraries), Mason has an evident affection for many librarians.

He notes that "you can't be a good librarian, a good archivist, or even a good academic if you have no experience amassing a collection on your own for your personal use by frequenting bookshops." This welcome, if (for many of my colleagues) puzzling view serves as a telling counterpoint to a statement made to me by a Canadian university librarian, head of one of Canada's major research institutions, indicating that a book collector would never find a place in the university's library because "they are all thieves."

#### AND WHAT OF THE EDITOR?

Any reader of *The Pope's Bookbinder* with a passing knowledge of book collecting and literature in Canada will speculate about the role played by editor John Metcalf in shaping the text. Metcalf is a notable memoirist and fiction writer, a book collector and, as Mason readily acknowledges, a direct player in some of the events described in the memoir.

While *The Pope's Bookbinder* proclaims itself to be "A John Metcalf Book" on the title page, there can be no doubt that this is Mason's book. The book's acknowledgments thank Metcalf at length for both initiating the project<sup>2</sup> and his "ruthless hacking and slashing" editorial hand, resulting in "an actual book that can actually be read."

Those interested in what was excised (and

added) in the editorial process can refer to several excerpts of Mason's writings published in recent issues of the admirable journal *Canadian Notes and Queries*, including one that relates Mason's conversation with a heart surgeon who confessed to bidding on a book by phone in the middle of surgery. In response to Mason's incredulity and uncertainty over how this could actually take place, the following conversation is recounted:

"You mean you interrupted an operation to bid at an auction?"...

"No, I did both."

"Both? You mean you bid while you were operating?"

"Yes."

"Where was the phone?"

"On my shoulder. You need both hands with a heart."<sup>3</sup>

This is a good story that didn't make the cut and a reminder that Mason's advice that a collector should always have a dealer bid at auctions on their behalf is clearly irrefutable in some circumstances. Mason promises that the *CNQ* articles will continue, so there are more reflections and stories to come, even if there are "a fair number of stories that can only be told if I outlive certain people."<sup>4</sup> He is clear that the major motivator in editing down the text was space and told me that "many vignettes of the many dealers, bookscouts, librarians, and collectors I have known" were cut because "Metcalf was hoping for some international sales and felt that local people were the most expendable."

Metcalf may well have been prescient in having an expectation of foreign sales given the good review the book received from Michael Dirda in the *Washington Post*.<sup>5</sup> While readily acknowledging Metcalf's contributions in shaping the final text, Mason is unequivocal in stating that his input did not unduly shape the content:

He never—NEVER—attempted to influence what I said. I will admit that John's influence *did* cause me to modify several aspects of the book—but for literary rather than personal reasons. I don't think he approved of some of my views but he is far too devoted to





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*Mason presents a plaque to his friend and mentor  
Jerry Sherlock.*

literature to attempt to unduly influence  
any writer. (personal communication)

Sounds like an ideal editor to me.

#### CULLING THE WORTHY FROM THE DROSS

As the reader of this review will probably have deduced by now, Mason's writing style is engagingly meandering and relaxed while also being direct. On more than one occasion he states "as I have said" rather than "as I have written," and one has the feeling of sitting and listening to his recollections over a drink or three. While the text is a bit repetitive in places (bookselling mentor and employer Jerry Sherlock is on page 76 "the perfect example of the absent-minded professor" and on page 90 "the archetypal absent-minded professor"), this is a minor concern given the book's readability and conversational style.

I am not so immersed in the Canadian book trade to say with assurance that Mason is correct in all of his facts and assertions. Some of his characterizations of others in the book world have occasioned challenge, and given his self-proclaimed propensity for conflict, this does not surprise. We will see if refutations start to appear in print and not just in heated conversations.

I did identify a few errors relating to areas where I do have some knowledge, from the

minor (a Bill Hoffer catalogue is misidentified as being no. 87—there was no catalogue 87) to the more-significant discrediting of a former head of the Toronto Public Library for assuming the title CEO when in fact this job title had been mandated by misguided provincial legislation and should not be used as justification to discredit "her lack of credentials" to be a custodian of rare book collections.

On balance, my major complaint about *The Pope's Bookbinder* is the lack of an index—the first thing I looked for when I picked it up. Mason indicated to me that he regrets this omission: "I believe it [the absence of an index] was a serious mistake—I've had lots of complaints but perhaps I should view them as compliments since it seems people want to do more than find out if they were mentioned."

Mason acknowledges present-day threats to the continuation of the societal importance of books, noting that his wife and business partner, while she will inherit a large and wonderful book stock, is convinced "that the book will die about the same time I do, leaving her with massive overheads to house books that no one wants" (personal communication). He, along with many others, hopes that this is not the case. He does however note with concern the disappearance of many used bookstores and worries about how in the future young collectors will learn to judge the value of books and recognize the worthwhile and ascertain what constitutes appropriate value.

The author neatly sums up the place of the used and rare book dealer as follows:

Our job is to search out and buy from remainder tables, from garage sales and the junk heaps, those books which our instincts tell us someone should be looking for, and we hold them until that person appears. In other words, we are trained to cull the worthy from the dross. We rescue the past to hold for the future, and if we're wrong we lose money, so we learn to hone those instincts. (p. 403)

He is to be praised for capturing the essence of what motivates all of the players in the world of antiquarian books. He is frank and outspoken in itemizing his feuds with fellow dealers and his



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*Mason's current premises at 366 Adelaide Street West in Toronto.*

frustrations with institutional change at places such as Library and Archives Canada. While these are the elements of *The Pope's Bookbinder* likely to attract immediate attention, it is his passionate insights on the importance of books and the ecosystem of bookselling and collecting that make *The Pope's Bookbinder* indispensable.

I'll leave the final word to Mason: "I have come to believe that, more important than my or my colleagues' petty concerns or our personal ambitions, the true significance of our work is social, and our main contribution is the salvaging and retention of important artifacts of our civilization" (p. 130).

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 ~ Paul Whitney is the retired City Librarian of the Vancouver Public Library. He regularly contributes a column on modern first editions to *Amphora*.

#### NOTES

1. Despite this assertion, elsewhere Mason indicates that another book may appear, and he writes articles and blog postings on an ongoing basis. The quote is from " 'Blackmail Is Great Fun': An Interview with David Mason," distributed as part of the press release that accompanied review copies of *The Pope's Bookbinder*.
2. In correspondence during the preparation of this article, Mason more colourfully remarked, "Metcalf bullied me into doing the book."
3. "Auctions," *CNQ* 82 (Spring/Summer 2011), p. 14.
4. " 'Blackmail Is Great Fun.' "
5. Michael Dirda, review of *The Pope's Bookbinder*, by David Mason, *Washington Post*, July 3, 2013.



David Mason's take on the state of the rare book business follows, in a special excerpt from *The Pope's Bookbinder*.