

The Glory Days of the Independent Bookseller

HOWARD GREAVES reminisces about his bookselling salad days, when the Beatles sang, literary liaisons bloomed, and the new Penguin list could cause quite a flap.

“WE’RE NOT TOO terribly commercial here, so if you need to take off early now and again on a Friday for a party, that’s just fine.”

This assurance by Una Dillon at my interview in the early ’60s augured well for the working environment at Dillon’s University Bookshop in Malet Street, London, located among the many academic institutions of London University. And a relaxed environment it certainly proved to be!

My first job at the bookshop was in the mail order department, receiving orders for abstruse academic works from all over the world, many from former students, some graduates of the nearby School of Oriental and African Studies, now teachers and librarians in the newly developing universities of Africa. The shop had a substantial African section.

Then came the tracking down of the source of these specialized publications by consulting vast banks of reference bibliographies, going back many years, such as *Whitaker’s, Books in Print* and various trade directories. If the title was still elusive, then it was off to the London Library, where many a difficult search successfully concluded. For me, at least, an “every day is Christmas Day” spirit infused the department as mounds of parcels arrived to be opened.

Later, working in the paperback department, with its almost complete wall of Penguin books, provided unique experiences. Ms. Dillon bounding in, urgently asking for the Penguin edition of Sir Ifor Evans’ *Short History of English Literature* to check the author’s photo on the back cover. She was delighted to confirm that “that *is* Sir Ifor in the next room . . . I must go and welcome him.”

And, of course, many distinguished academics would visit the shop, for whom saving new titles in their field was, in a small way, we felt, assisting in their scholarship. Students of the nearby Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts provided a colourful and, indeed, “dramatic” variety of customer.

An experience looked forward to monthly was the arrival of the Penguin rep, Mr. Hedges,

to announce the titles due out the following month, giving one the somewhat “privileged” information on “next month’s Penguins” eagerly sought by one’s colleagues. No other publisher’s list would cause the same anticipation.

Sometimes a title appeared that would cause a real stir. One such was Bishop (John A.T.) Robinson’s *Honest to God*, which received a glowing half-page review in the *Sunday Times*. The following morning it appeared that the order proposed for its publisher would have to be greatly revised, given the likely demand that would develop throughout the day, and it was. The first batch sold out quickly, requiring yet further orders . . . and one’s bookselling instincts were proved reliable.

The basement of the bookshop housed the exotic *terra incognita* of foreign-language books, presided over by the somewhat daunting Middle European Eva Dworetzki, who, it was frequently said, sat atop the truckload of titles being transported from the closing of Bumpus Books to their new home at Dillon’s. It was said she simply “came with the books” . . . and stayed. It was also frequently said that she knew Dame Edith Sitwell.

In those pre-unionized days, the young staff were reliably all book lovers—liaisons would have the additional attraction of a common love of books—and the parties they organized seemed always to be to the accompaniment of Beatles records (this was 1964), with that exuberant twanging introductory chord to “A Hard Day’s Night” seemingly permanently reverberating through the London air.

The book trade was famous for its gossip, and that was traded vigorously at the nearby Marlborough pub on Fridays after work, with added authenticity if a publisher’s rep was a part of the group.

A number of staff arrived at the shop from Foyles appearing in a somewhat shell-shocked state. The less frenetic life at Dillon’s must have had a recuperative effect for some. One

of these emigrated eventually to Canada and became a very talented manager of the fine University of Toronto bookstore.

It was a blessed experience to have worked in such a fine independent bookstore—and cultural/social centre—just ahead of the age of bean-counters, conglomerate owners with no connection with the world of books. Of course, my time at Dillon’s also preceded the all-devouring digital appetites of the Amazons who, in return for decimating independent bookstores

around the world, provide merely the instant gratification of fast delivery and lower prices.

Supporters of the Net Book Agreement (“list-price maintenance”) in the ’60s correctly forecast that its termination would create bookstores with very limited backlists concentrating on only the highest-frequency sellers—“stores selling nothing but James Bond titles!”

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~ Howard Greaves is chair of the Alcuin Society.



WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

The Alcuin Society wishes to welcome the following new members:

Richard Bernier, Montreal, QC
Morgan Clendenning, Vancouver, BC
Craig Cullimore, Vancouver, BC
Heather Dean, Victoria, BC
Sofia Gelha, Sao Paolo, Brazil
Kathryn Hepburn,
Salt Spring Island, BC
Bethany Hindmarsh, Halifax, NS
Diane Huynh, Calgary, AB
Eli MacLaren, Montreal, QC
Margaret Mah, Richmond, BC

Leonidas Maniatis, Ottawa, ON
Jason Martin, Vancouver, BC
Robert McCullough,
West Vancouver, BC
Michael Penny, Bowen Island, BC
Neil Petrunia, Calgary, AB
Mary Ellen Reisner,
St.-Lambert-de-Lauzon, QC
Guzin Taskiran, Vancouver, BC
Lauren Washuk, Vancouver, BC
Kevin Williams, Vancouver, BC

Alcuin Society membership is open to any individual, institution or organization with an interest in the book arts, the history of books, book collecting and reading. An individual membership is \$50 a year, while institutional membership is \$75 a year. Students may join at the rate of \$25 a year for up to three years. A patron membership is available at the rate of \$125.

Society members within Canada pay in Canadian dollars; foreign memberships must be paid in U.S. dollars. Payment may be made online using PayPal or via cheque or money order made payable to The Alcuin Society, P.O. Box 3216, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 3X8.

