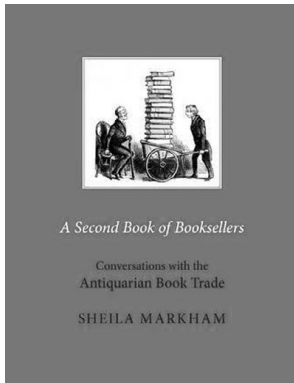


## *A Second Book of Booksellers*

BY SHEILA MARKHAM  
(SHEILA MARKHAM RARE BOOKS,  
2014, £20)



*A Second Book of Booksellers* continues Sheila Markham's first book, *A Book of Booksellers* (2004; 2nd ed., 2007), a gathering of interviews with antiquarian booksellers. This volume excludes the questions Markham posed, resulting in monologues which cleverly give us the dealers' take on their often-convoluted route into the trade, their mode of operating, and their views on the trade and its future.

As with the first volume, the present collection fascinates, especially in its demonstration, yet again, of the many diverse backgrounds of members of the trade. Yet what both volumes clearly stress is that the book itself is the true centre of it all. And reading about so many different characters and backgrounds indicates that perhaps the book is the only thing we all have in common. The motto of our international league, "*Amor Librorum Nos Unit*," seems to me to be as true as any professional motto ever was.

This collection differs slightly from the first. After an introduction by the highly respected Nicolas Barker, editor of *The Book Collector* where Markham's interviews now appear, Markham herself contributes a long piece that quite appropriately details *her* apprenticeship and *her* entry into the trade.

She also writes a tribute to Michael Silverman, the respected manuscript dealer, another fascinating character who is now deceased. Not just a record of his life in the trade, Markham's piece is a warm homage to Silverman, to whose memory she dedicates her book.

However, this second volume is a bit disconcerting for me. The book is full of people I'd love to meet, to share food and wine and trade gossip with. Along with some old friends, there are some dealers I know and have dealt with but not met, and a number of dealers quite unknown to me.

This highlights a subtle change the trade is going through; now that the Internet has levelled prices, many dealers don't travel to scout anymore, so dealers like me who seldom do fairs anymore don't meet many of their colleagues at all. This is sad.

In this volume one might wish to encounter more curmudgeons in the mode of Peter Eaton, a socialist who ended up selling books from one of the old stately homes, and who despised and denigrated his customers; or brilliant eccentrics such as the inimitable Eric Korn. But we still are provided glimpses of some amazing characters and fascinating opinions and anecdotes.

How about, for instance, William Poole, a blind bookseller and, more astonishing, not a bookseller who became blind, but a man born blind who in spite of that seemingly insurmountable obstacle became a bookseller, and a good one, too—a specialist in the classics. Almost unbelievable, but here he is.

We are also introduced to Alfred Breitfeld of Buenos Aires, who is much more courteous than I am. He mentions the common query booksellers get, "Have you read all these books?" "Of course not," he responds with civility and attempts to explain. Myself, I now always respond, "Of course. Do you think I'd sell a book I haven't read?" Surely there's a limit to the basic courtesies when common sense is so ludicrously insulted.

And Elizabeth Strong of McNaughtons in Edinburgh, who talks of the necessary ritual involved in doing business with the late, dearly missed Edward Nairn and his partner Ian Watson, the proprietors of John Updike in Edinburgh. Always, one does business at Updike's over a cup of tea.

I've never managed to acquire a taste for tea (a heresy in Britain and even in my own home), but I drank a lot of tea with Edward and Ian—easily the most expensive cups of tea I ever drank, as Edward slyly and gently played on my book lust. But what wonderful books I got for my torture.

And it wasn't just the tea that was torture, for we were invited to a wonderful lunch with them at their favourite restaurant in the Borders, where Ian's complete disregard for other drivers on the road meant we needed considerable amounts of Scotland's real national drink when we got there.

I also find here my friend of some 40 years, John Windle, who I thought I knew well. But here are all sorts of things about him of which I was ignorant. John is a Brit who after an apprenticeship with Bernard Quaritch went to San Francisco and worked for John Howell Books for a while before going out on his own. He built a formidable reputation for himself, first in business with Ron Randall, then on his own.

Now John provides us with another unique aspect of the book trade, for his wife Chris Loker runs her own children's book business in an adjoining office. I buy many books from John for my own personal library (and even more from Chris), and so persuasive are his descriptions that I never question the price, only whether I can pay it.

While he has lived for many years in San Francisco, John took off some ten years from the trade to take up Buddhism and to march for peace, consorting with the Dalai Lama. ("I had my sixties in the '80s," he says wittily.)

Somewhere I remember seeing a picture of John striding along a highway in some peace march wearing running shorts, looking fairly ludicrous. This is almost unbelievable to people who have read his scholarly descriptions of medieval manuscripts or his learned writings on William Blake. But it's true.

And here is Charles Cox, with whom I've done a fair bit of catalogue business in the past few years, exchanging many e-mails and invoices, but whom I have never met; now I get his history and a photo as well (he looks very formidable, but in fact he is quite amiable).

And I read about Timothy D'Arch Smith, whose books and reputation I know and have heard about endlessly from our mutual friend

Ian Young, the bibliographer of gay literature and a gay rights crusader in Canada and the U.S. for 45 years. Now I know a lot more of D'Arch Smith's fascinating career than ever Ian told me. And being a pro who is able to read between the lines, I can clearly see D'Arch Smith's great contribution to bookselling, far more than even Ian could convey.

While these are people I know, there are many other characters in the book whose backgrounds are just as intriguing.

I found myself making notes in the margins of Markham's book, indexing clever comments that I intend to steal for my own purposes. There's Larry Ilott's brilliant rendering of every bookseller's inescapable learning process, for example. Booksellers pay hard cash for almost every mistake, but Ilott puts it more succinctly than I've ever seen: "Like everybody else in the trade I bought my experience." Beautiful!

We also get strong opinions and views, and many subtle ones, which impart very interesting information to a dealer and great insight into the trade in Britain. Outsiders to the trade may skim over or completely miss these subtle hints, but future scholars won't.

But I wasn't many pages in before I found I needed two sorts of notes: one for the wise and witty quotes I wanted to steal, and another for the many brilliant and very wise business rules and ideas that I wanted to pass on to my staff and the younger booksellers I try to mentor.

Now, through the book once and on my second reading, I have pages and pages of notes lifted from Markham's contributors. Every member of my staff will be encouraged to read and reread all this wisdom, as will every young dealer I try to guide. It is wisdom acquired often through great pain, in the real world.

I could go on and on about Markham's two books (and I intend to elsewhere), but as I observed in my review of Markham's first book for the Bibliographical Society of Canada (<http://bit.ly/1urfawe>), I could easily write a review of every single interview she presents. My space being limited, I can only advise any book collector, dealer, librarian or student of the history of the book to buy this book and read it. And read it again and again as I will, and as I do regularly with the first

volume. I consider both of Markham's books to be very considerable contributions to the history of British bookselling in the latter 20th century.

Since they were conducted in Britain, most of the interviews are understandably with British dealers, with a few exceptions. There is therefore another thing Sheila Markham's two important books make clear: the North American trade needs to have its trade recorded in a similar fashion. With so many of the old famous bookstores already disappeared and now my generation of booksellers already gone or going, our history is in great danger of slipping into, first obscurity, then silence.

I urge the ABAA and the ABAC to take note.

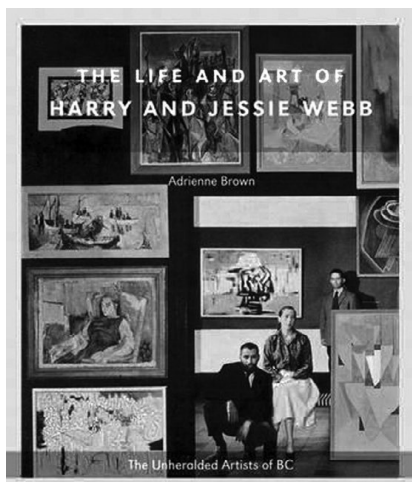
~ REVIEWED BY DAVID MASON

## *The Life and Art of Harry and Jessie Webb*

BY ADRIENNE BROWN.

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT R. REID

(MOTHER TONGUE PUBLISHING,  
2014, \$34.95)



The Unheralded Artists of B.C. series is the brainchild of Mother Tongue publisher Mona Fertig, who deserves our praise on at least three counts: one, the books are beautiful; two, the series redresses a wrong by reviving interest in deserving but neglected artists; three, these books tell us about ourselves,

placing their subjects in the context of the recent cultural past of Western Canada.

While the first two causes for commendation are applicable to *The Life and Art of Harry and Jessie Webb*, the seventh and most recent volume in the series, the third is perhaps the most important for the purposes of this review.

Two illustrations will serve to set the scene, though neither are among the lush reproductions of the Webbs' work that contribute greatly to the appeal of this book. However, both have associations with master typographer and long-time friend of the Alcuin Society Robert R. Reid, who wrote the book's introduction.

The first is a magazine cover, with ghostly city buildings outlined on a dark background and the letters "pm" in lime-green lower case lettering. It announces the appearance in 1951 of a literary magazine put together with love and hard work by a group of young artists and writers led by George Wright, a 19-year-old student at the Vancouver School of Art (VSA), and Yvonne Agazarian Maartman, later a famous psychologist and principal developer of Systems Centered Therapy.

Reid printed *pm* for free, his expertise in typography and layout complementing the Webbs' enthusiastic knowledge of art and its history. Jessie Webb was art editor, while contributors included poets Phyllis Webb (no relation) and Marya Fiamengo; Bill McConnell, a founding member of the Alcuin Society; artist-musician Al Neil; and artists B.C. Binning, Jack Shadbolt and Harry Webb—none of them yet household names.

A little bigger than a pocketbook, *pm* included abstract art, which enthusiastic readers wanted reproduced as cards. Rather than do this, the team designed original silkscreens and linocuts that could be removed from the magazine, if desired. The magazine lasted just

