

Geoffrey Spencer, 1920–2015

IT IS REMARKABLE that one so fond of literary allusion should have come to his end on the Ides of March: yet such was the fate of Geoffrey Spencer, a driving force in the formation of the Alcuin Society in 1965, and an unwavering friend of the Society throughout its history.

Born in Manchester, England, on January 1, 1920, Spencer spent most of his youth in Germany, where his father was engaged on business. The family returned to England in 1936 and Spencer served in the Royal Artillery and secretive Special Operations Executive during the Second World War, attaining the rank of captain. Shortly after the war, he came to Vancouver. One day in 1965 he found himself in a bookshop on Denman Street where Wil Hudson—who would go on to fame in Cape Dorset—was running a press in a back room.

The encounter was brief, but when Spencer next encountered Hudson, he felt the printer's talents needed more reliable and auspicious employment than letterheads and similarly ephemeral commercial works could provide.

And so was born the idea of the Alcuin Society, which begins its 50th anniversary year with a moment of gratitude for its key founder.

"It would be nice to say the Society arose out of an act of spontaneous artistic combustion, a font of book lovers clamouring to give expression to a mutually perceived need," Spencer reminisced on the Society's 20th anniversary in 1985. "In fact, it was dreamed up by me as an instrument to try to feed a worthwhile craftsman who did not show any signs of being able to do so himself."

Spencer, who was engaged in sales and gifted at gathering people, called together a dozen friends and eight showed. By the end of the evening, the group had staked a princely sum in the order of something less than \$50 to fund the nascent society's operations, which were headquartered at the Arts Club on Seymour Street at Davie. Spencer was a supporter of the club, so it was a natural venue for his latest venture.

The young society produced two bulletins for 112 members in its first year. Plans were afoot for a book, *A Theatrical Trip for a Wager* (1967),

which attracted the support of engineer P.R. Sandwell, an avid collector of exploration literature, who paid the princely sum of \$750 to become a life member. While membership was capped—after the manner of the Book Club of California—at 875, the Society has never had to turn anyone away. In fact, Spencer notes that Sandwell's dues came in the Society's hour of need. Government funding wasn't available, requiring the Society to do its utmost to pursue its vision of supporting fine press printing and the book arts, generally.

Twenty years later, Spencer could say that the Society had succeeded.

"We seem to have acquired a stature and influence out of all proportion to our diminutive size," he wrote in 1985. "We are still the only book society in Canada devoted to the book arts and what makes fine books."

Spencer, for his part, continued to play an integral role in the Society's activities. Widely read and generous with his wit and wisdom, he remained the driving force behind *Amphora* after stepping down as the Society's chair in 1971. Looking back on his involvement in 2005, he suggested that *Amphora* could rightly claim to rank among the longest-running bibliophilic journals in existence, with 140 issues to its credit (and now, 169).

But he also recognized that desktop publishing was changing the book business; since 1995 he produced copies of *Amphora* at his home in Shaughnessy as well as keepsakes and chapbooks under his own imprint of the Bookworm's Press. Bibliophiles of the future would be able to make their own books, a pursuit he embraced in the time left to him.

"I suspect that I won't be around to ramble on at the Society's golden anniversary in 2015," he mused at the time. "But I'll mutter suitable incantations from what I expect to be my new job in charge of the sulphur vats."

Spencer died March 15, 2015. He is survived by Elizabeth, his wife of 71 years, two daughters and a sister, among others.

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~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*.