

Through the Glorious Wilderness

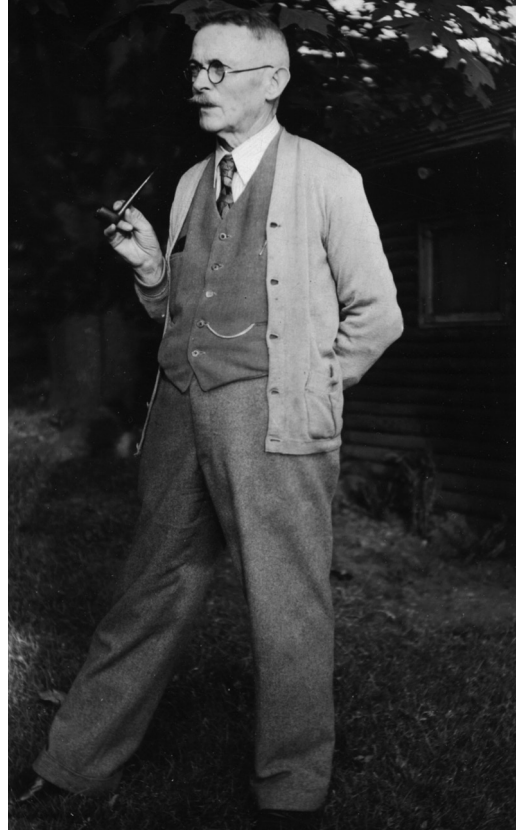
GARY SIM explores the multifaceted life of Vancouver pioneer, land surveyor, school principal, author, artist and naturalist Ruiter Stinson Sherman (1865–1941).

WHAT WE CALL the “history of Vancouver” began little more than 130 years ago. Of all the people who came here to make their fortune, one of the most interesting and accomplished arrivals was Ruiter Stinson Sherman, in 1891. An engineer by training, Sherman had a variety of interests that led him beyond his day jobs into areas that make him a fascinating member of the city’s then emerging community of artists and literati.

Sherman was born in 1865 in Springfield, Ohio, to English parents. His father, Thomas Stinson Shearman, was a cabinetmaker from Birmingham who had immigrated with his wife and three children via London, England. When Sherman was 10, his family moved to the Brantford area in Ontario, where they pioneered a homestead out of the forest. Interestingly, by 1890 Ruiter had changed his last name from Shearman to Sherman.

Despite this pioneer beginning in the woods of Ontario, Sherman travelled to England to become a doctor but he subsequently changed his mind and returned to Canada. He attended Central School in Brantford, then the Brantford Collegiate Institute, and after two years at Queen’s University graduated as a civil engineer in 1885. He also did military service with the 38th Dufferin Rifles from 1884 to 1889, eventually attaining the rank of sergeant. In 1890 he registered as an Ontario land surveyor. The final examination was described as “strict and searching,” and candidates required a significant amount of knowledge, including:

Geometry . . . the first six books of Euclid . . . Algebra, including Progressions, Plane and Spherical Trigonometry, Mensuration of Superficies; Laying out and dividing up of Land; Descriptions by metes and bounds for Deeds and other Documents; the laying out of curves . . . Practical Astronomy, including finding of time, latitude, longitude, Azimuth,



Ruiter Stinson Sherman.
(VCA photo)

Variation of the Compass, and drawing Meridian lines; the Theory and Practice of Levelling; the Principles of Evidence; Drawing of Affidavits; Taking of Field Notes and Preparing Plans; the Rudiments of Geology and Mineralogy, and the Sufficiency of their Surveying Instruments.

Although Sherman successfully did civil engineering work in Ontario from 1886 to 1891, including holding the position of engineer in charge of the Brantford Waterworks, he decided to travel to B.C. He arrived on the coast in 1891

and later became a member of the Old Timers of Vancouver club (the predecessor of the Pioneers Club). He entered into surveying partnerships with John Strathern and K.L. Burnett and registered as a Dominion Land Surveyor in 1892 and as Provincial Land Surveyor no. 18 in 1893.

As he later wrote in his story "The Timber Wolves," published 1926 in *Silent Study Readers* v: "In 1892 I spent several months in the primeval forests that fringe the shores of Powell Lake and the chain of lakes, its tributaries, the Goat, the Dodd and the Windsor . . . From April until August I wandered through this glorious wilderness."

Sherman did a number of important early surveys around southwest B.C., including a timber survey in the Nitinat Valley and surveys up Agamemnon Channel, Hotham Sound, and at Pemberton Meadows. He conducted a survey to determine the extent and capacity of the valley that would be dammed to service the Powell River pulp mill and also surveyed the Grizzly Mine for Sam Tretheway. While doing the latter survey, he wrote, he "lost a finger to an axeman working nearby" and made an emergency trip by boat "in a bad storm down Harrison Lake and by wagon to Agassiz" to get help. This apparently prompted him to seek a safer career.

FROM SURVEYING TO TEACHING

He married Nelda "Nellie" Sage in Vancouver in 1892, the bride coming west from Ontario for the wedding. Their son Walter Camdon Sherman was born in 1893. Ruiter qualified as a schoolteacher and began teaching in Port Moody in 1895. He then taught at the New Westminster Boys' School until 1898, when "family considerations" took him back to Ontario. Although intending to stay, he returned west in 1899, vowing "never to cross the Great Divide again without a return ticket in my hand." In 1899 he briefly taught in Mission City, where daughter Maud Rees Sherman was born in 1900.

The family moved in 1903 to Vancouver, where they lived in a number of houses before settling into 2285 West 6th Avenue around 1906. Others in the family also settled there, including Ruiter's brothers Thomas and Eustace,

respectively Vancouver's first and second official meteorologists. They recorded the city's weather from the Dominion Meteorological Observatory, a homemade shack in the backyard of 2271 West 6th. Thomas was an astronomer and spent decades trying to design and build the world's largest telescope, funded in part by Edward Mahon, a prominent Vancouver businessman. He also wrote articles about using the long-lost Brockton Point Observatory to calculate locations of places in B.C. such as Fernie.

Sherman received a B.C. teacher's certificate first class in 1903 and began teaching for the Vancouver School Board (VSB) at Mount Pleasant School. He transferred to Lord Roberts Elementary School in the West End in 1905, then in 1907 was appointed principal of Admiral Seymour Elementary School in East Vancouver, a position he held for 25 years, until his retirement in 1932. It was a large school in a neighbourhood made up largely of immigrants; at one point, students numbered more than 900 and spoke more than 40 languages. His would have been a challenging position. Nevertheless, Sherman seemed to maintain discipline without having to resort to the VSB's standard-issue leather strap, prescribed for use for a range of infractions from humming to face-painting; also cheating, fighting, or leaving school property without permission. Years later, a subsequent principal apocryphally noted that Sherman "only used his office for smoking his pipe."

INTERESTS FROM BUGS TO STORIES

In his summer holidays and spare time, Sherman accomplished an amazing number of things that were not part of his day job. His interests and skills were wide-ranging, from natural history to stamp collecting. He was a photographer, writer, artist, lecturer, entomologist and mountaineer. He continued carrying out legal surveys until at least 1922. He walked almost everywhere he went and owned a rowboat called the *Seagull*, which he is known to have rowed from Vancouver to Savary Island.

In 1902 he was one of 22 founding members of the Entomological Society of B.C., with a personal interest in Diptera, or two-winged flies. In 1927 he wrote a letter to a fellow entomologist

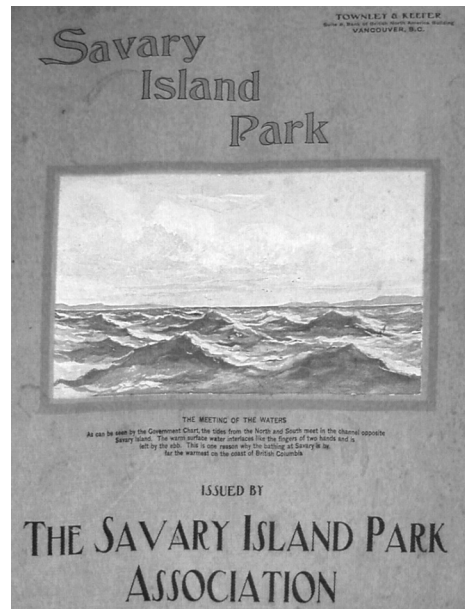
describing how he had “bred out” different species of flies in order to study them. He discovered a number of new insects in B.C., writing in great detail about 16 of his finds in the society’s 1920 journal, in an article titled “New Species of Mycetophilidae.” A short excerpt follows.

Platyura intermedia sp.nov.

Female. Length 3.5m.m. Yellow. Antennae except the scape fuscous. Thorax yellow with traces of three pale confluent stripes. The base of each abdominal segment dark brown. Wings uniformly yellowish slightly tinged with cinereous in region of R2-3, veins fuscous; subcostal vein ends in costa a little proximal of base of radial sector; R2-3 rather long and oblique in position; halteres yellow. Subcostal cross-vein slightly proximal of centre of subcosta; coalesced part of media about equal to the petiole. Anal vein produced to the margin. Fore metatarsus slightly shorter than tibia. Two tibial spurs on middle and hind tibiae. Savary Island, July 21, 1917.

B.C. Mountaineering Club charter member R.B. Mills noted in his memoir of the club’s early days, published on the occasion of its 50th anniversary, that he and two young South African war veterans, H.B. Rowe and George Jarrett, made many trips in the summer of 1906 and occasionally met others on the summits of local mountains, including “our entomologist R.S. Sherman.” In the first annual report of the B.C. botanical office in 1913, Provincial Botanist John Davidson noted: “The following have from time to time contributed specimens, but have not yet become regular correspondents of the office: — . . . Principal R.S. Sherman, Vancouver, B.C.”

In 1907 Sherman was a charter member of the B.C. Mountaineering Club. When the BCMC held a logo design competition, Sherman’s brother Arthur Evans Shearman won the contest, and the club still uses the logo. In 1913 Sherman wrote an article for the club’s publication *The Northern Cordilleran*, titled “The Mountaineer as an Entomologist.” Much of the article is devoted to an environmental



Top: BCMC logo from *The Northern Cordilleran*.

Bottom: Savary Island Park brochure cover courtesy SIHS.

discussion about controlling insect pests for commercial reasons, but he also wryly notes:

I have wielded a butterfly net long enough to realize how little the average man is in sympathy with the pursuits of the “bug-hunters,” as he likes to call us. But one becomes hardened to public indifference, pity

The Mountaineer as an Entomologist

By R. S. SHERMAN, D.L.S.

When I accepted an invitation to write a paper on the subject of entomology I did so with a full understanding of the difficulties I should find in compiling an article which would be interesting and profitable to the average reader. I have wielded a butterfly net long enough to realize how little the average man is in sympathy with the pursuits of the "bug-hunters," as he likes to call us. But one becomes hardened to public indifference, pity or contempt. Once while swinging my net on the banks of a famous trout stream, a gum-booted disciple of the immortal Walton very kindly advised me to get a stronger landing net; and when I explained to him that I was merely catching flies with it, he gave me a look of compassionate sadness that fairly touched my heart. "Poor fellow!" he murmured, "but he looks quite harmless." An entomological friend of mine was accustomed to inform such inquisitive bodies that he was capturing swamp-elephants, or crocodiles.

The field covered by the word entomology is so great that you will not, I am sure, expect me to cover more than an infinitesimal part of it in the space allotted to me. Most mountaineers have found one species of insect keep them busy all day, and perhaps another species, all night. When we realize that the species of insects exceed in number those of all other animal forms taken together, we may be either staggered at the immensity of forms to study, or charmed at their endless diversity.

There are, broadly speaking, three classes of mountaineers, according to their aims and ambitions. Some seek mere physical exhilaration; others love the hills for their sublimity and beauty, and still others, very much in the minority, who combine with their desire for physical exercise and their love for the beautiful, a craving for intellectual stimulus, a definite desire to study minutely and exhaustively some special feature of mountain life, be it bird or beast, insect or flower, and thereby attain a general uplift of all their mental faculties. Let us designate these as the master mountaineers, the others being mere tyros and apprentices.

It has been my lot to traverse the hills with men of all classes, including hunters and prospectors, whom we may speak of as professional mountaineers, and I do not hesitate to affirm that only to the master mountaineer can the hills yield their richest treasures. He brings back with him from a climb, not only the luxury of physical fatigue and

Excerpt from "The Mountaineer as an Entomologist" in The Northern Cordilleran.

or contempt . . . Most mountaineers have found one species of insect keep them busy all day, and perhaps another species, all night.

In 1910 Ruitter was one of the founders of the Savary Island Park Association, holding the positions of chairman and trustee. The group was formed to subdivide and market vacation

lots on Savary Island, which Sherman had first visited in the 1890s while surveying Powell Lake. Sherman bought a prime lot on the north beach east of the dock, and he encouraged his friends and neighbours to do the same. Ruitter built a cottage there for the family to stay in, called Traumerei, meaning "revery." He was appointed Savary Island's first postmaster. By the time the



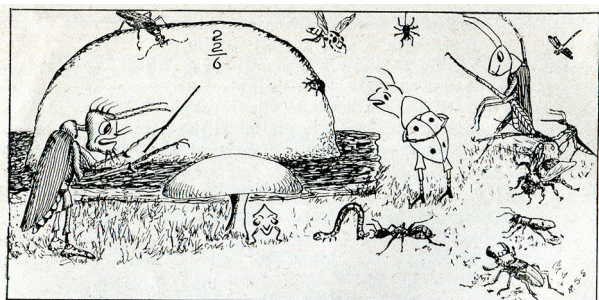
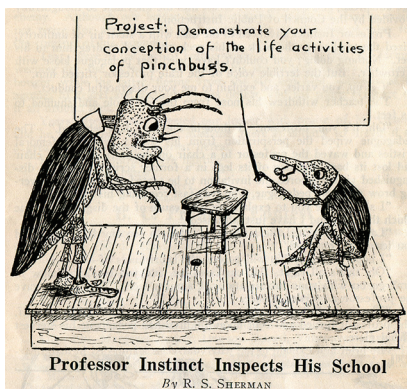
Left: Traumerei living room, 1927. Right: Traumerei cottage exterior.

island's post office opened in 1912, Ruitter had hired Harry Keefer as assistant postmaster, so he himself never actually held the position.

The Sherman family moved in 1913 into a new house at 3642 Dundas Street, where they would live for the next 75 years. Ruitter built it himself from a house plan and had a friendly competition with his next-door neighbour Josiah Wilson Macadam to see who could build the best house from the same plan. Who won the contest has been lost to time. Macadam, said to be a descendant of the inventor of the macadam (asphalt) road, was an artist and teacher who

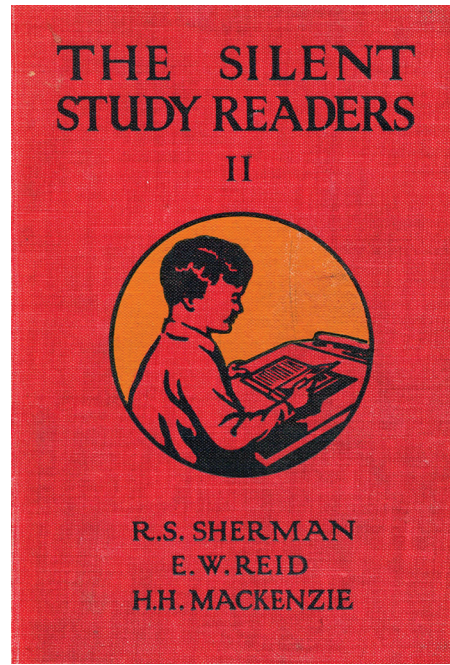
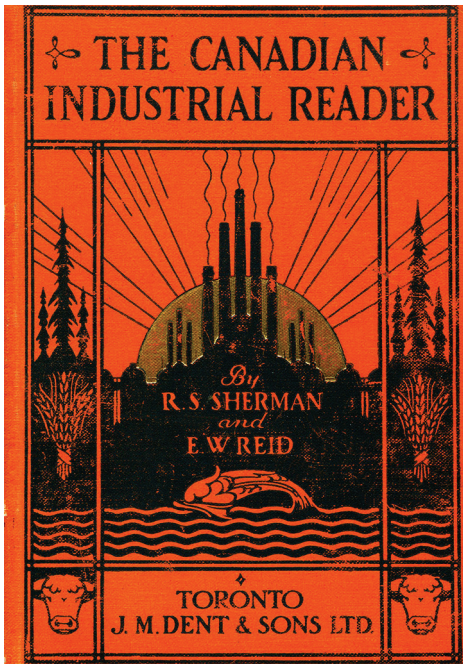
tutored Maud at home. He painted a portrait of Ruitter and Maud that was on display in the B.C. Society of Fine Arts' 1912 annual exhibition.

In 1919 Sherman began writing and illustrating nature stories for schoolchildren. These were published in a little magazine titled *School Days*, issued by the VSB. The magazine appeared 10 times a year from September 1919 to June 1930. By the end of its run Sherman had produced over 100 stories on all kinds of subjects, many also illustrated by his daughter Maud Rees Sherman. Other well-known artists who illustrated for the magazine were



PROFESSOR INSTINCT'S SCHOOL for BUGS
R. S. Sherman

Drawings from "Professor Instinct's School for Bugs."



Left to right: Covers of *The Canadian Industrial Reader* and *The Silent Study Readers II*.

Spencer Perceval Judge and Charles H. Scott, fellow employees of Ruiters at the vsb.

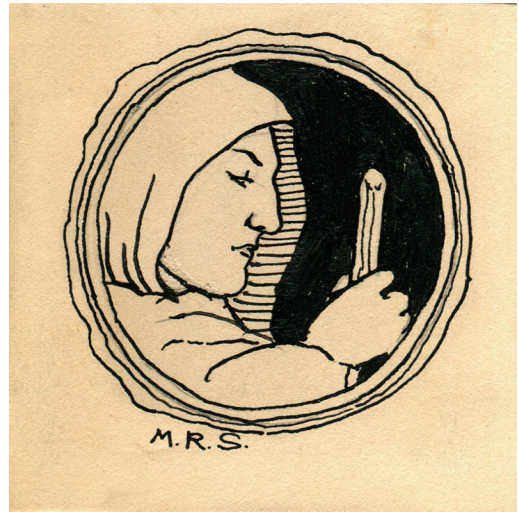
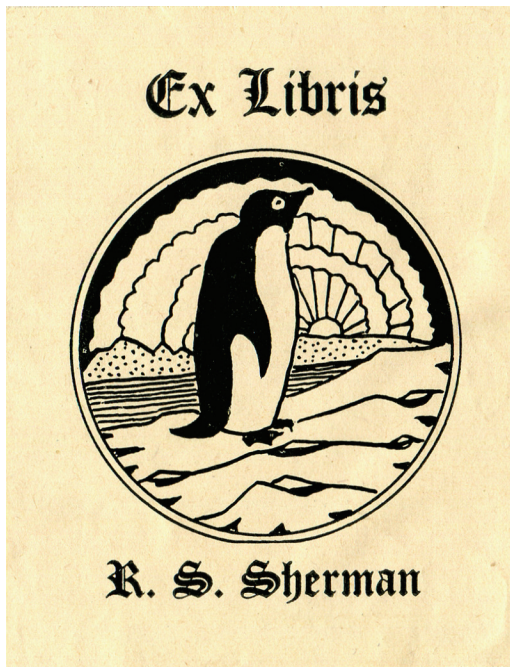
One of his favourite topics was, of course, insects, with stories titled “How to Know the Insects,” “Professor Instinct’s School for Bugs,” “The Tale of a Black Guard” (ants), “The Leaf Dwellers,” “In Spider Land” and “Trypeta the Fairy,” for example. He wrote about numerous bird species as well, including the eagle, water ousel, robin, swallow, sparrow, dabchick, crow, horned owl, woodpecker, heron, hummingbird, and loon. The stories are often anthropomorphic, in which Merwa the Moose, Kwah! the Crow, Pekan the Fisher, or Old Shag the Cormorant either talk to themselves or carry on conversations with each other.

These stories and dozens more were later published by J.M Dent & Sons in a number of books, including *Mother Nature Stories* (1924), *The Canadian Industrial Reader* (1926), *The Silent Study Readers I* through *VI* (1925–26), *Wild Folk and Their Ways* (1928), and *Nature and Language Workbooks* (1934). Sherman had other books in progress at the time of his death, including *Nature Strolls in Stanley Park*.

STRONG TIES TO LOCAL ARTS

Sherman was active in the visual arts in early Vancouver. In 1920 he was a founding member, along with his daughter Maud, of the British Columbia Art League, a group founded to create an art gallery and an art school in Vancouver. He exhibited a painting of Seton Lake in a monthly exhibition of the Vancouver Sketch Club that year. In 1922 Ruiters and Maud went on a sketching trip to the Pemberton-Darcy area led by Thomas William Fripp, a prominent artist who is considered to have been the first professional artist to make a living in B.C. In 1925 Maud was a founding student at the art school, now the Emily Carr University of Art and Design. She and her father were both charter members of the Vancouver Art Gallery when founded in 1931.

Sherman wrote a long article titled “The Ecology of Savary Island” that was published in the *Art, Historical & Scientific Association of Vancouver’s Museum Art and Notes* (March 1931). The article was illustrated with photographs by Sherman and his friend Fred Perry, and a pen and ink drawing by his daughter Maud of the giant arbutus tree on Savary Island. As mentioned,



Left: An R.S. Sherman bookplate found in a 1931 copy of W.H. Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago*.
 Right: Drawing by Sherman's daughter Maud in *The Voice*.

Sherman retired as principal from Admiral Seymour School in 1932, after 25 years of service.

An R.S. Sherman bookplate was found in a 1931 copy of W.H. Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago*. First published by J.M. Dent & Sons in 1918, the revised edition featured a number of exquisite wood engravings by English artist Eric Fitch Daghish. This copy also has a tipped-in note "With best wishes for Christmas and the New Year from Hugh R. Dent." At the time Dent was chairman of the large international publishing house. The bookplate was probably drawn by Sherman's daughter Maud, as it is very similar to a number of her pen and ink drawings, such as those in *The Voice*. The relevance of the penguin is unknown; it is probably just a drawing that he liked, as he had no known connection to the Antarctic.

By the time Sherman died in 1941, he was also known for his fine personal library, which included first editions of *Kim* and *Puck of Pook's Hill* by Kipling, and numerous early editions by Mark Twain, Charles G.D. Roberts, Stevenson, Hawthorne, Jules Verne, Ballantine, and others. A 1913 entry in his daughter Maud's diary lists more than 140 volumes. The library was slowly

dispersed over the years, and in 20 years of research I have found only a few books from his library and just this single bookplate.

In 1939 there was an interesting development in the Sherman household: a boarder arrived. He was a prominent photographer named Stuart Thomson, who had arrived in Vancouver from Australia around 1910. He hired June Sherman as his assistant, then business partner, as he took an average of 1,000 photographs a year around town. He was UBC's official photographer from the beginning, and the PNE's photographer from the mid-1930s. Thomson lived with the Shermans until his death in 1960.

Ruiter Stinson Sherman died on March 30, 1941, in the backyard where he had been working. Only a week earlier he had talked about moving to a new place where there wasn't already a surveyor and starting over. His wife Nellie and daughter Maud soon donated his insect collection to the Vancouver Museum, adding to Ruiter's previous donation. Unfortunately, over time the condition of the collection deteriorated, and all of it was finally discarded. No trace now remains except the fading news clippings noting the donations.

Nellie died in 1943, after which Camdon and Maud took over the house on Dundas, where they lived with June, Raymond and Stuart Thomson until their respective deaths. As each family member passed away, R.S. Sherman's collections were slowly redistributed, re-inherited or lost. His library supposedly went to an antique store on Granville Street, his glass plate photographs were smashed and thrown out, some of his manuscripts and correspondence were lost in a fire. No record has been found of his stamp collection, entomological supplies or field notes, cameras, negatives, darkroom equipment or art supplies. Some of his stories, like "Kwah! the Crow," were republished up until the 1960s in readers such as *Happy Highways and Young Adventurers*, but J.M. Dent & Sons was bought out and its records lost, and the Vancouver School Board has no record of publishing *School Days* in the 1920s.

Almost every group of which Sherman was a founding or charter member continues to thrive in Vancouver, including civic facilities such as the museum, the archives, the art gallery and the art school. Still-active groups include the B.C. Land Surveyors, B.C. Mountaineering Club, Vancouver Natural History Society, Burrard Field Naturalists Club, and the Entomological Society of B.C. He held more than 30 volunteer positions with those groups over the years, including president, vice-president, auditor, director, representative from one group to another, and chair of various committees. It is safe to say that he firmly wove his multidisciplinary life, work, and personal interests into the foundations of the city that we enjoy today.

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 ~ Gary Sim is a long-time member of the Alcuin Society and occasional contributor to *Amphora*. His work as a graphic artist was featured in *Amphora* 135 (June 2004). His personal website is www.sim-publishing.com.



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 Top: Some books from Sherman's book collection.
 Bottom: R.S. Sherman enjoying refreshments from June Sherman. (Stuart Thomson photo)

