

# Evidence of Refined Taste

The bookshops of T.N. Hibben and his staff served generations of Victoria residents, LANA OKERLUND discovers.

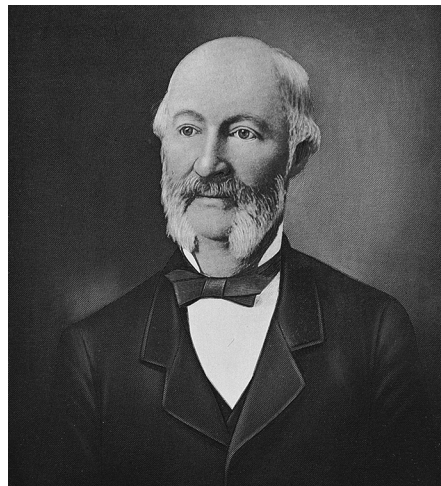
In all the wide range of industrial pursuits there is not a more interesting occupation than that of the bookseller, upon which the education of the masses and the enlightenment of the citizens of the country in a large measure depend. The city of Victoria is especially a city of erudition and culture, the consequence being that the book trade is of more than ordinary importance. There is no better evidence of refined taste in the house than the presence of books.

SO PROCLAIMED THE 1888 promotional publication *The New West*, introducing the entry for T.N. Hibben & Co., a book and stationery store that had been established in Victoria 30 years earlier.

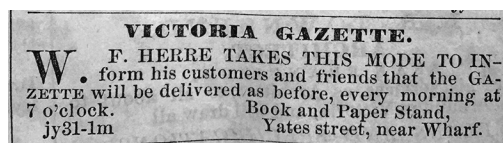
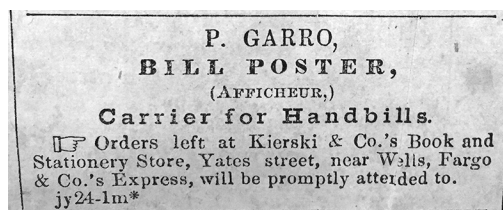
Thomas Napier Hibben (1827–1890), the firm’s founder, was certainly the most prominent of Victoria’s early booksellers—and his company the longest in business—but he was not the city’s first. This title belongs to William Kierski. Originally from Prussia, Kierski came to Victoria in July 1858 from Stockton, California, where he and his brother, John, had operated a bookstore since 1856. Likely perceiving a lucrative opportunity to be the first bookseller and stationer in booming gold-rush Victoria, Kierski established himself on Yates Street in the express office of Freeman & Co.

Close on Kierski’s heels on the Victoria bookselling scene was W.F. Herre, originally from France, whose first ad in the *Victoria Gazette* is dated July 31, 1858, only a week after the first mention of Kierski. Herre was also located on Yates Street, and he too came to Victoria after first operating a bookstore in California, in San Francisco.

Although Herre will be remembered as the second bookseller in Victoria, he did achieve a notable first when he created the city’s first lending library in November 1858. For a fee of \$5 for the first month and \$3 per month thereafter, or for \$1 per week, members



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*A portrait of T.N. Hibben from British Columbia: Pictorial and Biographical, 2 vols. (Winnipeg: S.J. Clarke, 1914). Photo courtesy of UBC Rare Books and Special Collections.*



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*Top: The first mention of William Kierski’s bookstore in the Victoria Gazette, July 28, 1858.*

*Bottom: W.F. Herre’s first ad in the Victoria Gazette, August 3, 1858.*

of the public could borrow a range of books and periodicals to enjoy at their leisure.

(Herre’s name also appeared in the press in a less virtuous context when in May 1860

**BUY BOOKS!!**

—

Buy Knowledge

—

**BUY POWER!**

—

BOOKS ARE KNOWLEDGE.

—

“KNOWLEDGE IS POWER,”

—

**BUY BOOKS!**

—

All the above can be had at

**STATIONER'S HALL,**

In the New brick Store,

YATES STREET, VICTORIA.

Where

**HIBBEN & CARSWELL**

Will be glad to see all their old friends and customers; and strangers are requested to call and examine their splendid Stock.

—

**ALL KINDS OF STATIONERY.**

Jy 20-1f

**HIBBEN & CARSWELL,**  
Booksellers and Stationers,  
**RECEIVE ADDITIONS BY NEARLY**  
Every Steamer to their present large Stock of  
School, Standard and Miscellaneous

**BOOKS,**  
Embracing most of the Modern and Ancient Standard Authors in

**POETRY AND FICTION,**  
**MECHANICS, AGRICULTURE,**  
**HISTORY, BIOGRAPHY, RELIGION,**  
Law, Medicine, Sciences, Music, etc.,  
**BIBLES, HYMN AND PRAYER BOOKS,**  
**MAPS,**  
In Sections of both Hemispheres.

—ALSO—

**Stationery,**  
Consisting of

**BLANK WORK IN GREAT VARIETY,**  
from Miniature to Counting House size,  
**Writing Papers and Materials,**  
Printers' Stationery and Wrapping Paper,  
**Playing and Visiting Cards**  
Letter, Note and Official Envelopes,  
**MUSIC AND MUSIC PAPER,**  
Drawing and Tracing Paper and Cloth,  
**DRAWING BOOKS & INSTRUMENTS,**  
Pocket and Counting House Diaries for 1861,  
**Blank, Law and Shipping Forms,**  
Log Books, Time Books, Draft and Note and Order Books,  
**SHIPPING RECEIPTS,**  
Copying Presses, Keyset Machines,  
And a variety of other Fancy and Staple Stationery,  
and a good assortment of

**GOLD PENS AND**  
**POCKET CUTLERY.**

**STATIONERS' HALL,**  
1422 1m  
40 Yates street.

.....

*Ads from the Victoria Daily Colonist,  
July 20, 1859 (left) and February 7, 1861 (right),  
highlight T.N. Hibben's offerings.*

he was arrested and fined £20 for operating a gambling den in a back room of his bookstore. Evidently this arrest was not sufficient to stop him, because in 1862 his sideline business was reported in a San Francisco newspaper covering the latest news from Victoria. “Herre . . . vends newspapers and periodicals ostensibly,” read the March 22 *Daily Alta California*, “but privately he has a very nice little back room, where, in spite of the law and the excessively obnoxious penalty attached thereto, gentlemen have been known to lay down more than they took up cards.”)

**VARIED STOCK IN EARLY STORE**

But back to 1858. By the time Herre set up his lending library, Kierski had returned to Stockton, evidently finding that the prospects in Victoria fell short of his expectations. And this is when Thomas Napier Hibben entered the picture, buying out Kierski’s concern on Yates Street and laying the foundation for a bookselling and stationery

business that would persist for a century.

Of English ancestry, Hibben had been born in 1827 in Charleston, South Carolina, where his father owned a cotton plantation and employed a large number of slaves. Hibben left home in 1850, lured west by the California gold rush. He reportedly met with some success on the gold fields before joining Charles Kimball in the Noisy Carrier’s Book and Stationery Co. in San Francisco.

In spring 1858, Hibben withdrew from his partnership with Kimball and headed north to Victoria. Whether he intended to establish himself in business there or join the crowds heading up the Fraser River in search of gold is unknown, but he decided to stay in Victoria. Kierski’s operation was for sale, an opportunity ready-made for Hibben that he could not resist.

Hibben initially called his business the Express Bookstore, a reference, perhaps, to his location adjacent to Freeman & Co.’s express office. But in July 1859, the business’s name was changed to Hibben & Carswell, in recognition of partner James Carswell. That same month, the firm moved into a new brick store at 40 Yates Street called Stationers’ Hall—named, presumably, after the building that housed the Stationers’ Company in London, the guild formed in 1403 that had a royally granted monopoly over England’s publishing industry until the 18th century.

Hibben & Carswell ads show the varied stock the store carried: “a splendid assortment of standard and miscellaneous books,” periodicals, bibles and prayer books, blank books, diaries, maps, writing paper and other “staple and fancy” stationery, wrapping paper, greeting cards, pocket cutlery (the name then used for pocket knives), pens and inkstands, board games, playing cards, visiting cards, music and music paper, drawing instruments, mathematical instruments, and much more.

The firm, like many early booksellers, also acted as a publisher, releasing in 1862 the *Dictionary of Indian Tongues, Containing Most of the Words and Terms Used in the Tshimpsean, Hydah, & Chinook, with Their Meaning or Equivalent in the English Language*. In later years, it would add bookbinding to its stable of services

and publish another Indigenous-language dictionary, a guide to British Columbia, a book of poetry, and maps, among other works.

In July 1866, Hibben & Carswell moved to the Stamp's building at 69 Government Street, opposite the Bank of British Columbia. Only a few months later, the firm announced that James Carswell was withdrawing from the partnership and that the company would continue as T.N. Hibben & Co.—or “Hibben’s,” as it was commonly called. (After leaving the firm, Carswell, who had been elected a member of the House of Assembly of Vancouver Island in 1863, moved to Cowichan in 1867 and opened a general store. In October 1872, Carswell died of epilepsy in Glasgow, his wife’s hometown, and perhaps also his own. Various historical accounts have stated that he was associated with the legal bookselling and publishing firm founded in Toronto in 1866 by Robert Carswell, which still exists as part of Thomson

Reuters Canada, but I haven’t seen any evidence definitively connecting the two Carswells.)

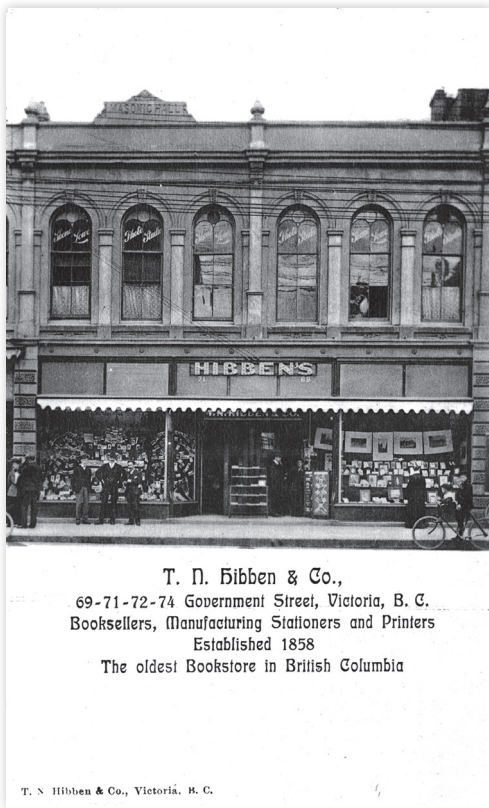
#### ASSOCIATES AND COMPETITORS

While James Carswell’s time with the firm was short-lived, others who joined Hibben’s in its early days would remain closely associated with it for decades, or would branch out to begin their own bookselling and stationery ventures. In the first category were Christian William Kammerer and William Henry Bone. Born in Hamburg, Germany, Kammerer joined in 1858 as the office clerk and bookkeeper and remained in a management role until his death in 1897. Bone, from Ontario, started as a 16-year-old messenger boy in 1870 and worked his way up through various positions until he became a full partner in the firm, along with Kammerer, in 1884. By the early 20th century he was managing the company.

Also at Hibben & Carswell in these early years was chief clerk Marshall Wilder Waitt,



*The interior of T.N. Hibben’s bookstore (1892). Photo courtesy of City of Victoria Archives (M10113).*



*The exterior of T.N. Hibben's bookstore, on a contemporary postcard (c. 1909). Photo courtesy of the Philip Francis British Columbia Postcards Collection, a digital initiative of Simon Fraser University Library (MSC130-1339).*

who was one of those who started his own book and stationery store after learning the ropes at Hibben's. Born in Maine, Waitt joined Hibben & Carswell in the early 1860s. In 1877, he opened his own store at 77 Government Street. He would go on to expand heavily into sheet music and musical instruments, even opening a second specialty store on Government<sup>1</sup>. After Waitt died of smallpox in 1892, his son-in-law, Charles Herbert Kent, continued the music side of the company (eventually renaming it the Kent Piano Company), while John Johnston purchased the stationery side. (Johnston did not last long; he went bankrupt in December 1893.)

Another bookseller who got his start at Hibben's was Robert Jamieson (son of the Rev. Robert Jamieson of New Westminster). Jamieson worked as a printer's devil on the *Dominion*

*Pacific Herald* in New Westminster and at the post office in Victoria before joining Hibben & Co. in 1883. He remained there until 1889, when he purchased John Bowerman Ferguson's B.C. Book and Stationery store at 61 Government Street and gave the business his own name. Already active in Victoria's theatre scene while a bookseller, Jamieson exited the book business in 1899 and eventually opened Victoria's first vaudeville house, the Grand, in 1904, and one of its first movie houses, the Crystal Theatre, in 1910.

Thanks to all of these booksellers—especially the “affable, courteous, generous” Thomas Napier Hibben, as one biographer described him<sup>2</sup>—and to others not even mentioned here, early Victorians were always well supplied with books. As *Dominion Illustrated*, a Canadian weekly, noted in its June 21, 1890, issue, residents “were never without the literature of the day; all that was necessary was to ask for it and it was found to be in stock. Few, if any, western cities or towns, however enterprising they might be, can tell such a story. But then there settled in Victoria a class of educated people, who could not dispense with that mental food which is necessary to the refined intellect.”

By the time this article was printed, Hibben was dead, stricken by a heart attack on January 12, 1890. The firm he founded carried on in various forms until the 1960s, but traces of Victoria's earliest booksellers otherwise disappeared as new enterprising individuals, attracted by the same goal of dispensing the “mental food,” fed the literary appetites of Victoria residents right up to the present day.

1. The article following this takes a closer look at one of Marshall Wilder Waitt's publications.
2. “Thomas Napier Hibben,” in *British Columbia from the Earliest Times to the Present: Biographical*, vol. 3 (Vancouver: S.J. Clarke Publishing, 1914), 694.

~ Lana Okerlund is a Vancouver-based book editor and writer with an interest in local history. Her blog, *A Most Agreeable Place* ([www.agreeableplace.com](http://www.agreeableplace.com)), is dedicated to sharing the stories and images of British Columbia's early bookselling scene.