

## *A greater good*

WE ALL LOVE a good book, whether “good” is a question of its appearance, design, content, or simply its significance at a given moment. A local bookseller memorably turned up her nose at some volumes I purchased years earlier at a local shop since destroyed when the restaurant next door caught fire. I was ready to let them go, but the bookseller wouldn’t hear of it: with an eye on the market, she wanted to stock recognized classics rather than cult favourites. What qualifies as good to one person isn’t always appealing to another.

Yet even market value isn’t always an indicator of worth: Toronto bookseller David Mason lamented as he dispersed his stock this summer that even a 90% discount seemed little incentive to buyers. “Doesn’t anyone want good books?” he asked in a lament for the state of the trade. “This is a carefully weeded stock built up over many years. It’s very depressing for me since I thought enough of these same books to originally pay more than the current selling prices for them.”

Sitting in an 850-square-foot apartment, I find myself often giving thought to the state of collecting. I have less room for my books than I would. I keep what I need to fuel my imagination and, unlike 25 years ago when I was building a personal library that would supplement local resources, can access a wealth of material via the Internet that accentuates the value of what local collections offer.

Ralph Stanton touches on this shift in the lead essay to this issue, which focuses on the importance of institutional collections, and in particular the Norman Colbeck collection of 19th-century and Edwardian poetry and *belles lettres* at the University of British Columbia. “Standard knowledge may flow through the Internet, but if you want access to what is not commonly available, if you want to push back the frontiers of knowledge into the unknown, then

you need to go to where uncommon knowledge is found,” Stanton writes, an encomium to the importance of collections that speak to a sense of place, and provide context and reference points for those adrift on the vast sea of online content. Cultivating those collections is another matter, however, and this is where the work of Norman Colbeck provides an illuminating case study.

Contributors to this issue of *Amphora* have enough to say about Colbeck and the collection that bears his name. What stood out for me as this issue came together, however, was the man’s focus as well as the idiosyncracies that came into play. Similar themes emerge from the lives of the various collectors Stanton discusses. Profiles of collectors in previous issues of *Amphora*, including Robert Coupe and John Meier Jr. point to similar tendencies.

Nicholas Basbanes’ discussion of bibliophilia terms it a “gentle madness,” but the same may well be said of collecting generally. Yet unlike the madness of hoarding (of which some private library holders stand accused), bibliophilia is not undisciplined collecting for its own sake but rather towards a greater goal. A prime fulfilment of the collector’s impulse comes when the collection becomes available to others. I remain grateful to the several private collectors who opened their libraries to me during my work towards *Robert W. Service: A Bibliography* (2000), allowing me to access a far richer store of material than I could have assembled on my own.

While this issue of *Amphora* celebrates the Colbeck collection, with its dazzling array of materials to delight bibliophiles and scholars alike, we can be thankful for the many others that give us a better understanding of our past and inspiration for the future.

~ Peter Mitham, editor