

Nets A' Drying, Woodcut by Leonard Hutchinson

ALCUIN BOOK & KEEPSAKE PRICES ON THE INTERNET

Richard Hopkins



HIS ARTICLE was originally intended to indicate to Alcuin members and collectors how much their Alcuin publications were fetching on the open market. It also turned out to be useful in comparing online secondhand and antiquarian book selling services. I entered “Alcuin Society” into nine Web-based book selling sites. In alphabetical order these were: Advanced Book Exchange (ABE), Alibris, Bibliofind, Bibliophile, BookFinder, Bibliopoly, E-Bay, ILAB the Web site of the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers, and Worldbookdealers. The results of my searches were as follows:

ADVANCED BOOK EXCHANGE (www.abebooks.com) – 80 entries, two of which were for the Alcuin Press in England;

ALIBRIS (www.alibris.com) – 1 entry;

BIBLIOFIND (www.bibliofind.com) – 11 entries, 2 of which were for the Alcuin Press in England; 9 are duplicates of entries on ABE;

BIBLIOPHILE (www.bibliophile.net) – 3 entries; all duplicates of ABE entries;

BOOKFINDER (www.bookfinder.com) – 13 entries; 12 are duplicates of ABE entries; 1 is a duplicate of an entry on ILAB;

BIBLIOPOLY (www.bibliopoly.com) – 0 entries;

E-BAY (www.ebay.com) – 0 entries;

ILAB (www.ilab-lila.com) – 9 entries, 1 of which was for the Alcuin Press in England; 7 entries are duplicates of ABE entries;

WORLDBOOKDEALERS (www.worldbookdealers.com) – 1 entry which appeared in no other database.

E-Bay is not a particularly good place to go looking for secondhand or antiquarian books. It sells everything from soup to nuts and older books just get lost in the shuffle. I must admit, however, to overhearing at least one prominent Vancouver antiquarian bookdealer speaking on the phone and telling his listener that he sells more books more quickly on E-Bay than he does on Advanced Book Exchange!

Alibris is not a great place for secondhand or antiquarian books. It sells new books and older books and I feel that new books are their main thrust and interest. Moreover, the one Alcuin Society title they listed, *Belinda or the Rivals*, was listed at a whopping \$68.95 US funds, while the average price on the Advanced Book Exchange (ABE) was closer to \$24 US.

Which brings us to the two great rivals for selling secondhand and antiquarian books on the Internet: the Advanced Book Exchange and the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers. ABE makes the following offer to visitors to the site:

Access the bookshelves of thousands of used, secondhand, rare, and out-of-print booksellers around the world. With over 8800 independent dealers in our network, shopping for hard-to-find books just got easier.

The Web site of the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers explains its unique niche in the world of bookselling in the following way:

Welcome to the site of the ILAB-LILA. It speaks for twenty nations and 2000 leading booksellers throughout the world. Its emblem stands for integrity and professionalism in the rare book trade worldwide.

The league publishes and upholds a code of practice based on the wide experience of all its national associations. The code is binding on all members. It is a mark of the success of this code that disputes are rare. If disputes should arise, the League mediates, and its authority ensures that judgments are implemented. The League presides over the network that links the antiquarian booksellers of the world.

The ILAB-LILA is obviously a challenger to the Advanced Book Exchange for the role of paramount secondhand and antiquarian book selling service in the world. If that is not completely clear from the general introductory message of ILAB, then it becomes much more clear in President Kay Craddock's welcome to the Web site:

The challenge before the League is to promote the ilab-lila.com search engine to the community at large as the world's best on-line source for rare and out-of-print books, offered for sale by booksellers who not only know their business, but also are prepared to guarantee their expertise. In this era of unprecedented open access to book collector[s] by simply becoming an on-line bookseller, when anyone can

virtually put out a shingle and trade with no experience needed, nor necessarily acquired, it is important that those affiliated to the ILAB are clearly identified as being different.

ILAB clearly throws down the gauntlet to ABE. How then did the two services do when they were examined for their listings of Alcuin Society books? The answer is that the Advanced Book Exchange did immeasurably better than the ILAB database: 78 listings of Alcuin Society publications on ABE as opposed to only 8 listings on ILAB. Not only that, fully seven of the listings on the ILAB site were duplicated on the ABE site. The only unique item listed on ILAB was the keepsake *The Song of the Queen Bee*.

Members of ILAB want to sell their books and so they take the intelligent step of listing their offerings on both sites. If ILAB represents only 2000 booksellers and ABE represents some 8800, and if ILAB members also list their books on ABE, it stands to reason that ABE is always going to be a better site to locate more copies of more books. This does not, of course, take into account the quality of the description of the books offered, the quality of the service, etc., only the factor of sheer accessibility to printed publications. I don't know about you but my first stop for checking on secondhand and antiquarian books is inevitably going to have to be ABE!

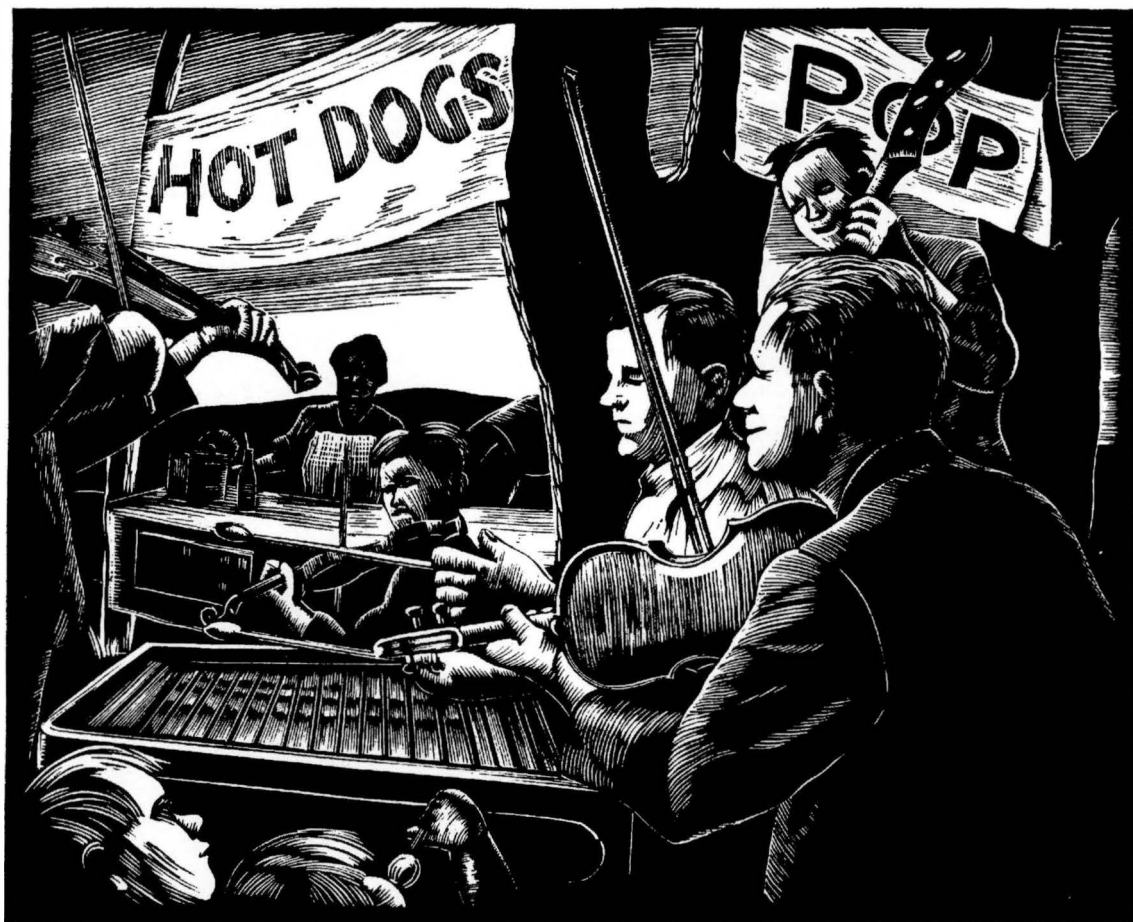
But enough of these service comparisons. What kinds of prices are Alcuin books and keepsakes fetching on the Internet? I list the publications I found on the net in alphabetical order by title below. I first report on the total number of copies for sale, then provide the range of prices asked by booksellers (all converted to US funds), then the mean average price (computed by totaling up all the prices and dividing by the number of copies of the book) and then the median price (computed by taking the middle price of all of the prices). The mean price is sensitive to extremely low or high prices; the median price is much less sensitive to price extremes. Please note that I have removed all entries for copies sold by John King, the Vancouver based, authorized Society bookseller for all Alcuin publications. Also please note that prices fluctuate slightly from day to day, particularly in light of the constant changes that occur in the value of the Canadian dollar rated against the US dollar.

Americae Pars Borealis – a single copy only – \$15.60 US;
Belinda or the Rivals – 6 copies/ \$11.23–\$150 US/ \$44 mean/ \$24 median;
Diary and Narrative of Richard Henry Alexander – 7 copies/ \$25–\$75 US/
 \$42.30 mean/ \$40 median;
Ear Reach – a single copy only – \$125 US;
Flowers in Heraldry – 5 copies/ \$75–\$125 US/ \$102 mean/ \$110 median;
Hand to Hand – 2 copies/ \$11.23–\$13 US/ \$12.12 mean/ \$12.12 median;
Hetty Dorval – 4 copies/ \$40–\$115 US/ \$53.75 mean/ \$50 median;
In Praise of Scribes – 4 copies/ \$28.08–\$95 US/ \$61.54 mean/
 \$61.54 median;
Mystique of the Detective Story – 3 copies/ \$14.56–\$45 US/ \$31.52 mean/
 \$35 median;
Self Portrait of a Bookseller – 2 copies/ \$14–\$25 US/ \$19.50 mean/
 \$19.50 median;
A Short Account of A Northwest Voyage – 2 copies/ \$29.64–\$75 US/
 \$102 mean/ \$110 median;
Song of the Queen Bee – a single copy only; \$25 US;
Substance of A Journal (John West) – 2 copies; \$100–\$150 US/
 \$125 mean/ \$125 median;
A Theatrical Trip for a Wager – 11 copies/ \$45–\$150 US/ \$71.80 mean/
 \$62.39 median.

Ear Reach was the third chapbook published by the Society. There were 126 signed copies, of which 26, lettered, were reserved for the author George Bowering, and 100, numbered, were for sale. The 40 page chapbook was printed by letterpress by Peter Quartermain at the Slug Press. Peter was a member of the board of The Alcuin Society at that time.

It should also be noted that there were five states for *Flowers in Heraldry*, “A Specials,” “B Specials,” “Ordinaries,” paperbound “Unnumbered Copies,” and loose sheets. Two listed as “A Specials” bear a price tag of \$125 US while the three copies listed at \$25 US are understandably examples of the unnumbered copies.

An example of one Alcuin Publication, *Belinda or the Rivals*, shows how it pays to do your research first before committing funds to buy a book. For *Belinda* you could pay anywhere on the Web from \$11.23 US to \$150 US for a single copy. True, the \$11.23 copy is Ex-Libris complete with library stamps, and the \$150 copy is one of 20 special copies bound in 1/2 leather. But you can also buy a copy described as “Fine in slipcase” for \$23 US or another described as “Very Good+ condition” for \$20 US. *Caveat emptor!*



Workers' Picnic, Woodcut by Leonard Hutchinson