

Let's Go to the Fair!

Bookman-about-town RICHARD HOPKINS dredges up details on Vancouver's antiquarian book fairs held between 1983 and 1990.

THE ANTIQUARIAN BOOK FAIRS that took place from 1983 to 1990 enjoy almost legendary status among Vancouver booksellers. Witness the fact that when asked about the fairs, some of the more senior booksellers who participated could not remember clearly whether there were two, three or four such fairs.

Thank goodness libraries and archival institutions preserve our past much more accurately than human memory! This review of the history of those early fairs is facilitated by an archive of material that bookseller Stephen Lunsford donated to Special Collections and Rare Books at the Simon Fraser University Library.

Lunsford's archive provides definitive, factual information on the times and places of these earlier book fairs. All five were held at the Robson Square Media Centre (now the University of British Columbia's downtown campus).

Victoria also hosted antiquarian book fairs in the 1990s, while Sidney revived a Vancouver Island book fair in 2002 and 2004. There was also a contingent of 10 booksellers at a more general Vancouver Waterfront Antique Show at the Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre in October 2000. This history, however, will focus on the five book fairs that took place in Vancouver between 1983 and 1990.

Sticking with factual information for the moment, it is interesting to note the names of those booksellers exhibiting at the 2010 fair who also participated in the earlier fairs: Cameron Treleaven, Ron Fryer, Steve Lunsford, William Matthews, Brendan Moss, Don Stewart, Terry Stillman, Michael Thompson, Bjarne Tokerud and Joyce Williams. There is still life, it would seem, in the old gang yet!

On a sadder note, here are the names of some of Vancouver's pioneer booksellers who are no longer with us: Joe Lawrence of Lawrence Books, Steve McIntyre of McIntyre's Books and William Hoffer of Hoffer's Books.

Not quite as sad is a list of those booksellers who have since closed down their bookstores: Anian (Nanaimo), the Okanagan Bookman (Kelowna), Poor Richards (Victoria), Terry Rutherford (Vancouver), and Ed Bowes of Bond's Books (Vancouver).

Perhaps not sad at all, just regrettable in their absence from the present fair, are Odean Long of the Haunted Bookshop in Sidney, David Beaver of Albion Books in Vancouver, Lance McCaughran of Criterion Books in Vancouver, Tom Williams of Tom Williams Books in Calgary, Peter Gray of Renaissance Books in Victoria, George Nicholson of Pooka Books in North Delta, and George Carroll of Carillon Books in North Vancouver.

To finish off this list-making, it can be recorded that some of the other Canadian dealers who participated in the earlier fairs were D.E. Lake and David Mason from Toronto and Richard Spafford from Regina. Among the U.S. booksellers that took part were three California shops: Serendipity Books from Berkeley, Brick Row Books of San Francisco and the Heritage Book Shop from Los Angeles.

But enough of fact-finding and listing. To capture some of the flavour of these earlier fairs, it a welcome relief to turn to a spirited first-hand account of the first fair, in 1983, by bookseller Stephen Lunsford:

Sitting in Number Five Orange one afternoon, Bill Hoffer and I argued about whether there



A display at the latest Vancouver Antiquarian Book Fair held in October 2010.

would be any point in trying to organize an antiquarian book fair in Vancouver. Bill wanted a fair to show those guys in the East that we could put together a book event every bit as good (and presumably better) as the established Toronto and Ottawa fairs; I argued that we would be best served by aligning ourselves with the relatively new Seattle fair, and make a Vancouver fair part of the West Coast circuit—California’s big fairs, Seattle, and Vancouver in succession. By the third beer (and sixth stripper), we had pretty much committed to announcing in various places the date for an upcoming fair. Then Bill buggered off to England, glibly describing to everyone the great Vancouver antiquarian book fair that was going to happen in March, 1983, only nine months away.

The gestation period proved just barely long enough to result in a fully-formed brainchild. With the help of Cap Munro, Terry Rutherford, and George Carroll, I managed to get together some commitments from friendly members of the trade, enough, at least, to ensure that the fair had *some* exhibitors. Then Jake Chernofsky, of the now long-defunct *AB Bookman’s Weekly*, got behind the idea and began promoting it, giving us some free

advertising and promising a special “Vancouver Fair issue” of what was then the most widely-circulated organ of the book trade. Think, “no Internet,” you younger members of the trade. Soon, we found ourselves—well, not overrun—but at least with sufficient commitments from dealers in Canada, the US, and Great Britain to potentially make the fair more than a provincial non-event. Bill had been talking up the great advantages of the upcoming fair as a place to buy well (the Canadian dollaretté was valued only slightly above the peso) among the English dealers, who began to slaver at the thought of a holiday that paid for itself in great un-scouted books—in a country that spoke English, to boot.

We tried to make the fair as attractive to exhibitors as possible, not requiring deposits (I ended up bankrolling the initial expenses), promising a venue with the atmosphere of a bookshop (the Robson Square Media Centre exhibit area filled with built-in-place shelving), a bar open during the entire fair (booksellers do take to a bit of refreshment), free lectures and exhibits (including a printed-on-the-premises keepsake by our friends at Barbarian Press), extensive radio and television coverage, and an included party at the close of the

fair (live music followed by a meal at our then-favourite Chinese restaurant—Yang’s on Main). We built it, and they came.

As the dealers arrived at the Media Centre, they were amazed by the long rows of dark shelving (thanks once again, Jacques and crew for your all-night effort to get it erected), and crowds already gathered to watch the set-up prior to the fair’s opening. A few local customers actually tried to scan shelves as dealers set up, using binoculars from the overlooking mezzanine in an attempt to spot sought-for treasures. And the opening night’s line was long—nearly a thousand folks showed up. Sales were brisk, expectations were surpassed, dealers made finds and deals that assured them they could pay for their hotel rooms, and generally the success of the fair showed in the ruddy cheeks of the dealers by closing time.

Further history may be gathered from the pages of *AB Bookman’s Weekly*, once the Bible of the antiquarian book trade. The first article was

written by John Pollock (May 28, 1984), the second by Jake Chernofsky (March 10, 1986). Chernofsky records the fact, by quoting Bill Hoffer, that the first Vancouver fair was actually planned for 1981 but had to be postponed until the later date of March 1983. Hoffer also alludes to the fact that the first fair in 1983 involved a fair amount of flying by the seat of the pants:

When we first thought of a fair, scheduled for March, 1981, and abandoned it in favour of a later date, we were so concerned that visiting dealers would suffer disaster that we made plans to billet them in our own apartments and houses. The cost-cutting tradition of that first fair survives to this day, with no work contracted out if it can be done by a bookseller or a bookseller’s friend.


Despite its unorganized beginnings, the first fair did eventually stumble through to success, according to a summary comment made by Bill Hoffer, who in fact completely missed the first fair since he was away on a buying trip in England: “The day the fair ended I received a telegram that said simply ‘1,300 paid admissions,’ and was happy to be remembered in the confusion of the tear down.” John Pollock concludes in his article that “when it was all over, the consensus, was to do it all again in 1984.”

Chernofsky begins his article on the third fair by contrasting the second fair held in 1984 with the first fair held in 1983:

By the second time around, the committee had set policies, established a budget and, most importantly, capitalized on its earlier practice of having booksellers attempt to do as many tasks themselves rather than contract out for services.

Writer John Pollock highlights this same theme in an article about the first fair:

Perhaps the secret was to do most everything themselves, rather than contracting for services. They put up the shelves and booths, they hired and trained the security personnel (where did they ever find a security man



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with a perpetual smile?), they wrestled the cases of books into the correct booths, they purchased refreshments and set up a serving table, they distributed publicity and answered the hundreds of phone calls that resulted. And when the exhibitors had even minor problems in setting up or packing up, they were always immediately available with whatever assistance was needed.

As Pollock notes, however, all was not toil and struggle in the organization of the book fair. There were definitely lighter moments along the way:

Some of their phone calls were amusing.

“Why is the Vancouver Aquarium having a book sale, are they going to be selling books about fish?” (This confusion [with Antiquarian] was not isolated; a truck driver delivered the fair’s paper bags to the Aquarium.)

“Do you have a list of every book that will be at the Fair?”

A family feud nearly broke out in the booth of Helen R. Kahn, Montreal. Seems one visitor, while perusing Helen’s catalogue, told his companion, “I told you we never should have let Uncle Harry sell Dad’s collection, it says right here that View of Canada is worth \$1,500!”

Shortly before the noon Saturday opening, William Hoffer gave a splendid imitation of Peter Pan as he led a procession of mostly younger folks. “Don’t worry,” said one bookseller, “they’re just librarians.” “Fine,” said another, “but did anyone check their pockets for rubber stamps?!”

Barney Hagar (Poor Richard’s Books, Victoria) reported a lady asking for “... books with nice black-and-white pictures I can tear out for my children to color.”

Chernofsky’s article also reports on the third fair, held in 1986, including news of a special tribute:

In addition to the usual presentation of dealers’ stocks, the fair will also offer two special features this year. The University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, and the Vancouver Public Library will

VANCOUVER & ANTIQUARIAN BOOK FAIR

VANCOUVER PUBLIC LIBRARY
310 WEST GEORGIA STREET
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 15TH, 10AM TO 9PM
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 16TH, 10AM TO 5PM

Americana	Fine Nations
Antique Maps & Prints	History
Art Books	Illustrated Books
Author Signed Copies	Literature
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A SUMMARY LIST OF DATES, SPONSORS AND PARTICIPATING BOOKSELLERS

.....
March 24–26, 1983

Sponsored by the Antiquarian Booksellers
Association of Canada, Western Chapter
“Twenty-odd exhibitors,” according to
AB Bookman’s Weekly

.....
March 22–24, 1984

Sponsored by the Vancouver
Booksellers Association
34 booksellers from both the U.S.
and Canada

.....
March 14–16, 1986

Sponsored by the Vancouver
Booksellers Association
50 booksellers from both the U.S.
and Canada

.....
March 11–13, 1988

Sponsored by the Vancouver
Booksellers Association
33 booksellers from both the U.S.
and Canada

.....
March 9–11, 1990

Sponsored by the Vancouver
Booksellers Association
36 booksellers from both the U.S. and
Canada

all be representing items from their Rare Books divisions; information about the collections, or about rare books in general, will be available from representatives of these institutions as well as throughout the fair.

Another special feature this year will be a demonstration of an Albion press by Jan and Crispin Elsted; this will include the printing of book fair keepsakes on the press.

This year's fair has been dedicated by the Book Fair Committee to Steve McIntyre, and his colleagues have established a fund in his memory. The following tribute and explanation is by Charles MacDonald, assistant librarian at Simon Fraser University:

“When Stephen McIntyre died of cancer, the Vancouver book trade lost a link with its historic past. From the '30s till his death (with time out for wartime work in a shipyard), Steve had been part of the trade, first as a scout but chiefly as a dealer. While he did specialize—Science Fiction (decades before the birth of SF shops), Business, the Press, Maritime—in truth he was a wide-ranging generalist. A respected leader of the Vancouver book trade, he was a remainder of the romantic age when the selling of books was pursued more as a way of life than a business.

After Steve died it was entirely appropriate that his proteges, the book dealers of Vancouver, set to work with the history department of Simon Fraser University to establish an annual prize to honor his Memory. The award goes to Simon Fraser's top history student and we have set ourselves the goal, working with family, friends and colleagues, to have it established on a permanent basis.

A prize in memory of a book dealer should not be a medal or a scroll; The Stephen McIntyre Book Prize is money, given with the injunction that it be spent on second-hand books.”

The end of this brief history returns to Stephen Lunsford's account of the earlier fairs and a brief explanation of how draconian new

rules and regulations at the Canadian border brought affairs to a resounding halt:

The next few years saw the Vancouver Antiquarian Book Fair fall into the rhythm of what was then a circuit of fairs in North America. The fair changed, of course, but continued to draw enthusiastic participants and crowds. The death knell for the fair sounded with the introduction of the GST only three months prior to what would have been the fifth fair. The confusion surrounding the GST entry requirements for exhibiting dealers—and the fair committee's inability to assure foreign dealers their stock wouldn't be held up at the border—pretty much killed the participation of any but local dealers, and thus undermined the primary reason for the fair to exist at all, to bring dealers and collectors together who might otherwise not have that opportunity.

Lunsford completes his deliberations on Vancouver book fairs on a much happier and more optimistic note: “After all the intervening years, and the utter transformation of the antiquarian book trade by the introduction of the Internet, I am delighted to see that the old fair will be reincarnated—with a new purpose, new structure, and new faces. And lots of exciting books.”

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~ Richard Hopkins is Assistant Professor Emeritus at UBC's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies. He previously wrote about efforts to save Canada's literary heritage sites in *Amphora* 152.

