

JOE'S PASSION: LAWRENCE BOOKS

John Alexander

LAURENCE BOOKS opened its doors in 1983 on Dunbar Street in Vancouver, British Columbia. The dream of owning an antiquarian bookshop had finally come true for Joe Lawrence, a retired professor from the University of British Columbia. Joe taught the History of the American West—what he called “the Cowboy Course”—for over twenty years. Having hung up his tenured spurs, he opened Lawrence Books.

“My husband dreamed of opening this shop for over fifty years,” said Mrs. Joan Lawrence. “He was in his teens when he decided that one day he’d become a bookseller. His first few years in the trade were challenging, because the bookshop’s clientele was small. But they were exciting years nonetheless. Joe was happy to be in the business, even in lean times.”

From the beginning, Joe’s selection of books was large, with numerous subject areas and subdivisions. He had collected his stock for decades before opening the shop, and rarely missed a yard sale or church bazaar that featured books for sale. Eventually the earliest customers became regular browsers and buyers. They also sold Joe their collections, or exchanged them under his generous trade-in terms.

“Joe started the shop with books that his dad gave him,” said Mrs. Lawrence. “History was always their big interest, along with militaria.” At the back of the shop is a separate room crammed with books on World Wars One and Two, the U.S. Civil War, great military leaders and famous generals, and espionage. Works by and about Sir Winston Churchill line the shelves around the doorway. Military buffs come from across Canada to look for items common and scarce, and usually find something that they want, but did not necessarily expect to find.

Over the years Joe’s need for more space became urgent. In 1989 he moved the shop to its current location on the corner of Dunbar and 41st Avenue.

“Originally he wanted to have a shop where his friends could join him for coffee,” said Mrs. Lawrence. “The shop grew, however, and we got very busy. The idea for coffee get-togethers faded pretty quickly. It’s amazing how much time it takes to run a bookshop. We found that the housekeeping was time consuming, with so many shelves to maintain in some sort of order. And the processing of new

stock – selection, purchasing, and pricing – was always a fulltime job. But fun.”

A large section of the shop is dedicated to paperback fiction, from classic novels to mass market romances. Browsers spend hours working their way through the shelves, which offer new titles every day and never thin out. In fact new stock lies in boxes all over the place, and people are welcome to rummage through them if they wish. Collectors of rare Penguins and Signet Books have discovered treasures in Joe’s paperback fiction room, at prices that are not much more than they originally were.

When Joe died in 1999, Mrs. Lawrence and their daughter Anne decided to take over the shop.

“Anne and I kept the business going, because Joe loved it so much”, said Mrs. Lawrence. “Many people tell us that they can’t conceive of a Vancouver without Lawrence Books, which is gratifying. And we can’t stop growing. We need to develop our selection in new subject areas to satisfy our customers, so we’re always interested in acquiring new stock.”

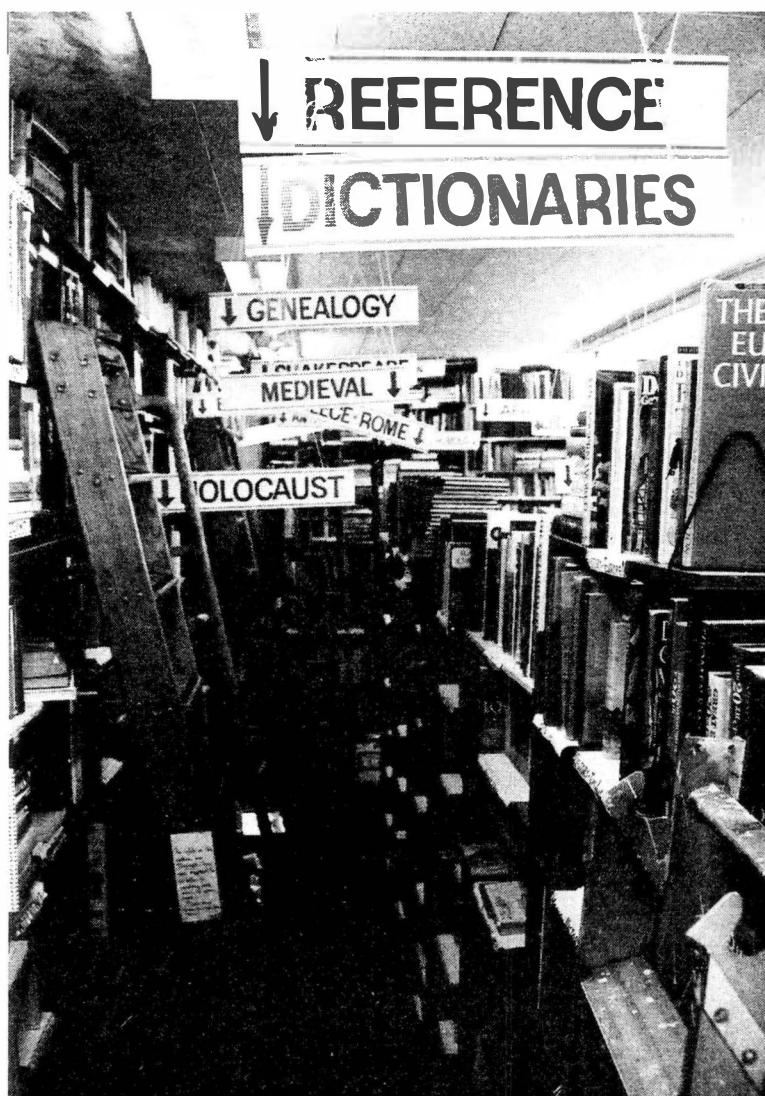
One area that has grown significantly is science fiction, a personal interest of Anne Lawrence. Gardening, travel, mysteries, and classic fiction are areas of perennial interest to many long-term customers. There is always shelf space, however, for books of the moment, trendy titles that attract business for a year or two before losing their appeal.

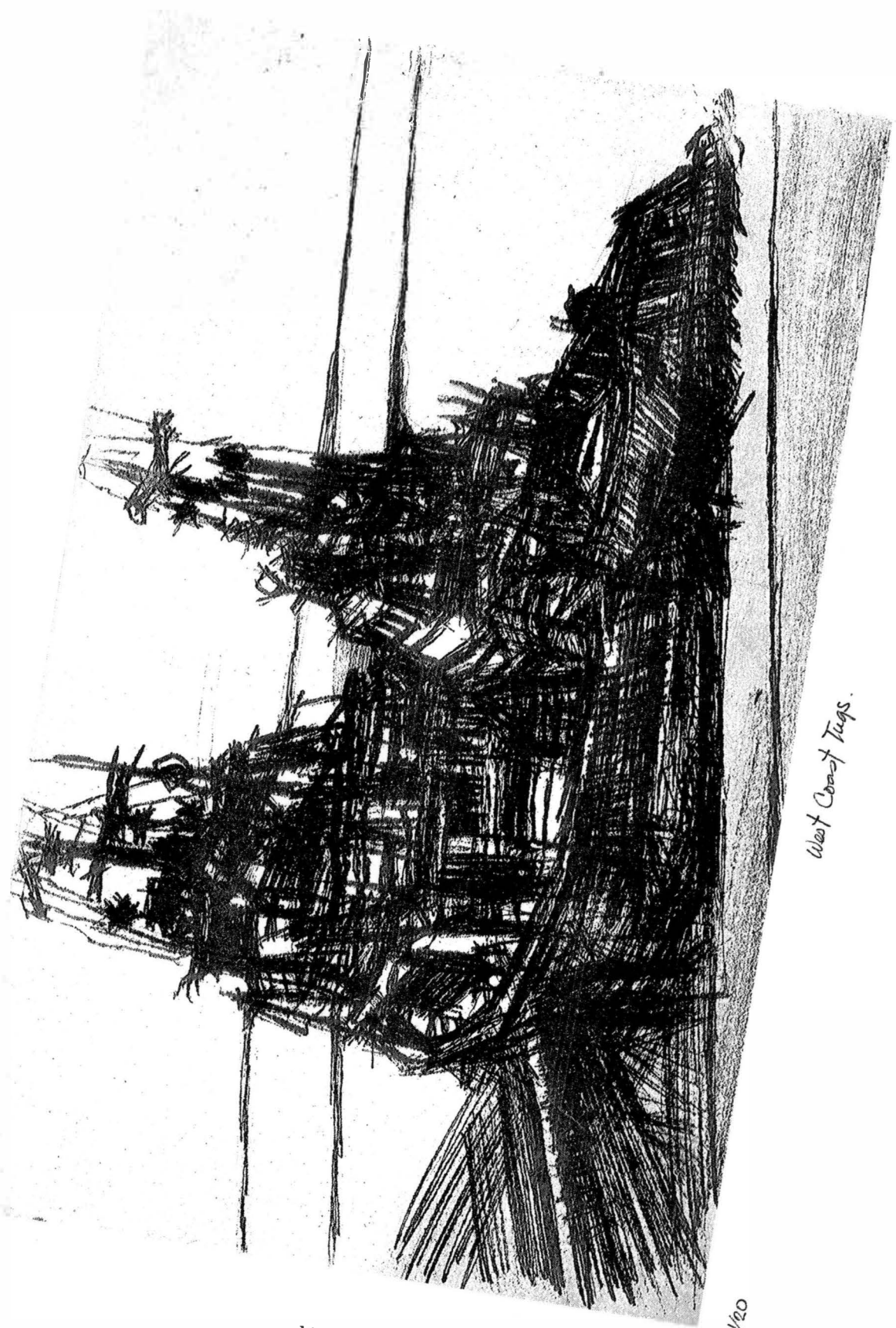
“Currently, books on Afghanistan are selling well,” said Anne. “But who knows how well they’ll move a couple of years from now? There’ll be some other topic to grab everybody’s attention, and doubtless we’ll be selling customers something new and unexpected. That’s the nature of our business, and one of the main reasons that my father dedicated so much time to it. Bookselling is never dull.” Years ago, Anne asked Joe Lawrence to open another shop.

“I told him that I’d run the second location, and he was thinking about it, but he passed on,” said Anne. “ But it’s not as if we’ve ever been forced to shrink the stock. When we moved into our current shop, we had more room, and found that we could expand in different areas. My father really enjoyed kids and children’s literature, and developed the stock in that area. We don’t have as many kids’ books these days, but we still attract a lot of young customers.”

When asked about the shop's success, Mrs. Lawrence suggests that it was Joe's determination that made the shop an institution for Vancouver's book-buying public. But there are other reasons. The shop is close to the University of British Columbia and several other schools. Professors and high school teachers have been recommending Lawrence Books to their students since the shop opened. And next door is a large grocery store.

"The grocer offers food for the table," said Joe in 1989. "But I offer sustenance for the mind and heart. No wonder this corner is so busy!"





Abigail Bell

West Coast Tugs.