

THOUGHTS ON ANTIQUARIAN BOOKSELLERS

Gary Sim

I READ WITH GREAT INTEREST the article in *Amphora* 134 by Edwin H. Bush titled “The Future of Used Bookselling: An Observation”. The article might aptly be titled “The Furor of Used Bookselling”, since the business is in flux for a number of reasons including computerization, on-line bookselling and changing buyer demographics. Both of the main topics of Bush’s discussion – what is a book and how will books be bought and sold – are quite relevant to my current personal projects. I will ruminate about the buying and selling of books in this article, leaving my thoughts on the question of “what is a book?” to a later date, the Editor permitting.

In my spare time I am a collector, a reader, a researcher, and a writer interested in the art history of Vancouver. I purchase current and antiquarian art books, art exhibition catalogues, and ephemera from a wide variety of sources, including antiquarian booksellers, estate auctions, flea markets, yard sales, and on-line via the Internet. The Internet is the clear winner in terms of which is physically easiest to do, most efficient in terms of time spent searching for items, and having a 24x7 shopping window of opportunity, clothing optional. There are also many millions more books listed on-line than any one store has on hand. This still doesn’t guarantee you’ll find the book you’re looking for.

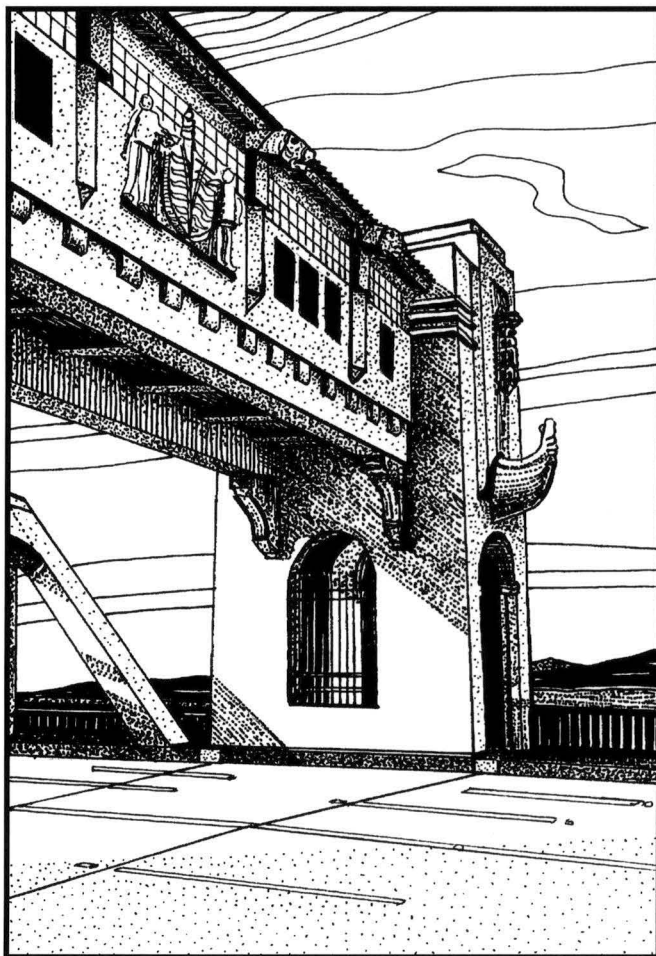
The Internet also has disadvantages, including the fact that you are out shopping with the entire world, items can be quoted in expensive foreign currencies with unknown exchange rates, and an order may incur noticeable shipping costs to get to your door. You are also dependent on the dealer’s description of the item, and must hope that what you receive is what you were expecting. Getting your payment to the dealer can also be problematic, an exercise in trust in not only the dealer but also the sending of money or credit information through the Internet or by mail.

Purchasing in person allows you to inspect the books before buying them, and even perhaps do a little bargaining with the seller. Bargaining seems to not exist on the Internet, the stated price being the only “offer” outstanding. However, given the perceived competitiveness of the Internet book-selling arena, it’s possible that many listed book prices are already discounted to a “sale” price. I have found that many books I ordered blindly on-line arrived in better condition and were more impressive than their on-line descriptions (and price) had led me to expect.

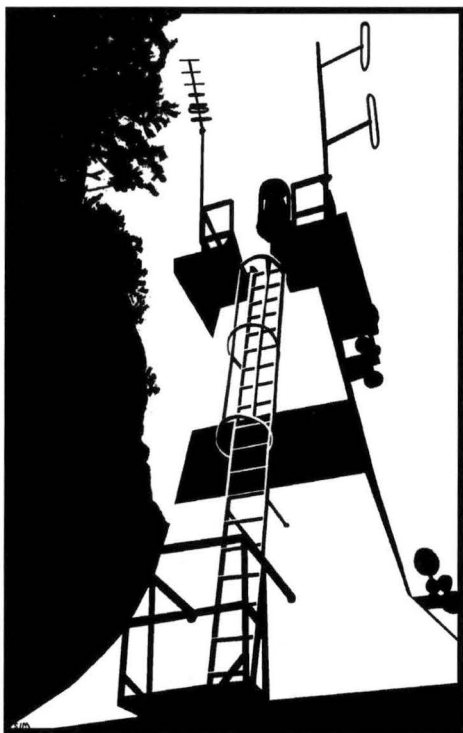
The sellers, when met in person, have a wide range of personalities, from the friendly and welcoming to the proudly cranky curmudgeons who run a sort of S&M bookstore where abuse of the helpless customers and staff is the general rule of the day. Behavioral disorders of this sort are filtered out by e-mail and direct order web pages; in fact antiquarian booksellers seem a polite and genteel folk when they communicate in writing. In person some provide interesting tales and information and are quite helpful, while others lurk silently like funnel-web spiders in dark little nooks and crannies at the back of the shop, stirring only slightly when prey enters the shop.

Lacking during Internet purchases are the fragrance of old bookstores, the annoyances of finding the store closed when you arrive (especially in mornings, it seems), the occasional toppling pile of books or unreachable shelf once you're inside, unusual shelving and sorting methodologies, and clouds of dust arising from exploration of little-used shelves. One also needn't jostle and rub elbows with fellow shoppers, squeezing past each other in too-tight aisles. Antiquarian bookstore patrons are often even more unusual than the bookstore owners, as they may only infrequently emerge into the light of day to go book-hunting. If you enjoy observing and meeting interesting people, though, this would be a benefit of in-person shopping.

I've discussed the topic of on-line book buying (and selling) with a number of antiquarian booksellers and others. No clear consensus emerges; some dealers like to sell on-line and others don't. Some see it as a threat to their business, others increase their business by using it. My own observation is that booksellers who list their stock on-line sell books



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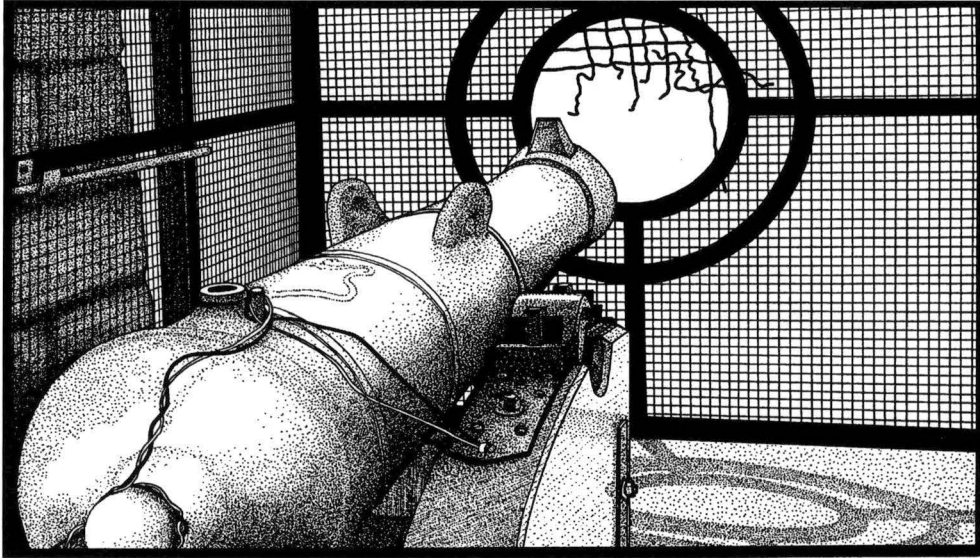
Prospect Point Lighthouse © Gary Sim

on-line. Booksellers who don't list their stock on-line complain that they don't sell anything on-line. Perhaps they listed a little stock by way of experiment. Essentially, the paradigm has shifted. The booksellers once had a "monopoly" if you will, based on the physical limitations of the customer travelling to visit different stores. You could only visit so many, and had to curry favour in the local ones. Now the buying opportunities are global. I'd like to personally thank all of the dealers who have spent their time listing books on-line, I have found many little treasures on your web-sites. Please list more.

What was originally an industry-wide impediment, the lack of computerization, has to a large extent resolved itself. Even the most reluctant antiquarians have at least come up with an e-mail address, if not a web site. Having avoided most 20th century technologies other than electricity and the telephone, though many have yet to make the transition to Point of Sale computer systems. I get much better customer tracking from the local pizza parlour than I do from bookstores when I spend a hundred times more money. Mind you, the pizza people don't have to list details of thousands of different pizzas.

After spending that money over a number of years I have finally partially trained one antiquarian dealer to call me when he acquires what he should know I'm looking for (I can hear the dealers all start cackling away at this). They wouldn't have a clue what the sum of my purchases from them has been over the years, though, with no tracking system in place and my purchases being made from any number of staff members. A summary of the titles I've acquired is not compiled. None of them makes any effort to "market" me with promotional newsletters or notices of books sales, or discount coupons for the next purchase. Once again the fast food folks leave antiquarians in the dust.

On-line book ordering, by its very nature, almost ensures that you



Nine O Clock Gun © 2004 Gary Sim

won't order a book from the same store twice, as you are shopping "in" thousands of stores. It is difficult to build up relationships with a large group of dealers scattered all over the world, having bought one book from each of them. Looking at it from their side, though, some "tourist" came "into" their store and bought something in the first "visit." I may "come back" again. I can guarantee that the books I recently bought from Amsterdam and Australia would not be on my shelf if they weren't listed on-line. Some dealers send catalogues with shipments, others e-mail information about their web sites.

On-line searching, although usually done through a very simple interface, can achieve better results with some creative searching techniques. Try using just part of the title or author's name. The more exact your search is, the less likely it is that you will find what you are looking for, even if it is actually listed on-line. Instead of looking for R.S. Sherman, or Sherman, R.S., or even Ruiters Stinson Sherman, try just Sherman. You will get more results listed, but they will include everything you would find in the more detailed searches. Plus you will often find exciting titles that you never knew existed and suddenly need to have. On-line book descriptions often contain more information than the book itself would provide to the prospective purchaser. These descriptions can be printed out for reference.

If the book you are looking for is titled "Montreal Museum of Fine Arts formerly Art Association of Montreal - Spring Exhibitions 1880 - 1970," for example, try looking for "Montreal Museum" or "Spring Exhibitions." Searching for the exact title will often exclude listings that are



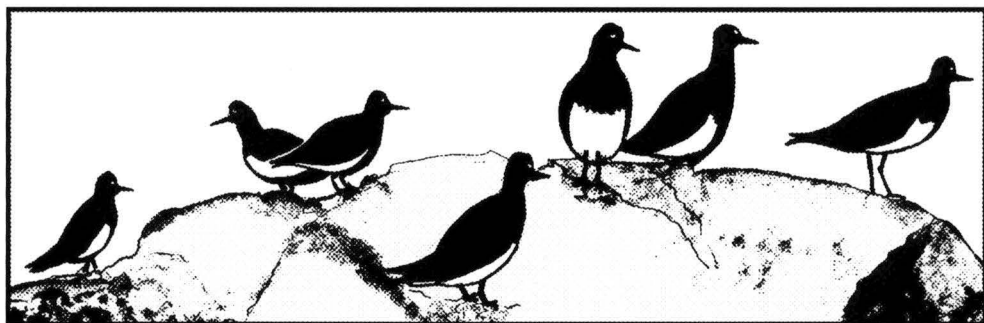
Lawn Bowling © 2004 Gary Sim

less than identical to the title you've typed, but which refer to the same publication.

If you find that book, and it's available from Amazon, keep looking. I ordered it from them and eight months later was still getting e-mails asking if I still wanted it shipped when they found it. I finally cancelled my order and suggested an alternative delivery location. I recently found the book listed by Atticus Books in Toronto, and had the volume (in excellent condition) in my hot little hands within a week. The price was higher than I would have hoped for, being a "bottom-feeder" at heart, but it was fairly priced, accurately described, well-packed (see below), and very nice to have. Thank you.

The pricing of books on-line is a continually hot topic with booksellers, and they will promulgate no end of theories about how the Internet is either good or bad, usually generalizing from the specific to make their point. There are indeed new and unknown sales dynamics at work in the on-line marketplace, with prices ranging from the ridiculously low to the ridiculously high for any given book. This confuses everyone, especially those who know what the book usually sells for. Using the filter of a search for a single book, one can get a sense of the seething chaos of the listings.

The main complaint from dealers seems to be that prices on the Internet are too low, that they can't make any money at it. There are a number of answers to this. Firstly, complaints about low prices fall on rather deaf ears when it comes to me, as I enjoy a bargain. Secondly, the prices listed on-line are the prices the dealers want to list. They can list their stock at exactly the price they want, it doesn't have to be low. The listings change continuously, today's high price may be tomorrow's low price. Thirdly, not all book-listers are equally educated in the worth of their stock, either locally or globally. Fourthly, if prices are ridiculously



Savary Island Black Turnstones © 2004 Gary Sim

low, then other dealers can purchase the items for their stock, and mark up accordingly.

It is wonderful to not only find a rare book listed on-line, but to actually be able to comparison shop between a number of copies of it listed in various conditions and printings, and select the desired level of acquisition – from reading copy or reprint to pristine signed first edition. The price is the key to completion of a purchase, but it is only one of many factors involved in the decision. One must also become familiar with the arcane jargon of the book description, and the various ways different dealers describe their stock.

Some book descriptions are very lengthy. It would seem to me more useful to list more books with shorter descriptions. Some long listings still fail to record all information of interest about a particular book. I recall one listing that went on and on at length about chips, nicks, tears, dings, creases, and other damage. I read it a number of times before I realized that all the listed damage was to the dustjacket; the book itself was only described in the first three letters of the lengthy paragraph: VG+. Ironically, the dealer hadn't noticed the page in the back of the book where the volume was numbered 114 of 1,000. I ordered the book for a fraction of its usual price, hoping (successfully) that it was one of the limited edition copies.

The successful order of a book on-line allows the distant bookseller to indulge in what seems a fairly common affliction in the trade – the urge to overpackage – that is otherwise stifled by in-person shopping and the resulting paper or plastic bag. Although on occasion a pamphlet ordered from afar might arrive in a single envelope, most books arrive with at least four or five layers of wrapping. The current record holder for a book I received in the mail is eight layers of packing, using various materials including padded envelope, bubblewrap, cardboard, brown paper, newspaper and a plastic bag, all held together with multiple layers of tape. There is a certain charm in deconstructing packages like that, and interesting things like newspapers from far-away lands emerge to be read in idle moments.

The packages themselves end up as works of postal art on the outside, their surfaces decorated with numerous colourful stamps, airmail or fragile stickers, customs declarations, inspection stamps, and other signs of their passage from halfway around the world to my shelves. Well, almost to my shelves. The Canadian Post Office is almost completely unable to deliver parcels when I am home, and I inevitably have to trudge six blocks to the nearest postal outlet to collect anything otherwise received the day before, and then trudge back home with the booty. On the other hand, I appreciate that the Post Office doesn't try harder to stuff deliveries into my little mailbox, and on this count a firmly packaged book is truly appreciated. For smaller items like exhibition catalogues, I've actually requested heavier packaging by the dealer to forestall this possibility.

And so you leave me, inspecting my latest package and deciding whether to start opening it with a knife, a pair of scissors, by peeling away the tape, or pulling the rip-strip if there is one. My tales of purchasing antiquarian books either in person or on-line concluded, I recommend both methods. Keep buying, keep reading, and happy hunting!



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