

NEWS AND NOTES

Richard Hopkins

Here is my very favourite bit of book news this time around:

The Bizarre World of Bonkers Book Collecting

“Dealers in these tomes are laughing all the way to the bank,” writes Sam Leith.

“Here’s one,” says Brian Lake. “*Criminal Life: Reminiscences of Forty-Two Years As A Police Officer* by Superintendent Bent.” His face creases with mirth.

Anyone who has ever pulled a Christmas cracker and, merry with port and clothed in an inadequate paper hat, provoked a fusillade of groans by reading out the motto enclosed, will be familiar with the genre: *The Haunted House* by Hugo First; *Skiving Off* by Marcus Absent.

Except that this is not a cracker joke. In 1891, the unfortunately named Charles Bent published, in all innocence, his memoir of a crime-fighting life. He can have had no idea of how, more than a century on, his book would be prized by antiquarian booksellers for its frontispiece rather than its contents.

According to the organisers of this year’s Antiquarian Book Fair at Olympia, west London, interest among collectors in what have become known as “bizarre books” – the quirkily titled, the inane of subject and the unfortunate of author – is rising fast.

Next month, several dealers will be offering this ephemera alongside the more traditional fare of literary first editions and books about exotic travel.

Mr. Lake, 57, the proprietor of Jarndyce Books, opposite the British Museum in London, is a pioneering

aficionado of bizarre books.

“The idea started at a book fair in York 10 years ago,” he says. “We came up with the idea of dud books. Every bookseller has a book that he’s had stuck in stock for years.

“We decided to do an exhibition of all these books that were unsaleable rubbish – but it expanded, because people started to bring along books they thought were funny.”

Mr. Lake went on to write *Bizarre Books*, a miscellany of the odder titles, and when he reopened Jarndyce after renovation work three years ago, included a window display of the best from his personal collection. It has become, he says, a local landmark.

Although he specialises in 18th and 19th-century novels, Mr. Lake says: “When I’m in a boring bookshop, my mind switches to looking for bizarre books. I was in East Anglia recently, in an absolutely hopeless bookshop. I could feel, I’m not going to buy anything for stock. And then, there was *Lost on*



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Brown Willy. Beautiful. 3 pounds 50 with discount. Have it!”

Many offer straightforward opportunities for a schoolboy giggle. *Drummer Dick's Discharge*. *The Romance of the Beaver*. *Flashes From the Welsh Pulpit*. *Play With Your Own Marbles*. *The Big Problem With Small Organs*. *Fine-Weather Dick*. *Scouts in Bondage*. All of these are real publications, and are to be found on or off the shelves of an antiquarian bookseller near you.

But the market for bizarre books is not limited to the double entendre. There are also those whose appeal is their arcane subject matter, a delicious proleptic irony, or, for want of a better expression, sheer “bonkers-ness.”

There's *Fish Who Answer the Telephone*. There's *Lady Loverley's Chatter*. There's *Progressive Afghanistan*, published in 1933. There's *The History of the Concrete Roofing Tile*, a perfect read for a romantic weekend. There's 1934's *Correctly English in Hundred Days*. (“This book is prepared for the Chinese young man who wishes to served for the foreign firm. It divided nearly 190 pages. It contains full of ordinary speak and write language.”)

Or there's *You Can Make a Stradivarius Violin* – the optimistic work of a man who confessed himself trained in neither making nor playing violins, and whose name was not Stradivarius but Joseph V. Reid.

Elizabeth Strong, of McNaughton's bookshop in Edinburgh, says there is value in even the wackiest titles. “It's social history – a tremendous picture of life as it was lived.” She mentions *The New-Poor Cookery Book* (1932) which suggests menus to help down-at-the-heel house-

holds that have to struggle by with only two maids – and titles such as *The Stocking Knitter's Manual* and *Be Clever With Leather*.

“You can buy really interesting things for not too much,” Strong says. “It's worth pointing out to people that you can collect without being rich as Croesus.”

Roger Teglow's shop in Macclesfield specializes in chess books, pamphlets and the period 1500-1850, but he, too, cherishes his sideline in bizarre books. “These books with odd titles are books that amuse me. Last year I had one called *Piles for Civil Engineers*.

“There's a growing interest in collecting these things: it's very cultish, and very English. It's a market that gets book collectors away from this passion for Harry Potter, and ridiculous things like that. There are ridiculous prices on those things. But these are fun – and they are usually never more than 20 to 30 pounds.

I ask Brian Lake, tentatively: “Do you ever read them?” He pauses, then laughs. “I try not to,” he says. I did read *The Fangs of Suet Pudding* once. Second World War thriller. Very weird. It's astonishing what gets published.”

I was inspired by this brief article to keep my eyes open for unusual or bizarre books whilst making my rounds of the local thrift stores in quest of a bargain. So far I have turned up several titles perhaps the most interesting of which is *Flushed With Pride: The Story of Thomas Crapper*, the inventor of the modern flush toilet, a true bargain at only \$1.99. I gave it to my 14 year old son as a whimsical joke, but much to my surprise and delight he quickly read the entire tome with considerable interest and re-

ported back to me that it was actually quite a good read!

The following bookish quotation was passed along to me by one of my more bookish students, Peggy McIsaac: “A true Reader, that is, one to whom books are like bottles of whiskey to the inebriate, to whom anything that is between covers has a sort of intoxicating savour.” Walpole, Hugh. *Reading*. Garden City, N.Y.: George H. Doran, 1926, p. 43.

Congratulations to all the winners of book prizes at the Society’s Biennial Antiquarian Book Roadshow this past April:

John Healey, Burnaby
(Belinda, or the Rivals)
Chris Trunkfield, North Vancouver
(Flowers in Heraldry)
Christine Dodd, Vancouver
(Flowers in Heraldry)
Faye Cooper, North Vancouver
(Canadian Settler’s Guide)
Juliana Pasko, Vancouver
(Belinda, or the Rivals)
Thomas Chan, Vancouver
(In Praise of Scribes)
Lorna Mulvenna, Vancouver
(Canadian Settler’s Guide)
Mrs. Amor Veneracion, Vancouver
(In Praise of Scribes)
Claudia Cornwall, North Vancouver
(Flowers in Heraldry)
Mr. N. C. Morrison, Belcarra
(In Praise of Scribes)

Congratulations are also in order to all of the publishers and designers who won awards in our 22nd annual awards for excellence in Canadian book design.

A complete list of the award winners for this year may be found on the Society’s web site at www.alcuinsociety.com. Just click on “Activities of the Society” to locate information on these well deserving books as well as information about the winners of past competitions.

Congratulations also to Alcuin Board member Eric Swanick and his colleagues at the Special Collections Division of the Simon Fraser University Library for acquiring among other recent collections the papers of Alan Twigg, Lisa Robertson, Caroline Adderson, and Smaro Kamberelli. Good timing Eric – since Caroline Adderson is this year’s winner of the B.C. Book Prize for fiction for her well received and well reviewed novel *Sitting Practice*.

News of Friends and Members

Rhonda Batchelor, a good friend of the Alcuin Society, has opened a new bookstore in Victoria, B.C., Lamplight Books. It is a cozy bookstore specializing in both paperback and hardcover literature including international fiction, literary biography, belles lettres, Canadian literature and an excellent poetry section (many of these titles signed). Lamplight Books is located on lower Johnson Street at 551A Johnson Street (in the Paper Box Arcade). Call 250-381-1430.

Member **Caryl Wyse Peters** of Frog Hollow Press has just published a chapbook entitled *Tracery & Interplay* by poet Matt Robinson. Matt is a young poet from the Maritimes and his new book features linked poems about

hockey. The 28-page chapbook has been printed on Mohawk Superfine Text. Tracery & Interplay has been printed in an edition of 100 signed and numbered copies. The price is \$30. For further information visit the Frog Hollow website at www.froghollowpress.com or write to Caryl at Frog Hollow Press, 1758 Armstrong Avenue, Victoria, B.C., V8R 5S6.

Member **Andrew Steeves** of Gaspereau Press was the well deserved winner of not one, not two, but three Alcuin awards for distinguished book design! Here is a brief excerpt from a Gaspereau press release:

Gaspereau Press is delighted to announce the recognition of its books in the Alcuin Society's 22nd annual juried book design competition. Robert Bringhurst's *Ursa Major* and Jan Zwicky's *Wisdom and Metaphor* won first prize in the categories of poetry and non-fiction, respectively. J.J. Steinfeld's *Would You Hide Me?* won honourable mention in the category of prose fiction. *Ursa Major* was typeset collaboratively by Andrew Steeves and Robert Bringhurst. *Wisdom and Metaphor* and *Would You Hide Me?* were designed and typeset by Andrew Steeves, co-owner of Gaspereau Press.

Upcoming Events to Watch For

The Society has just received notice about a week of book arts and calligraphy workshops at Lethbridge Community College, August 15th to 22nd called Kalligraphia 2004. We don't have a great

number of details but do know that we located a web site by putting "Kalligraphia 2004" into Google. We also discovered that Alcuin member Martin Jackson has designed some absolutely smashing t-shirts for the event that are available for purchase. The contact person for the event is Connie Ferguson, email furgasonc@hotmail.com

The **2004 DIY Book Festival** has issued a call for entries for its annual program, which celebrates the success of independent authors and publishers. Award winners will be honoured at a ceremony held on October 2, 2004 in Los Angeles in conjunction with the 2004 DIY Book Festival, now in its third year. **The DIY Book Festival** will consider self-published or independent publisher non-fiction, fiction, children's books, how-to, photography/art, comics, 'zines, fan fiction, and e-books released after January 1, 2002. All entries must be in English and have been self-published or issued by an independent house that has published less than 50 works since the entry cut-off point.

Our grand prize for the 2004 DIYBF Author of the Year is \$1000 cash and a flight to Los Angeles for our gala awards ceremony. Genre category winners will receive a combination of books, software and cash awards, including a review in *DIYReporter.com* and free admission to the DIY Convention events.

Entry forms are available online at www.diyconvention.com or may be faxed to you upon request by calling 323-665-8080. You can also enter the contest by phone by calling 323-665-8080 between 10am and 6pm Pacific time.

The **Art of the Book '03 Exhibit** is coming to the McPherson Library Gallery at the University of Victoria, B.C., from October 9th to 27th, 2004. Organized by the Canadian Bookbinders and Book Artists' Guild (CBBAG), it is their fourth juried exhibit and celebrates the 20th Anniversary of the Guild. It covers the whole field of book arts including Fine Binding, Artist's books, Box making, Fine printing, Paper making and Calligraphy. Comprising 72 pieces by 67 book workers from Canada, the U.S.A. and the UK, the work ranges from traditional to contemporary, including new technologies.

The exhibit opened in Toronto in September 2003 and now travels to seven other locations across the country until the end of 2005. It offers an opportunity to see the finest work being done by the Canadian book arts community as well as CBBAG's distinguished foreign members.

More information is available from Susan Corrigan or Sheila Smith, the CBBAG curators, at cbbag@web.net or Caroline Riedel, University of Victoria curator at criedel@uvic.ca.

Up and Coming Alcuin Society Events

Sunday, September 26th

Join us at the Vancouver Public Library for the celebration of books and reading called Word on the Street. We will have two tables there, one for general information about the Society and a second featuring our award-winning book design books for the past year. Lots of books for sale at this event and many, many author readings.

Saturday, October 30th

Wow – the first ever Wayzgoose for the west coast! A “Wayzgoose” has been traditionally defined as “an annual feast of the persons employed in a printing office.” Our version will feature a veritable feast of limited edition and fine press books from many contemporary B.C. publishers. Try this on for size: Barbarian Press, Cotton Socks Press, Cowan & Tetley, Charles van Sandwyck Fine Arts, De Walden Press, Editions Lucie Lambert, Fox Run Press, Frog Hollow Press, Greenboathouse Books, Heavenly Monkey, Mother Tongue Press, Pie Tree Press, High Ground Press. A free event once again with our friends and partners, The Vancouver Public Library.

Saturday, November 6th

Join us for the Alcuin Society Annual Auction of Canadian Books. These are copies of new books that were submitted to our annual book design competition. Some of the books are duplicate copies of titles that actually were prize winners in the competition. Buy a number of handsome books just in time for Christmas giving. If you don't show up to this event, see if I care; all the more books for me at real bargain prices! This is a noon, lunch time event held at the University Golf Club. Come for lunch and the auction, or if you can't make the lunch come along later for the auction itself. Many worthwhile books are auctioned off either by way of an oral auction or by way of a consecutive silent auction.

Whether you are a bold, brassy type or the shy and retiring type, there are terrific bargains for everyone!

List of New Members

Thomas Clail, Niagara Falls ON
Soren Henrich, Victoria BC
Ross Lindskoog, Edmonton AB
David Devine, Vancouver BC
David Brydges, Edmonton AB
Jason Dewinetz, Victoria BC
Susan Fraser, Vancouver BC
Daniel Wilson, Egmont BC
Gary Sim, Vancouver BC
Nicholas Collins, Vancouver BC
Susan Huber, Saltspring Is., BC
Mary Crane, Victoria BC
Roy Leeson, Victoria BC

Jeri Bass, Victoria BC
Michael Cahen, Gabriola Is. BC
Emily Post, Port Coquitlam BC
Hazel Pigott, Senneville QC
Robert Coupe, Burnaby BC
Marsha Drake, Vancouver BC
Dan Leab, Washington CT, USA

Welcome Back

Wesley Bates, Clifford ON
McGregor Hone, Lumsden SK
Celia Duthie, Galiano Island BC



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