

MURDOCH'S BOOKSHOPPE OF MISSION, B.C.

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WHEN I THINK OF BRIAN AND ANN MURDOCH, a well-known title by Robertson Davies comes to mind: "What's Bred in the Bone." Ann's father always wanted to have a bookstore and, I imagine, he talked about it a lot. When he retired, he opened a bookstore in Manitoba. Later, he relocated to B.C.'s Okanagan area, where he opened another bookstore. Brian's father, after he retired, had a bookstore in Chilliwack, B.C. throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. When his landlord pulled the lease he moved, but to a less successful location. At just that time Brian and Ann made a timely decision to move to B.C. from Alberta. They bought a portion of the stock of 'Stone Soup Books' in Chilliwack and shortly afterward, in 1993, they opened their own bookstore on the Main Street of Mission, B.C.

Brian is one of the proponents of the philosophy that a combination new-and-used bookstore is better than just-a-new or just-a-used bookstore, so he set the store up to provide selected new titles to complement their used book stock. He concentrated on areas of Canadiana and British Columbia history, books on First Nations, Literature, and Children's Books, with a spattering of other books on general subjects. A small back room in the store was, and is, devoted completely to secondhand books, while the larger front room contains a happy mix of both. Over the years Murdoch's Bookshoppe has maintained this mix but a concern with profit margins has meant that the portion of new books has gradually dropped to less than ten per cent.

In 1997, Brian began to issue catalogues of books for sale. He found this very satisfying and continues to do so today, despite the general demise of bookseller's catalogues caused by that upstart new cousin, the internet. Brian retains catalogue sales because he strongly feels that he can still target specific audiences with specific-subject catalogues.

As always, some catalogue customers who live close enough to visit by car, still do. A person may come to pick up a particular title from the catalogue, to look at a few other listings, and then browse around the store. Often he or she will end an enjoyable morning or the afternoon in the bookstore with perhaps a half a dozen unplanned for purchases. (*Amphora* readers may find it enticing to look for at least one catalogue this year from Brian and then feel encouraged to shop at Murdoch's Bookshoppe.)

As well as at the storefront, Brian began to sell on the internet in 1999,



first on eBay, then more on Abebooks. He also searched for other book matching services online. He's happy to sell pricey or somewhat obscure books online where the shop can access thousands of buyers around the globe who may be eager to snatch them up. Few of those types of buyers live in the Fraser Valley however. While online selling is an opportunity for some extra money that can't be ignored, Brian says the internet sales are totally unpredictable. Though the Murdochs have experienced some good monthly sales online, they don't rely on them. Instead they concentrate on the customer in the store.

Three comfortable chairs—one in the front room, two in the back—allow customers to sit down and peruse books at leisure. Like all good bookstore owners, the Murdochs are happy to take customers' lists of wants and try to find out-of-print books for them. Customer satisfaction is important at Murdoch's Bookshoppe.

Brian says that the Christmas season and other gift-giving occasions are good times for them. Many customers ask their advice about what books to buy for family members. It's not uncommon to hear: "You know what Dad (or Mom) likes to read. Can you suggest something?"

Brian and Ann Murdoch are the throwback middle-aged bookstore owners who want nothing more than to become Golden Age bookstore owners and maybe have their grandchildren working summers in the store with them. They enjoy selling books and they cling to the hope that enough book buyers will survive the barrage of technical options in their lives and hold on to that selfish treat of being allowed to touch as many books as they want in Murdoch's Bookshoppe.

Brian admits that the supply of good used books is a challenge for him. Book scouts who used to buy books very cheaply at garage sales and thrift stores and sell them for a reasonable profit to him, now sell the books themselves online. Many other people who were uninterested in bookselling now see they can sell online for very little effort and appreciate a good income, so the sources of used books are declining in number. More people now look for the same books. Brian still does have the advantage that some people who come into the store to sell books, sometimes invite him into their home to buy them. Often this is preemptive of a move to downsize their homes, or because an estate has books that must be dispersed to the beneficiaries in the family. These situations are usually a bookseller's best opportunities to purchase books. They can

also be the biggest waste of time if one goes out to evaluate a library only to find several other bidders are there, or that the best books have been withdrawn by the family with only textbooks and uninteresting books left in the collection.

When I asked Brian for a humorous anecdote concerning his store, he provided the following:

“A woman phones and asks me if I have a copy of *Darwin and the Beagle* by Alan Moorehead. I confirm that I do. She and her husband are coming out from Surrey to get it. A few hours later, a couple around sixty years old come in the store and the husband says, “We’re here to pick up the book *Darwin and the Beagle*.”

“Before I can say much more than ‘Hi,’ the woman has launched into a long story about how they came across this title, knew they didn’t have it in their collection, and went right down to their closest big-box bookstore and asked a clerk if a copy of it in any edition was available. The clerk looked in the animal section of the store, checked their store computer and said, ‘Nope, must be out of print.’ The couple were so disappointed because, you know, they collect every title they can find on their favourite type of dog, the Beagle.

“I say, ‘Well, I’m sorry you had to make the long drive to find this out, but I’ve got good news and I’ve got bad news. I have four different editions in paperback and hardcover of Moorehead’s book, *Darwin and the Beagle*, that’s the good news’. ‘Oh, joy!’ she said.”

“The bad news,” I continued, “is that it is not a dog book, but rather a story of Charles Darwin and the little ship that carried him around the South Seas in search of species to help prove his Theory of Evolution.” ‘Oh, fizzle,’ she said.”

So we have yet another example that anyone can sell books but only some people know books. Bookstores like Murdoch’s Bookshoppe need to survive for just that reason alone.

Murdoch’s Bookshoppe is located at 33078 1st Ave., Mission, B.C. V2V 1G3; phone (604)826-9229; email: brian_murdoch@paralynx.com

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