

Criterion Books: A Shop Standard

Terry A. Stillman

Lance McCaughran of Criterion Books came forward to shake my hand. We hadn't seen each other for a while, close to a year I think.

"How are you doing?" Lance asked.

"Struggling along," I say, "how about you?"

"Gettin' by", he says.

Two stock answers from booksellers these days who are asked this common question in greeting.

"Business is slow," Lance adds, "slower than usual".

"Why do you think that is, Lance?"

He makes a face and almost spits, "Internet".

"Fewer customers?" I ask.

"For sure. And hardly any dealer sales. Especially American dealers; they just don't come up to Canada to shop anymore."

"Why's that?"

"Internet", Lance says. "Used to be, American dealers would put out catalogues, and they'd come up here and buy the same books from us all the time to put in their catalogues. Even if they only made ten dollars on a book, they'd always have it in their catalogue, available to their customers. These are specialist dealers I'm talking about mostly."

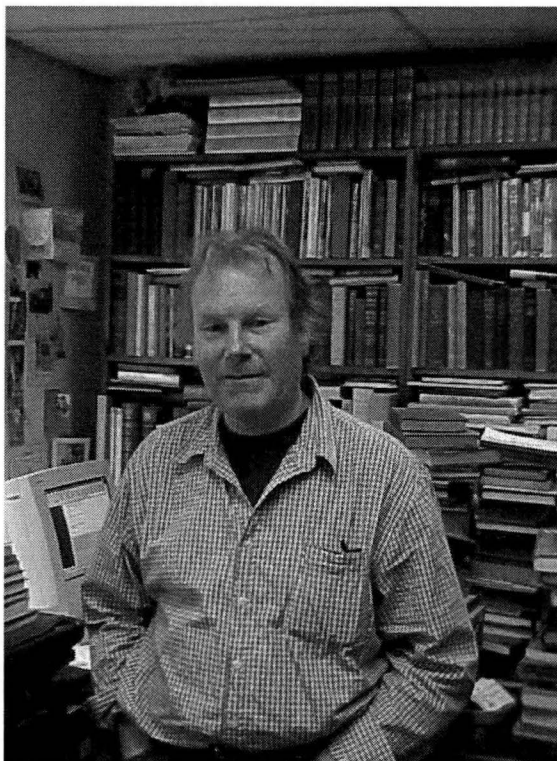
"Then what happened?"

"The Internet came along and three things happened: one, some dealers didn't think they could find a bargain in Canada anymore, partly because the American dollar was devalued, but mostly because they thought we Canadian dealers were all hooked up to the Internet now and our prices would have gone up on many books; two, part-timers started offering many general and low-end books on the Internet for a dollar or two—the bottom fell right out of a certain segment of the market; three, the dealers who still published catalogues began to suspect that their customers were just using them for reference now...customer would find a couple of books in the catalogue that looked interesting, then look them up on the Internet, find a cheaper copy and order it instead. Most dealers don't publish catalogues anymore; they'd be lucky to get their costs back."

"You don't sell online, do you Lance?" I ventured.

"Did for a while, but I got fed up and quit doing it. I'll be damned if I'm going to give all these amateurs free information with my listings!"

I looked around Lance's shop and took note of many of the titles on the



shelves. Lance has a quality inventory, even if twenty-five per cent of it is on the floor. Because his store is on the second floor, I think he loses a significant amount of sales as opposed to a street-level store at the same location. I asked him about this drawback.

“I don’t think it is much of a deterrent. You know that book collectors will go through cement walls to buy books.”

I heard a noise and turned to see a fiftyish man carefully making his way down one of the aisles toward us, successfully avoiding the piles of books.

“Can I help you find something?”, Lance asked.

“Just looking around mostly,” the man answered. “I’m a dealer from San Diego. Do you have an antiquarian section?”

“What I have is over there,” Lance pointed behind his desk.

“Okay if I look?”

“Sure, go right ahead.”

Lance and I continued talking while the man pulled out a few books and looked at them.

“Any old atlases?” he asked.

“No, sorry,” Lance answered.

“Okay, thanks.” The dealer took a couple more minutes wandering down the length of the shop, then down the stairs. He’d obviously been looking only for a few specific things. The other twenty thousand books there didn’t seem to interest him.

“All that way from home. You’d think the man would want to buy something, but he didn’t really seem that interested, did he? Why would that be, Lance?”

A slow smile appeared on Lance’s face and his eyes twinkled.

“Internet?”, I asked.

“Got it in one,” Lance said.

Lance opened his bookstore in the same location in March, 1992. The space had been empty for about a year, but previously Michael Thompson Books had spent a few years there, and before that it was a cookbook store, Chef Bell's. So there was already a precedent set for customers treading up that long staircase.

"I looked 'Criterion' up in the Gage dictionary, Lance, and it was defined as 'a rule or standard for making a judgment; a test'. Was that why you wanted to open a bookstore, to set a standard?"

"Nah, I just wanted to open a bookstore. Don Macleod said to pick something unique to call it, so I did. Besides, I don't think you can really set out to set a standard in a bookstore can you? A bookstore's stock simply reflects the owner's opinions and personality."

"Don Macleod was sort of your mentor wasn't he, Lance?"

"He was the guy who got me into the book business all right."

"So you can blame it on him?" I suggested.

"Yeh," Lance answered with a laugh.

"What advice did Don offer you?"

"Oh, Don Macleod had so many witticisms and he was full of insight into the book business. I remember two things he said to me in particular. One was if you open a used bookstore, you'll eliminate 99% of the population. You'll only get the interesting people in your store. The second was 'The best thing hasn't been found yet.' He used to say that a lot. 'Just remember, the best thing hasn't been found yet.' It gave a lot of beginning booksellers like me hope."

Don Macleod now lives on the Sunshine Coast and his name lives on in Vancouver as "Macleod's Books", owned and operated by Don Stewart since the 1970s.

"So, Lance, will you continue on with a bookstore and for how long?"

"I think I will soldier on. I'll keep my store open as long as overheads allow it and unless the book business completely dies. I like selling books. And the people are interesting. I liken it to travel. Especially downtown here, we get book buyers and collectors from all over the world. I usually have time to talk to them and they tell me about where they're from. Last week alone, I had some people in from Newcastle, and Australia, and half a dozen other places. The customers make the book business even more interesting than just the books alone. And the regular local customers become friends."



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“Do you think there will still be bookstores in five or ten years?”

“Sure, I think so. Because people who really appreciate books like to see them and hold them before they buy them.”

“Some people say that young people today aren’t buying books like their parents and grandparents did. Do you have any young collectors?”

“Yes, there are some. I have one young guy’s been coming in here for a couple of years. He’d be about seventeen now. That guy must have read more books on the sea than anyone else I know, and he can tell you all about it. He’s a really neat kid.”

“So, Lance, sounds like you’re still happy in the book business.”

“Yeh, I’d say so. It’s a great business. Sure, you can sit and despair for a day or two when sales are low. But then you sell some books. You turn around and buy some more, and it starts all over again.”

As I trudged down the twenty-six steps to the sidewalk, I thought maybe “Criterion Books” has set a standard afterall, or perhaps a belief or precedent for people who just want to open a bookstore. Lance McCaughran is yet another good bookman trying to keep the dream alive.

Criterion Books is located at 434 W. Pender St., Vancouver, B.C. V6B 1T5 (604) 685-2224. Open 11 to 5:30 Mon. to Sat.

Terry Stillman is the Proprietor of Stillman Books (establ. 1981) and resides in Maple Ridge, B.C. His web site is www.stillmanbooks.com