

Collecting vs. Entropy

Gary Sim

One of the pleasures of being a member of the Alcuin Society is the receipt of interesting and unexpected items in the mail. One such item, the recent issue of the *Journal of the Fellowship of American Bibliophilic Societies* (Fall 2005, Volume IX Number 2) contained an article that sparked my interest. The article was a review and discussion of the exhibition *Disbound & Dispersed*, The Caxton Club's Leaf Book Exhibition.

The subject of breaking books (taking them apart to use pages, illustrations, or maps individually) was discussed in the article written by Martha Chiplis, with reference made to other forms of book misuse, such as using them to wrap mummies. The Caxton Club's Leaf Books were limited edition books in which an early, original page (leaf) from a book - sometimes hundreds of years old - was bound into a new book.

A variety of arguments which I will not reiterate are put forth in the article and elsewhere to support either the breaking of books or the preservation of books in their original form. The main problem with early books, especially illuminated books or books containing early maps, is that the individual pages are often cumulatively worth far more than the book as a whole. Books are also broken or damaged through simple stupidity, ignorance, or necessity.

A worst case scenario would be the activities of Mr. Gilbert Bland, whose hacking and slashing of cartographic books across North America (including books in U.B.C. Special Collections) was the subject of the book *The Island of Lost Maps* by Harvey Miles, published by Bantam Dell in 2001. I highly recommend this book for a good read, albeit unsettling.

Willful human actions are of course not the only hazards that a book faces during its existence. Time and its minions destroy all. Fire, water, rot, insects, earthquakes and war all play their part in the destruction of books. Our best efforts are essentially futile in the face of this fact. Yes, some books (or their earlier equivalents such as papyrus scrolls or clay tablets) have survived for thousands of years. This is typically through sheer chance, not through willful human intervention and preservation, except perhaps in tombs. It seems that the more we collect and cherish, the more likely it is that entire collections will be destroyed. This is historically evident all the way from the Library at Alexandria burning down through to the ravages of World War Two on collections in Europe.

WWII also had its effect on local B.C. historical material. Paper drives were held to collect paper for re-pulping, so that men could go to war rather than work in the logging and paper industries. As a result, vast quantities of newspapers, magazines, and ephemera were collected and destroyed in the name of patriotism. Much of what remained was used as fuel to heat houses.

In my own research into local art history I have encountered far more examples of willful and stupid destruction of material than I would have believed possible. For example, the former Principal of one of Vancouver's oldest elementary schools spent a weekend with his kids cleaning out the basement of the school, filling 2 or 3 dumpsters full of 100 years of school history - books, pamphlets, school records, class records, student grades, enrollment forms, attendance summaries, school photographs, and so on. He just wanted a tidy basement. He kept one small box of records including, ironically, the school punishment register and the school strap that should have properly been used on him.

The tidying up took place at a time when the school's budget was so tight that the teachers ran out of photocopy paper for the year in early spring. Apparently the thought that 100 years of school records might have had a value never entered the Principal's head.

Another story was recently recounted to me about an appraiser being called to a house in West Vancouver, where the estate of an early Vancouver artist was being settled. The appraiser arrived to find a member of the family burning handfuls of original watercolour paintings in the fireplace to keep warm, the heat in the house having been turned off.

The last twenty years of work by historic Vancouver photographer Stuart Thomson was destroyed by his assistant June Sherman after his death in 1960. She simply didn't want to bother doing anything with the approximately 20,000 photographs other than throw them out.

In 1981, when June took possession of the family home following the death of her father, she took the opportunity to "tidy up" again. First, she smashed a collection of historic glass plate negatives made by her grandfather Ruiter Stinson Sherman (1865 - 1941). Then she threw out a large collection of early Vancouver artwork created by her aunt Maud Rees Sherman (1900 - 1976). Fortunately, a neighbour protested that action, and was handed a pile of paintings and drawings with the instruction

to “take them away”. Twenty-five years later I met the neighbour, who told me the story and passed the artwork on to me.

The destruction continues. A folio of original correspondence from the explorer Simon Fraser was only this year thrown out by an auctioneer in Victoria who didn’t have the wit or time to bother finding out what the documents actually were. Their estimated market value of \$50,000.00 is irrelevant compared to the permanent destruction of the important historical documents. They had not been copied, and are now lost forever.

More subtle forms of destruction also occur. My research at one point led me to read all early copies of *The B.C. Teacher*, the journal of the teacher’s federation. The library that owned the collection of journals had bound them into volumes. That was not a problem by itself, except that the library removed and threw out all the thick paper covers in order to produce thinner volumes that would take up less shelf space.

My problem with this was two-fold. Firstly, the covers contained information that I was actually seeking, advertisements for early school publications by the author I was researching. Secondly, the front cover contained the index to each issue. With the index discarded, I had to go through every issue page by page to find out what was inside. Could not a photocopy of the index have been made on thinner paper?

Interestingly, a Canadian university recently acquired one of the two remaining sets of the complete run of *Amphora*, the very journal you are now reading. Why, one might ask? Because their existing collection of *Amphora* had been bound into volumes that were difficult to read and to photocopy.

Institutions also microfilm original material and then discard it, or perhaps put the material in a book sale. I admit, I don’t like microfilm. I recall one visit to an archive, where I asked to see copies of *School Days* magazine, published by the Vancouver School Board from 1919 to 1930.

An archivist looked up the material, and then said to me “I’m sorry.” When I asked why she was sorry, she explained that they had not yet microfilmed the copies, and that I would have to look at the original magazines instead! Ah, the smell and feel of old paper, the pencil scribbles of an elementary school student from eighty years ago...in this case, the magazines were from the collection of Professor Emeritus

and former B.C. Deputy Minister of Education Walter Hardwick. The microfilm would have been a pale substitute.

In my research I keep meeting people who are wondering what to do with historic material in their possession. Should they try to sell it on the open market? Should they give it to a Library, a Special Collections, an Archive, or a collector? They want to know what it is worth, and whether it is worth keeping.

I am somewhat at a loss to give them a good answer. I know that many institutions regularly de-accession material as they run out of storage space. This gives collectors a chance to acquire material otherwise almost impossible to find, but the material seems to be as often thrown out as re-collected. It also provides no confidence that donated material will be kept, unless it is identified as being more valuable than other material.

The recent breakup of the library of Doris and Jack Shadbolt was distressing. It should have been moved in its entirety to a new home. Instead, it was divided up in a manner that will prevent the books, catalogues, and ephemera from ever being studied as a whole. Institutions across Canada garnered the more valuable items, then thousands of the remaining books and catalogues were sold to a second-hand bookstore in Vancouver.

I found out about this two or three weeks after the material “hit the market”, and rushed over to see what I could collect. There was a huge trove of art exhibition catalogues, for example, either written by Doris Shadbolt, about Jack Shadbolt, or dedicated to the Shadbolts by artists all over Canada. Original letters and other ephemera fell out of the pamphlets as I leafed through them, including a three-page document titled *Chronology of Conceptual Concerns*, detailing Jack Shadbolt’s art education and thought processes throughout his life.

There were also many art reference books, ranging from as far back as the 1930s when Jack began to collect. Scores of nature books, especially on birds, showed where he did the research that went into many of his artworks. Completely separate from the art books was a large collection of literature, including many attributed first editions from Canadian authors.

I collected what art books I could, although I was far from being first at the “feast”, and unable to acquire everything else from the collection that remained in the store. I felt a deep sadness, knowing that the library

had essentially defined the Shadbolts - who they had been, who they knew, what they knew, what they liked, and what they thought about. This intimate picture has now been shattered.

My own collection worries me. What if my apartment burns down while I am away (or worse, while I'm home)? What if the old plumbing blows out and floods my apartment, destroying books and paintings? What if insects are at this very moment nibbling away on some tasty 1928 exhibition catalogue? I decided that I would record information from such publications, and then donate them to somewhere safe and accessible to the public. I looked around for places to donate to, and finally decided to give to the Library at the National Gallery in Ottawa.

The collecting mandate at the National Gallery places their highest priority on early art education material, and their collection of publications from the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts (now Emily Carr Institute), for example, had gaps in runs of items such as the annual Prospectus. For many of the years they did not have a single copy, whereas their mandate was to collect three copies of each. I was able to fill in some gaps in the fond, and I know that those pamphlets are now far safer and more accessible to researchers than they were in my apartment.

I have been taken to task for sending the material "so far away", mind you, by those who feel such local material should remain local. I am confident that I made the best choice, though, and am proud to have added rare Vancouver material to the national collection.

Still, in the end, I feel that all of our efforts will be defeated by time. What will the National Gallery be like in 10,000 years? What further disasters will befall institutions, human beings as a race, or our planet? Ottawa is geographically more stable than the west coast is, but a fire or a major "building envelope" failure could wipe out my donations as surely as they would do so in my apartment. A political shift in funding could terminate the National Gallery Library. Hopefully Federal funding is more stable than Provincial funding.

Despite my rather fatalistic outlook, I do what I can to collect, connect, conserve, create, donate ... and hope.

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