

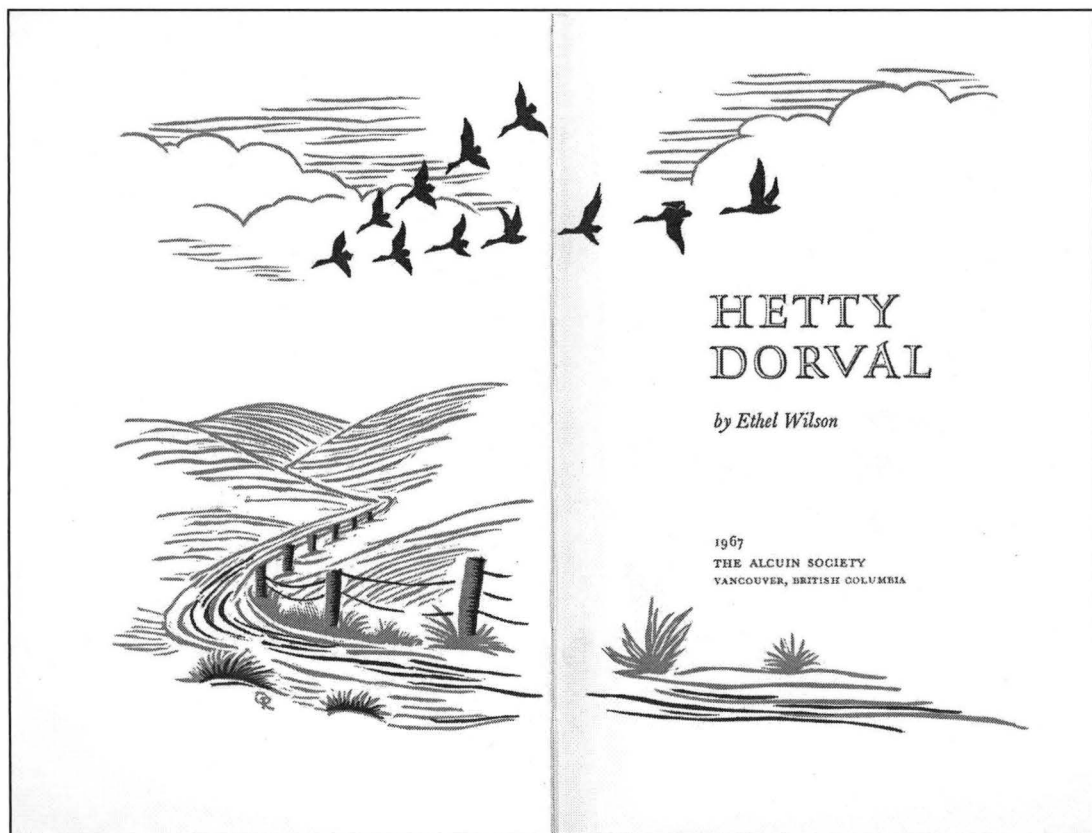
1965-1971

As we shall have attained our majority by the time this appears in print, it may be worth looking back to see what we have achieved over the twenty years of our at times precarious existence.

In 1965 by chance I came across a small bookshop on Denman Street with pretty run-of-the-mill offerings. However, in one corner there were some nice bits of typography on display consisting of greeting cards with lesser known poems and quotations under the imprint of the Grouse Mountain Press of North Vancouver, B.C. There was also a handsome booklet, signed and numbered in an edition of 100, of Berthold Brecht's *On Posterity*, plus a splendidly produced letterpress broadsheet printed in black and red with that spine-tingling passage from *Ecclesiastes* "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." It struck me as masterly typography curiously out of joint with everything else: swans nesting among ducklings.

It turned out that the bookshop with its backroom press was a loose partnership between the printer, Wil Hudson, and somebody whose name I have forgotten, who was supposedly in charge of the front end. The partnership broke up within a few weeks of my meeting Wil Hudson, who then managed to transplant himself to a dimly lit basement at 323 Cambie Street, Vancouver. I dropped by from time to time, simply to chat and to inhale the intoxicating smell of an old-fashioned print shop. Wil seemed to me one of the most naturally talented printers I had ever come across, well-read and almost entirely self-taught. His taste was unerring and quite distinctive, leaning on the best of typographical tradition and yet in many ways ahead of his time. Nature, unfortunately, did not seem to have matched its gift of raw talent with any kind of business sense or the persistence to see things through to completion.

It rapidly became apparent that Wil was heading for the rocks. He could not handle commercial printing in any volume, and he found it impossible to keep going on the odd order for elegant letterheads. He managed to complete a book sponsored by the Vancouver Public Library, *Douglas in California*, but it strained him to the limit. He was clearly going to starve in short order unless some way could be found to keep him alive.



Hetty Dorval, published in 1967, was the Society's second book.

It would be nice to say that the Society arose out of an act of spontaneous artistic combustion, a font of book lovers clamouring to give expression to a mutually perceived need. In fact it was dreamed up by me as an instrument to try to feed a worthwhile craftsman who did not show any signs of being able to do so himself.

The mechanics were fairly simple. I phoned about a dozen book people I thought might be interested and invited them to my house to mull over the possibilities. The meeting took place in the fall of 1965. Of the dozen invited, eight showed up. As I recall, it was all rather heady (is it my imagination, or was the beer in those days stronger?) and, true to the pattern of most foundation meetings I have attended over a lifetime, all were in favour—provided somebody (which turned out to be me) did all the work.

Towards the end of the evening, the hat was passed around and the Alcuin Society was founded on something like \$48. Even allowing for the fact that the buck in those days had a bigger bang, it wasn't much. Looking back, I shudder at the sheer audacity of it. But then, founding societies is a

kind of Anglo-Saxon sport; you only have to browse through *Whitaker's* to get some idea of the range of groups out to promote, or prevent, something or other.

We, that is Wil Hudson, Pam Crosse (another friend and well-wisher of Wil), myself and Wil's mean-looking cat called Erasmus, who produced two kittens called Arrighi and Tagliente, got through the winter laying plans whose sparkle was in inverse ratio to the squalor of our surroundings. I remember that Wil had a bunk behind the Chandler & Harris, and peed in the sink under the disapproving gaze of a bust of William Caxton on a shelf bracket just above the press. Wil called the press his "Iron Maiden." It all had a touch of Gorki's "lower depths," which, to me at least, was stimulating.

On or about April Fool's Day in 1966 we moved into an 8' x 8' "office" carved out of an unused nook behind the bar at the Vancouver Arts Club on Seymour Street. The rent was \$25 a month, and for that, in addition, all Society members got guest privileges at the club, which, at the time, had the best lunchtime conversation in town. It also gave us somewhere to hold annual general meetings, assuming we made it that far.

In that first year we produced the first two issues of a members' bulletin as a forerunner to the Society's quarterly, *Amphora*, in 1967. We also started on our all-important first book, *A Theatrical Trip for a Wager*, and, in addition, persuaded six prominent Vancouver artists to contribute their work towards illustrating a twelve-sheet portfolio of *Seventeenth Century Posies*, selected by me and written out by Anne Tresize, the Society's first (and to my mind still most impressive) keepsake.

Wil, single-handed, was turning out the book with just enough Kennerley type to set four pages at a time, at which point he would have to break up the form and distribute the type. If we had known what kind of undertaking it was to print 500 copies of a hand-set 280-page book, with Lombardic caps in a different colour for each chapter heading; with Wil going in for what the Germans call *Feingeisterei* by claiming all the ascenders and descenders needed hand-filing for a better fit; and with barely enough money in the kitty to buy stamps—well, we would have given up before we started. As I recall, the best part was discussing the illustrations with Sam Black. We leafed through the manuscript over a bottle of Scotch, and

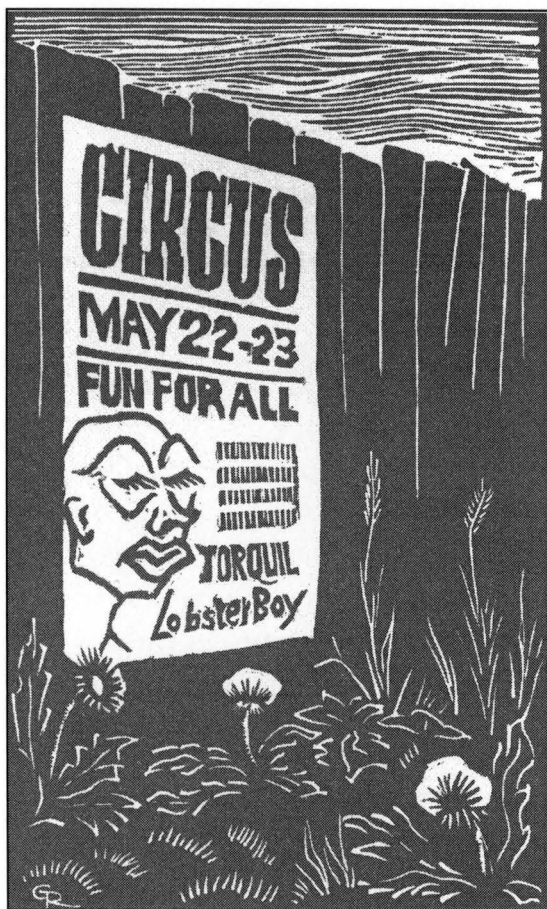
towards the end of the bottle found ourselves in perfect agreement. The finished portfolio was assembled at the Arts Club by a crew of volunteers, suitably lubricated.

About six months into the first year we wrote a constitution combining the best features of similar societies in England, Switzerland and the U.S. (notably the Book Club of California), and by the end of the year had enrolled 112 members, including our first life member, P.R. Sandwell, whose one-time fee of \$750 came when we most needed it. We also collected some prepayments for the book and so were able to pay our way as we went along. Everyone worked for the love of it, except Wil Hudson, to whom we doled out a minimum subsistence. Somehow he got by on it. As for the other hurdles, we managed to get over them by coaxing, cajoling, scrounging and bartering with a panache that was outrageous, ignorance being the prerequisite of daring.

Initially we had high hopes of some funding from the Canada Council, which was alleged to exist for the purpose of encouraging the arts. Unfortunately we did not fit into any of their preconceived slots, and the council seemed incapable, or unwilling, to make up a new slot that did fit. After keeping us dangling they tendered their regrets while providing handsomely, as I recall, for some character whose art consisted of attacking a grand piano with an axe. In the end we made it alone and unaided.

It was decided that the issues of *Amphora* should be numbered with Roman numerals. As already stated, *Amphora I* was produced in 1967, *Amphora II* was delayed until the spring of 1968, but it was a hefty issue in which, *inter alia*, we printed our entire membership list, which by then had reached 177, of which 136 were individual members and 35 were corporate members consisting mainly of university libraries, and one more life member, Paul Mellon.

In 1967, still tightrope walking, we managed to produce two books. Wil Hudson handled John West's *Journal*, our third book, in collaboration with another working printer, Nick Schwabe, and Donald Jarvis was induced to illustrate it in return for half a dozen copies. Our second book, Ethel Wilson's *Hetty Dorval*, was the first reissue of this novel, which had been sold out in its year of publication, 1947. As Wil had his hands full, we



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I WAS VERY MUCH SUBDUED WHEN I LEFT FOR Lytton on Sunday. I hoped, yet feared, to see Mrs. Dorval on the way. Knowing that I should never feel right with her and with myself if I did not go again to see her and say good-bye, I still dreaded to go. In a sense I had learned to love her very dearly. She was all that I thought beautiful, and so nice to be with. That, I believe, was Hetty's chief equipment for life. She was beautiful, and so nice to be with. I did not meet her on the Lytton road.

I saw Ernestine that Sunday evening. She ran in to Mrs. Dunne's after church to tell me about the circus. The thing was incredible news. Ernestine and I had never seen a circus. "Is it going to be a real circus with lions and elephants and clowns, d'you suppose?" I asked. Ernestine said no, she didn't think so. Not a real circus, just a small travelling fair, and the posters were already in town.

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One of the linocut illustrations by Gus Rueter and a chapter opening from Hetty Dorval.

went over to Victoria, where Charlie Morriss had a small printing company renowned for quality printing. He did 375 copies for us, with Gus Rueter doing some fine lino blocks. What I remember chiefly about this book is the fact that Ethel Wilson signed all 375 copies on what turned out to be her deathbed. What I don't remember is how we paid for all this. Perhaps an example will serve to illustrate how manna was coaxed from rock.

Don Atkins, an old-timer who has been printing *Amphora* for the past fifteen years, still speaks, with a slightly glazed look, of the way we financed our fourth book—*Belinda, or The Rivals*, the first satirical novel published in Canada (1843). We did not have a bean and were unwilling to seek advance subscribers. Eventually we obtained the cooperation of the biggest printer in town, Evergreen Press, who agreed to do it entirely on credit, holding the stock as security and allowing us to pay as we drew copies from the warehouse. No time limit was imposed, and no interest charged. I think our requirements intrigued the craftsmen who normally were involved in com-

mercial ventures: would those entrusted with the actual printing sign their names in the colophon of all copies; and would they agree to work first thing in the morning, when minds were fresh and hands steady? It worked: we've got the books to prove it, and when Evergreen gave us the remaining copies at a discount, heartily sick of the whole business, they got rid of an annually recurring irritant on their balance sheet that reminded them of the time they played Medici to our Alcuin!

Our first annual general meeting had a massive attendance of twelve. The round dozen listened impassively to the treasurer's revelation that in that year we had taken in \$7,331 and spent \$9,819. According to Dickens that should have spelt misery, but I do not recall any downcast faces. *Amphora IV* gives a further clue as to how we managed to do so much on so little. In that issue is a reproduction of Bill McConnell's bill for his legal services in filing our annual report in Victoria. He charged \$2, which included disbursements of 50¢. That was, I think, typical of those early members who sustained the Society in difficult years, and this is as good a place as any to sound the honour roll of the pioneers: Pam Crosse, Basil Stuart-Stubbs, Bill Duthie, Don Atkins, Nick Schwabe, Neil Brearley, Roy Daniells, Anne Terriss, Jim Alexander, Anne Yandle, and others who did not for some reason join but wished us well.

In 1968 we started on our seventh book, an edited version of Catharine Parr Traill's *Canadian Settler's Guide*. It was supposed to be finished in 1969. It finally made it, as a breech birth, in 1975. Also, unfortunately, it broke the back of our relationship with Wil Hudson. He was a fine typographer and printer, but not the easiest man in the world to get along with. He left the book half-finished, and the Society had the devil's own job carrying the project to completion. Although the type was matched, we had to go over to offset for the second half. Finally the book was issued in two sections of unbound signatures enclosed in a slipcase, leaving it to members to look after their own binding.

Perhaps our most significant contribution, started in the early years, may be the seminal influence exerted by the prestige of our name in sponsoring various competitions for excellence in the field of letters and the graphic arts. The first was an award for an "Essay on the Book," open to students in

the School of Librarianship at the University of British Columbia. The second was an annual award to the student of the Graphic Arts Department of the Vancouver Vocational Institute who submitted the most outstanding typographical composition of a set piece. This not only encouraged excellence in typography at the font, so to speak, but also provided Alcuin Society members with a flow of keepsakes as a by-product. (Editor's note: Unfortunately this award had to be dropped some years later due to changes in the curriculum at the institute.)

Amphora VIII marked the end of the Society's first era. The report of the annual general meeting in that issue indicated, *inter alia*, that the newly elected president was Allen Segal, who, incidentally, was another life member. I had to return to England, and Wilf Chappell became the Society's secretary for the next several years.

Before I pass this history over to Wilf to provide an account of the middle years, I'll make some comments as I see things in 1985.

What niche has the Alcuin Society carved out for itself in the world of Canadian arts and letters? The answer, given the evidence, is that we seem to have acquired a stature and influence out of all proportion to our diminutive size. Our journal is widely quoted and is still, in its way, unique. Though the production of substantial press books has lagged since the early days, there is an irregular but nonetheless satisfying trickle of collectible memorabilia. And after twenty years, we are still the only book society in Canada devoted to the book arts and what makes fine books.

Three times over the two decades we nearly gave up the ghost, but somehow rallied and carried on. Abner Dean, the American cartoonist, drew what is to me one of the most painfully perceptive cartoons of our emasculating times: a naked little man standing on a hummock of his assorted creations, trying to attract the attention of a similarly naked file of passersby, each following their leader with averted eyes. The caption is "Look what I've done." I feel for that little man. Since that chance meeting on Denman Street I believe that due to our efforts in the Alcuin Society, some at least of that trudging human chain now occasionally lift their eyes to look at stars. Could we ask for more? Over to you, Wilf. [See page 53.]

A Book

*is a version of
the world.*

*If you do not like it,
ignore it;*

or

*offer your own version
in return.*



SALMAN RUSHDIE