

1971-1982

In one of his early promotional pieces Geoff Spencer had described the Society as “a group of amateurs, in the classical sense.” At the time I took over as secretary, the board of directors consisted of a group of individuals, each of whom was a professional specialist in his or her own field. Faced with such an array, the minutes show that the secretary asked for terms of reference. The board construed this request as quite the biggest joke in recent memory. When they had recovered from their paroxysms of mirth, the chairman said, in effect, “Look, sonny boy, you just go ahead. We’ll tell you when you do anything wrong.” It was noticeable, however, that between board meetings each and every director put out the welcome mat at any time of the day and gave me their complete cooperation. Professional specialists they were, but in their connection with the Alcuin Society they were “amateurs in the classical sense.”

A simple policy was established. The Evergreen Press account for *Belinda* had to be paid and, because of the high cost of book publishing, everything would be subordinated to the production of *Amphora*, if only as a means of keeping the membership intact. A further incentive to the publication of *Amphora* was the knowledge that by producing four copies each year we would be exempt from federal sales tax. In connection with the journal, it was agreed that the contents were to be factually correct, but couched as lightly as possible. There was already too much literary suet pudding in the marketplace. The third point in the policy was that we should continue publishing at least one keepsake each year—simple enough in the light of our Vancouver Vocational Institute award mentioned by Geoff—and fourth, we would produce books as and when financially possible.

It suffices to say that the policy proved to be sound. Relatively little time elapsed before we became aware that *Amphora* was not only well received, but was being used as a source of reference. Requests would come in for copies of individual articles, or even whole issues, or copies of various issues which had covered a particular subject. Perhaps this can be best exemplified by citing a twenty-minute telephone call at 7:00 a.m. from the Special Collections Department of a New York university library.

With the regular production of *Amphora*, the board decided that Roman numbering would become cumbersome, and so No. XVIII was the last in that numbering. From No. 19 on we have used the Arabic numerals.

Membership increased to three hundred and spread from the North American continent to Australia, Puerto Rico, Africa, Holland, Germany and South America, and increased in the British Isles.

Hand typesetting of *Amphora* proved to be impractical. A lot of this work had been done by the students at the Vancouver Vocational Institute under the leadership of Jim Alexander, who, apart from being a member of the institute's faculty, was a director of the Society. The decision to go offset left Jim's students free for the production of *The Diary and Narrative of Richard Henry Alexander in a Journey across the Rocky Mountains*, which appeared in 1973. It may be noted here, parenthetically, that for some inexplicable reason, all five hundred copies were not bound at that time. The unbound copies were unearthed some years later, by which time we had discharged our bill with Evergreen Press. Consequently the press had no compunction about binding the remaining copies for us, for which they were paid promptly upon presentation of their bill.

In 1974 we embarked on a strange venture by publishing *A Short Account of a Northwest Voyage Performed in the years 1796, 1797 & 1798*. The type was set in Toronto, and 450 copies were "printed...using a late nineteenth-century Albion hand press, by amateurs, members of the Alcuin Society..." The printing was done under the direction of Ron Hagler on the Albion in the School of Librarianship at the University of British Columbia. The big thing we learned from this was how easily Byronic white Brocade paper could be squandered, but it was good fun, nevertheless.

Arising from this experience, though, we devised a new source for keepsakes. It was known that the membership contained a number of printing enthusiasts who operated small private presses. Consequently we commissioned them to print keepsakes, with the Society offering to foot the paper bill. This provided a number of interesting keepsakes at about the time the change in curriculum at VVI dried up that source.

In 1975 we were able to complete the Catharine Parr Traill book started by Wil Hudson. Concurrently we learned that there had been and was a

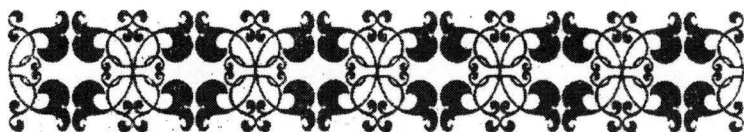
vogue among French book enthusiasts to bind loose-leaf signatures. As a result, and in order to save cost, only a few copies of the Traill book were bound, and purchasers were given the option of bound or unbound copies. The weakness of this was that unbound folios, even in slipcases, are absolute anathema to libraries, and libraries constituted nearly half our membership.

In the realm of major works we subsequently published *In Praise of Scribes*, and, through the generosity of Allen Segal, *Flowers in Heraldry*. Thereafter the Society kept its publishing arm open by printing chapbooks in limited editions of about 100 to 150 copies.

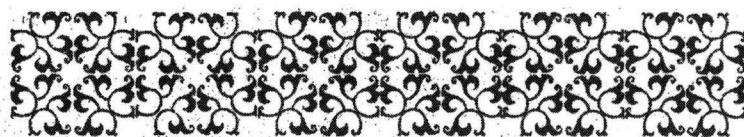
Despite the fact that the Canada Council could not find a slot for us and, incidentally, the Income Tax Department's constant reiteration that the Society was merely another book publisher, history may consider that the Society made its most significant contribution to the Canadian book arts in 1981 when it instituted an annual award titled Alcuin Citations for Excellence in Book Design in Canada. The award is now recognized by modest funding from several foundations. It attracts entries from most Canadian publishers and calls for no small labour in arranging for the judging and presentations at a special reception. There is ample evidence that the award is valued by the recipients, and that its very nature encourages excellence in Canadian typographical design.

In completing this short review of the Society's second era, it seems to me imperative that certain acknowledgments should be made. It was fun. It was made possible by a group of amateurs in the classical sense who all cooperated marvellously. They cannot all be named, but some can be without detriment to the others. Allen Segal, who, among many pleasant memories, instructed his receptionist that the secretary of the Alcuin Society was not to be kept waiting; Michael Batts, a tower of strength; Basil Stuart-Stubbs, who, for most of the era, was chief librarian at the University of British Columbia, and the antithesis of the common concept of the dreamy type in academe; Anne Yandle, head of Special Collections at UBC, for whom nothing was too much trouble; and, of course, Geoff Spencer, whose aid ensured that the welfare of the Society and the British and Canadian postal services was never in doubt.

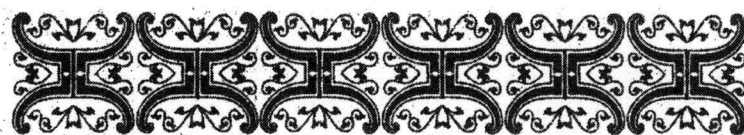
In 1983 Anne Tayler appeared on the scene encouraged by Peter Quartermain and enthused after spending a summer cataloguing the Alcuin Society archives held in Special Collections at UBC. She'll tell her story of the '80s and perhaps you'll see why Geoff Spencer calls her the "Pocket Dynamo."



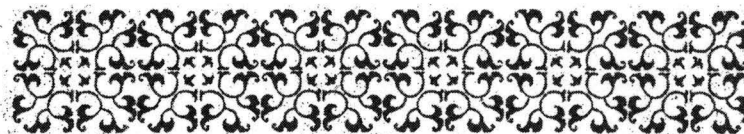
*Ornament is but the guiled shore to a most dangerous*



*sea; the beauteous scarf veiling an Indian beauty; in a*

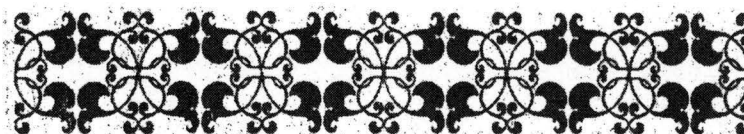


*word, the seeming truth which cunning times put on to*



*entrap the wisest.*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



Typical Page from "The Bradley Ornaments"