

1983-1985

In the summer of 1980, I discovered the Alcuin Society the hard way. I had just completed the third year of an Honours English BA, and like most students, I was desperate for a summer job. I managed to get one described as Manuscript and Periodical Researcher for Special Collections at UBC and found myself staring at an immense table loaded with some thirty boxes of material which, I was told, were the archives of the Alcuin Society. "It's not a very big group," my supervisor said, "but their secretary is very efficient and he's kept everything." If anyone had suggested at that moment that within a few years I would be deeply involved in the Society, and a member of its board of directors, I would have thought them quite mad.

It took a full two months to work my way through those boxes, but by the time I finished I felt as if I knew the Society and many of its members. What's more, I had met the "efficient secretary," in the form of Wilf Chappell, and had learned not only that he was efficient, but that he had the most amazing memory. No matter what sort of faded, undated or illegible item of correspondence I dragged out, he invariably managed to identify names, places and situations. I also got to know several other former directors, especially Frances Woodward and Anne Yandle of UBC Special Collections.

When I finally finished the catalogue, Wilf sent me a complimentary membership. At first I simply read *Amphora* and wondered how things were going behind the scenes. But when I started into a graduate program at UBC, I discovered that my thesis advisor, Peter Quartermain, was on the board of the Alcuin Society. I'm still not sure how it happened, but somehow he convinced me to get on the board in the spring of 1983.

As anyone who has ever sat on the board of a non-profit society will know, when you start attending meetings, its workings seem mysterious indeed. In spite of all I knew about this society, it seemed to me that the events, *Amphora* and money all materialized out of thin air and the back pockets of other directors. Thin air occasionally, back pockets frequently. The first back pocket any new board member encounters is that of Gene Horvath. Gene has been an active member, serving on the board for many years and as treasurer for the past four years, as well as hosting board meetings.

As a new director, I got involved gradually, planning dinners, writing the newsletter, and joining the Publications Committee. The committee has had to wrestle with the question of whether or not to publish another Alcuin book. While there was a general consensus that we should publish something, the committee was faced with some very serious concerns about the feasibility of such a project. The desire to produce an interesting text in a beautiful form was very strong, but heavily weighed down by the determination not to get the Society into any financial difficulties.

The cost of producing letterpress books has risen dramatically, like most other things, over the past few years, and it simply became impossible for letterpress craftsmen to offer their services for next to nothing. The whole question of publication was debated for many years, in and out of committee, passionately and dispassionately, with frustration and determination, with uncertainty and hope.

Eventually, in consideration of the well being of the Society itself, as well as the interests of members and private presses around the world, the decision was made to continue the chapbook series started by Peter Quartermain, but to publish books only on very rare and special occasions. At the same time, the board decided to provide members with information about private press publication and to arrange for members to receive special discounts from some presses. Though one or two people were not content with this arrangement, it seems to have satisfied most of our members. In fact, nearly every one of our chapbooks has sold out completely within eight months of issue, and the private press profiles and checklists from other presses have attracted numerous positive comments from our readers.

While the board was busy struggling with the publishing future of the Society, personal demands of Wilf's time became such that he could no longer attend meetings. His presence was sorely missed indeed. Fortunately, his secretarial responsibilities were taken over by Doreen Eddy. Doreen handles all the members' correspondence and sees that all of the basic workings of the Society proceed smoothly. And when a letter, book or grant application is needed "yesterday," Doreen is always there to see it through.

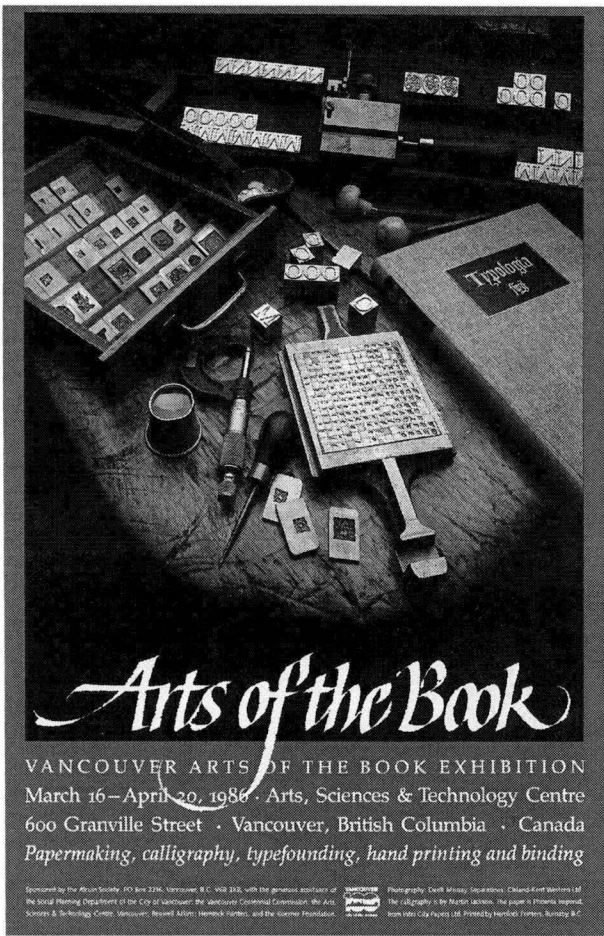
Wilf turned over editorial work to Ron McAmmond, but a couple of years later, personal and professional demands pressed Ron also. With Wilf and Ron both unavailable, responsibility for *Amphora* was thrust into the capable hands of Barbara Hemphill. While Barbara has taken care of planning, organizing, editing and proofreading, Gwen Murray has been a tremendous help with the paste-up and design. This anniversary is the result of much burning of midnight oil on the part of these two.

I've only been slightly involved in the Publications Committee, working only on the newsletter. My first real sense of involvement came when I decided to pick up where Peter Quartermain had left off with the Alcuin Citations for Excellence in Book Design in Canada. None of the board members knew much about running such competitions, so we jumped in feet first. The first Citations in 1982 had attracted only thirteen submissions, so we broadened the scope of the competition, replacing the single category with five: Poetry, Prose, Juvenile, Pictorial and Other.

We had no idea what to expect when we sent out 200 letters of invitation, but when judging day arrived, 31 publishers had responded, submitting just over 100 books. There was a modest awards reception at the Canadian Book Information Centre in Vancouver, and the winning books were exhibited for several months. Given the success of the 1984 competition, we decided to make the event an annual one.

The year 1985 has seen a real surge of activity and interest in the Alcuin Society. The Citations competition was even bigger and better, with forty-five publishers submitting over 120 books, and winning publishers and designers travelling from Ontario, Northwest Territories and Alberta to attend the awards ceremony in Vancouver. Nearly fifty members and guests attended the spring dinner and annual general meeting in May, certainly the best attendance since I have been involved. (The first AGM I attended had fewer than fifteen members present.) Thanks to the work of Rudi Diesvelt, the Society began, in July, to participate in Circle Craft on Granville Island in Vancouver. For the first time, the Society now has a location where publications are available for sale to the general public.

In September, we held a special dinner in honour of a visit by John Dreyfus, the eminent printing historian from England. Over sixty people



Arts of the Book

VANCOUVER ARTS OF THE BOOK EXHIBITION
 March 16 - April 20, 1986 · Arts, Sciences & Technology Centre
 600 Granville Street · Vancouver, British Columbia · Canada
Papermaking, calligraphy, typefounding, hand printing and binding

Sponsored by the Alcuin Society, PO Box 2236, Vancouver, B.C. V6B 2S8, with the generous assistance of the Social Planning Department of the City of Vancouver, the Vancouver Cultural Commission, the Arts, Science & Technology Centre, Vancouver, Robert Atkins, Henswood Partners, and the current Foundation.

attended that dinner. In October, the Alcuin Society Library opened at Butler Gallery on Pender Street. The library is the work of two board members, Gwen Murray and Madeline Williams, both of whom had spent many hours sorting, cataloguing, filming, making protective covers, and carting books from one place to another. There has been a steady trickle of donations and visitors to the library since it opened, and if you haven't already been to visit, we urge you to do so.

November saw the arrival of our sixth chapbook, *Tending the Fire*, a previously unpublished poem by Robert Bringhurst

printed by Glenn Goluska. The edition is limited to 126 copies, of which over half have been sold already. November was also the month for our regular fall dinner, and for the second year we held an auction of the books submitted to the Citations. The money raised at the auction, approximately \$500, will be used to finance next year's competition.

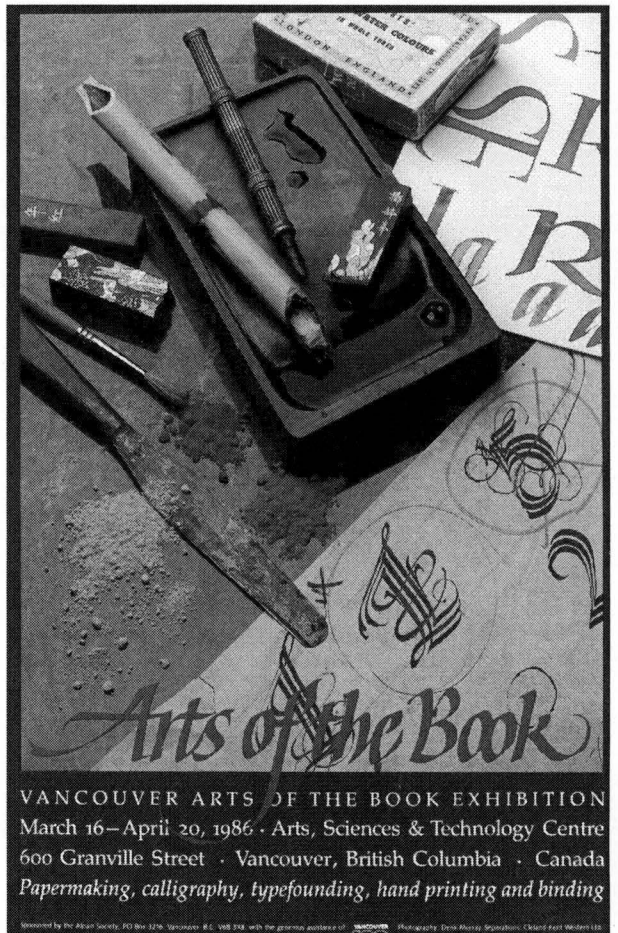
One other special event occurred in November 1985. The Vancouver Partnership for Business and the Arts hosted its first awards luncheon to recognize outstanding achievements by corporate sponsors of the arts. Awards were made in three categories, with about a dozen nominations in each category. Benwell Atkins, nominated by the Alcuin Society, received an award for sustained support by a large business. The runner-up in this category was Chevron. Benwell Atkins has given the Alcuin Society unqualified support over the past twenty years. It would be impossible to list here all the times and ways the firm has helped the Society. Suffice to say that when our bank balance looks bleakest, the invoice for the most recent issue of *Amphora* mysteriously dissolves into thin air. Don Atkins himself has served on the board and continues to attend the meetings. And when exuberance over some new scheme clouds our vision (especially in respect to funds), he

quietly brings us down to earth with one hand and yet manages to help get the project finished with the other hand.

These various events alone made the fall busier than usual, but the Society was also involved in two other very important events. The Society, along with Simon Fraser University, co-sponsored a very successful eight-week course in book arts, "The Rare and the Beautiful," which was the first of its kind in Vancouver. This course was coordinated by Barbara Hemphill and myself, and featured eight different instructors including several private press operators, designers, typographers, a type designer and founder, a binder, and the curator of the Rare Book Collection at the University of Washington. Hopefully it will be the first of many such ventures and certainly it reflects the intention of the present board to see the Society foster all the book arts—typography, printing, design, binding, papermaking, paper decoration, calligraphy, and so on.

In a similar vein, Barbara and I organized a major Arts of the Book exhibition, in conjunction with Vancouver's centennial. The exhibition took place between March 14 and April 20, 1986. After opening the Antiquarian Book Fair March 14 and 15, it was housed at the Arts, Sciences & Technology Centre, 600 Granville Street, Vancouver. We are still selling posters from this event and they are eagerly sought.

Focusing on local book arts, the exhibition included a hand press, operating daily; binding displays and demonstrations; papermaking and decoration displays and demonstrations; and calligraphy displays and demonstrations. There was an exhibit of printing, paper, binding and calligraphy produced in the Vancouver area over the preceding one hundred years, supplemented by visiting exhibits from book arts organizations across Canada and the United States. In conjunction with the exhibition, the Society sponsored several book arts workshops featuring, among others,



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Glenn Goluska, one of Canada's finest letterpress printers; Michael Wilcox, one of the top designer binders in the world; and David Carruthers, a fourth-generation Canadian papermaker.

Exhibit material has been offered by virtually every book artist in the Lower Mainland. A number of local businesses, particularly printers, have offered to provide materials and services to help promote the exhibition and produce a catalogue of exhibit materials. The Society has also received numerous cash donations from private citizens, and substantial grants from the Koerner Foundation and the Jean Chalmers Fund of the Canada Council. In addition the City of Vancouver just informed us that a substantial grant was approved by council. Cheers!

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the past years is the number of local members who have turned out to help with various projects. Long-time member Jack Meek has always helped with exhibits at the Antiquarian Book Fair; Crispin Elsted will be running the press at the exhibition; Courtland Benson is organizing bookbinding workshops at the exhibition; new members Lucy Dahl and Fiona Garrick prepared books for the auction and Nick Hunt was our auctioneer—a very fine one too. Another new member, Martin Wolf, is building display cases for designer bindings. Likewise, a number of our members have regularly contributed to *Amphora*: Geoff Spencer continues to contribute regularly and to attend board meetings whenever he is in town; Michael Batts, also a long-term member, continues to provide us with intriguing material; Glennis Zilm regularly contributes informative and delightful reviews and helps with marketing our publications; and Crispin Elsted has contributed some fine essays and regularly produces the Private Press Profile. And these are not the only sorts of contributions made: some other members, including Allen Segal, Esmond Lando, Celia Duthie, Geoff Spencer and many, many others, have made contributions to the library and book auction, and donations to special events such as the Citations or the upcoming exhibition.

It is this willingness of the members to give time, materials and funds to the various activities of the Alcuin Society, in this our twentieth year, that reflects the vitality of the Society, and shows that it is ready for the next twenty years.