

1972-1980

The Alcuin Society as I Remember It

When Geoff Spencer asked me to reminisce about my time as executive vice-president and president of the Alcuin Society, I refused at first, not solely because of the pressure of work, but rather because I honestly could not remember much about those years. I have discovered that this was from 1972 to 1980, but looking through my archives I can find no trace of any records. Either I destroyed them all in order to make more space (for books), or they were in the collection of files that had to be thrown out after a storm drain in my neighbourhood blocked up and flooded my basement. I do remember meetings in the gloom of the old Arts Club Theatre, before I joined the board, and later more convivial meetings at Eugene Horvath's home and in the basement of Allen Segal's home among the books and bottles. Most of the time we seemed to spend vainly trying to raise enough money to be able to publish and still remain solvent.

The Alcuin Society's books will be familiar to most of our members today, but many will not know of the numerous keepsakes we published in earlier years and, while I may have no administrative records, I have found a box containing, I think, most of these keepsakes, along with various items, such as printed invitations to join the Society, an invitation to a testimonial dinner for Wilf Chappell, and a full-page article on the Alcuin Society from the *Globe and Mail* (by William French, July 8, 1976). The keepsakes vary from poems and Christmas greetings to maps and manuscripts, from original works to reprints, and from single sheets to slim brochures. Without exception they are finely printed and as much a tribute to the work of the Alcuin Society as the books and *Amphorae*. At least one of them is not without topical significance, and in view of the current debate in Vancouver about the desirability or otherwise of opening a casino, it might be worth reprinting the satirical chapbook on *The Wonderful Advantages of Adventuring in the Lottery*.

A further search in my archives revealed, however, a number of unfinished or unpublished items, planned, I believe, for the Alcuin Society. The most substantial of these is a projected translation of Johannes Charlier de Gerson's *DeLaude Scriptorum*, presumably intended as a companion piece to the translation of Trithemius's work. There are notes and offprints

about early printers in Canada and in B.C., and surely there must be more to say on the latter topic than was said by Douglas McMurtrie in 1929—but perhaps it has been done and I have not kept up with things. There is a brief introduction to, and selections from, “The Press,” a poem by John McCreery, intended, I suspect, to be the first in a series on printer-poets. Not that there are to my knowledge any great poets among them, but at least they show some sense of pride in their trade: “Dealing with those who rise above the throng, / To whom some rare, some splendid gifts belong / We meet the brow of genius with delight, / And with its hopes and sympathies unite.”

Under the circumstances, though, perhaps I may be permitted to impose upon the readers of *Amphora* one of these rediscovered fragments from the past, since it appears to be, if nothing else, appropriate to the occasion. In his lengthy poem “De Sanctis Eboracensis Ecclesiae,” Alcuin describes the library at York and provides us (in lines 1525–610) not perhaps with an account of what was actually there, but with a list of standard works that should or would have been there, lists of books being, like lists of places, people, etc., part of the classical tradition of poetic catalogues. Here, at all events, is my version without commentary, beyond noting that when the Abbot Aelbehrtus died, he was succeeded by Eanbaldus, one of his favourite two pupils, Alcuin being the other:

And to his other son, who stayed close by
 Long draughts of his learning to take, slaking the thirst,
 Choicest of books he gave, wealth above all.
 Unnamed till now, the prologue of our verse—
 If you would know the truth—his name will tell,
 Not like was the wealth divided twixt these twain
 To that one rule of the church, its treasures, lands, receipts
 To this one fairest wisdom, a place of study and books
 Which his noble master everywhere had culled,
 Assembling wondrous treasures beneath one roof.
 There you will find the ancient fathers' works:
 Whatever Roman is in the Latin world,

Whatever the noble Greeks to the Romans gave,
Whatever the Hebrews from their Lord received,
Whatever of light shone bright from Africa's shores.
What father Jerome wrote is there, and Hilary.
And Bishop Ambrose; works of Augustine
And Athanasius himself; what Orosius wrote of old,
What Gregory the Great instructs and Leo the Pope.
Here Basil and Fulgentius shine forth,
Cassiodor as well and John of Chrysostom.
What Athelm taught and Bede the Venerable,
What Victorinus wrote and Boethius.
Ancient historians are there Pompey and Pliny,
The subtle Aristotle, Cicero the noble orator,
Sedulius's poems and those of Juvenecus;
Alcimus, Clement, Prosper, Paulinus, Arator.
What Fortunatus wrote or Lactantius,
What Vergil, Statius and that author Lucan,
And masters of the grammatical art:
Probus, Focas, Donat, and Priscian
Servius, Euticius, Pompey, and Charisius.
There, readers, you may find still many more
Distinguished masters both in art and word,
Authors of many volumes rich in sense,
Whose names this present song may not recount
Since longer were the task that fits our theme.

*A BOOK
reads the better
which is our own,
and has been so long
known to us,
that we know
the topography of
its blots,
and dog's ears,
and can trace the dirt in it,
having read it at tea
with buttered muffins.*



Charles Lamb