

## Reflections upon the Alcuin Society's 40th Anniversary

**A**sked to reflect on my years as an Alcuin Society member and chairman from 1993 to 2004, I'm reminded of "Lines on Facing Forty," by Ogden Nash (*Verses from 1929 On*):

I have a bone to pick with Fate.  
Come here and tell me, girlie,  
Do you think my mind is maturing late,  
Or simply rotted early?

I am well past forty so recollections of last week can be iffy. I will begin by relating how I learned of the existence of the Alcuin Society.

Although living in Vancouver since 1964, I did not know about the Alcuin Society until 1990 and, appropriately, I discovered it due to a book. I spent thirty-seven years in the forest industry, most with Crown Zellerbach Canada, a firm acquired in 1982 by Fletcher Challenge Ltd., a New Zealand company. They bought British Columbia Forest Products and merged it with Crown Zellerbach Canada in 1989 to form Fletcher Challenge Canada.

I was in charge of Human Resources for the new company. The president decided all offices and common areas would be decorated with Canadian art. Buying art was added to my job. Gordon Smith, David Blackwood, Alex Colville, Jack Shadbolt, Mary Pratt, Toni Onley, William Kurelek, Robert Davidson, J. Fenwick Lansdowne, E. J. Hughes, Ivan Eyre, Joe Fafard, Victor Cicansky, Karoo Ashevak, Dorothy Knowles and many others were represented in oil, acrylic, whalebone, etching, ceramic, serigraph, bronze, lithograph, aquatint and mixed media.

While I was buying artworks, the idea emerged for a book, a promotional tool for marketing and executive use. It became a 12" x 16" limited edition book with thirty-one tipped-in colour plates each with protective sheets, bound by hand and housed in a slipcase. To a novice, the finished book seemed well designed. "Mrs. Hawes," I said to my secretary, "there must be an organization in Canada that judges book design." She returned within thirty minutes saying "I called the Vancouver Public Library. There is a

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group in Vancouver that judges book design and its name is the Alcuin Society." We entered the book for judging in 1991. No limited editions that year were judged worthy of an award. Curious about the judge's comments, I requested and received a long letter from Dr. Ronald Hagler, head of the judging team that year and professor, School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia.

This is how I learned about the Alcuin Society, which I quickly joined. As she did for all new members, Doreen Eddy, long-time secretary, sent me a welcome letter. It included *Testimony and Appeal: From the Will of Sydney Cockerell*, a lovely hand-printed keepsake by Jan and Crispin Elsted of Barbarian Press, and a list of publications available for sale, all of which I eventually bought. And so began threads that led to meeting Ron Hagler, Doreen Eddy, Jan and Crispin Elsted and many others, all part of a wonderful community of book people.

As a new member in 1991, I attended the Society's annual general meeting at the Vancouver Lawn Tennis and Badminton Club, my first chance to meet other members. Madeline Williams was chairman and other directors were Don Atkins, Rudi Diesvelt, Terry Dobroslavic, Barbara Hemphill, Richard Hopkins, Gene Horvath, Jean MacDonald, Guy Robertson and Doreen Eddy. Two things I remember from that day: warm greetings from everyone met and the marvellous commemorative piece at each table setting. Atop a small folder was a 2 1/2" amphora held upright in a bronze wire holder. Inside the folder, in beautiful calligraphy, were the words "*am'phora, n. (pl. -ae, -as). Greek or Roman. Two handled vessel. Amphora, amphorae or amphoras. Single or two handled vessel, Amphora has for twenty-five years been a cornucopia of literary articles. To commemorate 25 years of Amphora we have created a limited edition of 25 miniature amphoras. The amphorae were made by Meegan Macfarlane of Heriot Bay, B.C. & the antiqued bronze stands by Kurt Morrison of Hornby Island, B.C. This No: 09 of Twenty Five.*" A class introduction to the Alcuin Society.

Soon after the AGM, Don Atkins asked me to join the board, overcoming protests about lack of knowledge by saying "You don't need knowledge. You'll pick it up. All you need is willingness to work." True words from a

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man without whose support the Society could never have survived. In September I attended my first board meeting. Richard Hopkins had succeeded Madeline as chairman. Meetings were held at the Osler Street home of treasurer Gene Horvath and were always over in good time to enjoy a glass of wine and sweets, courtesy of Gene and his wife Maria. I recall many discussions about the impending birth of *In Praise of the Book*, a superb anthology of the best articles from the first twenty-five years of *Amphora*. By October I was on a committee with Gene and Guy Robertson. Our assignment was fundraising and marketing. Arifin Graham designed a new membership brochure. It used an alphabet tree woodcut illustration from a 1490 book provided by Gene Horvath. Progress on fundraising was minimal, lack of funds a chronic problem.

The year 1992 was dominated by concern about survival of the Society. Recently returned from England, our founder Geoff Spencer recommended a number of changes, including an offer to provide content and edit *Amphora*. During the year steps were taken to explore a working relationship with Simon Fraser University by co-sponsoring events and having access to their facilities for board meetings. An early benefit of this relationship was the joint launch in February 1993 of Robert Bringhurst's now world-renowned book *The Elements of Typographic Style* and *In Praise of the Book*, the aforementioned anthology. A month later the board donated to Simon Fraser University all previous winners in the Alcuin Society Competition for Excellence in Book Design in Canada, some 100 books. Since then all subsequent winners are donated to Simon Fraser University for use in their Writing and Publishing Program.

In September 1993 work pressure in their day jobs caused the resignation of Richard Hopkins and *Amphora* co-editors Terry Dobroslavic and Gail Edwards. I was persuaded to become chairman. At a meeting in November Geoff Spencer joined the board and was appointed editor, continuing a role admirably performed with zest, imagination and timeliness since founding the Society.

Lack of funds continued to be a concern, and in September 1992 the Society applied to the Gaming Commission of British Columbia for a casino licence. Once such a licence was granted, the applicant had to provide

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volunteers to work in a casino from 5:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m., performing such jobs as chip runner, cash counter and chip cashier. At least two volunteers had to be graduates of a training program offered by the Gaming Commission. Volunteers could not leave the casino at any time during those hours or leave until the cash balanced. This sometimes meant not leaving the casino until 4:00 or 4:30 a.m. It was a tiring way to generate funds—long hours in a smoky environment. Four years after the Society applied, it was granted its first licence, for July 16, 1996, at the Royal Towers Hotel in New Westminster. Ann Cowan, her husband Peter Buitenhuis, John King and Mary Conibear volunteered. The Society's share of the night's proceeds? A cheque for \$10,254 and a 30 percent jump in 1996 revenue for ten hours' work.

In January 1998 the Society's application for another casino licence was rejected on the grounds "that our programs and services, directly and indirectly, benefit individual board members and the publishing, bookbinding and related industry." This denial was aimed at Don Atkins, whose firm printed *Amphora* and other Society material. He wrote a letter offering to resign as director if that would reopen the door. Subsequently, I travelled to Victoria to meet two senior people in the Gaming Commission. After a three-hour meeting, much of it spent explaining our educational role as an arts organization, we were reinstated, with Don Atkins being appointed an *ex officio* director. Later that year we got a licence at the casino on Pender Street in Chinatown and the volunteers—John King, Hugo Buitenhuis, Mary Conibear, Don Atkins, Sylvia Smallman, Jim Rainer, Richard Hopkins and Stuart Isto—counted the grubby cash in a smoky environment. We left with a \$16,613 cheque, 34 percent of our revenue for that year.

The year was a memorable one for many reasons. In March came a handwritten letter from Dr. Pierre Rioux, then living in Minot, North Dakota, that read: "Dear Mr. Rainer: Enclosed please find a donation for the Alcuin Society. Best wishes for continued success!" and with it a large cheque! Dr. Rioux, now living in Minnesota, was given a life membership. After speaking with Dr. Rioux by telephone and writing a letter of thanks on behalf of the Society, I received the following from him: "Thank you for your recent letter. Your publication champions the life affirming values of fine books

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and your loyal readers value all the hard work you and the other Board members perform." These words were followed by a PS: "I hope to have more good news for the Alcuin Society soon." Clearly, Dr. Rioux's recognition stemmed from reading *Amphora* and the work of Geoff Spencer.

The "more good news" was revealed in June when the Society received a letter—and another substantial cheque—from Dr. Daniel J. Schultz of the International Society for Philosophical Enquiry that read:

Dear Mr. Rainer: Each year our Society endeavours to "reward individuals and groups whose accomplishments and goals exemplify the ideals of the ISPE" as set forth in our charter. One such criterion is "a superior person or group who strives to benefit society through advanced enquiry, original research and/or creative contributions, and who has demonstrated significant progress in these ..." It is our opinion that your work to "promote a wide appreciation for books and reading in society and to support excellence in book design and production" is most worthy of our recognition and support for this great ideal. Congratulations to you and your group for a job well done. It is our hope that your work will continue and that it will have far-reaching positive impact for us all.

Accompanying the letter was a beautiful clear glass plaque, resting in a glass stand, etched with the ISPE logo and the words "THE WHITING MEMORIAL AWARD PRESENTED TO THE ALCUIN SOCIETY IN RECOGNITION OF THEIR OUTSTANDING AND CONTINUED CONTRIBUTION TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF SOCIETY 1998." Geoff Spencer acknowledged our good fortune in *Amphora* 114 in a delightful article, "Thirty-Three Years in the Desert—and Then Manna Falleth from Heaven!"

Don Polak joined the board as treasurer in October 1998 and, shortly after, the Gaming Commission changed procedures for gaming applications. Casino duty was replaced with direct charitable access to gaming revenue. Tighter rules and more detailed supporting data required a highly organized and professional application. Under Don's guidance our applications are concise yet thorough, informative and challenging. From 1999 to 2004 grants averaged \$18,000 per year. Without this money the Society could

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not stage the Antiquarian Book Roadshow, the Wayzgoose or many other smaller events. The funds also provide support for our publications.

During my eleven years as chairman, program events were capably organized by Ann Cowan, Anne Yandle, Mary Conibear, Brenda Peterson, Maureen Elston, Sylvia Smallman, Susan Andrews, John King, Gina Page and Eric Swanick. Co-sponsors were Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia, the Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver Museum, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, Graphic Designers of Canada and the University of Victoria. A small listing of the events reveals the diversity of the program:

- Workshops and lectures on three occasions by Claire Van Vliet, proprietor, Janus Press, Vermont
- Illustrated lecture, "Aspects of an Alternate Book Art," by Philip Smith, master bookbinder, Chippenham, England
- Illustrated lecture, "The Gregynog Press, 1923–1996," and workshop by David Esslemont, managing director, Gwasg Gregynog Press, Wales
- Lecture, "Printers in Venice in the Time of Aldus Manutius, 1494–1515," by Marino Zorzi, director, Marciana Library, Venice
- First Antiquarian Book Roadshow, featuring book appraisals, speakers, demonstrations and displays. Held at the Vancouver Public Library, this all-day event has been held in 1999, 2000, 2002 and 2004 and planned biennially.
- Illustrated lecture, "Decorated Book Papers," and workshop on hand-coloured books in England by Graham Moss, proprietor, Incline Press, England
- Illustrated lecture and workshop on wood engraving by Wesley Bates, proprietor, West Meadow Press, Ontario
- First Alcuin Wayzgoose, a one-day fair in 2004 for letterpress printers from British Columbia with displays and demonstrations of paper-making, printing and bookbinding. Held again in 2005 at the Vancouver Public Library and planned biennially.

Major events such as the Antiquarian Book Roadshow, the lectures and workshops by Graham Moss and Wesley Bates as well as the Wayzgoose



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involve a lot of organization by Alcuin Society members and other volunteers. Staging them is fun and the enthusiastic response of people attending tells us that our public education efforts are reaching an appreciative audience. In addition, the Society has tables each year at Word on the Street in Vancouver, the Sunshine Coast Festival of the Written Arts in Sechelt and the Haig-Brown Festival and Book Fair in Campbell River. It participates in the Sidney Book Fair when it is held. Such events provide an opportunity to enlist new members and to sell inventory of past publications.

Building membership is the sum of many activities by all Society members. When I first became involved with the Society, membership was about 170 and not growing. Today it is 350, with Canadian membership in every province except Prince Edward Island, in 23 states, in England, Scotland, Wales, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, France and Iran. From Bath, England, to New York to Columbus, Ohio, to Halifax, N.S., to Ucluelet, B.C., it has been my great pleasure to meet in person or by letter over half our membership.

It is a publication miracle that in the Society's first eleven years a small group of book enthusiasts produced eleven limited edition books and twenty-eight keepsakes and broadsides, all beautifully designed and produced. Those involved say it was not without trouble; yet it was accomplished. Not everything was sold in those years. Unsold inventory was stored free in the warehouse of Benwell Atkins, our printer, until one day in 1995 when Don Atkins called. "You better come down. All the inventory is on pallets ready for shipment to the dump." In thirty minutes I was at the plant. A decision was reached that if Don provided a truck, I would store the inventory in our basement. That afternoon three pallet loads found a new home.

Most of the stock was printed between 1966 and 1977, and this inventory has generated an average of \$3,700 in sales revenue every year since 1995. Many people have helped sell the stock. Every item is listed on John King's website (<http://www.abebooks.com/home/alcuin>), and orders come in from around the world. Gradually the mother lode is disappearing, and the day is nearing when new material will need to be published. The Alcuin Society website also lists all the publications for sale.

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Close exposure to this inventory piqued my curiosity, sufficient to stimulate me to compile a bibliography of the publications of the Society from 1965 onward. It turned out to be a longer task than anticipated. All the books are included as well as chapbooks and pamphlets, keepsakes and broadsides and ephemera. The bibliography includes a section on *Amphora* and the many interesting things bound into it or included loose. Geoff Spencer filled in many gaps in knowledge and Anne Yandle's familiarity with the Alcuin Society archives at UBC Library's Rare Books and Special Collections division was a huge help. Stuart Isto typeset and printed a letterpress cover. Benwell Atkins printed the text and bound the book in 1999. I enjoyed making this contribution to the history of the Society. A few copies remain for sale.

