

Occasion for Rubies

The 40th Anniversary of the Alcuin Society

For a fortieth wedding anniversary, a man is supposed to give his wife rubies, these being, according to Job, exceeded in value only by wisdom (Job 28:18). What she ought to get is the Distinguished Endurance Medal (DEM).

I am somewhat vicariously reminded of this because the Alcuin Society has now earned its ruby, and God knows, may even have acquired the odd bit of wisdom in the process. In consequence, I have been asked to dredge up whatever I can remember and write something appropriate, an overview of our forty years of precarious existence, together with some thoughts, perhaps, on the Society's future.

As I haven't suffered from the mind-mutilation of a university education, I'm not a terribly disciplined thinker. You must therefore forgive me if what follows has some of the mixed qualities of an Irish stew and an overripe Gorgonzola, the latter particularly apposite if you split the word into its two parts, Gorgon and Zola. But with almost four score and ten under the belt, one tends to become a mite tetchy.

I understand that the early history of the Society is to be covered by reprinting what I wrote for our twentieth anniversary (*Amphora* 62, December 1985), buttressed by some further reflections when we had reached our thirtieth, an occasion that also marked the hundredth issue of *Amphora*. And before I pass on too lightly over that one hundredth issue of December 1995, it is worth noting that no other bibliophile journal has had such an uninterrupted run. Oliver Simon's *The Fleuron—A Journal of Typography* published seven volumes between 1923 and 1930, for a total of 1,350 highly professional pages. *The Colophon* had two incarnations: the original series started in 1929 by Pynson Printers, and its continuation as *The New Colophon* in 1948 published by Duschnes Crawford. It had 2,500 subscribers, a figure we can only dream about; however, the journal only lasted a relatively short time. I doubt whether the combined number of issues came to five. The quarterly *News-Letter of the Book Club of California*, which was founded in 1912, might have had a run of 372 issues had it been started in its foundation year; however, the issue I've just plucked at random from the shelf is marked LXVI—Winter 2000. The actual number is more likely 86.

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There are a number of outstanding bibliophile journals in Europe, notably *Stultifera Navis*, the semi-annual of the Swiss Bibliophile Society, and Germany's *Philobiblon*, a quarterly published since 1948 by Hauswedell and Co. in Stuttgart. The original pre-war *Philobiblon* was the brilliant but erratic brainchild of an eminent book dealer who, in view of what subsequently transpired, had the misfortune to be born a Jew. The Nazis stole his assets and he was lucky to get away with his life. There is therefore enough solid evidence to believe that the Alcuin Society has trumped them all in terms of the longevity of its journal, currently up to No. 140—justifying, perhaps, a modest attack of self-congratulation.

I see our journal now, as I have seen it from day 1, as the lifeblood of the Society. It is the glue that binds together a widely dispersed membership. Only local residents can usually attend our functions. Those scattered around the globe depend upon *Amphora* to be aware of what we are up to.

Bibliophile societies have relatively few occasions when members come together, and only local members tend to do more than scrape acquaintance. The opportunities to make friends are limited. And, by its nature, a bibliophile society is usually a pretty low-voltage affair. However, when I cast my mind back, there were at least two occasions when things shifted from the mundane to the bizarre. Both involved the same member of the board. As he is also my friend, I hope he will forgive me for recounting what I remember of two of his escapades, allegedly to further the interests of the Society. No name, no pack drill, but what the heck, I'm talking about Rudi Diesvelt.

Rudi is marvellously talented with his hands. He has an underground cavern where he practises his skills as leathersmith, silversmith, jeweller, bookbinder, woodworker, carver, and much else tried and discarded along the way. He is also enormously enthusiastic when the bug bites, and he will readily launch himself at any project rated on the Crackpot Scale. What distinguishes him from other likeable crackpots is that while most just talk about their schemes, Rudi actually goes ahead and does them.

In 1985 the Winter Olympics were held in Calgary. A friend of Rudi's was running a cultural sideshow and invited Rudi to participate. As a director aware that the Society's fortunes were at a low ebb, Rudi conceived the

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idea of heading for Calgary, dressed as a monk from Alcuin's period. He was accompanied by his wife and a blonde bookbinder we shall call Charlotte. The ladies dressed as handmaidens at the court of Charlemagne. The idea was to run a small booth, centred around a video Rudi had made that showed the various stages in the creation of a fine press book.

Fine-tuning took the idea to its limits. Rudi built a special desk with a front flap, behind which the projector was concealed. It projected the video as if by magic on to a parchment skin from Cowley's in London, and was stretched across the sort of frame on which skins were traditionally scraped to produce parchment. While the video was shown, the handmaidens, directed by Charlotte, went through various processes of bookbinding. The background music—a last-minute inspiration—consisted of Gregorian chants. At the end of the show, Rudi sold Alcuin books and memorabilia.

When we had listened to Rudi's outline of the scheme, we had considered it harmlessly eccentric, the sort of thing to be expected from a buddy who happened to be a likeable licensed lunatic, but since Rudi himself was financing the whole thing, our blessing was cheap and readily bestowed. We thought his impact on the Calgary Olympics was unlikely to cause an unscheduled stampede. So off they went and we forgot about the whole thing.

In due course Rudi came back with his handmaidens and casually tossed \$500.23 into our kitty. He'd sold most of the Alcuin books and had had a roaring time. His show was an instant hit where it matters most, with schoolchildren, who turned up in droves. I can't remember whether we got any new members out of the affair, but it did ensure that when Rudi came up with an even greater bit of tomfoolery, we listened with greater attention.

Again, the whole thing wasn't going to cost us a sou. Rudi's crackpottery had the supreme virtue of being self-financed. The broad sweep of the thing is still vivid. As a belated tribute to Alcuin, whose promotion of Caroline minuscule letters had raised us from the level of glottal savages, Rudi proposed to dress once again as a monk and walk from the abbey on the island of Iona, off the northwest coast of Scotland, to the abbey of Lindisfarne, off the coast of Northumbria in England—a hairshirt pilgrimage in tribute to Alcuin.

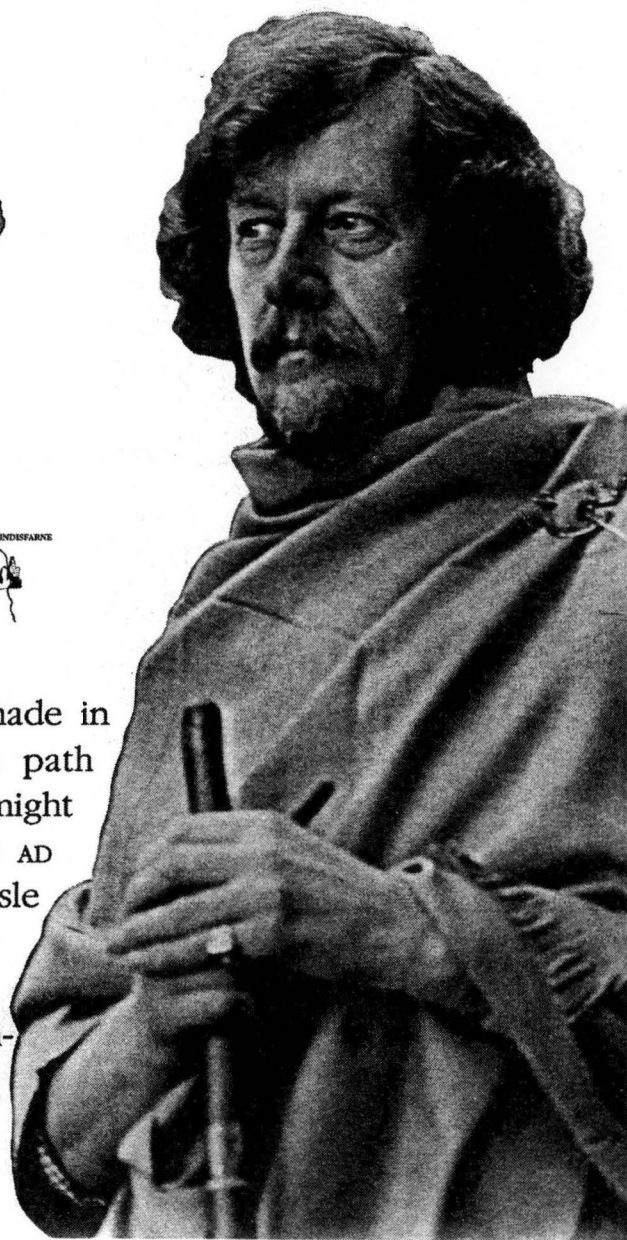
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He had been, as usual, meticulous in assembling verifiably authentic trimmings, but what he lacked was some convincing rationale for the venture. I gave him one. I said that it seemed to me likely that at some stage in his cultural ministry to Charlemagne, Alcuin may have so exhausted himself in the cause that he was near breakdown. So perhaps he asked for a period of what the military now call R & R in which to recharge his batteries. He would also, I went on, after such a tony experience at the court, have wished to renew his connection with common folk. Thus he might well have conceived the idea of a walk between two renowned abbies. In a rite of self-purification, he might also have wished to do so by the simplest means and subsistence, sleeping among wild primroses along the hedgerows or in a farmer's barn, etc., etc. Pure blarney, but Rudi liked it, and so the idea of "A Walk on the Wild Side" was born.

A few words about the trimmings. Somehow Rudi got hold of some dark-brown wool from Jacob sheep and had it spun, then woven, into a length of cloth sufficient to make a monk's garb. He corresponded with a consultant in the history of shoes and shoemaking and Janet Backhouse, the curator of illuminated manuscripts at the British Museum, about the type of footwear a ninth-century monk might have worn. From drawings provided and an illustration in the Lindisfarne Gospels he made his own sandals. He also made the belt, the pouch dangling from the belt, and an ivory diptych (a hinged two-leaf tablet written on with a stylus) on which to make notes—the BlackBerry of its day. Finally—and I love this bit—he asked me whether he ought to seek the Queen's permission for his pilgrimage, or simply let her know what he proposed to do. I chuckled and said there was certainly no harm in letting her know, but I doubted he would get a reply.

So one day in spring Rudi set off for Iona, wife Gretchen in tow as the support team. The idea of the simple life went by the board. Instead of sleeping in haystacks or trading blessings with a farmer in return for accommodation in the barn and a full English breakfast, Rudi sent his wife ahead each day to scout the land for a comfortable bed and decent grub. Having found and booked it, she would drive to meet him in a well-sprung limousine. Refuelled and refreshed, Rudi would resume his hairshirt journey in the morning.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ALCUIN OF YORK.



An attempt is to be made in 1990 to retrace the path that Alcuin of York might have undertaken circa 790 AD in a pilgrimage from the Isle of Iona to the Abbey of Lindisfarne on Holy Isle.

A personal Time-Travel Adventure undertaken by a member of The Alcuin Society of Vancouver.

*An
Alcuin Society
New Edition*



THE ALCUIN SOCIETY
P.O. Box 94108, Richmond, British Columbia, Canada
September, 1973

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He made it to Lindisfarne in jig time and paid his respects on behalf of Alcuin. Then they flew back to Canada, mission accomplished. I asked him in due course what had struck him most about his journey. He said it was the totally po-faced reaction of those he met on the way. They either ignored him or passed by with a casual glance. I told him why: the Brits respect their privacy and the right to be eccentric. In Salisbury Cathedral close one day I came across a young man with a lion cub on a lead. No one took the slightest notice, except two young girls who stopped and asked if they could pat his lion. I can still hear his reply: "Certainly you can; but I wouldn't advise it." I wrote all this up in a back issue of *Amphora* if you can be bothered to look it up.

A word about past presidents from my Gorgonzola perspective. So far we've had thirteen, with the current, fourteenth, not long enough in office to have made an impression. The thirteen were fairly representative of the human species—a few outstanding, most middling. To me a successful president is one who doesn't just preside at meetings but actually does something. Anne Taylor, for example, seemed to me exemplary. She was dedicated and untiring. If something needed to be done and nobody showed much enthusiasm for doing it, she'd pitch in and do it herself. Somehow, at one and the same time she was studying for a degree, running the Alcuin Society, organizing a major book arts exhibition and mothering her brood. How she managed it was a marvel and accounts for the nickname I gave her: "The Pocket Dynamo."

Our fifth chairman, Allen Segal, remained magisterially uninvolved in the workload but had one tremendous asset going for him: he had a large wine cellar, and throughout the most boring of meetings there was the epilogue in the wine cellar to look forward to.

Don Atkins was our home-spun Medici and generous to a fault. Without him we'd have gone broke half a dozen times. Brian Peet had his own revelation on the road to Damascus. A former headmaster of York House School, he reinvented himself as a book dealer and moved to a lovely but isolated backwater on the borders of the English Lake District. The transition seems to have been seamless, and it is one of my big regrets that I failed to visit him there. The rest I barely knew, as I left the active running of the

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Society after the first seven years to scribble away in an English thatched cottage in Wiltshire. On the whole, they must have done passably well, as we're still here and wouldn't be if they hadn't.

Has the vision I had when I started the whole thing been realized over the years? Well, no, it hasn't; but in fairness I may have expected too much. My vision was that out of a pool of talented members, the Society would produce at least one finely wrought book each year. Each issue of *Amphora* was to be accompanied by a keepsake featuring good typography, calligraphy or any other of the book arts. There would be four timely issues each year, with content ranging around the world and written in plain English. That to me represented the bare minimum of ink on paper and lay at the very heart of the thing. Any meetings, exhibitions, competitions and the like to further our aims were, of course, desirable and welcome but only as secondary to the core requirement.

Ah, I hear you say, you make too much of a thing about ink on paper. It's just something sanctified by use. Times change. The words are still there but stored differently in a computer's black hole. True and, indeed, I'm composing this on a computer, and when I'm finished it will find a home on my hard drive. But first I'll print it out as ink on paper, where I can reach for it and derive an entirely different satisfaction from handling paper rather than conjuring up dancing dots on a computer screen.

And I know I'm not alone. Where today is the gadgetry by which two dozen novels can be packed into a pocketbook-sized contraption and read at will on a screen? Ten years ago it was heralded as the coming thing, making books on paper as outdated as mothballs. For quite a while I haven't heard a whisper about electronic books. People didn't take to them, and I'll hazard a guess that they never will.

Let's talk about money, the root of all evil, but painful if you haven't got enough. We as a Society never had enough, and for thirty years we scraped along barely above extinction. The Canada Council refused to acknowledge that we were worth funding and told us they had no category in which to pigeonhole a bibliophile society like ours. We thus were entirely dependent on our dues, the sale of spasmodically produced printed goodies, and

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the generosity of members like Don Atkins, whose firm printed *Amphora* and at times failed to send us a bill.

As an aside, this allows me once again to comment, as I have for forty years, on the remarkable fact that the prosperous East of Canada has, in all that time, failed to give birth to any kind of bibliophile society such as ours. We are still the one and only.

Then, after thirty years in the desert, along comes Don Polak, a treasurer with street smarts. In addition to keeping immaculate accounts, Don had mastered the art of squeezing foundations for grants by writing irresistible applications. He got us on the list of the B.C. Gaming Commission, which has given us an annual grant ever since. Without it, we wouldn't be around today, and our appreciation to Don and the commission is immeasurable.

A few thoughts about the future (in my case, what little there's left of it). In 1965 when we got started, land line telephones were still a privilege. At home one had, if lucky, a portable typewriter, and the acme of technology in the office was a golfball IBM Selectric. Lithography was moving in for the kill, but letterpress technology, pretty much unchanged since Gutenberg, was still around in local print shops. In the right hands it still produces a magnificent result, but it's unwieldy and takes up more space than can today reasonably be afforded. That is why bibliophiles in the letterpress era tended to be appreciators rather than themselves creators of fine printing.

Today, the PC, the Internet, printers, copiers and scanners have created the opportunity for almost everyone to reach beyond appreciation to the act of creation. One may lack motivation, but the means are available for most to set up as printers/publishers. You can do it in a corner of your living quarters or on the kitchen table between meals. There can be a heady moment when you choose a name and possibly your own printer's mark. I have now been in the self-publishing game for well over a decade. My equipment is a PC (wildly out of date by nerd standards, but serviceable), a laser printer, a copier, a scanner, a pair of scissors that need sharpening, a razor blade, a glue stick, a ruler and a long-arm stapler. With this, I produce keepsakes and booklets up to 64 pages in editions up to 25. So far I have produced a round dozen. Beyond 25 copies I take my paste-up to a copy shop and have them do it. At the moment, I am completing the layout of a 64-page booklet

of satirical poems, *Prickly Poems for Punctilious People*, with a slight bow in the direction of Harry Graham, whose *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* was published in 1899 and had its one hundredth anniversary in 1999. In a fit of extravagance, I have commissioned line drawings, and sometime this year the booklet will appear under my own imprint of the Bookworm's Press: *At the Sign of the Shaky Hand*. And if I can do it, you can do it.

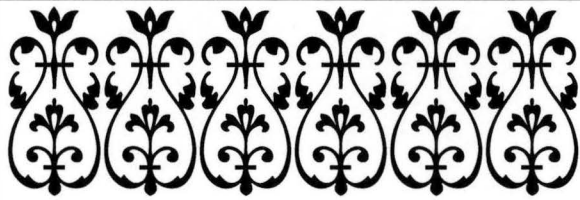
I suspect that I won't be around to ramble on at the Society's golden anniversary in 2015, but I'll mutter suitable incantations from what I expect to be my new job in charge of the sulphur vats. Keep well and keep going.



Geoff Spencer, founder of the Alcuin Society, and Howard Greaves, the Society's current chairman.

I BELIEVE
THAT A MAN
IS RICH IN
PROPORTION
TO THE NUMBER
OF THINGS WHICH
HE CAN AFFORD
TO LET *Henry David Thoreau*
ALONE.

Judith '87.



My
library
was dukedom
large enough.

WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE

