

COLLECTING

Paul Whitney's initiation to the dynamics of collecting modern fiction

My first contact with the modern firsts market came when as an English master's student in 1970 I was working on William Burroughs. The only way I had to access the important part of his work contained in small press and fugitive publications was to purchase them, from (mostly) New York-based dealers. And yes, at that time prices were in the upper affordable range for a student with a job on the side. Getting on mailing lists and reading dealer catalogues informed my beginning understanding of the dynamics that propelled the firsts market: supply and demand fuelled by criteria ranging from critical and academic approval to generally perceived "hipness" and of course condition. It was then that it dawned on me that I should stop writing my name in my books. The lending of any book of potential collecting interest to friends who were cavalier in how they handled them came to an end.

With this rudimentary grounding in book collecting I came to Vancouver to attend library school, and at UBC I had the privilege of studying under two superb book men: Roy Stokes and Dick Fredeman.

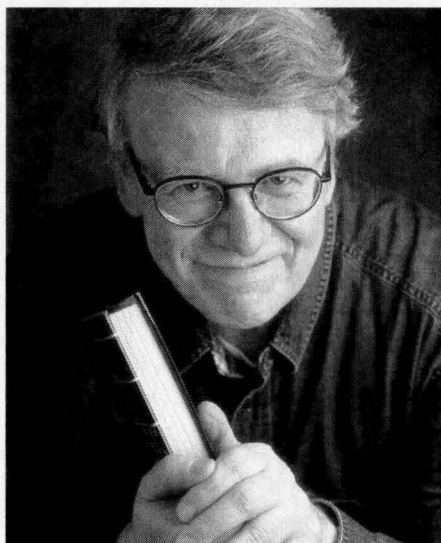
Roy taught courses on publishing, the history of the book and bibliography. What I most remember is his reminiscing about his personal collecting and research. Stories such as going from bookshop to bookshop in London the morning of the publication of *Under Milk Wood* looking for a first printing strongly resonated for me as an emerging collector.

As a number of *Amphora* readers will know, Dick Fredeman had many collecting enthusiasms. Foremost of these was Pre-Raphaelite books, art and artifacts. He took pleasure in sharing his joy in his superb collection with his graduate students. Seeing the personal collection that resulted from an individual's passion and persistence was a revelation. At

the time I took courses from him, he had his students work with the Norman Colbeck Collection of Victorian literature at the UBC Library. I developed a solid understanding of how to look at multiple editions of a book and analyze the role of the printer/publisher (arguably far more important in the period of movable type) and the author in the evolution, or in some instances the corruption, of the text.

Although my curriculum at library school prepared me to work in a university special collections environment, the vagaries of the job market when I graduated resulted in employment in a public library. While my duties had no relevance for my bibliographic knowledge, the opportunity to develop popular fiction collections meshed perfectly with my inter-

est in popular culture. I ended up with a career that gave me the opportunity to handle a significant percentage of new fiction published in English as well as read publisher catalogues and the trade press from Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. Information on print runs and special editions along with advance industry buzz and prepublication reviews informed my collecting. Conversations with publishing acquaintances, bookselling friends



Alex Waterhouse-Hayward

and librarian colleagues provided tips and insights that led to the discovery of authors who became central to my collecting focus.

Equally important as my education and profession to my development as a collector were the modern first book dealers whom I have had contact with over the years. Undoubtedly the most influential on my understanding of the trade and the source of many fine books in my collection was Bill Hoffer. Bill has assumed legendary status in the annals of Canadian bookselling, seemingly equally admired and loathed by those who came in contact with him. There is no doubt in my mind that this brilliant, erratic, opinionated and difficult man, whom I counted as a friend, was the seminal influence on me as a collector. I'll comment more on Bill in a future Modern Firsts column.