

# Book Talk:

*Essays on Books, Booksellers,  
Collecting, and Special Collections*



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# A Book Collector Builds A Life

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**W**HAT AM I doing here?

I must confess to more than a little astonishment at being in company with notable authors and publishers, eminent scholars and librarians, and distinguished dealers, as well as presidents of the ABAA. And me—just a book collector. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I am not a professional. However, I have managed to build a life around collecting books and making a place for myself among professionals who know so much more than I do but who, nevertheless, are willing to help amateurs wanting to learn and expand their horizons, to work with and to teach them, and to welcome them as colleagues in the world of books.

Several threads have created the fabric of my book life. I read books, but I must admit to a terrible impatience with most contemporary fiction and I am out of the loop at many social gatherings. I hunger for the substance of English history; give me a good new biography of Henry VIII any day. I love reading history but, in truth, if it happened after 1688 I really do not care. Unless it is royal. Or London. Or just plain interesting. I collect books as objects, yes, but content is important. I treasure my collection, finding it hard to part even with out-of-scope books, although sometimes I find it

necessary to sell books to provide the funds to acquire others that I would prefer to have in my library.

Like all boys, I was a collector; I collected stamps, coins, bugs and, of course, books. My first collection was the work of Edward Stratemeyer, better known by his pseudonym, Franklin W. Dixon, the author of the *Hardy Boys*; I got rid of all the dust jackets because they ruined the uniform look of the shelved books. (I learned recently that this passion for uniform shelves is an English trait, so maybe I come by my Anglophilia naturally. You know, Samuel Pepys put little wooden blocks under his smaller volumes to raise them in order that the tops of his books would create a straight line, but I have yet to go that far.) In addition to the *Hardy Boys*, there were other nice books that I systematically destroyed: I submitted my father's boyhood copies of Heinrich Hoffman's *Der Struwwelpeter* to attacks of crayons, and I simply wore out my copies of *Treasure Island*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and other books with wonderful N. C. Wyeth illustrations.

My father was a book collector, with very eclectic interests: he bought English, French, German, and Latin literature (he read all four languages), history, mathematics, illustrated books, anything that appealed. Dad once complained that my interest in English history from the eleventh to the twentieth century was too narrow. At one time he owned a second folio Shakespeare, which I loved to look through; for me, the best part was seeing the stains from the candle drippings that remained after some long-ago reader enjoyed his book of an evening.

My father loved book collecting, I admired my father, and the combination led me to wet my feet; I found that I enjoyed it, so we shared the interest and enjoyed it together, until the end of his very long life.

In my working life, I was in the investment world, and from 1977 to 1979 I was situated in London. I have no idea why my firm sent a municipal bond guy to live and work in London, but it did, and, undoubtedly, living there stimulated my book collecting interest.

In the late 1970s, Dad started giving his books to his kids—for

tax purposes—and he gave me one of my current treasures, Francesco Bartolozzi's engravings of Hans Holbein's drawings of the court of Henry VIII. During the two-and-a-half years I lived in London, I bought the 1754 edition of John Stow's *Survey of London* from Stanley Crowe for a few hundred dollars. There are wonderful plates in that edition, along with its fascinating text. Some collectors may remember Stanley; he was not easy to buy books from—somehow he did not seem to want to part with his stock. It bothers me that my Stow is missing one plate, though it appears never to have been bound into this copy, and was not removed by a print dealer. I am reminded of the late Leonard Hansen, book enthusiast and Grolier Club member, who bought damaged books with great abandon for relatively few dollars. "After all," Leonard said, "the Metropolitan Museum is perfectly happy to buy statues with arms, or legs—or who knows what else—missing!"

I was pleasantly surprised, and still am, at how reasonably priced unusual, old books can be. For a few hundred dollars—or a few thousand—you can buy, and own, fascinating bits of history. Now I know that a few hundred dollars—or certainly a few thousand dollars—is real money, but compare the prices of books with some of the purchases people put on their walls! Maybe this is because book spines do not dress up a wall as well as paintings and prints do, and "art" is a better weapon in the competition which Thorstein Veblen termed "conspicuous consumption." Whatever the reasons, these wonderful pieces of history seem relatively undervalued, with no offense intended to my friends who collect modern prints.

While living there, I started to collect books about London: these included publisher Rudolph Ackermann's *Microcosm of London* and his *Westminster Abbey*, which led me to see what else might be out there, like Ackermann's *Oxford, Cambridge, and the Public Schools*. And, although I did not have the courage to bid on it at the Prescott sale at Christie's in 1981, I was able to buy, more than a year after the sale, Christopher Wren's own copy of Sir William Dugdale's *History of St. Paul's Cathedral* (1558). I had not bid because, in all candor, I was

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scared to death, as a relatively new and very naïve collector, of making some horrendously expensive mistake. But I have never regretted buying it; this is history that I can hold in my hands.

So here I was, an investment manager who had bought a few books (and been given others). Although I am now an avid student of history, in college I was not a student at all. I had no interest in history or literature; I spent too much time on other activities. I got my “gentleman’s C’s” at the beginning of the time when a “C” was no longer really gentlemanly. Now my whole life is “book learning,” in several senses of the phrase.

In 1992, I was standing in the Harvard Club coat-check line with William Manchester’s biography of Winston Churchill under my arm, when a fellow standee suggested that if I enjoyed that, I should try Jasper Ridley’s biography of Henry VIII; I was not 100 percent sure of the connection between Churchill and Henry VIII, but I followed his advice. Loved the book. I then read John Guy’s *Tudor England* and the J. J. Scarisbrick biography of Henry. I was hooked.

Two years later my wife, Susie, and I went off to Cambridge, England, each to take a two-week summer course. She took Dickens; I took Tudor history. I had recently purchased a copy of the *Bishops’ Book* (1537) and I brought it along, together with some other bits of English Reformation material—they are all octavo, easily carried. I was not taking the course for credit but I decided to write a paper about the *Bishops’ Book*, just for the hell of it. I had not penned an “*ibid.*” or “*op. cit.*” since receiving my bachelor’s degree, many years earlier, but here, when it was not required, I enjoyed it.

The mid-1990s found me buying a few books here and there, and filling most of my nonworking, waking hours with reading about Tudor England, much to Susie’s distress. Among our non-Grolier Club friends, almost no one cares about the history or the books of sixteenth-century England, but I have to admit that that is one of their attractions for me. Somehow, I rather enjoy doing something that others think is a little offbeat.

A few years earlier, my Dad had a book on which he wanted an opinion. I went with him to Christie’s, then on Park Avenue and

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59th Street, where we met Chris Coover, now head of their manuscripts department in New York. He took us around the corner to see The Grolier Club (of which I had never heard) and I thought it was quite splendid but well above my level. I did keep up with Chris and in 1996 he suggested that I should join. He asked me to give him the names of the collector members whom he could ask for supporting letters, as one or two letters from nondealers was preferred. But I knew only dealers, such as the wonderful Nicholas Poole-Wilson and others at Quaritch. My reason for joining the club was just that: to meet other collectors, and librarians.

The required letters were garnered from a couple of generous souls willing to perjure themselves and I joined The Grolier Club in mid-1997. I found the club to be just what I had hoped, replete with fellowship and proffered friendship. Members said, "Tell me about yourself; what do you collect?" not, "Oh, you're a new member, may I tell you about myself?" These are the kind of people who have "biblio," "byron," and "firstfolio" as their e-mail addresses. There is one couple, both of whom are members, where the husband gave his wife, for Christmas a couple of years ago, shelf space. He actually emptied a bookcase and gave her so-and-so-many linear feet. Now that is devotion. And the wife of one collector told me that she *knows* that her husband is not having an affair, "He would not spend good book money that way."

Less than a year after I joined The Grolier Club, I retired from full-time work, although I continued the part-time role of marketing my firm's services in London, which took Susie and me there at least four times a year; "tough duty," as they say, but this came to an end in October 2001.

In retirement, I had four projected areas to keep myself occupied: to take classes at Columbia and NYU, to work on my book collection, to read more English history, and to build a model railroad. I have more than managed the first three; the model railroad still awaits another day or, more likely, another life.

One of the first highlights in my Grolier Club activities came when I, along with other new members, was invited to exhibit a few

books in the "New Members' Collect," an annual show in which recently admitted members display a few items from their collections. This gave me a bit of a view of the work—and the rewards—that are part of the physical mounting of exhibitions. My Club involvement grew when I was asked to join the Publications and Members' Exhibitions committees, then chaired by Carol Rothkopf and Mary Schlosser, respectively. By demonstrating a little interest, you can get very involved.

What better way was there to fill my time in an interesting and productive manner than to do some volunteer work at The Grolier Club? I spoke with Eric Holzenberg, the director/librarian, and he suggested I work in the library with curator Michael North, who started me cataloguing the Club's collection of eighteenth-century Sotheby's catalogues on the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). This was pretty interesting—for a while—looking at the catalogues themselves, and seeing books listed by format (folios, octavos, and so on, rather than strictly by author) and RLIN was okay, if bizarre. I have to confess, though, that I tired of this project after some months of doing it for a day or so a week. There is just so much RLIN cataloguing that you can stand. It is awfully repetitive, so I asked Michael and Eric for another project—and this next one kept me happily occupied for a couple of years.

This time they wanted me to work on the Sydney Cockerell/Harold Peirce correspondence, which continued from 1897 to 1931, a collection of which The Grolier Club had purchased in 1998. Few people knew of Peirce, but it seemed that everyone knew of the redoubtable Sydney Cockerell. Everyone, that is, except me. I not only did not know who he was, I could not even remember his name, and I had to write it on a slip of paper as a memory jog. Well, I now know who he was. I spent over a year going through more than five hundred file folders of the letters between these gentlemen, creating what was to be a finding aid but which ended up being an article in *The Grolier Club Gazette* and then a book of the edited and annotated letters which detailed many aspects of the book world in the first third of the twentieth century. As interesting as the letters.

themselves, were, I never could have completed this project without the help of one of the great scholar-collectors, Mark Samuels Lasner. He added many insights about the myriad people whose names come up in the correspondence, always with generosity of spirit and never with a suggestion of the surprise he must have felt at how little I knew about matters that are almost second nature to him. This is an example of the kind of relationship that The Grolier Club and Fellowship of American Bibliophilic Societies (FABS) foster.

While I was working on the Cockerell project, my younger son, Alan, said he had been concerned that I would be at loose ends after I retired. Apparently relieved, he said after I got so involved in this and other club projects, "The Grolier Club is your fraternity house!"

To augment my book collecting and interest in English history, I started to audit classes at Columbia: "The Reformation," "Beowulf," "Canterbury Tales," "Depiction of London in Renaissance Literature," and the like. Among the great aspects of auditing college courses at my age are the opportunities to get to know the professors without being accused of grade grubbing, and I have brought a couple of my instructors to The Grolier Club as my guests. I have also brought my books to classes, and that has worked out very well. Just doing that may have encouraged some undergraduates to become collectors. I was excited to learn that one of my professors at Columbia, Alan Stewart, would be co-curating, with Heather Wolfe, an exhibition at the Folger Shakespeare Library in fall 2004 on the "Culture of Letter-Writing in Renaissance England." I offered to lend him one of my treasures, four letters from George I, written in 1724 to members of the French nobility; two of them have never been opened and still bear their red ribbons and wax seals, just as they were affixed nearly three hundred years ago. It sounded good to Alan and Heather, and it sounded good to me that a bit of my modest collection would be exhibited on loan at the Folger.

Along with this, I started to do some teaching. Before I lived in London, I had taught investment banking as an adjunct, at the Columbia and Harvard Business Schools, and I had loved it. Maybe,



I thought, I could teach English history, tying in my book collection. Lorella Brocklesby, whom I had met when I took a couple of her English history courses at NYU, asked me out of the blue if I would like to conduct a full-day NYU workshop on Henry VIII. I realized that although I knew a lot more about English history than most Americans, I was really not equipped to teach a course in it. "Why not let's do it together?" I asked her. I could talk about Catherine of Aragon and the divorce, the split with Rome, and the five other wives, as well as the early years of the English Reformation. Lorella could cover her areas of expertise: art and architecture of the period, fashion, and theater, and we could share the political-historical bits. But what would make this class different would be the books: I would—and did—bring into the workshop a couple dozen books from or relating to the period—to share the thrill at holding history in your hands. The books ranged from Holbein's drawings of the court of Henry VIII (not the original drawings, Her Majesty the Queen owns them, but, rather, the almost equally spectacular Bartolozzi engravings which my father had given me twenty-five years earlier) to Ackermann's *Oxford and Cambridge*, and from Henry's *Assertion of the Seven Sacraments against Martin Luther* to John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* to Gilbert Abbott à Beckett's *Comic History of England*. Lorella and I turned out to be a good combination; we still call Henry "Herny," in remembrance of a typo in one of our e-mails.

I went on to teach three classes at my local adult school, at which Lorella has taught for many years. She gave four sessions on the age of the Tudors, and I complemented this with some of my books in a kind of "hold history in your hands" show-and-tell. The following semester we did the Stuarts, and the next spring the four Georges. My classes give a dozen or so people the opportunity to see and touch some unusual items; they also had a chance to chat about "rare books."

Funny things happen. I was preparing a handout for the Georgian class in which one of the books to be included was an immensely heavy copy of Hogarth's engravings. The volume was to be open to one of his most famous works, "Gin Lane," and when I

looked at the text on my brand new computer screen, I was surprised to see a light underlining below that just-inserted title. Placing my cursor there produced a tiny icon, with a broad, lower case letter "i"—you know, like an "information" sign. Clicking on the icon, I was offered a map of, and driving directions to, "Gin Lane." Wonder of wonders! I tried for the map, and was offered, as the closest fit that "MSN Maps and Directions" could find, "Gina Street" in London, Kentucky. Computers do not know everything. What else could I offer at NYU? I suggested "A Day at The Grolier Club," and in spring 2004 it ran on a Saturday, from 11 to 4, with an hour break for lunch. We started with Eric Holzenberg giving a 45-minute tour, then I talked for an hour or so about books I had brought. Following lunch, a half hour was spent viewing Garrett Herman's splendid Darwin show, we had another hour of show-and-tell and hands-on book examination, and ended with a half hour at the exhibition of Bill Drenttel's and Jessica Helfand's spectacular collection of volvelles.

For fall 2004, NYU asked me to give a course on rare books. Me? What can I do? I am very aware of what I know and what I do not know (remember what I said about teaching English history?). I do not feel comfortable at the prospect of pretending expertise on descriptive bibliography, binding, illustration processes, identification, and other details of the rare book world, but I have gotten to know a lot of experts, who shine where I barely glimmer, so I ran a sixteen-hour NYU course, *Introduction to Rare Books*—with no fewer than ten Grolier Club members as guests. Think about how *you* might maximize your knowledge and contacts. I guarantee you will get pleasure from it.

One school thing reminds me of another: Rare Book School (RBS), in Charlottesville, Virginia. RBS is one of the great experiences a book collector can have. Susie and I have been there twice. First we took Terry Belanger's "Descriptive Bibliography"; I loved it, treated it like solving a puzzle, and Susie, well, she weathered it. A couple of years ago we went back and, again with Terry, took "Book Illustration Processes," which, I am glad to report, Susie enjoyed

more than "Des Bib." RBS is grand, not only for the course content, but for the opportunity to meet and work closely with other like-minded people. Lunches and dinners are full of as much book talk as one can stomach, so to speak.

When Susie and I married, she had little interest in and no knowledge of "rare books," but, over time and through the process of osmosis, she and I came to share an enthusiasm for much of my collection. While she really does not care about my major passion, Tudor England and the English Reformation, she loves and, indeed, urged me to buy, several of our choicest items: a complete run of Ackermann's *Repository of Arts*, the English magazine published from 1809 to 1828, and our Duke of Windsor material, including the former Edward VIII's own presentation copy of the warrant granting him his ducal title.

Another way to meet fellow biblio types is on trips, such as the FABS excursion to New York. Susie and I went on the Grolier's *Iter Britannicum* in 2001, where she lost count at fifteen libraries in six days. We did not just look around these libraries; each of them took out its greatest treasures for us to enjoy. For example, at the Royal Library at Windsor, we saw a small notebook in which a ten-year-old child had written charmingly about sitting and waiting, restless and hungry as only a child can be, through "Daddy's" and "Mum's" coronation. It was, of course, Princess, now Queen, Elizabeth, writing about the coronation ceremony of her parents, George VI and Queen Elizabeth, the late queen mother. "Granny" (the formidable Queen Mary) assured her that there would be ample tea and cakes at the ceremony's conclusion. And while "Granny" claimed not to remember her own coronation in 1911 (of which "Uncle David's" copy of the *Form and Order* is in my collection), ten-year-old Elizabeth asserted that she would *never* forget hers.

More recently, we traveled to Washington, Amherst, and Northampton, and again to England, although this time it was only for a day each in London and Cambridge. Taking advantage of these travel opportunities gave us hours of contact with people interested in the same things as we are, as well as enabling us and our

fellow travelers to reminisce about common experiences when we met again in home territory.

One of the wonderful things you can do at The Grolier Club is work on setting up exhibitions, nine per year. I mean physically setting them up—handling all kinds of wonderful material and seeing more than just the exhibited openings, without having to buy the books. A wonderful camaraderie develops.

Even better than setting up others' shows is the opportunity to curate an exhibition drawn from your own collection. In 2000, I was lucky enough to mount one at The Grolier Club, on the second floor. Like every other exhibition curator, I brought in too much material, and had to leave some items out, but so it goes. But I did get to see about eighty of my books open at one time. I felt like an old man with several children and numerous grandchildren. These people would come to visit me occasionally, and we would have a nice, quiet chat, or a cup of tea. But for this birthday celebration, or whatever, here they were all together, talking animatedly among themselves, and relating to one another. That is what these eighty books were doing.

If you choose to write an exhibition catalogue, as I did, it is worth the ton of work, more than you can possibly imagine, that goes into it. You learn a great deal about your own subject and your collection.

As this is being written, I am working on another show. In, I think, April 2001, I was at a Grolier Club lunch, seated next to Werner Gundersheimer, then director of the Folger. "What would you think of working together on an exhibition in 2009, commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of the accession of Henry VIII to the throne?" I asked, somewhat hesitantly. "Good idea," he said, but he pointed out that he would be retired by then. I brought it up again, to Folger's Richard Kuhta and Bill Stoneman of the Houghton Library, who liked the idea. Then John Bidwell of the Morgan Library signed on, so here I am, leading this commemoration of my friend, "Herny," at the Grolier, in very distinguished company. I think we can pull it off.

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Most of the projects I have discussed: working in the Grolier Library or mounting and setting up an exhibition, take a fair amount of time. But even if you have time constraints, and we all do, there is always something worthwhile in which you can become involved. For example, The Grolier Club has about ten committees, ranging from Members' and Public Exhibitions to Library to Admissions, and from Finance to Publications to Special Functions to the House Committee. Joining one, or more, of such committees is a great way to become involved in your club, and who knows where it will lead?

I am sure by now you get the idea. One can build a wonderful life around books, as I have. As in a spider web, the threads just come together.