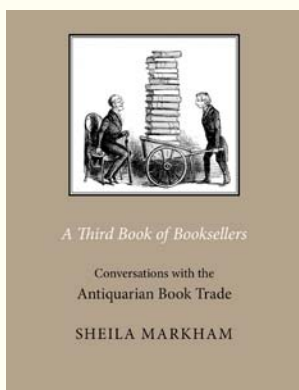


Book Review:

What's the deal with dealers?

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MARKHAM, Sheila.
A Third Book of Booksellers: Conversations with the Antiquarian Book Trade. Introduction by Richard Ovenden. London: Sheila Markham Rare Books, 2021. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 272pp. Illustrations. Edition limited to 500 copies. £35.



I'm not sure what the deal is with dealers, but the public's fascination with antiquarian booksellers continues. The lifestyle -- the independence, the thrill of the hunt, the working from home (more often than not these days) -- seems irresistible. These and more partly-true stereotypes all come into play. But persist it does, as a new third volume in a series from English antiquarian bookseller Sheila Markham shows.

In the Fall 2004 issue, *A Book of Booksellers: Conversations with the Antiquarian Book Trade, 1991-2003* by British antiquarian bookseller Sheila Markham was reviewed. In 2014 she came out with *A Second Book of Booksellers*. With

this *Third Book of Booksellers* the trilogy comes full circle and the trajectory becomes clear: “My first two volumes of conversations aimed to provide a snapshot of rare bookselling before the coming of the internet and during the period of adapting to it,” she writes in an intriguing opening. “The third volume demonstrates the huge benefit that I have personally derived from the new technology” – an attitude shared in many of these 35 essays to varying degrees and with caveats. All three are top heavy with British dealers, not surprisingly.

A Third Book of Booksellers consists of 35 interviews in essay form (31 booksellers, 4 collectors), most of which first saw light of day in the distinguished quarterly journal *The Book Collector* and appear here in chronological order. Demographically and in order of frequency, the dealer countries represented (usually but not necessarily their country of birth) include 13 English (8 in London), 5 Americans, 2 French (both Paris), 2 Spanish (both Madrid), 2 Australian, 1 Scottish, 1 Turkish, 1 Dutch, 1 Japanese, 1 South Korean, 1 Argentinian, 1 Italian. Males are 22 in number, females 9 – over 40%, a healthy percentage though not true of the trade across the board. Of the collectors, 2 are English, 1 Japanese, 1 Icelandic, and the male-female ratio 50/50.

The British certainly have the home court advantage in *A Third Book of Booksellers*, which to American readers is a plus. They bring a perspective, a world view, a way of expressing themselves, that continually surprises. What is it about the English that, for Americans, so often makes them seem witty and eccentric, more articulate, able to drop the F bomb so skillfully? Is it *truly* so or is this merely some American inferiority complex? More importantly, do the English ever feel the same way about Yanks? *Naah* – that is, not bloody likely. Perhaps I’ve simply been watching too much Britbox.

Richard Oventen, librarian of Oxford’s main research library, the Bodleian Library, certainly gets around: He wrote

the fine preface to Federico Varese's *Tradecraft: Writers on John le Carré* which I reviewed in the last issue of *Manuscripts*, and in *A Third Book of Booksellers* he provides a lively, intimate introduction recounting his own background and how it involved many of the booksellers who appear in these volumes. *A Third Book of Booksellers*

reminds me of how much rich knowledge and good company there is in the world of rare and antiquarian booksellers. I have personally benefited enormously from their generosity, patience and comradeship. Despite the economic difficulties, the world of rare books endures and is perhaps (at least from the outside) going through a strong period.... Long may it flourish and generate new material so that Sheila Markham can produce further volumes in this series.

A sentiment with which this reviewer enthusiastically concurs, by the way – but for a differing take on this see the paragraph about Edwin Bloemsaat below.

These intense and thoughtful brief essays – most are about a half dozen pages – come largely but not entirely from well-established dealers with strong specialties, strong memories and strong opinions. Some are certainly newer to the trade and their perspectives are intriguing and welcome. But all recount a journey that led to a lifetime surrounded by books and manuscripts, their struggles to rise up the ladder. Successes appear alongside failures, each jam-packed with tales, anecdotes, stories of specific titles and specific collections bought and sold.

What makes *A Third Book of Booksellers* a reviewer's challenge is this: How do you capture the essence of 35 wildly disparate essays, each memorable in its own way yet one hundred percent different from every other? Every dealer's

tale of how they arrived where they are – their background, education, passions, priorities – are splintered and scattered, making seeing the forest for the trees something of a trial. But as crazily dissimilar and unrelated as dealers are from each other, they do have certain features in common and certain truths about the book and manuscript worlds do emerge. Let's spot check a random handful and try to seize on a few....

"I buy what I like" is the title of London bookseller Bogoslav Winner's essay – one of the most often-heard expressions in the book and autograph profession:

My attitude has always been that I buy what I like. I would find it very dull to deal in trophy books, and I've never understood the attraction of modern first editions. People make a lot of money, but they're buying the same books all the time. I hardly ever buy a book that I know. If it 'speaks' to me and I think the price is right, I buy it. Nowadays you look at books much more closely than, say, fifty years ago. A book needs the added value of annotations and an interesting provenance.

Buying what you like is perhaps the most prevailing attitude that unites these dealers. Savvy dealers tend to like what they like, trusting and hoping that enough customers will agree with them to make their business a success. That's not to say that the opposite sentiment – I only buy books that I know – doesn't sometimes feel like the prevailing sentiment among the "trophy only" dealers often found in the U.S. trade.

One recurring and delightful aspect of *A Third Book of Booksellers* is reading about dealers whose specialty one knows little or nothing about. Carl Williams of London is one such instance. His focus on counterculture material intrigues as much as it baffles. As a collecting trend it's showing some staying power. High-end book fairs are filled with counterculture stuff

these days, though what “it” is sometimes defies explanation.

“Counterculture is whatever I say it is,” Williams begins his essay “The aesthetic possibilities of altered states of consciousness” -- which helps explain its indefinability. It proves as challenging to define as, say, “Americana” – no two definitions match, but most overlap in various ways – and reminds one of Potter Stewart’s “I know it when I see it” definition of pornography. It can be highbrow philosophy or lowbrow street material. At one end he describes his favorite material as “high and low culture, an approach that many people don’t understand” – myself included, though I value his tales about a side of the book and autograph world to which I’ve simply never been exposed.

An autograph element is not lacking in *A Third Book of Booksellers*. Williams has one of the many autograph tales that crop up in this book:

I was already doing odd jobs for Ed Maggs, to whom I sold a series of letters between Thomas J. Wise and Frederick H. Evans, the photographer who began his career as a bookseller in Cecil Court. Evans was accusing Wise of stealing some literary correspondence from his shop in Cecil Court, after discovering an item from his stock in a Christie’s catalogue. The item was withdrawn from the sale, but Wise refused to acknowledge that it belonged to Evans – almost taunting him in his letters, to which Evans replied with ever-longer letters. He never got his property back, I think. I bought the letters from Godfrey Pilkington of the Piccadilly Gallery, and I’m now sorry that I didn’t also buy a play that Evans had written on the whole saga. I wonder where it is now.

What antiquarian booksellers did prior to finding their calling always fascinates, and ranges from high-pressure high-

paying business careers to the mundane and down-to-earth. For instance, Roger J. Treglown (of Heversham, a village of 647 souls in Cumbria) was “enjoying my hippy lifestyle, living in a cottage on the Moors, making a bit of money by building dry stone walls, cleaning windows, emptying dustbins and so on.” Some were practically born into it, such as Peter Kraus of Ursus Books in New York whose “uncle” was the revered Austrian-American purveyor of mind-boggling rarities on a scale seldom seen before, Hans Peter Kraus, but more often dealers interspersed higher education with dabbling in this and that before somehow dipping their toe into bookselling and finally taking the head-first plunge.

Treglown thanks the inimitable American bookselling duo Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine Stern (many of whose jointly-penned books were reviewed in this column long ago) for stressing “the importance of connections and looking for things that might not be immediately obvious.” He “keep[s] one of their quotes above my desk to remind me of their approach: ‘Today much of the book trade seems bent upon becoming purveyors of modern books written in English and protected with jackets in mint condition – books that demand few skills other than the ability to pay for them.’ ” It’s refreshing to notice that the British dealers who dominate *A Third Book of Booksellers* seem less fixated on “high spots” than their American counterparts.

The first American encountered is San Franciscan Chris Loker. Her statement, “The rare book world is a magnificent place, filled with rugged individualists who walk to the beat of their own drum,” resonates – and she herself is a striking example. She transitioned from the marketing world and became a leading children’s book dealer and picture book authority, even publishing renowned picture books herself. An essay by Loker’s husband, noted book and manuscript dealer John Windle, appears in *A Second Book of Booksellers*.

Exotic by comparison is the story of Alican Akin, founder of Khalkedon Rare Books in Istanbul, Turkey. Turkish and Ottoman material rarely arises among Western-focused American and European dealers, so this dive into the world of early printed books and manuscripts of the East reminds us that ours is but one among many worlds. At age 43, Akin is a relative youngster in antiquarian bookselling and one of the younger dealers in this book – older folks dominate these essays – and it's jarring to read that "I have no experience of bookselling before the internet." But it is encouraging to find this enterprising dealer making his mark; he is even helping that country's national antiquarian booksellers association attain membership in the International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB). "In Turkey bookselling is regarded as a highly desirable occupation and attracts people of all ages," he writes, to my surprise and delight. "There is a significant number of women in the trade, and many of them are extremely good at what they do." Surprise and delight once again.

The second American to appear in *A Third Book of Booksellers* is, I'm happy to report, also female, and also a San Franciscan as is Chris Loker. Bulgarian-born Zhenya Dzhavгова's account of emigrating to the U.S. in 2003 and teaching high school until a book purchased at an estate sale snowballed into "stumbling" her way into antiquarian books is an all-too-typical instance of those *not* born to bookseller parents magically finding their way into what seems their destiny, as yours truly attests. Zhenya's founded ZH Books in 2010 and specializes in antiquarian Slavic and Eastern European material. Although she laments "it was a dream to have a shop," she finds that "I've become very comfortable in my office in the backyard of our house in Fremont, California." Hers is a heartwarming tale of determination and success.

Two Australians make appearances in *A Third Book of Booksellers*. First comes Kay Craddock, the only living

bookseller I know of who has been the subject of a biography – Stuart Kells’ *Rare: A life among antiquarian books*, reviewed in this column in the Summer 2011 issue. Kay’s “My university was life itself” essay might be considered a Cliffs Notes version of this highly-recommended book. Ironically, the *other* Australian in *A Third Book of Booksellers* is Craddock’s sister-in-law, Sally Burdon of Asia Bookroom in Canberra.

Some of the best down-to-earth guidance about dealing in antiquarian books comes from Craddock. “My advice is always to buy whatever appeals to you; if you can’t afford the best edition, buy the best you can afford,” she comments. “The first step is to have the book on your shelf.” Here’s another sentiment of hers one almost never hears in the book world: “I love being a general bookseller. I’ve been cataloguing \$30 books today, and I know that they will give some people a lot of pleasure.” *Huzzah!* And this from a former president of the ILAB and the first female president of Australia and New Zealand’s national association. Craddock is no stranger to fine antiquarian material either, as attested by mention of handling copies of Schoeffer’s 1472 Bible and Shakespeare’s Second folio. (Her sister-in-law also addresses the economics of selling low-end inventory, noting that her husband “had been saying for a long time that I should stop selling \$35 books.... I love them, but as the years go by I do see his point, and I’m working on changing the balance as I get older.”)

On the topic of selling online, two Americans of vast experience best express the range of opinion. The venerable Charles Wood of Cambridge, Massachusetts – who has issued a great many stunning hard-copy catalogues reflecting his specialties (heavily architecture, landscape, decorative arts) and on whose website many of these may be read and drooled over – remarks:

Having done almost 200 paper catalogues, I've reached the point where all my future catalogues will be electronic. I realise that I'm breaking with a long tradition in the book trade, but the last printed catalogue was just one problem after another, stressful and expensive. Electronic lists are easy to produce and I already have a few in the pipeline....

The octogenarian's can't-beat-'em-join-'em attitude shows another quality often seen among these dealers: the ability to pivot, accept the inevitable and soldier on. So too does his closing sentiment, which demonstrates why so few in this profession ever fully retire:

I still haven't lost my love of buying and selling, and the sense of joy I derive from the physical presence of books. I know so much more than when I started in the business that I'm able to buy more creatively, and I can still find wonderful things. I hope I croak while ordering a book, because it's been so much fun.

Back to back with this enlivening attitude so common among dealers is the essay of almost-octogenarian Peter Kraus, likewise a leading specialist in architecture but also art, illuminated books and decorative material. His enthusiasm and love of the trade matches Wood's, though his take on selling online differs markedly:

The internet is catastrophic for my business and, I believe, for the rare book trade in general. It wiped out bookshops and the opportunity for young people to learn the business in the best environment. Gone are the days when Warren Howell educated an entire generation of booksellers in his shop in San Francisco. The internet also enabled ignorant people to sell books. I'm not sure how many of them

know how to collate a book – not many, given the number I order online and then have to return because they're incomplete....

Kraus doesn't quite end on this sour note. He adds: "However, if you approach rare bookselling with passion, curiosity and the humility to recognize that you will never know it all, there are still tremendous possibilities out there."

Edwin Bloemsaat of Florisatus Fine Books, Manuscripts and Musicalia (The Hague, Netherlands) is one of the younger dealers found in *A Third Book of Booksellers* and a relative newcomer to bookselling. While he seems enthused about exhibiting at book fairs in Paris and Germany ("Germany is the place to find not only many young booksellers but also young collectors"), elsewhere he shows a pessimism not much seen in this book, starkly different from that of Richard Ovenden cited above. On the antiquarian book scene in The Netherlands, Bloemsaat writes: "The collecting of high-quality books was never very flourishing in Holland and seems to be now completely out of fashion. Few young people go to fairs, nor are there many exhibitions about rare books. As regards the antiquarian trade, the number of serious booksellers is dwindling, as many are reaching retirement age."

Of online bookselling Bloemsaat is apparently not a fan. "I don't put my catalogues online or send out lists before exhibiting at fairs." He notes, "I think the time has come to produce printed catalogues again, and to write readable descriptions, explaining what is important about each item. Everyone is in a hurry these days, and so the choice of caption above the description is very important." His is one of very few gloomy voices in this book. "In my experience almost every subject is going down in price, except for the really high spots, which have become so expensive that they are beyond the reach of most dealers – so much so that I'm finding it difficult to

buy books at the moment.” Bloemsaat’s attitude is very much the exception, most dealers feeling enthused about or at least resigned to the reality of online bookselling.

Similarly, long-time Welsh dealer Jeff Towns (Dylans Bookstore, Swansea) writes that “I decry the effect of the internet on my bookselling business.... I began to withdraw from bookselling when the internet came along. The only thing you learn about a customer online is their credit card number which, although useful, is the least interesting thing about them.” Some might find his solution radical, others intriguing. He closed his brick-and-mortar shop and

My son came up with the idea of a mobile bookstore, which has given me a way to sell off a few books. And to do it in an interesting way. After much searching, we bought an old mobile library in Harrogate... fully fitted with beautiful, cantilevered shelving. The drive back to Swansea took almost ten hours, as the bus only goes fifty miles an hour with a following wind. We lettered it up as Dylans Mobile Bookstore, filled the shelves with books in Welsh, and had our first outing.... I was aware of mobile libraries but had never seen one.... We now take the bus to a number of festivals and are often double-booked at weekends.

Each essay in *A Third Book of Booksellers* opens with a black-and-white photograph of the dealer, all fine and sensitive and evocative. Many are outstanding – one of them (collector Diana Scarisbrick) so striking that Markham mentions “It was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery in London, where it is on permanent display.” It’s extraordinary how black and white portraits lend a timelessness that color cannot approach.

All of these first-person essays are based on Markham’s interviews with the subjects, some conducted via Zoom. She could more easily have presented straightforward verbatim

question-and-answer transcripts, which lend a friendly, decidedly casual air but can also make for less clarity and focus, depending on the interviewee. Dozens of back-to-back Q & A interviews simply make for less informative reading. She wisely opted to edit them into their first-person form. Nothing matches the immediacy of firsthand narratives for compelling story telling. The 2004 *A Book of Booksellers* presents a blend of first-person and some third-person essays, so the entirely first-person approach clearly works best.

Dealers and collectors alike will find Markham's *A Third Book of Booksellers*, barely touched upon above, strangely addictive. Readers will enjoy the many quick delves into all manner of specialties -- types of books (modern firsts, illuminated manuscripts, fine presses, you name it) and locations of focus (the Antarctic, Korea, Iceland, Argentina, Paris, many others) -- along with the mix and match of business models -- open shop and the personal touch, home office and mail order, auction house.

Antiquarian book and historical document dealers are among the quirkiest human beings you may ever meet. Their boundless enthusiasm tends to defy whatever their physical age may be; their intense curiosity knows no bounds. I heartily second Richard Ovenden's hope that the *Book of Booksellers* series continues. With this third volume representing the post-internet world of bookselling, who knows what evolutionary stage a fourth volume might present. Perhaps an internet backlash will grow the same way vinyl albums have revived in the music industry... perhaps AI may rear its head... perhaps....