

From the Serious to the Not so Serious

WILLIAM BUTTS

FLECK, Robert D. *Books About Books: A History and Bibliography of Oak Knoll Press, 1978-2008*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2008. 8vo. v, 232pp. Illustrations. Hardbound \$45.00, softbound \$25.00.

GREEN, James N., and STALLYBRASS, Peter. *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press and the Library Company of Philadelphia and The British Library, 2006. 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. x, 178pp. Numerous illustrations. \$49.95.

CASTNER, Leon, and KATHENES, Brian. *Betcha Didn't Know That! 101 Antiques and Collectibles Trivia Tips That Can Make You Rich, Famous, and the Hit of the Party*. Hope, NJ: National Appraisal Consultants, 2007. 8vo. Softbound. 165pp. \$14.95.

No publisher has appeared in this column more often over the years than Oak Knoll Press of New Castle, Delaware. In front of their logo autograph collectors with a scholarly or bookish bent should bow and chant, *Wayne's World* style, "We're not worthy! We're not worthy!"

Robert Fleck founded Oak Knoll Books—dealers in books about books—in 1976, and Oak Knoll Press—publishers of books about books—began two years later. (The existence of a “Books About Books” section in my own shop amazes and amuses the uninitiated. But the fact is that books about books is the largest single category of books in existence—or so I’m told. It’s a statistic I believe.)

Fleck’s 50-page introduction tells the entertaining story of the young chemical engineer who chucked it all to specialize in one of the most fascinating, yet sometimes arcane and overlooked, field of antiquarian bookselling. He chronicles the challenge of finding adequate retail and publishing space; their early catalogues and decision to focus on direct selling techniques; their shift into publishing and development of prestigious co-publishing arrangements with the likes of the American Antiquarian Society, British Library and similar distinguished organizations; his challenges as president of the ABAA (Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America) and then the ILAB (International League of Antiquarian Booksellers); and the changes and challenges caused by the growth of the Internet. It’s a fascinating story of hard-won success, ably told.

But the meat ‘n’ taters of Fleck’s *Books About Books* is the 150-page chronological annotated bibliography of all Oak Knoll Press books. Each title is briefly discussed and summarized, and Fleck also notes each edition or additional printings published. It intrigues this reviewer no end to note which titles have gone through the most printings, the most editions. You wouldn’t think a book about the incredibly specialized subject of headbands (“those decorative bands of silk or cotton which can be found fastened inside the top (and sometimes also the bottom) of the spine of a book”) would prove such a steady seller, yet Jane Greenfield and Jenny Hille’s *Headbands: How to Work Them* went through an impressive eight printings between 1990 and 2008!

Titles involving autographs and documents, forgery studies and other issues relevant to the autograph world are sprinkled throughout, making this rich terrain. If you already have a good reference library of autograph literature, this helps you fill in gaps. If you’re just starting such a library or have only the scant few reference works that even many long-time collectors have,

BOOKS ABOUT BOOKS

A HISTORY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY OF
OAK KNOLL PRESS, 1978–2008



Books About Books is a superb method to learn what exists. Sure, many of the titles listed are long since out of print, especially the older titles, but the Internet has made the tracking down of specialized titles easier and more affordable than ever. Given the

lack of a truly definitive bibliography of autograph literature—a massive, unwieldy project if ever there was one—*Books About Books* at least profiles one leading publisher’s output.

In no particular order, let’s peruse some of the main categories of autograph-related books the determined autograph collector with a broad interest and open mind will find in flipping through Fleck’s *Books About Books*. Many of the following have been reviewed in this column, by the way.

Biographies and memoirs of noted antiquarian booksellers and collectors are without fail chock full of tales (some of them even true!) about autograph material and signed volumes that have passed through their hands—along with much book and autograph legend and tall tales. Delightful is how I’d describe English bookseller Percy Muir’s 1956 *Minding My Own Business*, which Oak Knoll reprinted in 1991—charming tales of bookselling at the genteel firm Elkin Mathews between World Wars One and Two, well populated by “enthusiasts, experts and eccentrics.” Frank Herrmann’s *Low Profile: A Life in the World of Books* (2002) is similar, but mostly concerns the publishing and high-end auction scene in England of the last few decades. I had my criticisms about Anton Gerits’ *Books, Friends and Bibliophilia* (2004) when I reviewed it, but few other memoirs cover the European antiquarian bookselling scene from the 1950s until now so well. And every collector worth his salt knows the adventures of those grand bookselling ladies Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine B. Stern, both recently deceased. Oak Knoll published several of their joint memoirs. Typical is *Old Books in the New World* (1996), which “records for the first time in detail their book buying trips abroad between 1947 and 1957.” Among private collectors, there’s the “obsessive collector of rare books and artifacts,” 19th century New Zealand gov’nor George Grey, whose autographic gems may be appreciated in Donald Jackson Kerr’s *Amassing Treasures for All Time: Sir George Grey, Colonial Bookman and Collector* (2006). Robert Fleck’s own *A. Edward Newton: A Collection of His Works* (1988) elaborates the great Edwardian fop’s choice literary holdings.

Studies of various historical scripts pepper Oak Knoll’s backlist. The intricacies of ancient and medieval scripts may be observed and better understood through Stan Knight’s *His-*

torical Scripts from Classical Times to the Renaissance (2003), Vera Radosavljevic's *Materials & Techniques of Medieval Manuscripts* (2008) and Kathleen P. Whitley's *The Gilded Page: The History & Techniques of Manuscript Gilding* (2008). If the broader spectrum of handwriting styles throughout history piques your curiosity, Rachele Altman's *Absent Voices: The Story of Writing Systems in the West* (2004) might be sought out. If the products of a specific ethnic group, perhaps Russell and Corinne Earnest's *Flying Leaves and One-Sheets: Pennsylvania German Broad-sides, Fraktur and Their Printers* (2005). If relatively modern attempts at mastery of letter forms catch your fancy, consider William E. Henning's *An Elegant Hand: The Golden Age of American Penmanship & Calligraphy* (2002) or Peter Holliday's *Edward Johnston: Master Calligrapher* (2007). If tracking the ownership history of books based on ownership signatures, margin notes and other documentary evidence is your thing, how about two titles edited by Robin Myers, Michael Harris and Giles Mandelbrote—*Owners, Annotators and the Signs of Reading* (2006) and *Books on the Move: Tracking Copies through Collections and the Book Trade* (2007).

The history and study of library formation—especially early libraries, filled with scrolls and codices instead of printed book-forms the backbone of the serious consideration of early manuscripts. Oak Knoll published the massive 5-volume *History of the Library in Western Civilization* by Konstantinos Staikos starting in 2004. Other useful specific studies include Neville Thompson's *The Winterthur Library Revealed* (2004) and Richard Wendorf's *America's Membership Libraries* (2007).

Forgeries: Everyone seems fascinated by this topic, autograph collector or not, and the savviest collectors can't get enough of it. Oak Knoll published several important studies on the topic. Pat Bozeman's *Forged Documents: Proceedings of the 1989 Houston Conference* (1990) and Robin Myers' *Fakes and Frauds: Varieties of Deception in Print & Manuscript* (1996) deserve a place on every serious collector's shelves. Narratives about particular famous forgers also find their place here. Joseph Rosenblum's *Prince of Forgers* (1998) details French forger Vrain-Denis Lucas and his staggering output, and his *The Practice to Deceive* (2000) profiles nine high-profile forgers.

Autograph collectors determined to educate themselves on

matters either general and popular or arcane and esoteric are highly recommended to flip through Robert Fleck's *Books About Books: A History and Bibliography of Oak Knoll Press, 1978-2008*. It's a goldmine of autograph information.

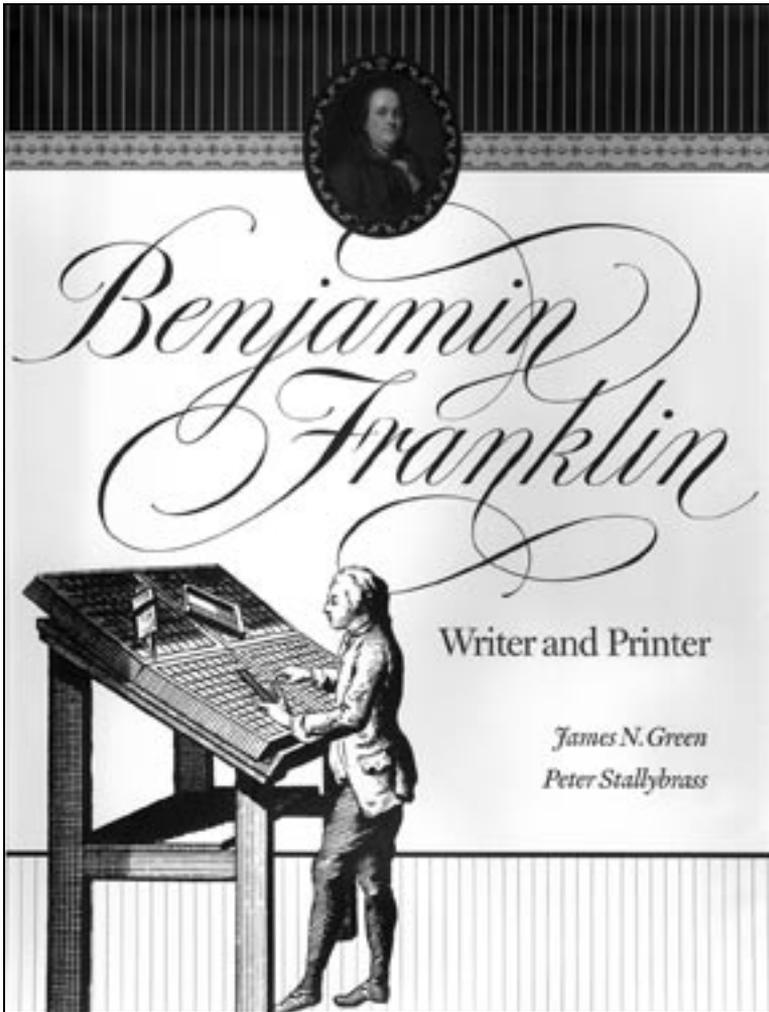
Speak of the devil: Another Oak Knoll Press title.

Few books influenced my early years more than Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. His Horatio Algerish tales of seeking to improve himself through diligent application, hard work and self-education impressed this youth mightily and helped form the Puritan work ethic my wife makes fun of to this day.

Most people are vaguely aware of Franklin's profession as a printer, though this takes a back seat to his more crowd-pleasing accomplishments: Scientist, inventor, politician, statesman, patriot, signer of the you-know-what. Printing, though, dominated the major portion of his early work years. James N. Green and Peter Stallybrass's *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer* thoroughly demonstrates that, though he did have his failures, a capable and shrewd businessman he was—enough so he was able to step back from the business while in his forties to pursue other interests. And autograph collectors will be surprised to learn the extent to which Franklin thought about the act of writing and of writing materials, and how frequently references to pen, ink and such made their way into his writings. Indeed, they colored his world and helped form his approach to it.

Partnering first with Hugh Meredith (1728) for twenty years and then letting David Hall run the business for the next twenty, Franklin's press issued an impressive array of pamphlets, small jobs (handbills, broadsides, receipts, etc.), legal forms, currency, a modest number of books. Few sources gather under one roof such a fine variety of illustrations of these rare imprints and a number of unusual Franklin documents—all in superb full color, of course—and thankfully not a Declaration of Independence to be seen. There are, for instance, two small illustrations of pseudonymous early editorial letters penned by Franklin (signing himself "Anthony Afterwit" and "Celia Single") for *The Pennsylvania Gazette*.

Also unusual are illustrations of printed newspaper edito-



rials (from “The Busy-Body”) that appeared in *The American Weekly Mercury* on which Franklin penned his and another contributor’s initials to record authorship. Or Franklin’s copy of James Burgh’s *An Hymn to the Creator of the World* (1750), which he marked up with changes and additions before adding the text to his *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. The numerous illustrations of Franklin’s press work, too, are enough to make anyone

interested in Franklin autograph material want to branch out into collecting his imprints. The full-page illustration of the first pamphlet authored and printed (both anonymously) by him, *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper-Currency* (1729), is particularly breathtaking.

Franklin's best moneymakers were *The Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Poor Richard's Almanack*, both early successes that established the firm and helped it to eliminate competition. Green and Stallybrass show how a great variety of miscellaneous small jobs (today's vanity press) remained a vital income source—and they illustrate a great assortment of these rarities. Of the 228-plus small printing jobs Franklin recorded having printed with Meredith, only a mere 27 identified examples survive. Which gives collectors hope: Could examples of some of these 200-plus treasures survive in private collections, awaiting identification—routine pieces of unremarkable Philadelphia ephemera such as bills of lading, bookplates, subscription receipts and so on? And the same could hold true of the even larger number of small printing jobs undertaken by Franklin and Hall. It's a tantalizing thought.

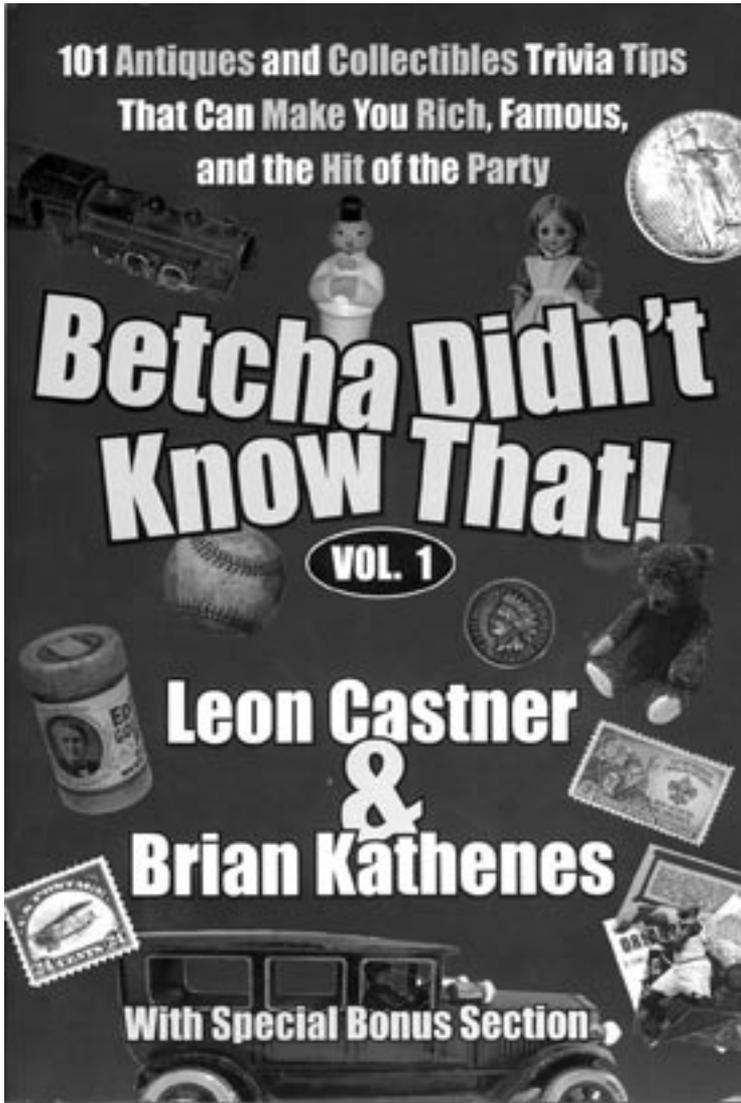
While not an autograph reference work by any means, *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer* will give any collector or dealer new insight into the importance of pens and paper and writing in his life, and how he used his writing skills and his profession to advance his interests. "We have focused here," note the authors, "upon the mechanics of how Franklin used his skills as a writer and printer in the service of political action." Green and Stallybrass manage to bring Franklin's persona as writer/printer *and* his handsome script to life in a new and uncommon way.

And Now, The Not So Serious

What better diversion from the somber study of historical autographs and documents than a dose of fun, harmless trivia—an autographic *Trivial Pursuit*, if you will?

Leon Castner and Brian Kathenes' *Betcha Didn't Know That!* promised to be just such a light, breezy "beach read." I hoped for enough autograph-related bits to hold my interest.

It got off to a decent start, too, one of the first chapters bear-



ing the bloated title “Autographs, Collectibles & Memorabilia: The Eclectic Life—Autographs: Will the Mystery Guest Please Sign In?” The general opening comments were inoffensive enough, if sometimes obvious (“Today autograph collectors can

be found in every state in the US and around the world”). Potential collectors are cautioned to study and learn, to “Assume it is not real until proven otherwise” and a few other basic tenets of collecting just about anything.

But it quickly began to annoy in petty but irksome ways, as when Kathenes (the autograph guy in this duo and I believe author of this chapter) refers to Clement C. Moore (of *A Visit from St. Nicholas* fame) as “*Clemente* Moore” (italics mine)—since the previous chapter concerned baseball, perhaps his mind was on Roberto *Clemente*. The next page, in explaining the word “holograph,” he notes, “Ask Daniel Webster, and the old dictionary writer would probably reply, ‘It’s a document written entirely in the handwriting of the person whose signature it bears.’ Way to go, Dan!” Last I looked *Webster’s Dictionary* was penned by **Noah** Webster (1758-1843)—not the Massachusetts statesman Daniel Webster (1782-1852). By the way, in the chapter on stamp collecting, the authors tell readers not familiar with the philatelic term “selvage” they’re in need of a “Daniel Webster Moment” before explaining it. Seems to me that Castner and Kathenes badly need just such a moment.

Moving on, the oft-told tale of Ulysses S. Grant’s *Memoirs* and the printed signature and inscription present in every copy of the book is related. What irks here is the generic-to-the-point-of-meaningless valuation comment, “A common set, in great condition, is valued at about \$350.” Quick and easy answers, however inaccurate, seem to be the norm in *Betcha Didn’t Know That!* Any Civil War buff learns that Grant’s *Memoirs* was issued in four different bindings: Green cloth, half leather, full leather, deluxe morrocan. Where I live in Galena, Illinois—Grant’s adopted hometown—I handle more sets of this than most dealers. Not to toot my own horn, but we price them fairly and they fly off the shelves. The green cloth binding (the cheapest and most common of the four bindings), among knowledgeable collectors, normally sells in the \$200-\$300 range in superb condition—though, to be fair, in our free-for-all Internet world, one sees inexperienced dealers trying to realize \$1,000 for the same set. The other three bindings (half leather, full leather, deluxe morrocan) are each a good bit scarcer and more expensive than the basic clothbound edition, and in fine condition usually run

from \$300-\$400 to roughly double that for the best binding (deluxe moroccan). To place a flat \$350 valuation on a set with several variations is simplistic and misleading.

Other chapters in *Betcha Didn't Know That!* cover a mishmash of collectibles: Clocks, toys, glassware, the old standbys coins and stamps, etc. Autographs do make the occasional appearance here, too—but usually with less-than-satisfactory results. In the chapter on stamps, the well-known story of Benjamin Franklin using the franking privilege and signing himself “B. Free Franklin” is told. When the authors then call this the “Franklin Privilege,” I suspect this is a malaprop (a la *Daniel Webster*) rather than intentional misuse for comic effect.

A chapter on comedy teams and material related to them brings forth the astonishingly off-the-wall comment regarding Milton Berle that “Autographed vintage head shots of Uncle Miltie consistently sell at auction for a [sic] about \$350.00.” Can I argue that the authors are wrong? No—perhaps they do indeed have printed auction records proving the truth of their statement. The real issue, though, is what kind of auction results should one cite as representative of what a collectible item normally sells for in the real world? Should one even quote *au-**ction* results, which are highly volatile and unpredictable, at all? Wouldn't fixed price sales present a more accurate gauge? The mine-is-bigger-than-yours bidding phenomenon often present at auctions—indeed, the principle which allows them to thrive—doesn't lend itself to meaningful valuations.

At this moment, for instance, one reputable and knowledgeable East coast autograph dealer offers a charming Berle signed photograph for \$60, another Midwest dealer offers a similar example at \$50... and on and on and on. Even though the just-released 7th edition of the *Sanders Autograph Price Guide* more than triples the typical \$72 value for a signed photograph listed in the 6th edition (most odd, for no dealer I know of sees any increased interest in Berle autograph material), the fact remains: In the real world, it's quite easy to purchase a signed Berle photograph for a fraction of the \$350 price tag Castner and Kathenes place on it. Looks like the real world and the auction world will have to agree to disagree on this one.

Call me nitpicky—guilty and proud of it—but I maintain that

writings about autographs are only as good as their information is painstakingly detailed and accurate. To present misinformation and half-truths fails to foster the kind of savvy, knowledgeable collectors on which the future of our hobby rests.

No one put it better than Abraham Lincoln: "For those who like this kind of book, this is the kind of book they will like." *Betcha Didn't Know That!* will be enjoyed by anyone desiring *Antiques Roadshow*-type tidbits on antiques and collectibles served up tabloid style—so long as you're not overly concerned with accuracy. As for me, I prefer fastidious care with facts in even the most flippant and lightweight of books. Casual is one thing, downright careless another.

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Help your Society to help you by making your tax deductible contribution to the Replevin Fund today. Should the federal or state government challenge any item in your collection and you have to go to trial with all its costs, let the Society build its war chest to continue to assist members so endangered. Names of contributors will be gratefully acknowledged in these pages. If you want us to help, be of help. Remember the issue can be further complicated by the lack of a uniform definition as to what is an official document, leaving governments free to interpret and act upon this as they will—"unless we conquer, as conquer we must, as conquer we shall"—Churchill. Please make your checks out to The Manuscript Society earmarked for the Replevin Fund and send them to Edward C. Oetting, Executive Director, 1960 E. Fairmont, Tempe, AZ 85282-2844. Do it today!