

A Book About Books About Books

FEW PUBLISHERS HAVE APPEARED in this column more often than Oak Knoll Press of New Castle, Delaware. Autograph collectors with a bookish bent should bow before their logo and chant, *Wayne's World*-style, "We're not worthy! We're not worthy!"

Founder 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. In 2008 Oak Knoll Press published *Books About Books: A History and Bibliography of Oak Knoll Press*, authored by Robert Fleck. (The existence of a "Books About Books" section in my own shop amazes and amuses the uninitiated. Books about books is actually the largest single category of books in existence—or so I'm told.)

Fleck's 50-page introduction tells the entertaining story of the young chemical engineer who chucked it all to specialize in the fascinating yet arcane field of antiquarian bookselling. He chronicles the challenge of finding adequate retail and publishing space; their early catalogs 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 Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America and the 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 *Books About Books* is the chronological annotated bibliography of all Oak Knoll Press books. Each title is briefly discussed, and Fleck also notes each edition or additional printings. 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, like many long-time collectors, have only the scant few reference works common to the autograph industry, *Books About Books* is a superb way to learn what

else exists. Sure, some of the titles are long since out of print, 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, *Books About Books* at least profiles one leading publisher's output.

Biographies & Memoirs

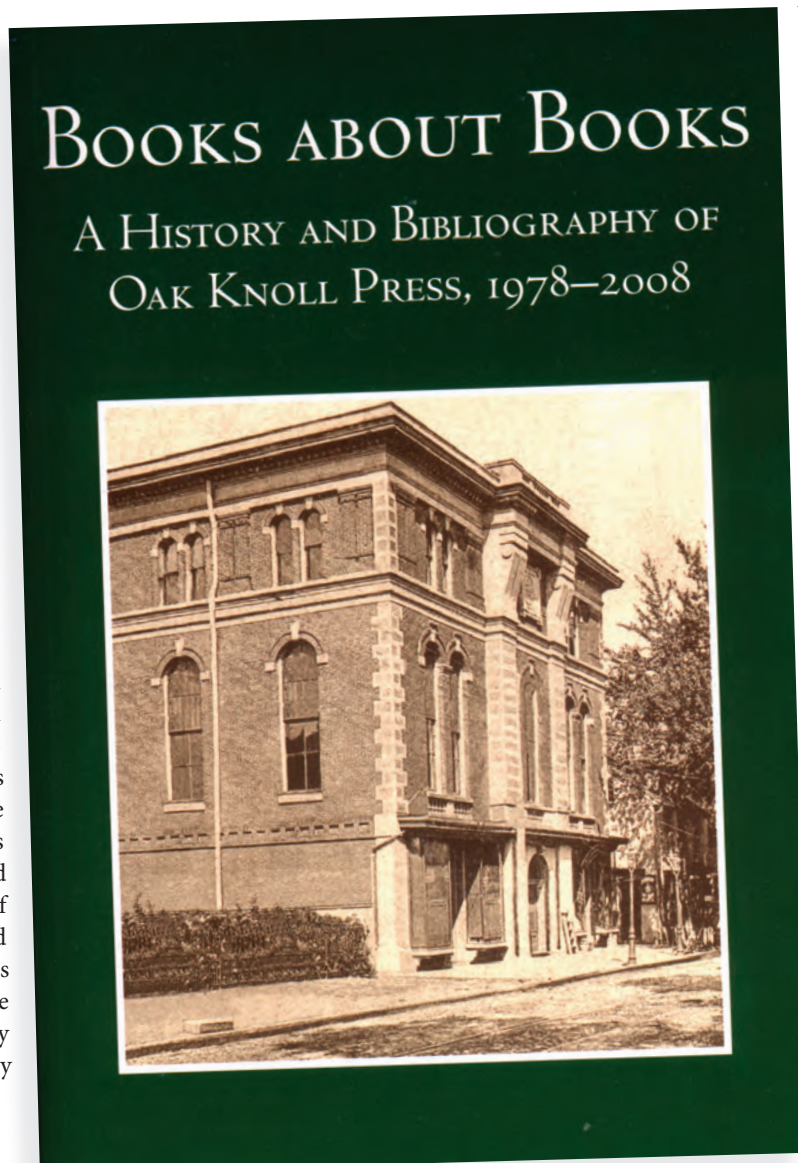
Biographies and memoirs of noted antiquarian booksellers and collectors are chock full of tales (some of them even true!) about autograph material and signed volumes that have passed through their hands—along with much book and autograph legends and tall tales.

English bookseller Percy Muir's 1956 *Minding My Own Business*, which Oak Knoll reprinted in 1991, provides charming tales of bookselling at the genteel firm Elkin Mathews between World Wars I and II, 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 do a better job of covering the European antiquarian bookselling scene from the 1950s until now.

And every collector worth his salt knows the adventures of those grand



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, softbound \$25.

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’na 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 Historical Scripts

Studies of various historical scripts pepper Oak Knoll’s backlist.

The intricacies of ancient and medieval scripts may be better understood through Stan Knight’s *Historical 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 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).

Forgeries

Everyone seems fascinated by the topic of forgeries, 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).

Robin Myers’ *Fakes and Frauds: Varieties of Deception in Print & Manuscript* (1996).

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 gold mine of autograph information. 📖
