

## Depravity and Generosity: The Attraction of Manuscripts

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**BLANDING, Michael.** *The Map Thief: The Gripping Story of an Esteemed Rare-Map Dealer Who Made Millions Stealing Priceless Maps.* New York: Gotham Books, 2014. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. xviii, 300pp. Illustrations. **\$27.50.**

*In Pursuit of a Vision: Two Centuries of Collecting at the American Antiquarian Society.* Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 2012. Small 4to. 222pp. Illustrations. **\$35.00** (paperback), **\$55.00** (hardbound).

Two themes recur more often than any in the books reviewed in this column over the past twenty-plus years: There's no end to mankind's depravity in finding ways to lie, cheat and steal for personal gain, and there's no end to mankind's generosity in selflessly sharing our history for the benefit of all. This installment brings a stellar example of each.

Michael Blanding's *The Map Thief: The Gripping Story of an Esteemed Rare-Map Dealer Who Made Millions Stealing Priceless Maps* enters a Pantheon of Shame of reviews that include Travis McDade's *The Book Thief: The True Crimes of Daniel Spiegelman*, Allison Hoover Bartlett's *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much*, Ken Perenyi's *Caveat Emptor: The Secret Life of an American Art Forger*, Jeremy

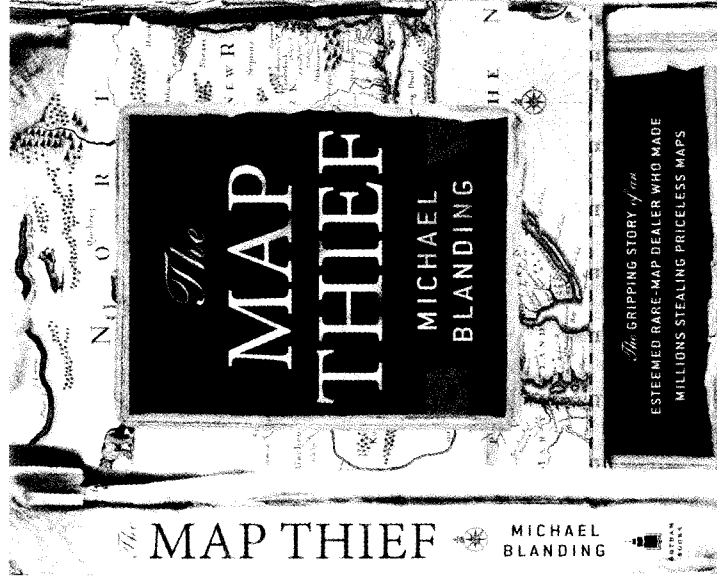
Norman's *Scientist, Scholar & Scoundrel* and Lee Israel's *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* *Memoirs of a Literary Forger*. That lineup goes back only a few years—I haven't the stomach to delve deeper into the tales of miscreants reviewed earlier.

Antiquarian maps are a cousin to historical documents—with a vicious twist: The number of dealers is far smaller, the supply of good material is far smaller, and prices therefore tend to run far higher, routinely running into tens of thousands of dollars and more. Add to this many of these maps were published in books or atlases and are easily sliced out provided you have access to those books and that the institutions who own them don't normally inventory *every individual map* in every book they control and you have a scenario ripe for exploitation.

E. Forbes Smiley III (think Charles Emerson Winchester) was a man with pretensions—loads of them. With a name that reeked New England blueblood, Smiley craved the trappings of high-end antiquarian map dealing—the Manhattan gallery, winning and dining with the elite in expensive suits at even more expensive restaurants, flying to European auctions to bid at auction on rarities for an exclusive clientele, hobnobbing with upper echelon collectors and curators. All this comes at a stiff price. If you don't have deep pockets able to maintain this level of inventory and bear the market's ups and downs, your downfall will be swift and severe.

Smiley was flamboyant and colorful—and knowledgeable, a quick study who liked to do research. His problem, it seems to me, was severe *impatience*. He wanted to belong to an exclusive club *right now*, without the many years' apprenticeship, of slowly building up an inventory and a reputation. Smiley's business model was based on pure impulse, on instant gratification with no thought on consequences. "Whenever he saw a map he knew his clients should have," writes Blanding, "he snapped it up, worrying later how he'd pay for it. At auctions in London he'd walk out with maps, promising to have the money wired, figuring out how to come up with the cash once he got back to New York." Not surprisingly, "He began falling further and further behind in his payments...."

The cracks were appearing. In 1986, for instance, up-and-coming Americana specialist William Reese bought at auction the first maritime atlas published in America for \$25,000—



which Smiley then purchased from him for \$50,000 with a check that bounced. Reese eventually got his money, and even let himself get burned a second time with another item and another bounced check. Blanding's description of Smiley's cavalier reaction to this is telling:

*Smiley put the incident out of his mind. To him, the numbers added up—he just wasn't able to complete the deal fast enough. But the truth was, he was overextending himself, chasing too many high-priced maps and atlases before he was able to sell them. He told himself that if he just worked harder, eventually it would pay off with financial success.*

Smiley's business history followed a typical trajectory. After a few years in business he issued his first formal catalogue (*The Early Cartography of North America*), an impressive scholarly offering of 68 maps. He opened a studio—which was supposedly

burgled in April 1989. (Here Blanding fails to connect the dots for us and make sense of some dealers who “doubted the theft had ever happened.” Apparently Smiley wasn’t insured—so why fake a break-in if there’s no insurance money to collect to pay off creditors?) He snagged a few top-level collectors who used him as their sole agent to form their collections.

But Smiley’s was a complicated life in many ways. He relocated from Manhattan with his wife and young son to Martha’s Vineyard, which allowed him to cut expenses but maintain a tony address—yet he also purchased a summer home in tiny Sebec, Maine (“determined to give [his son] as idyllic a childhood as his own”). He seems to have tried his best to revitalize this down-on-its-luck village, refurbishing old buildings and even opening a restaurant—but like many benefactors, he struck many locals as a pushy outsider and a long, unpleasant civic fiasco ensued. Severely blocked arteries required a quadruple bypass heart operation.

Eventually Smiley’s lavish lifestyle and lopsided business model caught up with him. He began seriously price-gouging his clients to make ends meet; their patronage crumbled and other business deals went sour. Blanding’s picture of Smiley’s transition from high-flying antiquarian preserving rare maps for posterity to desperate criminal robbing Peter to pay Paul—bravely mutilating rare atlases up and down the East coast to keep afloat—will make you cringe.

Smiley’s downfall began in 2005 with a razor blade silently and accidentally dropped onto the plush carpeted floor of the Beinecke Library at Yale University, noticed by an alert employee—but it was like a cannon shot across the genteel world of antiquarian map collecting. Soon Smiley was singing to authorities, cooperating to help them pinpoint the whereabouts of hundreds of antiquarian maps he had stolen—many of which would never have been known to be stolen in the first place. Archives he’d visited scrambled to figure out what they were missing—difficult since they often weren’t sure what they had. Expensive and sophisticated measures were proposed to prevent this kind of thievery in the future, many of them never implemented due to the economic crisis hitting the country around this time.

Blanding lays out the fallout from Smiley’s several year crime spree in fine detail—the devastation of betrayed friends and

colleagues, the nightmare of figuring out which map may have come from which mutilated book (a jigsaw not complete to this day), the dilemma of deciding a sentence appropriate to the crime versus leniency for remorse and assistance in righting the wrongs.

*The Map Thief* should intrigue anyone with a budding interest in antiquarian maps—if this tale of chicanery hasn’t already scared them off for good. Blanding, who himself has “a collection of international subway maps covering the walls of his home,” understands the allure of these precious artifacts and offers up “A New World,” an introductory chapter outlining the history of mapmaking and map collecting. His style is readable and journalistic rather than scholarly, engaging the reader through anecdotes and case studies. A memorable image of the 2013 International Map Fair at a hotel in Miami opens this chapter, with a delightful picture of meeting an Alabama peanut farmer who goes from buying maps of southern Alabama to acquiring a map of North and South America for \$135,000. Only then does Blanding offer up a succinct, straightforward history of cartography.

He also shows that maps aren’t merely topography on paper or spendy wall decorations, but how they were used (and abused!) as political tools in their day. Mapmakers used them as vehicles to display national pride, to distort the truth by assigning a nationality to contested terrain, to belittle one’s enemies by shrinking or otherwise distorting their terrain. He pays special attention to one of Smiley’s specialties, English 18<sup>th</sup> century mapmakers. We get a fine tour of the cartographic scene of that century. English and French mapmakers vied with each other, each claiming territory for their homelands in their maps. Sometimes this reflected the political reality of the moment, but other times little more than wishful thinking.

Elsewhere in *The Map Thief* we get interesting snapshots of the major dealers who populate the antiquarian map world—Dick Arkway, Philip Burden, Ken Nebenzahl and the always eccentric Graham Arader among them—and a few of the major library collections from which Smiley pilfered. It’s an intriguing picture of an arcane corner of the antiquarian world to which few of us are exposed.

In the end Smiley received what critics think a light sentence

and restitution that can likely never be fully collected. Some dealers were brought to near-ruin because of losses that had to be reimbursed, some reputations were irreparably tarnished, some distinguished careers brought to a premature end. Unlike most of the other thieves and forgers discussed in this column over the years, Smiley seems to have emerged from the ordeal a changed man. After release from prison,

*A friend helped get him a job that first summer working at a catering company for \$9 an hour. Eventually he was able to use his skill in working with his hands to find employment as a landscaper and laborer on building sites for \$12 an hour. With the computer skills he picked up in prison, he began building websites on the side for extra cash. His life is simpler now than it was flying off to London and Paris and dining at top restaurants. He now eats out with his family at the neighborhood clam shack and attends Ned's Little League games, watching the teams rather than pacing the sidelines with a cell phone to his ear. He's taken up watercolors and has had his work shown locally.*

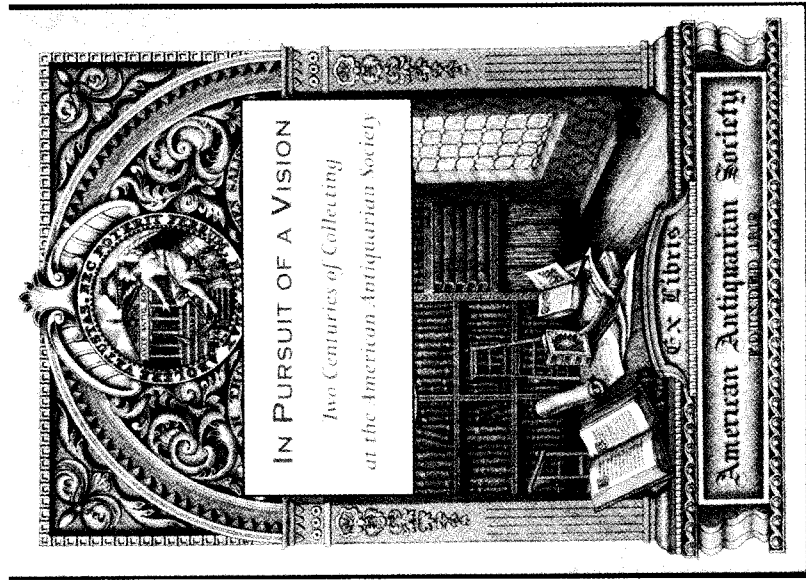
Call me sentimental, but I think he's found redemption. He seems like a decent guy.

*The Map Thief* is a chilling expose of greed gone amuck and the terrible consequences that one person's actions can have on those around him and on the printed heritage most of us seek to preserve and cherish. Smiley's criminal actions happened to occur in the rarified world of antiquarian maps, but could just as easily have taken place in the world of historic documents, rare books or other paper ephemera—as it has so often in other cases of recent years.

#### A Perfect Counterpoint

*In Pursuit of a Vision* makes the perfect counterpoint to *The Map Thief*. E. Forbes Smiley III demonstrates one person's self-interest destroying the cultural heritage of us all, while *In Pursuit of a Vision* shows many persons selflessly donating their historical treasures for the benefit of all.

Over the past couple of years both Philip F. Gura's *The American Antiquarian Society: A Bicentennial History, 1812-2012* and Jack



Larkin and Caroline Sloat's *A Place in My Heart: A New Edition of the Diary of Christopher Columbus Baldwin, 1829-1835* have been reviewed in this column. This learned society and national research library in Worcester, Massachusetts is a national treasure of pre-20<sup>th</sup> century American imprints and manuscripts. Its holdings are vast and deep, its lofty goal the preservation and study of our nation's rich culture and history. I'm a huge fan.

*In Pursuit of a Vision* is an accompaniment to an exhibition held at New York's well-known Grolier Club that most of us will, alas, never have the opportunity to attend—in person. But—and this is why I'm forever plugging exhibition catalogues—yes, we can! A high percentage of the 186 items in this exhibition

are illustrated in glorious color. True, looking at a book illustration isn't the same as beholding the actual item—yet seeing an artifact for thirty seconds in person isn't the same as being able to turn to an illustration of it whenever you please for as long as you please. It's not a bad tradeoff. Long-time AAS president Ellen S. Dunlap introduces *In Pursuit of a Vision* and explains its unusual organization:

*We could have... explored the Society's extensive collections, genre by genre: almanacs, annuals, atlases, auction catalogs, bibles, bibliographies, bindings,.... And on to United States views, western Americana, and yearbooks. Alternatively, we might have focused on the rarest items in the collection—the "firsts" and the "only knowns".... Or, we might have chosen to shine a light solely on the nineteenth-century collections.... The story of AAS collections could also have been told through an exploration of the projects of the Society's past research fellows....*

With holdings as extensive as theirs, the themes and selection could have headed off in a thousand directions—but the AAS chose a novel route that I've never seen in an exhibition catalogue. Dunlap continues, "Instead, we have presented *In Pursuit of a Vision* as a celebration of the generosity and farsightedness of a few of the many collectors, dealers, librarians, and others who have, each in his or her own way, contributed to the greatness of the Society's library by sending collections our way."

Novel indeed—to make the donors who gave the material to the Society the organizing principle. Thus "Isaiah Thomas as Printer, Collector, Historian, and Benefactor" kicks it off, he being the Society's founder (1812) whose personal library formed its nucleus. The first dozen items range from his handwritten "Catalogue of the Private Library of Isaiah Thomas, Senior, of Worcester, Massachusetts" (a manuscript volume with 2,650 entries) to the only surviving copies of the first broadside ballad he typeset as a 6-year-old in 1755 to other printed pieces he typeset as a teenage apprentice and his personal set of his own 1810 landmark history, *The History of Printing in America*.

Hannah Mather Crocker, granddaughter of minister Cotton Mather and that dynasty of influential New England clergymen, was among the Society's earliest and most generous benefactors.

She donated priceless Mather family material and artifacts, including large portions of the Mather family library and masses of manuscript material. Of the five items from these troves highlighted in *In Pursuit of a Vision* are the original manuscript of a 1648 sermon penned by Richard Mather and a 1690 letter from Cotton Mather to his father, Increase Mather.

Books, documents, prints and other paper from a couple dozen other benefactors follow, organized in the order received by the Society and each featuring a thumbnail biography of the donor. There were the Chase Sisters, Lucy and Sarah, dedicated to conserving current events. "While in the South [during the Civil War] the Chases were able to collect a variety of materials including business records of a Richmond slave dealer, papers from Jefferson Davis's office, and also souvenirs from General Grant's headquarters at City Point"—including coffee beans from Grant's headquarters, "a one story log house of two rooms." You can imagine the chaos in Richmond at war's end when you see the *Public Laws of the Confederate States of America* inscribed to President Davis, which the sisters were able to pick up in his office while wandering about the day after the surrender at Appomattox.

Since the organizing principle here is the donor rather than any theme or subject matter, items shown in this exhibition are highly eclectic, though in certain sections the editors do attempt to group together donors who gave heavily in focused areas. Donors of, for instance, American literature and poetry are placed together, as are donors of Western Americana and any other focused areas.

*In Pursuit of a Vision* is rich in autograph material. Without elaborating donors, a random flipping about turns up George Washington's personal copy of Charles John Ann Hereford's two-volume *The History of Spain* (Dublin, 1793), each volume bearing his ownership signature on the title page. There's John Greenleaf Whittier's personal copy of his own collection, *Poems Written During the Progress of the Abolition Question in the United States, between the years 1830 and 1838* (Boston, 1837), which "bears his characteristic purple ink manuscript corrections to several poems," part of a gift containing "several hundred presentation copies, but also significant holdings of John Greenleaf Whittier, many of them inscribed by the author." On

a bibliographic note, there's Samuel F. Haven, Jr.'s *Working slips for a bibliography of books published in America before the Revolution, 1858-1861*, a bundle of string-tied catalogue slips penned by this Worcester physician who "devoted his leisure hours to revising and expanding [Isaiah] Thomas's notes." Though he was killed at Fredericksburg in 1862, the AAS published this mass in 1874. "This first attempt to publish a comprehensive bibliography of early American imprints was not superseded until Charles Evans began issuing his *American Bibliography* in 1903."

But this inadequate glimpse fails to do justice to the dozens of rare books, broadsides, newspapers, prints, maps and other paper wonders that fill *In Pursuit of a Vision*—a testament to the generosity that has helped fill this extraordinary institution which preserves the history of our nation.